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# The ontological politics of kosher food; between strict orthodoxy and global markets

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**Abstract:** As markets for kosher food have expanded globally in recent decades, multiple rabbinical authorities and kosher certification bodies have emerged to protect – and project – the boundaries of what is permissible for Jewish consumers. In this paper we explore how, as kosher food has become more widely available in supermarkets and global food businesses, there has been a concurrent growth in demand within some Jewish communities for kosher goods produced in line with ever more strictly observed Jewish dietary laws (*kashrus*). Drawing on research on kosher markets and consumption practice in Manchester in the North of England, UK, we explore how multiple kosher ontologies are enacted in markets, and the wider effects of this multiplicity on consumption practice(s). We conclude with some theoretical reflections on the ontological politics of qualification in markets.

**Keywords:** economy of qualities; *kashrus*; kosher consumption practice; markets; ontological politics.

## Introduction

The Jewish dietary laws of *kashrus* underpinning kosher consumption practice were originally outlined in the Torah (the first five “Books of Moses”) and the Talmud (the key texts of Rabbinic Judaism) (Hirsch, 1962; Freidenreich, 2011). Yanklowitz (2019) argues that this gives rise to an ontological system governing the types of food (particularly meat) that Jews can and cannot eat: kosher designates that which is “fit” and “proper”, while “unfit” food is called *treifa* (i.e., non-kosher). Although this distinction may seem straightforward, in this paper we set out to bring the coherence of kosher into question. Specifically, we consider the ontological work (Mol, 1999) that is involved in kosher production and consumption. Viewed in this way, kosher is much more than a principle around which Jewish communities have been organised for millennia – it is also ‘an industrially produced quality of food’ (Evans et al. 2022, 473). It is not, however, a singular (observed) food quality; multiple *qualities* are attributed through processes of qualification that ascribe temporary, stabilising characteristics (Callon et al. 2002) to food stuffs that enable them to be traded as edible kosher goods. In this paper, we focus on the contestations involved, which allows us to contribute to burgeoning concerns over food production and consumption (Evans et al., 2017; Lever, 2019; Miele, 2011) and to theoretical debates about the ontological politics of qualification in markets (Evans et al., 2022).

Historically, the processes behind the qualification of kosher were often straightforward, as the Chief Rabbi in a particular locality had the final say on all matters relating to Jewish dietary laws (*kashrus*) within a community council or *kehillah* (plural: *kehillot*) (Gastwirt, 1974; Campbell et al., 2011; Lytton, 2013). While *kehillot* lost most of their legal powers as Jewish populations gained citizenship within modern nation states, the community *kashrus* model survived largely intact in Jewish communities across Europe. In the US, by contrast, rabbinic traditions did not translate unscathed from the ‘old’ world, and early rabbinical authorities had many disagreements attempting to establish consistent understandings of *kashrus*. As Campbell et al. (2011: 72) note, for newly arriving Jewish migrants, this ‘state of

affairs was nothing less than... scandalous' and many 'tensions, battles, and conflicts... ensued.'

A useful distinction can be drawn at this juncture between the European community *kashrus* model and the open economic model that emerged in the US (Epstein and Gang, 2002). The result of these developments, and the collisions that subsequently emerged, was the establishment of different modes of *kashrus* – and kosher – as the participants brought their respective realities to bear in this relatively new context. Clashes between competing modes of doing kosher continued after the second world war as new generations of Jewish migrants attempted to maintain traditional practices within the Jewish diaspora (Lytton, 2013; Fraser, 2018). As kosher was lifted further out of its traditional base in Jewish communities and into global markets during the 1990s, calls for tighter regulation to avoid misuse and fraud – which have always been present (Freidenreich, 2011) – also intensified (Regenstein and Regenstein, 1999; Lever and Fischer, 2018). Of the new certification bodies that subsequently emerged, the Orthodox Union (OU)<sup>1</sup> in the US is probably the most well-known global agency (Lytton, 2013); but in globalising markets for religious food products (Lever and Fischer, 2018) there are a plethora of certification bodies and rabbinical authorities offering multiple accounts of what is and is not kosher.

Kosher has simultaneously become a popular food consumption trend worldwide, valued by health-conscious consumers for its stringent production processes. According to Jeong et al. (2019), the market for kosher food generated \$24 billion in sales in 2017, and it is forecast to grow significantly (Persistence Market Research, 2017). At the same time, as the presence of kosher in global markets has grown, there have been increasing demands in some Jewish communities for kosher goods aligned with more strictly ascribed *kashrus* qualities (Lever and Fischer, 2018; Wise, 2006; 2009). Work on food ontologies is instructive for exploring these multiple enactments of kosher. Roe (2006), for example, illustrates how eating carrots is both political and ethical; the material connections involved can be linked back to the fields where carrots are grown; to the workers who pick them; to the packers who pack them; and to the multiple meanings of edibility that subsequently emerge. Similarly, Yates-Doerr (2015) provides insights into what is at stake in these debates, showing how meat in the Guatemalan highlands is enacted as a high-status food; as a process of exchange within a wider family or kinship group; and as a multicultural dish that can exclude as well as include (both meat and people). As Mol (2002) puts it, objects – whether carrots or meat – do not stand alone; they are enacted in various ways through multiple relations of practice.

These insights have implications for understandings of food qualities and processes of qualification in markets (Callon et al., 2002; Berndt et al., 2020). In a recent study bringing these ideas into debate, Evans et al. (2022) shed new light on the ontological politics of “freshness” in the food industry (see also Jackson et al. 2019). They argue that *both* objects and qualities are enacted through practices; that together they have political effects; and that the multiplicity of qualities offers a way of linking questions of markets to debates about ontological politics. It follows that to qualify as a good for sale in a specific market (i.e., organic, vegetarian, fair-trade, halal or kosher), an object must hold specific quality attributes, which can be ‘intrinsic’ (i.e., attributed through production processes) and ‘extrinsic’ (i.e., judged and evaluated by consumers) (Callon et al., 2002). In the case of food, perceptions of quality – including freshness (Evans et al., 2022) but also others, such as kosher – are fluid and malleable, and tend to shift as ‘goods’ travel from sites of production

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<sup>1</sup> <https://www.ou.org>

(along supply chains) to trusted retailers and consumers (Murdoch and Miele, 2004; Higgins et al., 2011).

