• *Articles* •

Mommy Juice: Internet Memes and the Dark Humor of Wine Consumption Among American Mothers

JAMES B. SEAVER
Independent Historian and Folklorist

Abstract: *This article explores the role that Internet wine humor memes have played in reinforcing—and occasionally criticizing—the popularity of wine as the putative drink of choice for American mothers in the twenty-first century. It argues that various forms of this creative content have helped to normalize high rates of alcohol consumption among many middle-age, middle-class, predominantly white mothers raising children in the United States today. As such, they may reflect and even adversely influence the growing rates of mental health issues and Alcohol Use Disorders reported by public health authorities among this demographic during the past two decades.*

In February 2019, my sister, a full-time office administrator and mother of a nine-year-old and a four-year-old, sent me a text message containing a humorous wine meme she had just seen on Facebook. [1] The image, taken from the popular Disney Channel children's animated series, *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse*, showed the eponymous anthropomorphic rodent breaking the fourth wall as he whispered an aside to his preschool-age television audience.

The meme's anonymous author had not altered any of Mickey's words from the program; the creator had merely captioned them near the bottom of the photo to highlight Mickey saying "That's a surprise tool that can help us later" in reference to a "mystery Mouseketool" whose supposed utility would be revealed later in the episode. Broadly speaking, the "Mouseketool" meme was hardly new; it had originated as early as April 2017 before going viral in a number of different iterations that often involved weapons, illegal drugs, or condoms. [2] In the particular form sent to me by my sister, however, Mickey Mouse's "mystery Mouseketool" was a bottle of wine. The meme's main caption, positioned prominently above the photo of Mickey with his gloved hand to his mouth, reframed the image to place it within the context of a workplace conversation. "Why have you got a bottle of wine under your desk?" a coworker asks. The anonymous author's answer is meant to represent a reply from "me," meaning anyone viewing the meme at that moment. It comes in the form of a recontextualized utterance of Mickey's original "mystery Mouseketool" statement: "That's a surprise tool that can help us later…" [3]

The text message from my sister came in the form of a screenshot from her cell phone showing her Facebook news feed. From what I could tell, apparently someone had reposted the wine meme to a private Facebook group catering to mothers seeking travel advice and planning trips to the Walt Disney World Resort in Orlando, Florida. By the time my sister saw it, the post had already garnered three dozen likes and other expressions of approval from its viewers, suggesting that it must have resonated with them on a personal level somehow. And here it was not especially difficult to discern who those particular viewers probably were: women who balanced professional obligations in the workplace with the responsibilities of parenting young children. If their children regularly watched *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* on the Disney Channel, then it is likely that these mothers would have been familiar with the show's format and its frequent references to Mouseketools. But why exactly would they find this particular meme funny? Presumably because they were fairly avid wine drinkers who understood that having a bottle of wine on hand could assist with stress management later in the day.

The aforementioned example is but one of countless Internet wine memes in circulation that have been created by and/or for women who feel overextended by the daily demands of being parents and professionals. One could argue that in the twenty-first

century they have helped, in part, to perpetuate the common stereotype that wine is the alcoholic beverage of choice for middle-aged, middle-class, predominantly white women with children. (The alcohol advertising industry has done much more to drive that process, of course. In spite of mild attempts to diversify its customer base in recent decades, this remains its primary target demographic. [4]) Like consuming a glass of wine itself, there's little to no harm in laughing at the occasional mildly humorous joke or image that one encounters online; in fact, it may even burn off a little frustration or anxiety. But cumulatively, one cannot help but wonder if a steady diet of comical wine memes rooted in the trivialization of overconsumption might influence or even exacerbate an individual's susceptibility to experiencing an Alcohol Use Disorder (AUD). [5]

Does the content one encounters on the Internet ultimately affect how a person consumes alcohol? I believe that it can. I argue here that the often facetious manner in which wine consumption is depicted in wine humor memes has helped to foster a widespread acceptance of higher-risk drinking behaviors that can mask the prevalence and severity of Alcohol Use Disorders among American mothers. That is to say, it normalizes drinking in excess in the short term (binge drinking, which is defined by the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism [NIAAA] as four or more alcoholic beverages for a woman in a two-hour period) as well as in the long term (alcoholism or an Alcohol Use Disorder [AUD], which the NIAAA defines as "a chronic relapsing brain disease characterized by compulsive alcohol use, loss of control over alcohol intake, and a negative emotional state when not using"). [6] The gravity of such problems is obscured whenever wine is rebranded on the Internet with the common tongue-in-cheek, euphemistic moniker of *mommy juice*. [7] The suggestion in such instances is that, while the children are drinking fruit-flavored juice boxes, their mothers standing—or, more likely, laboring—nearby may enjoy a glass or two of Pinot Grigio, Chardonnay, or some other fermented grape juice product to take the edge off. But to speak of an alcoholic beverage so flippantly is to downplay its power as a habit-forming intoxicant that can lead to addiction and the many concomitant problems associated with it. Nevertheless, after the caffeine in coffee, alcohol remains the most popular mind-altering substance widely available to American moms without a prescription, and one that, it seems, many of them have come to rely on to help get through another busy day. This article will underscore the role that wine humor memes

have played in this process in recent years as well as the critical interpretation and pushback that they are increasingly generating among American mothers themselves.

During the past decade, social scientists, cultural critics, and medical experts alike have attempted to draw attention to a hidden yet growing public health concern in American society: namely, that the unreasonable expectations of contemporary motherhood are increasingly driving many women to self-medicate with alcohol—and oftentimes wine in particular—in ways that may present risks to their short- and long-term health and wellness. According to author Gabrielle Glaser, "Alcohol is a socially acceptable, legal way to muscle through the postfeminist, breadwinning, or stay-at-home life women lead. It's a drug women can respectably use in public and in private, even if it carries with it the risk of taking them under." [8] She notes a growing cultural anxiety about the way in which many American mothers are quietly self-medicating with alcohol to get through each day, frequently engaging in high-risk drinking behaviors that may culminate in an Alcohol Use Disorder. In her own work, Glaser acknowledges the occasional, sensationalist stories in the news about alcoholic "bad moms" who harm themselves and their families through their seemingly irresponsible choices. Even so, she writes, "[t]he real story is a silent, utterly bourgeois, and hiding-in-plain-sight problem: How a lot of American women are hanging right over a cliff" as they seek to manage the increasingly unmanageable demands placed upon them as partners, parents, and professionals. [9] Glaser's observations are echoed in a growing body of social science literature for popular and academic audiences on the connections between motherhood, stress, and alcohol consumption. [10]

