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Disciplined Into Hiding: Milk Banking and the "Obscured Organization"

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Abstract

Amid recent attention to nonprofit and voluntary organizing, empirical studies have largely focused on social capital functions, decision-making, and volunteer relationships, in contrast to missions or practices that are contested, controversial, or concealed. This study examines how nonprofit milk banks and online milksharing networks experience concealment in unique, unintentional ways. Using ethnographic fieldwork and discursive interviews, we analyze how Discourses of Filth, Suspicion, and (In)adequacy discipline members' corporeality and participation in the milk banking/sharing industry such that concealment is enacted and enforced. The findings provide evidence for *obscured organizations* as a useful complement to *hidden organizations* by highlighting how organizations involved in body product exchange encounter unique symbolic, structural, and technical communication problems that bear community consequence. The results have implications not only for studying contemporary organizations, but also for theorizing hidden organizing and stigmatized membership.

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Amid recent attention to nonprofit and voluntary organizing, empirical studies have largely focused on social capital functions, decision-making, and volunteer relationships, in contrast to missions or practices that are contested, controversial, or concealed. This study suggests that organizations involved in body product exchange—specifically, breastmilk donation, banking, and exchange—experience concealment in unique, unintentional ways. A somewhat controversial and lesser-known modern practice, breastmilk donation and the industry organized around banking and exchanging human milk is made obscure through *D*iscourses (i.e., social forces embedded in macro-level communication that naturalize the world in certain ways; Fairhurst & Putnam, 2004) that discipline the gendered corporeality of its members. Research attention to such organizations may help scholars better understand how organizing around physical labor and socially stigmatized work is shrouded from view.

The contrast between concealment of breastmilk donation at the public level and expressiveness at other levels suggests that our understandings of concealment choices may need to be extended. Thus far, hidden organizing literature has largely assumed intentionality on the part of the organization or its members when managing tensions of (in)visibility—theories on hidden organizing denote "any sort of organizing that is *intentionally* shrouded from view" (Stohl & Stohl, 2017, p. 1, emphasis original) or collectives which "communicatively conceal core aspects of themselves from various audiences" (Scott & Kang, 2017, p. 44). A hidden organization chooses to conceal its affiliations and activities toward some anticipated and beneficial end (Stohl & Stohl, 2017). Scholars like Jensen and Meisenbach (2015) have noted the importance of delving further into societal norms, resistance, and motivations for implementing hidden practices, and encouraged further research on the relationship between hidden organizing and stigma management (e.g., Meisenbach, 2010). This study problematizes motivations around hidden practices and considers the consequences for those organizations who are hidden despite wishing otherwise. Further, Scott (2013) has encouraged scholars to continue challenging existing theory by exploring hidden organizing in all its forms. Breastmilk donation, banking, and exchange—also known as *milk banking*—is one such form of organizing that is largely hidden from view. In the following paragraphs, we define "milk banking" and its core organizational features and argue for its relevance to communication scholarship.

Milk banking is the process by which moms with excess breastmilk provide that milk to parents with low supply or compromising medical conditions. Formal markets include for-profit and nonprofit milk banks that pasteurize/sterilize breastmilk for infants in Neonatal Intensive Care Units (NICUs). Nonprofit milk banks are accredited by the Human Milk Banking Association of North America (HMBANA) and rely on community collection sites to obtain donations.[1] Informal markets involve self-organized, online exchanges driven by monetary ads or altruistic donation. The latter, also known as *milksharing*, is facilitated via community Facebook groups run by volunteer administrators and guided by core values of informed choice and consent. Eats on Feets and Human Milk 4 Human Babies are the largest, most active milksharing networks in the United States. In this study, we focused exclusively on *nonprofit* milk banks and milksharing networks. (Hereafter, we use "milk banking/sharing" to refer to this collective.)