As Ponte and Gibbon (2005: 7) explain, in this context ‘quality is cognitively evaluated in different ways depending on what ‘world’ is used to justify evaluation and action – and hence on which broader normative order is invoked’. This relates directly to Boltanski and Thévenot’s (2006) insights on “economies of worth” (i.e., market, industrial, civic...) and “conventions” about what is considered ‘right’ and ‘good’ in different situations, where conventions refer to established ways of doing things (i.e., mutual expectations) in the coordination of economic activities. While the historical expectation that kosher is produced in a particular way can arguably be viewed as a convention in this sense, given the ways in which diverse market actors are now making claims and counter claims about what is and is not kosher, we agree with Evans and Mylan (2019, 444) that conventions are arguably ‘reproduced and sustained through food practices.’ While the ontological politics underpinning this situation may reduce encounters by establishing market boundaries, it follows that market enactments are delicate and that they may overflow with unexpected social and moral consequences (Berndt et al. 2020; Evans et al. 2022).

We seek to clarify (some of) these consequences through the ontological analysis of kosher undertaken in this paper. A key conceptual element of our argument involves a distancing from both perspectivalism and constructivism, challenging both partial standpoints and singular, contingent truths (Mol, 1999). Instead, our analysis brings to the fore questions of how kosher is dependent on multiple qualification processes (Callon et al., 2002) and on specifically endorsed material semiotic practices that entangle, interfere and sometimes collaborate within markets across different sites of consumption and production (Berndt et al. 2020; Evans et al., 2021). While studies of food ontologies often focus on specific material objects (Roe, 2006; Yates-Doerr 2015), we explore how kosher is enacted in multiple ways with variable effects. Our main contributions are to identify instances of ontological politics (Mol, 1999; 2002) in markets (Evans et al., 2022) and to address related questions about what is at stake for Jewish communities (in particular) and for consumption communities (in general).

### **Context, methods and analysis**

To explore such questions, we draw on research exploring the changing dynamics of kosher consumption practice in Manchester in the North of England, UK, which has a well-established Jewish community stretching back more than two centuries (Williams, 1976).<sup>2</sup> This is particularly insightful, as it illustrates how, as kosher has become integrated into global food markets (Lytton, 2013), it has been variously enacted with *more or less* strictly ascribed *kashrus* qualities (Lever and Fischer, 2018; Wise, 2006; 2009).

Data were collected using a variety of qualitative methods. As well as gathering historical data from archives<sup>3</sup> and diverse media sources, we undertook multiple visits to food certification, production and consumption spaces in and around the North Manchester Jewish community to observe the performativity of rabbinical authority, branding and kosher consumption practice, all of which were recorded in fieldnotes. We also conducted informal and semi-structured interviews to explore three overarching areas – religion, regulation, and consumption – identified in the literature on religious food markets (Regenstein and

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<sup>2</sup> This was part of a larger study of kosher and halal food markets in Manchester in the UK and Copenhagen in Denmark.

<sup>3</sup> The Manchester Jewish Museum was an invaluable data source: <https://www.manchesterjewishmuseum.com>

Regenstein, 1999; Freidenreich, 2011; Lytton, 2013; Lever and Fischer, 2018). During 2016-2017, we interviewed 15 individuals, including rabbis, store owners and managers, and kosher consumers (see Table 1). Participants were identified using personal and professional contacts via a snowball sampling strategy to enable purposive recruitment. All interviews were recorded and transcribed verbatim and subjected to a rigorous process of analysis. This initially involved reading and rereading all interview transcripts to identify rich passages of text, which were complemented with similar analysis of informal interviews (and fieldnotes) taken by the research team; coding and analysis were then undertaken following an abductive approach (Dubois and Gadde, 2002).

**Table 1: Research participants in Manchester**

Name/ Gender	Age	Occupation	Place of birth & cultural heritage	Marital status/ children
Adina	24	Housewife	London, England (Sephardi) <sup>4</sup>	Married, 3 children
Hannah	29	Housewife	Manchester, England (Sephardi)	Married, 5 children
Peter	33	Lawyer	London, England (Ashkenazi) <sup>5</sup>	Married, 3 children
Daniel	37	Rabbi, Synagogue Manager	Manchester, England (Sephardi)	Married, 5 children
David	45	Shop Owner	London, England (Sephardi)	Married, 3 children
Simon	48	Shop Manager	London, England (Ashkenazi)	Married, 5 children
Michael	49	Shop Owner	London, Lithuania (non-Jewish)	Married, 2 children
Aharon	54	Rabbi/ Community Worker	Manchester, England (Ashkenazi)	Married, 4 children
Nathan	57	Rabbi, works in <i>kashrus</i>	Manchester, England (Ashkenazi)	Married, 3 children
Leonard	61	Photographer	Gateshead, England (Ashkenazi)	Married, 1 child
Yaakov	61	Rabbi/ Historian & Public Relations Consultant	Salford, England (Ashkenazi)	Divorced, 1 child
Marc	67	Semi-retired Journalist	Manchester, England (Sephardi)	Married, 2 children
Elizabeth	68	Retired Housewife	Manchester, England (Sephardi)	Married, 5 children
David	70	Retired Clerk	Manchester, England (Ashkenazi)	Married, 5 children
Alon	78	Rabbi, works in <i>kashrus</i>	London, England (Ashkenazi)	Unknown

Throughout, we remained mindful of attending to the intimacies and visceral experience (Sexton et al., 2017) of kosher consumption and the importance of scrutinising practices in ontological analysis; doing kosher, with Mol (2002: 32), ‘depends on everything and everyone that is active while it is being practiced.’ Participants were assured of confidentiality, although some of the key actors in the North Manchester community were also aware that their business and/or place of work would be evident in the presentation of our research findings; pseudonyms are used throughout to protect the anonymity of research participants as far as possible.

The rest of the paper proceeds as follows. In the next sections, drawing on insights from our fieldwork, we briefly explore the qualification of kosher from the ancient to the modern period and the historical development of Jewish communities in Manchester. This leads to our main findings, where we identify several enactments of kosher cutting across multiple sites of production and consumption in three key kosher realities. We conclude by discussing

<sup>4</sup> Sephardic Jews can be traced back to Middle East, North Africa, Spain and Portugal.