Public health experts also have proven themselves useful in highlighting these connections with quantitative data. For example, we know from a recent NIAAA statistical study that alcohol-related deaths in the United States doubled between 1999 and 2017. While men continued to comprise the majority (76.4%) of those who died, the biggest increase in mortality rates occurred among non-Hispanic white women, with that trend accelerating in the years since 2010. The study's authors observed similar increases in the prevalence of drinking (up 10.1%), binge drinking (up 23.3%), and hospitalizations and emergency room visits among women. When the statistics were analyzed by age group, the study's authors noted that "deaths related to chronic alcohol use increased most for people

aged 25-34," with the highest number of alcohol-related deaths occurring among men and women between 45 and 74 years of age. [11] The NIAAA study sticks to the numbers in its analysis without suggesting much in the way of causation; nevertheless, the reader may draw the conclusion that many white women of child-bearing age are drinking significantly more than in previous decades, suggesting perhaps that motherhood might exert some sort of influence upon such behavior.

Not surprisingly, predominantly white women of child-bearing age, especially those who live in middle- and upper-middle-class suburban areas, are the same demographic that is frequently targeted by advertisers marketing wine products to the American public. [12] According to author Ann Dowsett Johnston, "Women's buying power has been growing for decades, and our decision-making authority has grown as well. The alcohol industry, well aware of this reality, is now battling for our downtime—and our brand loyalty." She draws our attention to the proliferation of "[w]ines with names like Girls' Night Out, MommyJuice, Mommy's Time Out, Cupcake, and yes, Happy Bitch," which can be found on store shelves across the nation. Johnston wonders if wine labels that stress celebration and cutting loose also promote high-risk behaviors like binge drinking and addiction. "[I]t's the widespread normalization of heavier consumption that translates to serious trouble," she warns. Most importantly, Johnston asks sobering questions about the motivations that might lie behind such behaviors: "Has alcohol become the modern woman's steroid, enabling her to do the heavy lifting necessary in an endlessly complex world? Is it the escape valve women need, in the midst of a major social revolution still unfolding [in the workplace and the home]? How much of this is marketing, and how much is the need to numb?" [13]

It may very well be the case that folklorists—yes, folklorists—are the experts best suited to answer some of these questions. By dint of their distinctive methodological approach as scholars, folklorist Andrea Kitta contends, she and her colleagues are "uniquely positioned to understand" public health issues in ways that might be downplayed or even unacknowledged by medical professionals from other fields. What advantages do they have up their sleeves? Kitta explains,

> To begin, folklorists spend a great deal of time looking at the transmission of information and the networks associated with that information. … Folklorists often

> concern themselves with how narratives are transmitted, how they circulate, how people meet and know each other, and how those people interact.
>
> Significantly, folklorists also understand the importance of narrative. … Additionally, folklorists offer an understanding of the effect tradition has on these topics[,] … [as well as] the importance of dynamism and variation. …
>
> Folklorists seek to understand the nature of representation and often choose to study—and sometimes speak for—those who they perceive do not have a voice. Folklore scholars have long studied issues associated with representation; they continue to be engaged in conversations about how to collaborate with their participants so as to best represent them. … [Those people] should also be considered … participant[s] in the process, and perhaps a part of the solution. [14]

All of this is to say, the stories that people tell about themselves and their health concerns matter. The ways in which they position themselves and their own health narratives within certain communities matter. The jokes they tell—even when it's laughter through tears—in Internet memes and other types of humor matter, too. And, collectively, a thorough appreciation of their value systems, traditions, and expressive cultures can lead everyone (whether medical professionals or not) to a better understanding of the challenges faced by a particular group of people while also suggesting meaningful ways of involving them in finding effective solutions. As such, public health experts, community health educators, and others in the medical community would do well to pay attention to the growing number of folklore publications on medical topics of shared interest—such as the AIDS epidemic, vaccinations and anti-vaxxers, and disability issues—and work to include folklorists in their research and outreach more generally. [15]

A folkloristic analysis of the link between motherhood and wine drinking in popular culture can help explain how increased alcohol consumption among American mothers has become normalized, concealed, often expected, and even actively encouraged in the early twenty-first century. And while a broad-spectrum, lengthy study of the problem is certainly warranted, a concentrated look at wine humor memes online represents a good start. Indeed, as Limor Shifman explains,

> memes may best be understood as cultural information that passes along from person to person, yet gradually scales into a shared social phenomenon. Although they spread on a micro basis, memes' impact is on the macro: They shape the mindsets, forms of behavior, and actions of social groups. This attribute is highly compatible to the way culture is formed in the so-called era of Web 2.0, which is marked by application platforms for facilitating user-generated content. YouTube,

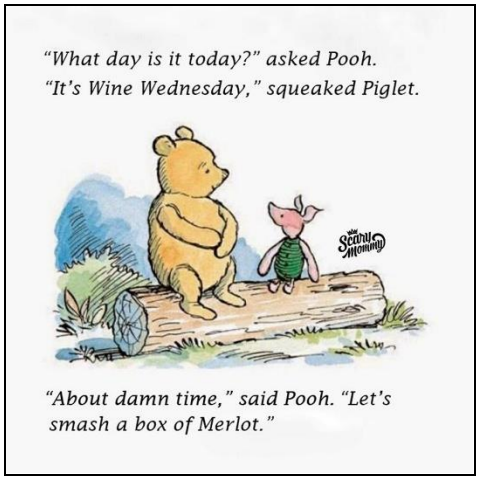
> Twitter, Facebook, Wikipedia, and other similar applications are based on [the] propagation of content … of users by users for users. [16]

Shifman emphasizes not only the viral nature of Internet memes, but also their tendency to mutate as content moves across time and space, much like a virus itself. "They can spread content *as is* by forwarding, linking, or copying. Yet … people do choose to create their *own versions* of Internet memes, in startling volumes. Two main repackaging strategies of memes are prevalent on the web: mimicry and remix," she notes. [17] And so we see that such creative content involves the interplay between tradition and innovation. It involves vernacular expression among groups of people with similar interests. It can involve narratives as well. Which is to say, it provides excellent grist for folklorists looking to understand larger phenomena like the connection between modern American motherhood and wine drinking. After all, as folklorist Lynne McNeill reminds us, "For as flippant as many memes may be, there are others that speak to surprisingly heavy social issues"—issues like the stress of modern motherhood and the impulse to provide self-care through alcohol consumption. [18]