Gimlet Media's podcast, *ReplyAll*, conducted an investigation of the industry's seldom acknowledged history in Episode #57, "Milk Wanted" (Bennin et al., 2016). In the episode, producers marveled at the mystifying "exchange rate" for informally shared donor milk, one where a donor "hands over" bags of frozen breastmilk and a recipient might show thanks by "handing back" a bottle of champagne. Yet, many who could donate remain unaware of the opportunity. Moms with excess breastmilk often dump it, not knowing there may be "other moms who needed [their] milk" (Bennin et al., 2016, 1:27). Other sources have confirmed that although HMBANA more than doubled the number of nonprofit milk banks in five years (Schreiber, 2017), banks still struggle to find donors. And despite the global presence of online milksharing networks, most people are shocked to discover that such a modern practice even exists.

Milk banking/sharing has clear benefits for parents and infants, given the preventative and protective benefits of breastmilk's composition. Yet, as shown throughout this study, the industry wrestles with public and political stigmatization the lactating, maternal body, jeopardizing its visibility. Milk banking/sharing remains an unstudied and largely unknown space in the communication discipline and social science writ large. As noted in Jones (2021), studies on donor milk are primarily found in law, medicine, women's studies, and the popular press (e.g., Akre et al., 2011; Carter et al., 2015; Hassan, 2010; Swanson, 2014). However, milk banking/sharing is a vitally important and opportune context for communication study because it resides amidst a complex network of contemporary political economies, discursive flows of hidden labor, and the stigmatization of gendered corporeality and reproductive choice. Thus, this study contributes to conversations on challenges faced by hidden organizations, the politics of embodied work, and the communicative performance of maternal identity.

As a result of this study, we proffer *obscured organizations* as a complement to Scott's (2013) "hidden organizations." Results reveal that concealment is not communicatively or strategically enacted by milk banking/sharing organizations themselves; rather, concealment is enacted and enforced by broader Discourses surrounding the practice which discipline members' corporeality and participation. Such Discourses also obscure the industry as a whole despite it striving for visibility and recognition. To frame this analysis, we review literatures on hidden and clandestine organizing, stigma, and embodied work, and explain how Foucault's notions of disciplinary and discursive power may expand the exploratory power of hidden organizing theory. Second, we explain our methodological location, outline sites and sources of data, and discuss the value of an iterative approach to analysis. After identifying disciplinary Discourses that culminate in the "obscured organization," we discuss implications and offer recommendations for future research.

Hidden Organizing

Organizational communication theory is based almost exclusively on visible organizing; knowledge claims are rooted in collectives that actively communicate their identity. In recent years, scholars have questioned this foundation and expanded the concept of organizational identification beyond an individual-level construct by examining topics such as the limits and politics of transparency (Christensen & Cheney, 2015; Hale, 2013; Hansen & Flyverbom, 2015; Shumate & O'Connor, 2010) and organizational secrecy (Costas & Grey, 2016; Hoerl & Ortiz, 2015), bringing greater awareness to "hidden organizations" (Scott & Kang, 2017). Theories on hidden organizing denote "any sort of organizing that is *intentionally* shrouded from view" (Stohl & Stohl, 2017, p. 1, emphasis original) or collectives which "communicatively conceal core aspects of themselves from various audiences" (Scott & Kang, 2017, p. 44). Such groups eschew the pressures of transparency by keeping secret certain affiliations, taking explicit steps to protect member identity, or concealing internal and external activities (Scott, 2015). Even visible organizations may have hidden or clandestine counterparts (e.g., black markets).

Scott (2013) argued that the hiddenness of organizations manifests across three dimensions—visibility of the organization, expression of individual member affiliation, and relevant audiences—to varying degrees. For example, shaded organizations are hidden on one dimension, whereas shadowed organizations are hidden on two. The former are hidden because the organization has a "limited market focus" (so identities are only known to a local audience; p. 158) or because it has reputation or legitimacy problems (so members attempt to disassociate from any "morally, socially, or physically tainted" work; p. 159). An organization is also considered heavily shaded if it has a mass relevant audience or members who express their affiliation, but the broader organization remains anonymous (see Askay & Gossett, 2015). In contrast, organizations are "shadowed" if the organization is recognizable but the relevant audience is local/limited and members are silent about affiliation (see Kang, 2019, or Wolfe & Blithe, 2015); if the organization makes itself anonymous and the relevant audience is still local/limited but members express affiliation (e.g., fraternal orders or gangs); or if the organization makes itself anonymous and members are silent but the relevant audience is mass/public (e.g., secret intelligence, organized crime, or anonymous activist collectives). Thus, concealment may be communicatively enacted by the organization or its members in a myriad of ways for a myriad of reasons, inclusive of various audiences (Scott, 2015).