<sup>5</sup> Ashkenazi Jews are descended from groups in Russia, Eastern Europe, Germany and France.

the implications of our analysis for understandings of the links between ontological politics, qualities and markets.

### **From the ancient to the modern period**

In the original qualification of kosher, Jews are only permitted to consume the meat of animals that chew the cud and have cloven hooves; for example, cattle, sheep, and goats (Leviticus, 11:3; 11:7). Pig meat is prohibited, as is the consumption of blood. There are also various prohibitions against eating birds, although chicken, turkey, duck, and goose are kosher – fish are only considered kosher if they have fins and scales. The Torah prohibits the consumption of insects, and rabbis go to great lengths to check that vegetables are not infested, although some *Sephardi* communities consider specific species of locust kosher – already drawing attention to the ontological multiplicity discussed in this paper.

One of our participants, Leonard (of *Ashkenazi* descent but married into a Palestinian Jewish family within a wider *Sephardi* kinship group) recognized this, stating that:

*‘For example, we [Ashkenazi] are not allowed to eat insects, but Sephardi can eat certain type of locusts... This has been their custom for 3500 years... because they are closer to the source than we are.’*

It is meat, however, including poultry, that forms the key historical talking point within *kashrus*. In general, meat only qualifies as kosher if the animal of origin is slaughtered using appropriate *shechita* methods, and the act of slaughter is thus given extensive coverage in the Talmud (Wise, 2006). Although it has been widely accepted since Moses that to be fit for human consumption meat must come from appropriately slaughtered animals (Lever, 2019), modern industrial slaughter practice is opposed by most Jews. For meat to be classed as kosher, a qualified Jewish *shocket* (plural. *shoetim*), or slaughterer, with the necessary skills and knowledge must conduct the act of slaughter (*shechita*) using a razor-sharp knife (*chalef*) to make a smooth *toing and froing* motion across a clearly defined part of the animal’s neck; any mistake and the animal carcass is rendered *treifa* (Lytton, 2013).

During our fieldwork, the rabbi Alon outlined the importance of this device in kosher qualification processes, observing that: *‘In Jewish law, a knife... issued to slaughter an animal has to be so sharp and smooth... because... it’s a biblical requirement that the animal can’t feel anything.’* *Shoetim* thus care for their knives meticulously to ensure sharpness, conducting regular checks for nicks and smoothness by running the back of their fingernails up and down the blade. This precision continues post-slaughter when the sciatic nerve and any hidden fats are care-fully removed, and carcasses are checked for disease and any other signs of imperfection (Lytton, 2013). While emphasising the need for rigorous training, these practices inform the materiality of *shechita* and the performativity of the *chalef*, all of which emphasise the socio-materiality of intermingling humans and non-humans between whom agency is distributed (Nicolini et al., 2012; Schäfer, 2017).

Rabbinical authority has been central to these processes of intrinsic product qualification from the ancient to the modern period, including via demarcations of (in)appropriate devices for use in slaughter. Yet, uncertainty about the extent to which kosher goods are produced in accordance with proper *kashrus* standards has always been evident in extrinsic evaluations (Liebowitz, 2019) – as we observed throughout our Manchester fieldwork.

## The origins and development of the Manchester Jewish community

Manchester's Jewish population can be traced back to the arrival of a small group of Ashkenazi traders of German origin in the mid 18<sup>th</sup> century, which by the 1780s had turned into a permanent settlement in the Old Town area of what is now the city centre (see Figure 1) (Williams, 1976). As this community became successful merchants and spread out into the then rural suburbs of Broughton and Cheetham Hill to the north (see Figure 1), tensions began to emerge with new groups of Ashkenazi arrivals from central and Eastern Europe. These processes intensified during the 1840s and divisions subsequently emerged between an established merchant class pursuing reform and modernization and newer arrivals focussed on retaining traditional Jewish values and customs (Williams, 1976; Lever, 2019). A small Sephardi community of Spanish and Portuguese merchants also became established in the city during this period, although these families moved to the more prosperous southern suburbs, where they would soon be joined by new Sephardi groups from Syria, Iraq and Morocco (Halliday, 1992). Thus, Manchester's Jewish community in the 1800's was characterized by a range of different cultural groups, with distinct origins and geographies, agglomerating in a rapidly urbanizing industrial city – which brought with it not only challenges of integration and inequality, but also the (de)stabilization of traditions and beliefs.

By the turn of the 20<sup>th</sup> century, these tensions were still evident across the city, which was by now a cosmopolitan industrial centre of reform (Wise, 2009). It was around this time that disputes began to intensify between strictly orthodox views of *shechita* (evident among the working poor) and the middle-class Jewish reform movement more closely aligned *with* and influenced *by* the state's push to institutionalise pre-slaughter stunning through organisations such as the RSPCA<sup>6</sup> (Wise, 2006; Frazer, 2018). In this context, a key kosher certification actor in the city emerged: the Manchester Shechita Board (MSB). Since its inception in 1892, MSB had regulated multiple kosher red meat and poultry producers (i.e. butchers offering *kashrus* and *shechita* services) across the Manchester region under licence from the Chief Rabbi and London Beth Din (LBD).<sup>7</sup> However, as political opposition to *shechita* grew nationally (Lever, 2019), MSB (led by established middle-class lawyers and merchants) began to experiment with pre- and post-slaughter stunning, often in the face of great hostility from the city's strictly-orthodox groups who were strongly opposed to reform. Eventually, in 1902, to bring a sense of order to the qualification of kosher meat production across the region, the MSB formed an official Manchester Beth Din (MBD) to provide full-time rabbinical advice and religious supervision for slaughterers, butchers, and licensed retailers under their jurisdiction (Wise, 2006).