Let us return to the *Mickey Mouse Clubhouse* "Mouseketool" meme that my sister sent me, the one in which a coworker is told that a hidden bottle of wine is "a surprise tool that can help us later." Why is this funny? Some of its humor lies in the irreverent juxtaposition of content meant for preschool-age children (a Disney Channel animated series) with an alcoholic beverage only intended for consumption by adults over the age of 21. For mothers with minor-aged children in particular, it might also be a subtle nod to an evening ritual of having a glass or two of wine (or, for some, perhaps even more) around dinnertime and/or after the kids are in bed as a way of melting away the stress of the day. Maybe it's the only time they'll have that day for a moment of self-care, a respite from the incessant demands of career and family. Ann Dowsett Johnston admits that in her own life, she "was using wine to decompress, to ease into the second shift of the evening—and so too were my friends, both the stay-at-home mothers and my professional peers. As many women [have] discovered, a drink is a punctuation mark of sorts, between day and night." [19] A blogger writing under the name "An Anonymous Mom" had an even darker confession: "My life is not my own, it hasn't been for a very long time, and I am weary from

being everything to everyone in my house. I am tired. Mothering is hard. Wine makes it easier. … [It's] my daily dose of sanity." [20] To laugh, even for a moment, at Mickey's mischievous Mouseketool would be to acknowledge the power of gallows humor when a mother feels almost at the end of her tether. [21]

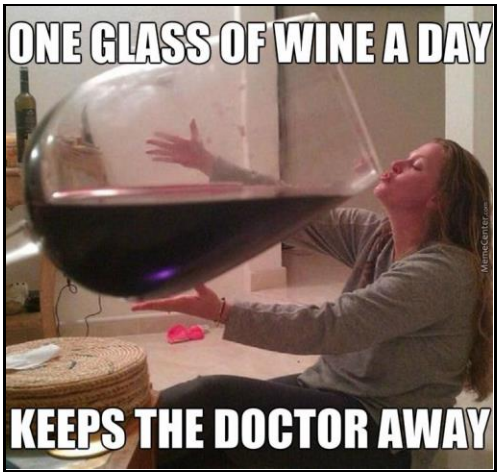
The Mouseketool meme is hardly the only example of iconic children's characters being appropriated to trivialize and promote wine consumption. The website Scary Mommy, which bills itself as "one of the largest, most influential and trusted sources of entertainment and information for millennial moms online[,] … a community of millions of women, supporting each other through acceptance, empowerment, and the shared experience of motherhood," has over four million Facebook followers as of this writing. [22] Contributor-submitted think pieces about wine and motherhood are quite popular on the platform, as is wine-related meme content. In July 2017, its Facebook page posted a doctored image of the classic A. A. Milne children's book cartoon characters Winnie the Pooh and his sidekick Piglet supposedly having a conversation about wine:



The post clearly resonated with its viewers; over 15,000 of them liked it in some way, nearly 4,000 commented on it, and the image itself was shared an additional 10,000 times on people's personal Facebook pages. [23] Once again, the humor lay in hearing beloved children's characters acting in decidedly kid-unfriendly ways: proposing that Wednesday itself was reason enough to drink; using profanity to express a sense of anticipation; and suggesting that the only suitable response was to "smash" an entire box of Merlot. Boxed wine is, of course, a product that is frequently marketed to women. A box of Franzia Merlot holds *five* liters of wine in it, or approximately 34 5-oz. glasses. [24] Clearly Pooh and Piglet

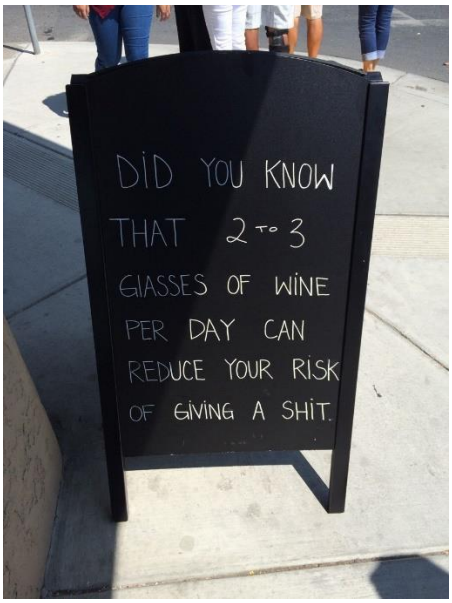
have their work cut out for them, which only makes the meme funnier for parental viewers who possess detailed knowledge of both Winnie the Pooh and the excessive consumption of boxed wine. It is likely that quite a few of the 10,000 people who reposted this cartoon image recontextualized Milne's nearly century-old characters even further with personal captions of their own, to be read by their friends and family in their own news feeds.

There is another common type of wine meme that circulates widely on social media outlets like Facebook and Instagram in the form of images and GIFs. It is the notion of wine as an alleged health food, which traces its origins back to American media stories about the "French paradox" during the 1990s. According to this theory, people in France have lower rates of heart disease as a result of their regular red wine consumption habits. [25] That has been popularly interpreted on this side of the Atlantic to mean that if one glass is good for you, then larger quantities of wine must be even better. [26] Case in point:



It is worth noting that the photo that forms the basis for this particular iteration is a perennial favorite among the wine meme community and thus takes many forms, often viewed through the lens of motherhood:

Invoking the language of medical doctors and the perspective of self-medication, other circulated Internet content highlights the power of wine to numb one's negative emotions. [27]



One can only imagine the feelings that one might be attempting to quell here. Anger? Frustration? Exhaustion? Perfectionism? Anxiety? Sadness? Or perhaps some combination thereof? Shared images like the one above are meant to be laughed at, and in so doing, they blunt the harder edges of motherhood that, if blogs and other online commentary are to be believed, represent the loss of self that many women experience during their quest to "have it all," i.e., to excel both in the workplace and in the home in spite of the structural barriers, entrenched sexism, and lack of support they experience from the people—let's be honest here: usually men—around them. As novelist Diksha Basu wrote in a *New York Times* op-ed, "Motherhood … has become synonymous with sacrifice. … Maybe more of us would

have children if it weren't seen as such an exercise in sacrifice. If we weren't told that we were going to lose every bit of the self we had finally grown to love. … I want to be a mother and a writer, and a whole slew of other things, with no thought given to the order of those identities." [28] It is, she admits, a challenge to stay positive under such circumstances, to focus on what is good and what is fun about motherhood. Perhaps wine memes couched in the language of self-medication or self-care help to burn away some of the negativity many mothers experience today.