Scott and Kang (2017) argued that external audiences assess the appropriateness of organizations' communicative behavior and make attributions about relevant motivations. A competence framework is important to theories of hidden organizing because it helps scholars discern attributed motivations for hiding—whether organizations are seen as inappropriately or appropriately concealing their identity—and "highlights the impetus for examining various hidden collectives" (p. 45). Scott and Kang distinguish three domains of hidden organizations within a competence framework. "Inappropriately hidden" includes collectives representing a substantial public threat that are widely seen as acting immorally or engaging in problematic behaviors and avoiding accountability (e.g., terrorist cells and hate groups). In contrast, an "appropriately hidden" organization conceals aspects of identity to protect itself, its employees, or its clients from harm, and so has broad support for engaging in concealing behaviors. These include domestic violence and homeless shelters, counter-terrorism units, and addiction rehabilitation centers or sobriety programs. Finally, "ambiguously hidden" organizations are those whose concealment choices are not fully understood. Such a collective may be appropriately hidden in one instance and not another, may manage multiple identities differing in visibility, or may include individuals who disagree about motivations for hiding. These include core-stigmatized organizations (brothels), activist collectives (Anonymous), and informal economies (underground markets).

With (in)appropriately hidden domains in mind, Scott and Kang (2017) called for multi-level analysis of hidden collectives to understand how expressiveness at one level may influence or be in tension with concealment at other levels (a recognition that, to date, has been mostly absent). We adopt this multi-level perspective by contrasting concealment of milk banking/sharing at the public level (i.e., little public awareness or recognition) versus expressiveness at the other levels (e.g., participants' openness about their membership or community outreach by relevant organizations). We argue that existing understandings of organizational hiddenness and concealment choices may need to be extended in light of the milk banking/sharing organizations analyzed in this study.

Stigma, Taint, and "Dirty Work"

Hidden organizations are oftentimes hidden due to their stigmatized, tainted, or dirty nature. This may relate to managing a "spoiled image" (Goffman, 1963) or engaging in business dealings that society deems improper (Hughes, 1962). Dirty work can come in a number of different forms, including one or more of the following characteristics (Ashforth & Kreiner, 1999; Drew et al., 2007): (1) physically filthy labor (e.g., janitors); (2) morally questionable or illegal activities (e.g., sex work); or (3) working with socially stigmatized issues or people (e.g., correctional officers). Often, dirty work also requires subservience or vulnerable emotional labor (Rivera, 2015) and marginalized groups tend to experience more taint than their privileged counterparts (Malvini Redden & Scarduzio, 2018). While some "dirty" occupations like border patrol or firefighting are highly visible or have mass/public relevant audiences (Rivera & Tracy, 2014; Tracy & Scott, 2006), many remain hidden or "shadowed." For example, as noted in the previous section, sex workers typically remain silent about their affiliation in an effort to protect their multiple and competing identities (Grandy & Mavin, 2014; Wolfe & Blithe, 2015).

Activities surrounding lactation can also be understood as dirty work. First, the body is being used in physical labor (i.e., the physiological process of lactation, the physical act of pumping, and the donation or sharing of one's breastmilk). Second, (in)effective lactation is complicated by Discourses that situate breastfeeding as morally ambiguous or repugnant. Norwood and Turner (2013) noted that the "Breast is Best Discourse" is limited; its presence is overshadowed by Discourses of (Hetero)Sexuality which define the breast as a "sexual object no matter the act in which it is engaged" (p. 81). Finally, breastmilk donation is entrenched in a history of exploitation (i.e., wet-nursing as a form of slave labor; Fentiman, 2009) and breastfeeding itself is socially stigmatized when it comes to conditions of appropriateness. Discourses surrounding women's bodies exceedingly portray biological and physiological processes or capabilities (e.g., lactation) as something dirty or "going wrong." This is not dissimilar to other of women's bodily processes inscribed as sicknesses; menstruation, pregnancy, infertility, menopause, and leaking are read as impaired and ailing (e.g., Trethewey, 1999). In sum, literatures on stigma, taint, and dirty work suggest that milk banking/sharing is compounded by the stigma, taint, and "dirtiness" of the lactating body—a body that expels, drips, and leaks; a body whose bioproduct may be donated, shared, and consumed.