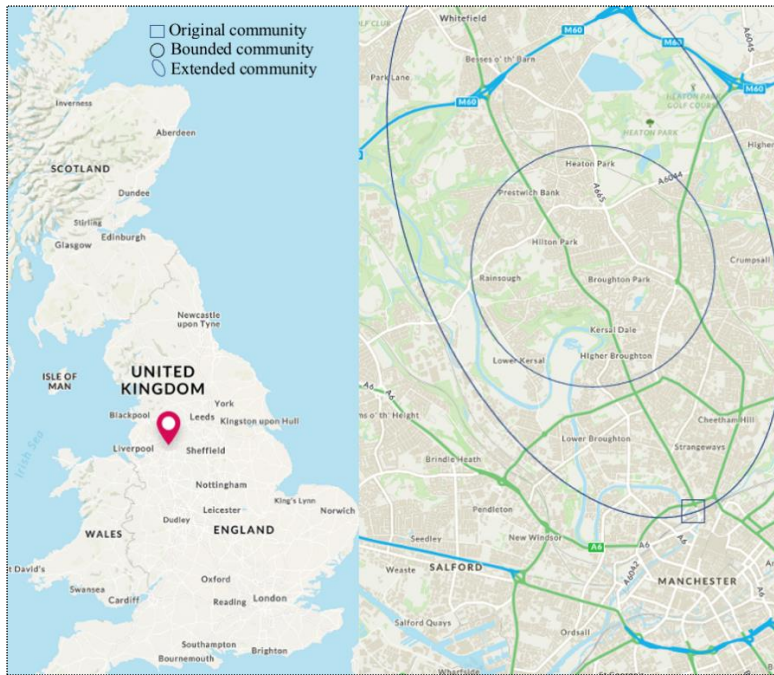
### Figure 1: The North Manchester Jewish Community

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<sup>6</sup> Founded in 1824, the Royal Society for the Prevention of Cruelty to Animals (RSPCA) is a charity operating in England and Wales.

<sup>7</sup> A Beth Din is a Jewish court of law that oversees matters of religious law in Jewish communities, including those relating to *kashrus*.



MBD has become the mainstay of the orthodox Manchester community, licensing butchers, grocers, delicatessens, and restaurants,<sup>8</sup> for example. Their adherence to the European community *kashrus* model was stressed by an MBD rabbi working in *kashrus*. While highlighting the need to make a profit, Nathan situated MBD clearly within the Manchester community, not only as a provider of *kashrus*, but of various social and welfare services:

*'[W]e are a communal body and our [kosher] certification... the money we receive is as a community, so the money gets fed back into the community, the various obligations of the Manchester Beth Din to serve the community... the whole infrastructure, education and other needs for the religious community.'*

As the Jewish population continued to spread out into the northern (see Figure 1) and southern suburbs in the early 20<sup>th</sup> century, the degree to which Jewish customs were adhered to varied greatly. Although strictly orthodox groups often attempted, almost always unsuccessfully, to maintain the religious standards of their towns and villages in Central and Eastern Europe (Williams, 1976; Wise, 2006), their interactions with a range of other actors were nonetheless consequential in imposing stricter kosher qualification practices in Manchester.

In 1925, a number of strictly observant *Haredi*<sup>9</sup> groups joined forces to signal their opposition to what they regarded as the erosion of traditional Jewish practices by forming the Machzikei Hadass (MH) society. It was in and through contact with Manchester's wealthy orthodox middle-classes (Williams, 1976) that this expanding group of families battled for control of the boundaries of orthodoxy and *kashrus* within the city. Indeed, rather than purchasing meat ascribed with kosher qualities via the MSB, MH continued to import meat from the religiously strict Gateshead community (in Newcastle, Northeast England) well into the 1930s. Kosher continued to be enacted, in this context, as an ethical and political object (cf. Roe, 2006) within networks of family and kinship practices that included as well as

<sup>8</sup> See: <https://www.mbd.org.uk/licenses>

<sup>9</sup> Usually referred to as ultra- or strictly orthodox, *Haredi* Judaism (*Haredim*) consists of various groups characterized by strict adherence to Jewish laws and tradition and opposition to modern values and practices.



excluded specific meat products and groups of people (cf. Yates-Doerr, 2015). By 1933, MH had become a traditional *chevroth* (a small religious society), providing meat and other services for the community, and by 1938 they had established a synagogue on Northumberland Street in the Salford neighbourhood of Higher Broughton. By the mid-1950s, they had split completely from MSB to establish an independent strictly orthodox community, although it was not until 1965 that England's Chief Rabbi agreed to license an independent MH *shocket* to conduct *shechita* in the city (Wise, 2006; 2009; 2010).

Throughout the post-war period, the kosher market and processes of product qualification also began to evolve in new directions as Jewish migrants moved to new locations within the diaspora (Lytton, 2013). These inevitably influenced, and were influenced by, the historical evolution of local kosher consumption practices, such as those in Manchester. Thus, what was deemed kosher for Manchester-based Jewish consumers depended not only on how *kashrus* laws were interpreted, but also on a wider milieu of licensing bodies, rabbinical authorities, migration patterns, and more. In the language of practices, products on the *kashrus* qualification journey were thus (temporarily) enacted as *distinct kosher objects* for different consumer groups – depending on their cultural and religious allegiance to particular Jewish communities (Mol, 1999). This process of (un)making and (not) realizing economic goods in the past highlights the particularities of the qualification of kosher consumption in Manchester – and elsewhere (Callon et al., 2002). Perhaps more importantly, the product(ion) of kosher goods relied on power-full economic actors who were especially consequential in determining the city's kosher practice, a dynamic which continues to this day.

### **Contemporary Jewish Manchester**

Today, Manchester has England's largest Jewish community outside London, with a population estimated at between 30,000-50,000. Although orthodox Jews are evident in communities and towns across the northern and southern suburbs alongside an assimilated Jewish population, most of the city's orthodox population are squeezed into a bounded community spread across two square miles in Broughton Park and Prestwich on the Manchester-Salford border, just north of the city centre (see Figure 1). In recent decades, as Jewish communities in Bradford, Liverpool, and Gateshead have contracted, and property prices in London have risen, this spatially confined community (Lever, 2019) has emerged as the mainstay of Anglo-Jewry in the North of England. As the community has grown, however, it has become more strictly orthodox, and the community is now home to a burgeoning proliferation of strictly orthodox groups (Wise, 2006; 2009; 2010).