And then, of course, there are the wine humor memes that highlight some mothers' inability to live up to their own or other people's performance standards. A personal favorite of this author involves the infamous Elf on the Shelf, a relatively recent yet widely popular Christmastime tradition meant to blackmail small children who still believe in Santa Claus into behaving appropriately for their parents because the Elf is watching. [29] The kids are told that the Elf doll, whom they cannot touch, flies to the North Pole each night to inform Santa of their naughty and nice deeds. When they wake up in the morning, the Elf has moved to a new location in the home to continue surveilling the activities of the children. At least, if the parents remember to move him or her after the kids have gone to bed…

This captioned image invokes the popular "Woman Yelling at a Cat" meme that went viral in the second half of 2019. [30] But while the emotionally distraught, shouting woman from the television program *Real Housewives of Beverly Hills* remains true to form, here the cat has been replaced with the impish Elf on the Shelf. The "Damn Elf on the Shelf" caption at the bottom adds an extra layer of humor with its patently dubious suggestion that *the Elf* is to blame for disappointing the mother's children in the weeks leading up to Christmas. Along similar lines, other memes poke fun at the idea of good intentions that fall short of living up to people's expectations of what "good mothering" supposedly looks like. Take for example:

The faux-Roy Lichtenstein-esque, mid-twentieth-century suburban housewife, clad in apron and oven mitts, consumes an entire bottle of wine while attempting to prepare food for her family. Presumably, she has become so intoxicated (but delightfully so, judging by the smile on her face) that her family has gone hungry due to her forgetfulness and dereliction of what some people would still consider her primary maternal duty. True, it's not the funniest joke on the Internet, but if there's any consolation to be found here, perhaps it's in providing mothers who enjoy drinking wine just a little too much the opportunity to say, "OK, I'm bad, but I'm not *that* bad." One final example of this particular theme takes the irreverence to a new level with its suggestion that this particular mother drinks wine in light of her failure to manage family planning successfully:

The responsibilities for birth control and the termination of pregnancies are still placed substantially upon women in contemporary American society, even when predominantly male governing bodies attempt to regulate their access to those goods and services. The grim joke in this meme is that the woman is drinking to forget the regret she feels about having (more) children and therefore putting herself in a position where she is expected to fulfill the duties of motherhood.

The "mommy juice" and "wine mom" Internet memes go on and on, and the brief survey provided here only begins to provide some indication of the wide variety of tones and themes contained therein. In spite of such variation, in most cases the humorous images and accompanying captions help to reinforce the stereotype in contemporary American society that wine is the beverage of choice for middle-aged, middle-class, predominantly white mothers. Furthermore, these memes, which circulate widely on social media platforms and parenting websites, help to normalize excessive consumption and high-risk drinking behaviors by rebranding them as coping mechanisms and self-care for women overwhelmed and exhausted by the pressures of modern motherhood.

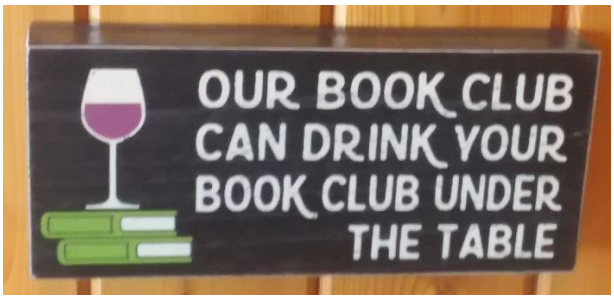
Such memes are problematic for a number of reasons. First and foremost, they pathologize motherhood, depicting it as something almost akin to a disease that requires self-medication with a large glass of wine. That supposed solution is easier to achieve in the short and the long term than giving American mothers what they desire: namely, more support from their partners, better and more affordable childcare options, paid family leave, income levels equal to that of men, and less pressure to live up to other people's standards of perfection. [31] But it comes at the cost of edging many women closer to the point of having a medically diagnosable Alcohol Use Disorder and the various problems

that frequently accompany it. Gabrielle Glaser, concerned about her own wine consumption in a society where alcohol is widely available and even considered requisite for many social occasions, eventually "gained an understanding [of] … how easily, how swiftly, how imperceptibly you could slip into a habit" if you didn't watch yourself and limit your intake. [32] She writes of women "who fear they drink too much but haven't yet suffered serious consequences." [33] Some of them seek out support or guidance on the Internet in blog posts (some anonymous, some not) or in popular places like Facebook's 700,000-member parenting group "Moms Who Need Wine." Glaser herself is quite familiar with this phenomenon:

> Online, in posts to perfect lady-strangers, the women confess. They unburden themselves to other worried drinkers who find that their own jobs and cooking and homework and college applications and clothes left in the dryer … are all a little easier to cope with after they pour themselves a nice glass of chardonnay. … They have the sneaking suspicion that the one glass that slid into two and then three and, oh, what the hell, now four, is a bad sign. [34]

Even in cyberspace, it seems, misery loves company. But that company can also reinforce self-destructive behaviors if such reinforcement is couched in the flippant language of Internet humor.

Simply put, the various manifestations of "mommy juice" and "wine mom" culture—Internet memes, yes, but also things like the wide assortment of customized beverage containers, home décor, and apparel available to the target demographic—function as symptoms of American society's systematic failure to provide many of its mothers with the comprehensive support they need to thrive in that role.



Examples of consumer items marketed to women wine drinkers at wineries and flea markets around the United States.

Photos on the left, right, and bottom by the author. Middle photo courtesy of Tara Saunders.

Again, Glaser writes, "Wine is far easier" as a temporary solution. "It's civilizing. It's good for us. We're supposed to drink it, right? … The problem, of course, arises when … women are not sipping a glass or two with dinner to relax. They are building their days around drinking time. Which for some begins as soon as the youngest child gets on the bus." [35] For too many women, that problem remains hidden, an additional source of anxiety as they struggle to live up to everyone's expectations as partners, professionals, and parents.