Previous research by scholars such as Hudson (2008) and Wolfe and Blithe (2015) has found that organizations experiencing core-stigma often use concealment to manage social condemnation and critical scrutiny; such concealment allows them to construct more positive identity roles outside of work. In doing so, stigmatized organizations also protect members and decrease the possibility of external disciplining. Organizations that work to project a recognizable image may even desire to hide particular attributes (e.g., member affiliations, policies, or practices). Yet, embodied work would suggest that the stigma imbued in milk banking/sharing is unique compared to other hidden organizations managing taint. For example, while sex work and breastmilk donation both relate to women's bodies, the nature of consumption is different. In one space, her body is considered sinful but voluptuous; in the other, her body is filthy as it expels, drips, and leaks (Ellingson, 2012) and transgressive in daring to position breasts as feeding devices, not objects of the male gaze (Norwood & Turner, 2013). It may be that whereas brothels are stigmatized in a moral sense and, say, immigrant advocacy organizations in a political sense, milk banking/sharing organizations are stigmatized (and hidden) in a different sense.

We suggest that the stigma imbued in the practice of milk banking/sharing complicates what has been heretofore theorized as the intentional, negotiated relationship between core-stigma and concealment (i.e., actively using concealment toward certain ends). Perceptions of "filth" or "dirtiness" that render the lactating body inappropriate, especially in professional settings, also render practices around lactation silent and invisible (Payne & Nicholls, 2010). Silence and invisibility emanate outward and cloud public knowledge and support of said practices, thereby shrouding the organizations that facilitate these practices. As a result, some organizations may experience hiddenness despite wishing otherwise. Such a relationship between stigma and concealment would stand in stark contrast to those hidden organizations that shroud themselves via their own agency or for their own benefit, strategic or otherwise.

Discourse and Discipline

Foucault's conceptions of power and discipline offer a fresh way to understand the communicative enactment of hidden organizing. The disciplinary power of Discourse, according to Foucault (1977), lies not in any single message about what one's body *should* do, but in the social forces that circumscribe what one's body *can* do; producing the very rhetorical situations in which one acts by conditioning subjectivities and specifying capabilities (Koerber, 2006). Indeed, the fact that some industries are hidden is a result not only of micro-enactments of identity or policy texts that reveal or conceal, but can also be attributed to larger Discourses or structures. Curiously, reference to

Foucauldian theory is missing in the hidden organizing literature. We contend that its incorporation serves to expand the explanatory power of why certain organizations are obscured even when the organization and its members seek otherwise.

As demonstrated in this study, powerful Discourses discipline and constrain milk banking/sharing organizations. From a Foucauldian viewpoint, power is not a commodity or top-down structure, but a process or set of invisible capillary mechanisms that pervade the entire body of social relations (Foucault, 1980, 1982). The disciplinary power of such dominant Discourses manifests in the variety of unstable, localized, and sometimes contradictory outcomes (Foucault, 1977). So, when an organization is hidden (an outcome), Foucauldian theory suggests paying close attention to the largely invisible Discourses of power that produce this capillary consequence.

Hidden organizing literature suggests that efforts to conceal organizational identity or shield member affiliation may be appropriate in some instances (e.g., protecting vulnerable members), but inappropriate in others (e.g., allowing criminals to avoid accountability; Scott & Kang, 2017). But Foucauldian theory reminds us that affiliation and identity are not just local enactments but are constituted in relation to surrounding norms and discursivities (Foucault, 1988). From this point of view, structures of identification and hiddenness are unstable, vulnerable, and often out of the control of individual actors. Even when members engage in concealment for well-intentioned ends, their actions may have unintended consequences. Foucault would likely say that organizations are less in/appropriately hidden than he would say organizations are hidden with a variety of unstable, localized, and contradictory consequences. And, if organizations that wish to be known are instead hidden, the process by which concealment occurs is probably largely invisible as the "perfection of power should tend to render its actual exercise unnecessary" (Foucault, 1977, p. 201). Therefore, we posed the following research questions:

> Research Question 1 (RQ1): What dominant Discourses about the maternal body and (in)effective lactation manifest in milk banking/sharing? How do these Discourses discipline or otherwise enact power upon members?
> Research Question 2 (RQ2): How do these disciplinary Discourses of power enact concealment and how does this enactment reflect, extend, or complicate theories of hidden organizing?