On one level, the ongoing rise of strict orthodoxy can be traced back to the aforementioned groups that arrived from central and eastern Europe in the 19<sup>th</sup> century, and to the establishment of the MH as a means of grappling with the politics of Jewish identity in a new place. Over time, the offspring of these groups married into other strictly-orthodox families, and by the early 21<sup>st</sup> century they comprised more than a quarter of all Manchester Jewry. If this trend continues, Wise (2009) argues that it will reverse three centuries of Anglo-Jewish history by returning these closely bound neighbourhoods to institutional structures reminiscent of a pre-enlightenment community. Even today, as Glancy (2015; no pagination) notes:

*'Wandering through Broughton Park on a Saturday afternoon is an extraordinary, timeless experience as the entire population dons its Shabbos finery and walks to prayers. The array of streimels [fur hats] and gabardine coats in the more Hasidic*

*streets is mesmerizing; one could be in Crown Heights, or Mea Shearim, or indeed in pre-Holocaust Lublin or Lvov.'*

Wise (2006; 2009) highlights other factors in the growth of strict orthodoxy in the city, including national slaughter legislation that has regularly pitted reformist, orthodox groups (aligned with MBD) against the more strictly orthodox members of the community (clustered around MH). The rising demand for stricter *kashrus* qualities can in turn be linked to the increasing complexity of the food industry, and to the differentiated kosher consumption practices that have subsequently emerged in global markets.

### **Contemporary kosher consumption practice**

In the North Manchester Jewish community today, both the MBD and a specific body within MH – the Machzikei Hadass Manchester Kashrus division (MHMK) – provide *kashrus* and *shechita* services. In 2004, a former MBD Dayan<sup>10</sup> also formed the strictly orthodox Badatz Igud Rabbonim Manchester (BIRM) division (headquartered in Israel), which also provides *kashrus* services.<sup>11</sup> Walking the streets of Broughton Park and Prestwich, allegiance to these key market actors soon becomes evident at the community's many food stores, butchers, bakers, delicatessens, cafés and takeaways through the display of *hechshers*. As a rabbinical certification mark that indicates a licensee's status (and allegiance to a particular *kashrus* authority) *and* as a seal of quality on kosher goods (which is inspected for integrity throughout production and consumption processes) a *hechsher* is a key market device (see Figure 2). Throughout our fieldwork we became accustomed to delineating shops and products based on the MBD and Mehadrin *hechshers* – the latter being used by both MHMK and BIRM to designate a higher level of *kashrus*.

We visited and conducted (formal and informal) interviews at several key establishments in the North Manchester community, some of which have spatial arrangements that enact specific normative orders (Cochoy, 2002; Ponte and Gibbon, 2005). Two key emblems of kosher consumption in the North Manchester Community lie at the junction of Leicester Road and Ashbourne Grove in Broughton Park in Salford (see Figure 2). The first is Halpern's Kosher Food Store<sup>12</sup>, a notable licensee of MBD and one of the leading independent kosher retailers in the UK. The second, MH Meats, serve as the major outlet for MHMK certified meat in the community, marketing themselves as Manchester's premium kosher butcher.<sup>13</sup>

We visited Halpern's several times and had numerous conversations with the manager and the owner David, who was also interviewed formally. As a key retailer in the community, Halpern's stocks pre-packed meats and non-meat products certified by MBD and MH, among many others. As well as competition from smaller kosher shops in the community, this is necessary, David argued, not only to meet the specific demands of Sephardi, Ashkenazi and health-conscious consumers, but to keep up with the increasingly diverse range of kosher food stocked in nearby supermarkets. As David stated:

*'Halpern's is appreciative of the need to provide as wide a range of kosher certification as possible for its clientele. This is paramount to the success of our business.'*

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<sup>10</sup> A Jewish legal expert.

<sup>11</sup> <https://www.koshercertification.org.uk/>

<sup>12</sup> <https://halperns.co.uk>

<sup>13</sup> <https://www.instagram.com/mhmeats/?hl=en-gb>

In a specialist kosher retailer such as Halpern's, products with *more or less* strictly attributed *kashrus* qualities coexist, and different realities collide and interfere on the store's shelves. The stores focus on health-conscious consumers is particularly interesting, as highlighted by the rabbi Yaakov:

*'If you're allergic to something like you've got some kind of dairy, milk allergy or sensitivity or you've got a nut allergy or sensitivity, then the kosher regulations and the supervision of the food is actually very, very helpful for that.'*

**Figure 2: The Mehadrin Hechsher on kosher chicken at MH Meats**



Simon, the manager at Haber's World Supermarket on Kings Road in Prestwich<sup>14</sup> an independent retailer licensed by MBD, described similarly how the store attracts both religious and non-religious customers looking for goods ascribed with specific *kashrus* qualities, although he argued that the number purchasing kosher solely for health reasons in the UK is probably much less than it is in the US. At the same time, Simon noted an interesting trend for goods such as free-range eggs being asked for in the store. Although goods ascribed with such qualities might be marketed as being healthier for animals and consumers by a wide range of food industry actors, Simon found this to be a strange development in Jewish communities, not least because, he argued, kosher is so strict with animal welfare that: *'An animal is not kosher if it has a broken bone or a bruise... so... the chicken farmers who supply the kosher trade are more careful.'* Whether it be animal care or animal slaughter, the integrity of animals is critical to processes of kosher qualification, with the practices involved emphasising both the materiality and performative effects of *kashrus* (cf. Jackson et al., 2019).

Simon also claimed that pre-packaged products imported from the US via market intermediaries such as Liebers Kosher Products<sup>15</sup> are increasingly popular, both for the shop

<sup>14</sup> [www.habersworld.com](http://www.habersworld.com)

<sup>15</sup> [https://issuu.com/gomarketing/docs/lieber\\_s\\_catalog](https://issuu.com/gomarketing/docs/lieber_s_catalog)

and for its customers, primarily because as mass-produced goods certified by the ‘big-five’ US kosher agencies<sup>16</sup> they are considerably less expensive. As Simon noted:

*‘The ultimate example is the OU... many American products, you’ll pick it up, you’ll not even know that it’s got a little stamp [or hechsher] on it somewhere, sometimes it’s literally miniscule. But the extra cost incurred by the supervision is defrayed almost totally by the fact that you’re... selling millions... to the general American public.’*

In conversation with the rabbi Yaakov on another occasion, Simon noted the impact of this ontological multiplicity on extrinsic consumer evaluations and judgements of quality in the store:

*‘Some people will accept the OU from America, the Orthodox Union, which is the biggest kosher organisation in the world, and other people won’t even touch it with a barge pole’.*

The photographer Leonard stated similarly that while for him personally: *‘Manchester Beth Din is ok, London Beth Din is ok... there are certain families that wouldn’t go near them.’* This was also noted by Daniel (a rabbi and synagogue manager) who affirmed that: *‘very religious people won’t go anywhere near [this type of] orthodox certification’.* These passing comments reinforce the ways in which, while the intrinsic qualities of kosher goods are derived from the quality attribution processes (i.e., *shechita*) certified by *more or less* strictly orthodox *kashrus* authorities, human actors also confer extrinsic qualities via competing judgements and evaluations, which can vary markedly from one consumer to the next.