There is, however, a growing chorus of women online who are fed up with casual joking about excessive wine consumption as a coping mechanism for the trials and tribulations of contemporary American motherhood. These blog posts, op-eds, and think pieces come in many flavors and often reflect the unique personal experiences of their

authors. But the common thread that runs through them all is the idea of normalization. That is to say, they condemn casual ways in which social media and other digital content inculcate in women the idea that it's essentially okay to binge drink on a regular basis as long as it's wine (as opposed to, say, tequila or vodka) and as long as the drinker can still meet other people's expectations of her without suggesting to anyone that she might be developing a problem. For example, writer Bridget Pendergraft complains, "These days I can hardly get on social media without running into an onslaught of "Mommy Juice" memes. … I don't blame memes for my alcohol addiction, but I do believe they play a part in desensitization. They made me feel like it was normal. They made it much easier to rationalize. I deserved those drinks because I was a mom and, gosh darn it, I worked hard to be a good mom." [36]

Writer Sarah Cottrell found herself in a similar situation. "As a mother, I find the number of demands put upon me in a single week dizzying and never-ending," she admits. "And so, like a lot of moms at the end of a long day, I turn to the Internet and my nightly wine. … Memes, blogs, all those snarky and witty women with clean houses and bold statements of being a 'hot mess' but 'have some wine' [have] become so normalized, I somehow didn't see it when my one glass of wine turned to five each night." [37] Carrie, one of the women she interviewed for her popular article on the now-defunct parenting website Babble, also pointed to her online activity and what she was exposed to there as enabling factors in the development of her own drinking problem. She admits, "I definitely feel [the memes] encourage moms to drink. … They made me feel like it was not only perfectly acceptable for moms to drink, but also that I should be drinking, that this is what moms do to deal with stress. They drink. And I'm the odd one out for not drinking." [38] Carrie brings up a very good point: namely, that it can be hard to socialize with other mothers if you are a woman who, for whatever reason, expresses any reluctance to imbibe with the rest of the group. Parenting blogger Celeste Yvonne lamented in a widely circulated Facebook post that "alcohol is the only drug that we have to explain NOT using." [39] The burden of explanation can feel particularly onerous for women who might be reluctant to admit to having an Alcohol Use Disorder and/or being in recovery. They rightly bristle at others' attempts to make them justify their decision to decline an alcoholic beverage or their desire not to be in the same room with one. Sadly, however, a potential

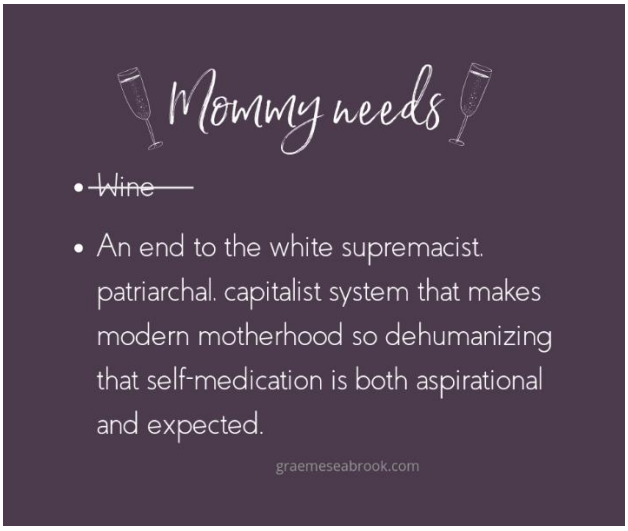
repercussion of this personal preference is that the non-drinkers will be marginalized by those who continue to drink, losing invitations and much-needed social support from other moms in the process. The cruel irony of that outcome is that memes circulating within online communities have helped to normalize high-risk drinking behaviors to a point where refusing to participate on that same level can leave one feeling ostracized.

Beyond memes, some of the think-piece writers and bloggers whose work I surveyed put the blame elsewhere. Writer Kristi Coulter confessed to being angry not only at the patriarchy, fashion magazines, and social media for the unreasonable standards of beauty and achievement they impose, but also at women themselves for going along with those expectations and "for being so easily mollified by a bottle" when they fell short. [40] *HuffPost* contributor Lauren Stevens points an accusatory finger at alcohol manufacturers who know that many mothers are vulnerable to addiction yet nevertheless "continue this charade by marketing wine and liquors that make light of, and cater to, moms drinking for release." [41] And writer Meghan Splawn rightly calls out the obvious sexism and the gender double-standard that demeans wine as "mommy juice" while failing to characterize beer as "daddy juice"—"although," she admits, "it'd probably sell well, TBH [to be honest]." As a child herself of a parent with addiction issues, Splawn also worries about the long-term impact that high-risk behaviors related to alcohol consumption might have upon her own children if they were to internalize such expectations of parenthood. She encourages parents not to use inappropriate euphemisms like "mommy juice" for alcoholic beverages around kids, preferring instead to call them by their proper names as part of "help[ing] our children develop healthy relationships with alcohol." [42]

Finally, some bloggers have chosen to place the blame squarely on the American social, economic, and political systems that expect so much of them simultaneously as workers and mothers in the early twenty-first century that they give until they feel like they have nothing left of themselves. Sarah Hosseini characterizes in stark terms the wine consumption that eased her 5 o'clock transition from professional to parent each day. "I needed to numb the burden of second shift," she writes. "I needed to feel like myself again, a human, an adult woman who didn't only exist on this earth to change poopy diapers and manage toddler playdates. I needed to find humor in my abysmal life[,] and the only way I

could laugh about it was with one, two, or three glasses of wine every single night. I'm not alone and my story isn't unique." [43] One wonders, of course, if wine memes encountered on the Internet ever assisted in eliciting that grim laughter. It's likely that they did.

Sadly, wine memes that tap into the critical sentiments expressed by these astute think-piece writers and bloggers are few and far between. In our current keyed-up political and cultural atmosphere where the language of crisis is regularly employed, few people want to dwell on the fact that increased alcohol consumption by women in the United States represents a hidden yet growing public health concern, particularly while casually scrolling through social media. Nevertheless, an audience for more envelope-pushing memes does exist, and it is comprised of people eager to see a new spin put on tired punchlines. For proof, one need look no farther than a widely circulated, genre-defying Facebook meme whose words eventually made their way onto silk-screened apparel and tote bags in the spring of 2019:



The statement, first posted by parenting writer and speaker Graeme Seabrook, is both a clear rejection of wine as a coping mechanism for the immense pressure that she and other mothers feel today and a battle cry for American society to reform the system that so frequently robs them of their sense of self. [44] Perhaps it would be a nice change of pace to see other wine memes that tap into this radical theme.

As a historian and folklorist interested in alcohol issues who has also spent many years working in the wine industry, I'm troubled to think that an alcoholic beverage

enjoyed by so many might also be secretly causing problems for tired, stressed-out mothers across the United States. I certainly don't see any harm in having an occasional glass or two of wine; in fact, in the past I've recommended it to friends and family for, among other purposes, decompression and stress relief. (Maybe I—a non-parent—had nevertheless encountered enough wine memes to internalize their subtext as well?) And addiction treatment specialists will tell you that wine is far from the only culprit worth blaming in our nation's longtime struggle with Alcohol Use Disorders. Nevertheless, the "mommy juice" and "wine mom" humor memes that circulate online have done much in recent decades to reinforce the notion (also promulgated by the advertising industry) that wine should be the drink of choice for middle-aged, middle-class, predominantly white women with children. Furthermore, they have helped to normalize high-risk consumption habits like binge drinking that can lead to addiction. I'm okay with wine itself; but I'm no longer okay with many of the jokes people tell about it on the Internet and in real life. If Facebook, Instagram, and other platforms where memes circulate are to be like Mickey Mouse's "Mouseketools"—meaning surprise tools that can help us now *and* later—then people ought to stop using them to perpetuate dangerous, trivializing misconceptions about alcohol consumption that minimize the associated risks. It's a tall order, to be sure. But if the widespread backlash against "mommy juice" and "wine mom" culture in the media and across the blogosphere in recent years is any indication, then the organic evolution of these memes that we crave might not be so merely aspirational after all.

James B. Seaver is an independent historian and folklorist based in Bloomington, Indiana. In 2018 he earned his Ph.D. at Indiana University, where he has researched and taught courses on the history and culture of alcohol in the United States. For the past eight years he has also worked for one of the nation's largest wineries.

Notes and References

[1] The author wishes to thank Jared L. Schmidt, Kim D. Stryker, and John E. Price for their editorial assistance with this article and for their continued encouragement and patience during its lengthy gestation. The opinions expressed here, and any errors contained therein, are the author's alone and do not necessarily reflect those of any institutions or businesses with which he was or is affiliated.

Limor Shifman, a scholar of digital media and popular culture, defines a *meme* in the following way: "In the vernacular discourse of netizens, the phrase 'Internet meme' is commonly applied to describe the propagation of content items such as jokes, rumors, videos, or websites from one person to others via the Internet. According to this popular notion, an Internet meme may spread in its original form, but it often also spawns user-created derivatives." See Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, issue 3 (April 2013): 362.

[2] Matt and Y F [pseudonyms of online contributors], "It's a Surprise Tool That Will Help Us Later," *Know Your Meme*, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/its-a-surprise-tool-that-will-help-us-later (accessed January 14, 2020). For a short, unaltered video clip of the Mouseketool song and statement from which the meme originated, see DisneyJuniorUK, "Mickey Mouse Clubhouse | Toodles' Birthday | Disney Junior UK," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=BY1O7fBKJ_A (accessed January 14, 2020).

[3] My thanks to Nancy Stephens for sharing this meme with me and offering advice regarding this article in general

[4] See Gabrielle Glaser, *Her Best-Kept Secret: Why Women Drink—and How They Can Regain Control* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2014), 17-21, 42-43.

[5] Frequently oversimplified under the culturally defined and often stigmatized term *alcoholism*, Alcohol Use Disorders (AUD) nevertheless vary in their symptoms and behavioral manifestations among the many people who experience them. The National Institutes of Health's National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) considers AUD to be a medical diagnosis of a disease defined first and foremost by "problem drinking that becomes severe" and a body's dependence upon alcohol. Common problems associated with AUD include strained family relationships, inability to meet work responsibilities, binge drinking, dangerous behaviors like operating a vehicle while intoxicated, depression and anxiety, and a variety of physical health concerns. National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "Alcohol Use Disorder," https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders (accessed January 14, 2020). See also: National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "Women and Alcohol" fact sheet, https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/publications/brochures-and-fact-sheets/women-and-alcohol (accessed November 16, 2019).

[6] National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism, "Drinking Levels Defined," https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/moderate-binge-drinking (accessed January 14, 2020), and "Alcohol Use Disorder," https://www.niaaa.nih.gov/alcohol-health/overview-alcohol-consumption/alcohol-use-disorders (accessed January 14, 2020).

[7] The author's search for references to wine as "mommy juice" prior to 2000 on Google Trends and the ProQuest Historical Newspapers database did not turn up any meaningful results, suggesting that the term only entered common usage in the twenty-first century.

[8] Glaser, *Her Best-Kept Secret*, 15.

[9] Ibid.

[10] On the challenges and repercussions of modern motherhood from the perspectives of

popular psychology and/or sociology, see, for example, Darcy Lockman, *All the Rage: Mothers, Fathers, and the Myth of Equal Partnership* (New York: Harper, 2019); Sheryl Ziegler, *Mommy Burnout: How to Reclaim Your Life and Raise Healthier Children in the Process* (New York: Dey Street Books, 2018); Ada Calhoun, *Why Women Can't Sleep: Women's New Midlife Crisis* (New York: Grove Press, 2020).

For academic approaches to these issues, see Caitlyn Collins, *Making Motherhood Work: How Women Manage Careers and Caregiving* (Princeton: Princeton University Press, 2019); Susan J. Douglas and Meredith W. Michaels, *The Mommy Myth: The Idealization of Motherhood and How It Has Undermined Women* (New York: Free Press, 2004); and Andrea O'Reilly, ed., *Twenty-First-Century Motherhood: Experience, Identity, Policy, Agency* (New York: Columbia University Press, 2010).