Returning to the same intersection in Broughton Park, across Ashbourne Grove from Halpern’s is the MHMK-licensed MH Meats (remember Figure 2). Our first visit was met with interest by the three staff working in the shop, who immediately informed us that all the meat in the shop is of the highest MH quality, and mostly *glatt* kosher. The term *glatt* refers to kosher goods derived from carcasses that have undergone a more rigorous process of qualification under a stricter standard of *kashrus*. This involves internal checks for bruises and other blemishes on the lungs of an animal (which must be smooth and defect-free) and washing water over the surface of the lungs to check for bubbles. While all kosher meat undergoes a process of salting (koshering) within 72 hours of slaughter to stop blood congealing, *glatt* often involves further salting to remove any last residues of blood.

*Glatt* becomes a particularly insightful arena into the differential enactment of kosher that occurs alongside competing *hechsher* certifications and different consumer groups. Unlike Halpern’s, where we encountered multiple aisles of kosher products ascribed with qualities from *kashrus* authorities around the world, in MH Meats we find two walls of vertically stacked open refrigerators containing kosher meat and poultry products exclusively bearing the Mehadrin *hechsher*. Discussing the extra *glatt* qualities ascribed to kosher chickens in MH Meats, Leonard explained the significance of removing the last traces of blood from poultry carcasses to increase product quality:

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<sup>16</sup> Orthodox Union (OU) (<https://www.ou.org>), OK (<https://www.ok.org>); KOF-K (<https://www.kof-k.org>); Star-K (<https://www.star-k.org>) and CRC (<https://www.crcweb.org/kosher.php>).

*'It's supposed to be more comprehensive. The salting of the inside the chicken is facilitated by having a broken split chicken. So they're called split back chickens and they're the glatt version of a chicken, a kosher chicken.'*

While some of our research participants would eat any *glatt* product, others indicated that they only ate *glatt* from specific *kashrus* authorities. A young Prestwich housewife named Adina explained this situation care-fully when discussing the family's preference for 'Chalak Beit Yosef' beef *glatt*,<sup>17</sup> which is certified by the London Board of Shechita (LBS) and ordered from a local *Sephardi* butcher in the North Manchester community. This combination was important for Adina, as it enacts objects with specific cultural qualities: 'So we're *Sephardi*... my husband is from Syria, I come from a *Sephardi* [Greek] family as well, which is a degree stricter.' Although differences between *Sephardi* and Ashkenazi qualified goods are lessening within some Jewish communities and across markets, in some instances *Sephardi* enacted kosher is still seen to be of a higher *kashrus* quality.

As opposed to the US economic model, where *glatt* (and standard kosher) qualities are attributed to products within anonymous industrial slaughter facilities and meat processing factories under the supervision of the 'big five' kosher agencies (Lytton, 2013), in the European communal model *kashrus* qualities are usually attributed by established community organisations. While MBD and MHMK both oversee *shechita* slaughter in slaughter facilities close to the Manchester community, *glatt* qualities are attributed by butchers licensed by these authorities. Nathan, a rabbi working in *kashrus* for MBD, explained:

*'The glatt kosher is the standard of the meat, to do with the processing of the meat, and so the butchers do it, then the butchers can either sell glatt or they sell regular [kosher]. We have a new butcher started a few months ago and he only sells glatt, and we have a butcher, which sells both [standard kosher and glatt].'*

Meat, in this sense, is differentiated in distinct kosher 'goods' through successive processes of 'qualification' and 'requalification' (Callon et al., 2002). Ascribed qualities are in turn verified by the *hechshers* of particular *kashrus* authorities before they are placed on the counters of trusted licensees for extrinsic processes of consumer qualification (Higgins et al., 2011). Nathan also explained that MBD licensed butchers are inspected by an MBD *shomer* (plural: *shomrim*) to maintain *kashrus* standards,<sup>18</sup> but also that, when meat arrives at a butcher's premises, an internal *shomer* often oversees delivery and inspects the integrity of the *heschner*, before accepting the goods in question and attributing (or not) the final *glatt* qualities of that particular establishment. This offers crucial insight into how multiple agents of qualification come together in attributing meat as *glatt*, a process also occurring for kosher more broadly.

But this complicated story of kosher's qualification extends further. Due to the ongoing *globalising* of kosher markets (Lever and Fischer, 2018), Jewish consumers can also choose from a vast range of prepacked kosher goods in supermarkets and multinational retailers, although these ranges are only found in stores in close proximity to Jewish communities. Just past the junction of Leicester Road and Bury Old Road on the fringes of the North Manchester community in Cheetham Hill is a Tesco Hypermarket, which has one of the largest selections of prepacked kosher food in the UK. In the World Food section, we find vertical freezers and chilled cabinets with numerous branded kosher meat and dairy goods,

<sup>17</sup> <https://www.shechita.org/insight-chalak-beit-yosef-dayan-y-y-lichtenstein-rosh-beth-din-federation-synagogues/>

<sup>18</sup> In Jewish religious law, a *shomer* refers to someone who is entrusted with the care/custody of another person's object.

many of which had been ascribed with *kashrus* qualities at market intermediaries such as Gilberts Kosher Foods<sup>19</sup> (which now certifies UK meat products as both kosher and halal) and branding agencies such as Yarden<sup>20</sup> (who supply products certified by Israeli and US authorities). Kosher goods certified by the LBD and the Grand Rabbinat of Paris,<sup>21</sup> among others, were also available at Tesco during fieldwork, while MBD certified goods were also evident in global markets (Lever and Fischer, 2018).