On women and alcohol specifically, a thorough historical context may be gleaned from the following: Lori Rotskoff: *Love on the Rocks: Men, Women, and Alcohol in Post-World War II America Gender & American Culture* (Chapel Hill: University of North Carolina Press, 2002); Catherine Gilbert Murdock, *Domesticating Drink: Women, Men, and Alcohol in America, 1870-1940*, Gender Relations in the American Experience (Baltimore: Johns Hopkins University Press, 1998); and Sarah W. Tracy and Caroline Jean Acker, eds., *Altering American Consciousness: The History of Alcohol and Drug Use in the United States, 1800-2000* (Amherst: University of Massachusetts Press, 2004), especially Michelle McClellan's chapter "'Lady Tipplers': Gendering the Modern Alcoholism Paradigm, 1933-1960," 267-297.

Other social sciences monographs worth examination in spite of their age include Jan Waterson, *Women and Alcohol in Social Context: Mother's Ruin Revisited* (New York: Palgrave, 2000); Moira Plant, *Women and Alcohol: Contemporary and Historical Perspectives* (New York: Free Association Books, 1997); and Marian Sandmaier, *The Invisible Alcoholics: Women and Alcohol*, 2nd ed. (Bradenton, Fla.: Human Services Institute / Blue Ridge Summit, Pa.: Tab Books, 1992). Finally, the author highly recommends the documentary *Risky Drinking*, directed by Ellen Goosenberg Kent and Perri Peltz, HBO Documentary Films, in collaboration with the NIH National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA), 2016.

[11] Aaron M. White, I-Jen P. Castle, Ralph W. Hingson, and Patricia A. Powell (National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism), "Using Death Certificates to Explore Changes in Alcohol-Related Mortality in the United States, 1999 to 2017," *Alcoholism: Clinical & Experimental Research* 44, no. 1 (January 2020): 178-187.

[12] In spite of the industry's attempts to broaden the market for wine products in recent decades and welcome in people of color and other historically marginalized groups, the public face of wine consumption in the United States today nevertheless remains that of a middle-aged, middle-class white woman. This fact is made manifest even in product advertisements unrelated to wine that nevertheless include it as part of a lifestyle pitch to this key purchasing demographic.

For example, see Campbell's Soup's 15-second television ad, repeatedly shown in the mid-2010s, featuring a thirtysomething, white mother and her two young, shrieking children in a suburban supermarket. We see her frantically stockpiling groceries amid radio warnings of a winter blizzard approaching her town. Faced with the stress-inducing prospect of being homebound with them for

several days due to road closures and school cancelations, the mother snatches a bottle of red wine on her way to the checkout aisle. A female narrator concludes the ad with a reminder that "Campbell's Soups go great with the cold and a nice red" because they're "made for real, real life." See Jo O, "Campbell's Soup Winter Storm Jonas Commercial," YouTube, https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=rMtedIwkh7c (accessed January 31, 2020).

[13] Ann Dowsett Johnston, *Drink: The Intimate Relationship between Women and Alcohol* (New York: HarperWave, 2013), 39-40, 55. The marketing of wine to the lucrative "mommy" demographic has resulted in some fierce competition among two of the brands Dowsett Johnston mentions. According to an April 2011 article in the *New York Times*, a trademark lawsuit occurred that month between MommyJuice and Mommy's Time Out wines to clarify who could use the word "mommy" on their label. The MommyJuice label featured an image of "a woman juggling a computer, kitchenware, a teddy bear and a house. … MommyJuice … argues that moms everywhere deserve a break' and urges them to 'tuck your kids into bed, sit down and have a glass … because you deserve it!'" "Mommy's Helper, in Red and White, and in the Courtroom, Too," *New York Times*, April 24, 2011, p. WK2. The marketing push of wine-related products to middle-aged women also extends beyond the beverage itself to the world of entertainment, as evinced by the recent Netflix film *Wine Country* (directed by Amy Poehler, Paper Kite Productions, 2019). The movie tells the fictional story of a group of women celebrating the fiftieth birthday of one of their friends with a wine tasting trip to California's Napa Valley wine region.

[14] Andrea Kitta, *The Kiss of Death: Contagion, Contamination, and Folklore* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2019), 5-6.

[15] See, for example, Diane E. Goldstein, *Once Upon a Virus: AIDS Legends and Vernacular Risk Perception* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2004); Andrea Kitta, *Vaccinations and Public Concern in History: Legend, Rumor, and Risk Perception*, Routledge Studies in the History of Science, Technology, and Medicine (New York: Routledge, 2012); and Trevor J. Blank and Andrea Kitta, eds., *Diagnosing Folklore: Perspectives on Disability, Health, and Trauma* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2015).

[16] Limor Shifman, "Memes in a Digital World: Reconciling with a Conceptual Troublemaker," *Journal of Computer-Mediated Communication* 18, issue 3 (April 2013): 364-365.

[17] Ibid., 365.

[18] Lynne S. McNeill, "LOL and the World LOLs with You: Memes as Modern Folklore," *Phi Kappa Phi Forum* 97, issue 4 (winter 2017): 21. I am indebted to McNeill's work for directing me to Shifman's aforementioned article.

Within the academic discipline of Folklore, scholars have been slow to embrace Internet culture and online communities as subjects worthy of their attention. Fortunately, this reticence is subsiding. For more on Internet folklore, see Trevor J. Blank, ed., *Folk Culture in the Digital Age: The Emergent Dynamics of Human Interaction* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2012), especially the introduction written by Blank, "Pattern in the Virtual Folk Culture of Computer-Mediated Communication," 1-24; Lynne S. McNeill, "The End of the Internet: A Folk Response to the Provision of Infinite Choice," in Trevor J. Blank, ed., *Folklore and the Internet:*

Vernacular Expression in a Digital World (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2009), especially 82-85; Russell Frank: *Newslore: Contemporary Folklore on the Internet* (Jackson: University Press of Mississippi, 2011); and Trevor J. Blank and Lynne S. McNeill, eds., *Slender Man Is Coming: Creepypasta and Contemporary Legends on the Internet* (Logan: Utah State University Press, 2018).

[19] Dowsett Johnston, *Drink*, 167.

[20] An Anonymous Mom [sic], "Scary Mommy Confessions: When You're a Mom Who Drinks," *Scary Mommy*, https://www.scarymommy.com/mothering-drinking/ (accessed October 16, 2018).

[21] For a folkloristic definition of gallows humor and an analysis of its place in medical environments, see Lisa Gabbert, "Suffering in Medical Contexts: Laughter, Humor, and the Medical Carnivalesque," *Journal of American Folklore* 133, no. 527 (Winter 2020): 3-26.

[22] "About Scary Mommy," *Scary Mommy*, https://www.scarymommy.com/about-scary-mommy/ (accessed January 25, 2020).

[23] "Wine Wednesday!" Scary Mommy Facebook page, July 19, 2017, https://www.facebook.com/thescarymommy/photos/a.375569458300/10155160992588301/?type=3&theater (accessed October 10, 2018, and January 28, 2020).

[24] Franzia, "Merlot" product webpage, https://www.franzia.com/wines/merlot/ (accessed January 28, 2020).

[25] For more on the history of the "French Paradox" as a cultural phenomenon within the United States, hear Brooke Gladstone's interview with *Wine Spectator* assistant managing editor Robert Taylor, "The Red Wine Paradox" segment, "Blame It on the Alcohol" episode, *On the Media*, WNYC Studios, July 6, 2018, https://www.wnycstudios.org/podcasts/otm/segments/red-wine (accessed November 21, 2019).

[26] Image credit: Beverly Jenkins, "Can You Relate to These Boozy Memes about Wine?" LiveAboutDotCom, July 31, 2017, https://www.liveabout.com/boozy-wine-memes-4147298 (accessed December 19, 2019).

[27] Ibid.

[28] Diksha Basu, "Rebranding Motherhood," *New York Times*, August 10, 2018, https://www.nytimes.com/2018/08/10/well/rebranding-motherhood.html (accessed October 15, 2018).

[29] The Elf on the Shelf tradition traces its origins back to the children's book by Carol V. Aebersold, Chanda A. Bell, and Coë Steinwart, *The Elf on the Shelf: A Christmas Tradition* (Kennesaw, Ga.: CCA and B, 2005). The eponymous elf doll comes with the explanatory book, allowing children and parents to initiate and participate in the tradition within their own homes.

[30] See Philipp and Y F [pseudonyms of online contributors], "Woman Yelling at a Cat," *Know Your Meme*, https://knowyourmeme.com/memes/woman-yelling-at-a-cat (accessed January 27, 2020).

[31] Themes along these lines emerge repeatedly in op-eds and blog posts, including the following: Darcy Lockman, "Don't Be Grateful That Dad Does His Share," *The Atlantic*, May 7, 2019, https://www.theatlantic.com/ideas/archive/2019/05/mothers-shouldnt-be-grateful-their-husbands-help/588787/ (accessed May 23, 2019); Sarah Buckley

Friedberg, "Society to Working Moms," public Facebook post, April 18, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/sarah.buckleyfriedberg/posts/10100880594353836 (accessed May 23, 2019); Basu, "Rebranding Motherhood"; Kristi Coulter, "Giving Up Alcohol Opened My Eyes to the Infuriating Truth about Why Women Drink," *Quartz*, August 21, 2016, https://qz.com/762868/giving-up-alcohol-opened-my-eyes-to-the-infuriating-truth-about-why-women-drink/ (accessed May 23, 2019); Sarah Hosseini, "Why I'm Done Making Mommy Wine Jokes," *Ravishly*, September 8, 2017, https://www.ravishly.com/why-im-done-making-mommy-wine-jokes (accessed October 15, 2018); Lauren Ferranti-Ballem, "Why Mommy Drinks: The Scary Truth about #WineMom," *Today's Parent*, January 2, 2018, https://www.todaysparent.com/family/parenting/why-mommy-drinks/ (accessed October 16, 2018).

[32] Glaser, *Her Best-Kept Secret*, 9.

[33] Ibid., 12.

[34] Ibid., 12-13.

[35] Ibid., 55.

[36] Bridget Pendergraft, "How 'Mommy Juice' Memes Normalized My Alcoholism," *The Mighty*, November 8, 2017, https://themighty.com/2017/11/mommy-juice-memes-alcoholism/ (accessed November 26, 2019).

[37] Sarah Cottrell, "How Mommy Drinking Culture Has Normalized Alcoholism for Women in America," *Babble*, https://www.babble.com/parenting/mommy-drinking-culture-wine-motherhood/ (as of January 29, 2020, the link is no longer functional; published online circa February 2018; accessed by this author on October 10, 2018). For a similar article pushing back against the trend, see Leah Campbell, "How 'Mommy Juice' Culture is Normalizing Alcohol Addiction," *Healthline*, April 18, 2019, https://www.healthline.com/health-news/the-rise-of-mommy-juice-culture-and-its-impact-on-kids (accessed November 26, 2019).

[38] Quoted in Cottrell, "How Mommy Drinking Culture Has Normalized Alcoholism for Women in America."

[39] Celeste Yvonne, Facebook post on May 15, 2019, "Celeste Yvonne – The Ultimate Mom Challenge" Facebook page, https://www.facebook.com/theultimatemomchallenge/posts/i-went-to-a-play-date-the-other-day-at-someones-house-almost-the-moment-i-steppe/1235722833269142/ (accessed October 7, 2019).

[40] Coulter, "Giving Up Alcohol Opened My Eyes to the Infuriating Truth about Why Women Drink."

[41] Lauren Stevens, "Why 'Mommy Juice' Scares the Hell Out of Me," *HuffPost*, published August 11, 2014, updated December 6, 2017, https://www.huffpost.com/entry/why-mommy-juice-scares-th_b_5664325 (accessed October 15, 2018).

[42] Meghan Splawn, "Hey, Moms: Can We Please Stop Calling Alcohol 'Mommy Juice'?" *Kitchn*, June 6, 2019, https://www.thekitchn.com/mom-wine-culture-268335 (accessed November 26, 2019).

[43] Hosseini, "Why I'm Done Making Mommy Wine Jokes."

[44] Capitalizing upon the popularity of her Facebook post in April 2019, writer and life

coach Graeme Seabrook quickly released a series of custom shirts with the statement's full text printed on them and made available for purchase through her website, although similar merchandise soon made its way to Amazon.com and other third-party vendor websites. For the post, see Graeme Seabrook, CLC, "Mommy Needs …" graphic posted to Facebook on April 23, 2019, https://www.facebook.com/GraemeSeabrook/photos/a.482670785160058/2224210181006101/?type=3&theater (accessed May 22, 2019). For a selection of women's apparel and tote bags bearing the popular statement, see https://themom.store/collections/this-mommy-needs (accessed December 20, 2019).