These developments have been relatively recent. Fifty years ago, kosher products would have been very difficult to find outside butchers, delicatessens, and independent retailers within the community, yet they are now available in mainstream outlets for religious and non-religious consumers. Moreover, while an economic good becoming kosher at this time might have contained a very small number of ingredients, today the same kosher good might contain hundreds of ingredients, thus increasing the complexity of kosher qualification processes considerably (Lever and Fischer, 2018). As a young lawyer named Peter noted, these developments have direct implications for kosher consumption practice among younger generations, who: *'might be a bit stricter than they were years ago... because food products are a lot more complicated than they used to be.'*

This highlights how the expanding multiplicity of ingredients, particularly through industrial production, can make kosher consumption practice particularly challenging for strictly religiously consumers. It also consolidates the ontological multiplicity we observed throughout our fieldwork: as more certification authorities, *hechshers*, inspectors, and ingredients complicate the intrinsic qualification of kosher, likewise do various consumer groups extrinsically differentiate kosher along religious, health, generational, and other (e.g., affluence, cultural, geographical, psychological) lines that entail an expansion of the realities of what constitutes kosher in practice(s).

### **Kosher, multiplicity and ontological politics**

Our analysis identified three key kosher realities within which objects are enacted with multiple qualities across multiple sites of production and consumption. The first is an orthodox kosher linked to the European community model through established orthodox *kashrus* authorities; this is a flexible kosher, amenable to a range of licensed businesses in Manchester and to certified kosher goods sold in local, national and global markets. Historically, tensions around kosher qualification in Manchester have played out between orthodox and strictly orthodox authorities, and we can still see this today. Even so, unexpected consequences emerge in markets (Boltanski and Thévenot, 2006; Berndt et al., 2020) and tensions can also break out between competing orthodox authorities (Epstein and Gang, 2002) over mundane everyday goods. This occurred in the early 21<sup>st</sup> century when the *Mars Bar*,<sup>22</sup> accepted as kosher by LBD, was questioned by MBD on the grounds that it contained trace elements of animal ingredients and thus needed to be more rigorously supervised.

A retired housewife named Elizabeth in South Manchester remembered this situation clearly:

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<sup>19</sup> <http://gilbertskosherfoods.co.uk>

<sup>20</sup> <https://israelifooddirect.com>

<sup>21</sup> [www.consistoire.org](http://www.consistoire.org)

<sup>22</sup> A popular chocolate bar in the UK and US.

‘There was a thing about Mars Bars for a long while and they said you can eat a Mars Bar in London but as soon as you get as far as Manchester don’t eat a Mars Bar.’

For some of our interviewees, this type of controversy was linked back to the politics of *kashrus* in the old world where, as Yaakov confirmed:

‘Every Jewish community wants to feel as if it’s in charge of its own destiny and its own affairs because they all come from different parts of Europe where there were different cultures and different subgroups.’

**Table 2: Three kosher realities**

Versions of kosher	European community or US economic model	Enactments	Practices and controversies
<b>Orthodox</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ European community model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Multiple orthodox</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Everyday mundane</li> <li>○ Israeli products</li> </ul>
<b>Strictly orthodox</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ European community model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Multiple <i>glatt</i></li> <li>○ Sephardi</li> <li>○ Israeli</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Orthodox certification</li> <li>○ Israeli products</li> </ul>
<b>Globalising kosher</b>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ European community model</li> <li>○ US economic model</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Multiple orthodox</li> <li>○ Big five US agencies</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>○ Intermediaries and branding</li> <li>○ Dual kosher/halal certification</li> </ul>

The second version of kosher is a strictly orthodox kosher, which is again linked to the European community model and to the politics of *kashrus* in the old world, but which adheres more closely to *kashrus* authorities and communities that have historically challenged established orthodoxy in the new world. Discussions over *glatt* kosher lie at the centre of this kosher reality, where stringently ascribed *kashrus* qualities are made visible by MHMK using the Mehadrin *hechsher*. The BIRM enactment of a stricter version of kosher adds another level of complexity to the qualification process, not least because, as Nathan at MDB argued: ‘Israeli products have a certain holiness... and therefore have to be treated in a certain way.’ There are many complexities to this process, including the requirement to leave land in Israel fallow every seven years to restore the earth’s fertility, which adds a higher degree of uncertainty to intrinsic qualification processes for many kosher consumers.

The third kosher reality is a ‘globalising’ kosher, accepting of products from (m)any orthodox authorities and linked to both the European community model and US economic model (Epstein and Gang, 2002). Pre-packaged products found in Haber’s World certified by the OU provide a key example of this reality, with the qualities ascribed to objects by the OU being less noticeable (i.e., a smaller, less discernible *heschner*) than they are in the other two realities. This arguably allows kosher goods from orthodox certifiers to blend more agreeably into global markets and find their way to health-conscious consumers via market intermediaries, branding agencies and supermarkets, but where potentially controversial dual kosher and halal certification has emerged.

As routes to market continue to proliferate, the differences between kosher goods ascribed with *more or less strictly* attributed qualities are likely to blur further. This does not mean that that the politics of *kashrus* within kosher production and consumption will lessen, more

that it will become increasingly dispersed (as in the case of dual halal and kosher certification)<sup>23</sup> and at the same time ever more strictly observed (within Jewish communities). Nathan at MBD suggested that there is nothing unusual about politics of *kashrus* in this sense, and that the service provided by any *kashrus* authority is the same as that provided by:

*'... any business, you go to Sainsbury's and Tesco, you know where Cornflakes is cheaper, it's not only going to be the price, obviously it's going to be the service which they supply to you. So, the price might be less, but the service might be more demanding or whatever the requirements are.'*

Yet, while the services provided by *kashrus* authorities may find some degree of resonance with consumers' choices between competing supermarkets for any number of consumer goods, perhaps overlooked is the fact that enrolment in one version of kosher or another becomes politically imbued by virtue of the implications any kosher good sustains through personal experience. Indeed, the visceral and corporeal aspect of ingesting flesh considered kosher was alluded to by several interviewees, including Adina when discussing her shopping experiences:

*'I think it's more you pay for what you get... I'm paying because... more work has gone into the chicken that I'm buying than the chicken that I could get in Tesco.'*

A veritable maze of connections is involved in this process, including cloven-hoofed animals, certification bodies and butchers, but also rabbis, synagogues, historical community and kinship ties, as well as moral and spiritual concerns. As this terrain continues to shift, so too are the politics of *kashrus*, as kosher consumption practice undergoes subtle and profound shifts and is performed in ever more complex ways. The changing nature of consumption, seen here through the lens of kosher, clearly indicates the highly politicised nature of practices within contemporary food markets, which we explore further in the conclusions.

## **Conclusion**

This paper has explored the ways in which kosher consumption practice is aligned with ongoing processes of qualification and requalification. Drawing on empirical research in Manchester, we have seen that meat products are not uniform; kosher chicken is not simply kosher chicken. The process for foods to become kosher through adherence to *kashrus* is not so straightforward. Instead, the qualification of kosher emerges from practices involving specific devices and intermediaries: flesh and knives, inspectors and rabbis, supply chains and retailers. Its realities are multiple; ontologically different versions of kosher are enacted in different kosher markets and among different consumers (Mol, 1999; 2002). Together, these varieties reflect the fact that different koshers coexist, circulate, and occasionally interfere – as the cases of competing *kashrus* authorities and the *Mars Bar* demonstrate – within the economic spaces of Manchester and globalising kosher markets.

As different koshers continue to coexist, competing claims of what is (un)acceptable – reliant on the conference of ontological status through qualification – have implications for consumers' social identities. Taken to their furthest, interfering yet nonetheless overlapping kosher practices may generate divergently globalized and insular orthodox practices. Such cohesive-yet-distinct groups have, to an extent, coalesced already, as evident through the

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<sup>23</sup> Kellogg's cereal products have long had dual kosher and halal certification, but meat is more recent and potentially controversial.



divisions within Manchester's Jewish community. If these social formations and systematically assigned categories become further rigid and stratified, the coherence of kosher itself may be in the balance. The possibility that one version of kosher dominates or that kosher splinters into distinct objects (*à la glatt*), however, is tempered by the cultural and spatial ties reinforcing consumption practices, from consumers' rabbinical allegiance and the place they worship, to their proclivity toward shopping at Tesco, to a concern for the geographical origins of a product (or its ingredients). Indeed, there is a nuanced interplay of cultural dynamics informing the moment(s) of kosher consumption. At the same time, there are political economic consequences to this, as well.

In globalising markets, the kinds of actors involved in qualification play an outsized role. The effect of non-Jewish or non-religious consumers in the expansion of kosher market's in the US indicates that other perceived qualities (other than conformity to religious rules) – including safety, (w)holiness, organoleptic qualities and environmental compatibility (Silvern, 2021) – are motivating these buyers, who may not be interested in the 'authenticity' of kosher or the integrity of the certification process, but in the 'aura' of the kosher attribute (Hamerman et al., 2019). The privileging of lower production costs in contemporary capitalism, most evident in the US industrial processing facilities where meat and other everyday products (from *Mars Bars* or Coca-cola to Oreo biscuits) are qualified as kosher, risks dissolving kosher's multiplicity, and foreclosing the potential for difference. Will the strength of cultural ties among Jewish communities prevent this? Are their identities at risk from the continued globalising of kosher consumption?

We can speculate from our findings that the religious and political identity of these communities is most at risk when latent unresolved controversies become activated beyond the communities themselves, as in the UK and other European countries where the abolition of religious slaughter without stunning has gained significant consensus during the last century (Lever, 2019). In such cases, the qualification of kosher food becomes an area of contestation wherein identity (see Miele, 2016) and materiality attain political significance, thus leading to normative claims over qualification made not by consumption communities themselves, but rather by legal authorities or popular (social) media. Our findings suggest that unravelling the material connections constituting kosher objects help to understand these shifting conditions of possibility, and we invite more complete answers to the effects and consequences of this relational materiality from future research.

If the cultural practices of Jewish consumers may help forestall the dominance of one qualification process, the same cannot be said for qualities attributed to other products. For example, we might suggest that the uptake of Fair Trade across any conceivable product is the result of a process for qualifying goods spreading too far, too fast. Its co-optation by corporations reflects a tendency for capitalist relations to dominate qualification in the food system (Jaffee and Howard, 2010). Debates about what consumers prefer to eat (organic, vegetarian, vegan, free range, halal, fair trade, local, and surely other products) and how they perceive the qualities of (kosher) foods reflect the increasingly important role of food in identity production and the increasing politicization of food itself (Sassatelli, 2007). The intensification of contestation concerning the certification of kosher meat is thus symptomatic of a wider concern amongst many consumers about what they put in their shopping baskets and, ultimately, what they ingest. Perhaps, the longstanding negotiations over kosher within Jewish communities in Manchester (and elsewhere) can help with analysing ontological questions elsewhere in the economy of qualities. Closer attention to how qualification is negotiated between consumers, certification organisations, and cultural, religious and

economic interests may offer new entry points into investigating these politics of contemporary consumption. As we have seen, rather than promoting homogenization of certification standards and singularisation of kosher qualities (as many would assume), the globalization of kosher reveals the multiplication of consumption practice(s) that have emerged in line with the growing complexity of industrial food production.

Finally, our work extends the theoretical links between ontological politics and the economy of qualities. Indeed, if objects and qualities are both enacted through heterogeneous material and semiotic practices, our analysis confirms that although qualities are less stable than objects, there is immense work required to enact markets and negotiate the ontological politics of qualification (Evans et al., 2022). The enactment of kosher is performative in the sense that it produces varied social and geographical effects, yet these effects are also paradoxical (cf. Jackson et al., 2019). On the one hand, kosher is enacted as an ethical and political object that excludes specific meat products and communities. On the other hand, objects are enacted with qualities that broaden the appeal of kosher products (in global markets) while increasing the demand for more stringent *kashrus* qualities (in local, community markets). There are surely other object-quality entanglements in the food industry that warrant scrutiny. We therefore encourage further research exploring how the complexity of consumption practice unfolds through ontological politics and processes of qualification that allow diverse market actors to assert and prioritise different political realities with (often) unknown, relational consequences.

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