Method

This study was part of a larger project exploring the material and symbolic dynamics of milk banking/sharing. All data were collected by the first author as a known participant-observer. However, this article speaks in "we" terms to indicate the collaborative process of research design, theoretical development, and writing. In what follows, we outline the fieldwork and interview data that contributed to this article.

To collect data from this lesser-known industry, the first author adopted a performative, ethnographic lens in which "the researcher and research participants' bodies feature heavily in the gathering of data and the construction of research" (Jensen & Meisenbach, 2015, p. 570). Bodily immersion took several forms, including (1) virtual observation of public communication between administrators, donors, and recipients in two online milksharing groups (Eats on Feets and Human Milk 4 Human Babies[2]) and personal correspondence with group administrators; (2) regular volunteering at a local lactation support organization (doubling as a Mother's Milk Bank's collection site) and serving as the on-call contact to pack donations; and (3) working in the ISO-7 certified lab at Mother's Milk Bank dispensing and preparing donor milk for pasteurization, shadowing Donor Relations and warehouse teams, and assisting with inventory and community events. The extent of immersion (approximately 50 hours, excluding virtual spaces) afforded rich opportunities for data collection via known relationships with participants.

The first author facilitated *discursive interviews* with milk staff (i.e., NICU staff, lactation consultants, milk bank employees, and administrators from online milksharing networks) and donors/recipients from the aforementioned organizations. According to Tracy (2020), discursive interviews acknowledge that participants' perspectives "emerge from and intersect with larger discourses of race, class, and myth" (p. 160). While conducting discursive interviews and analyzing data, the researcher pays special attention to "large structures of power that construct and constrain knowledge and truth" and how those structures emerge in participant responses (p. 160). Interview questions explored how participants made sense of and navigated milk banking/sharing and how participation affected their identity as a medical professional, community member, or mom. In total, 37 individual interviews were conducted (21 donors, 12 recipients, five medical professionals, four milk bank employees, and two administrators from online milksharing networks).[3] Interviewees were recruited through a local chapter of Human Milk 4 Human Babies (with permission from page administrators) and via snowball sampling. Interviews took place in milk staff offices, libraries, cafés, moms' homes, and via video chat, resulting in 33 hours of audio or 660 single-spaced typewritten transcripts. All names are pseudonyms.

We approached the study as *bricoleurs*—quilters piecing together a mirage of partial and mismatched representations across sensitizing concepts to discern a complex situation and deliver a meaningful research synthesis—and engaged an iterative approach to analysis (Lindlof & Taylor, 2019; Tracy, 2020). We debriefed observations and interviews throughout the project and paid close attention to Discourses participants were evidencing. After data collection, we moved toward formal analysis by collaboratively sketching the meanings and connections among emerging themes (Creswell, 2013). Some themes became more salient than others as we examined the data for how they helped us understand the obscuring being done. Analysis stopped when emergent themes attended to research questions, provided significant theoretical insight, and when new data were unsurprising. The following section unfolds the findings of this analysis.

Results

Nonprofit milk banks and online milksharing networks experience concealment in unique ways. By interrogating these experiences, we trace the discursive context of the industry and demonstrate the need to expand understandings of hidden organizing.

Disciplinary Discourses (RQ1)

Analyses revealed three dominant Discourses circulating the maternal body and its circumstances of (in)effective lactation as experienced by milk staff, donors, and recipients: Discourses of Filth, Suspicion, and (In)adequacy. Evidence of these Discourses and their disciplinary power, as well as moments of resistance, were found across participants' discursive practices. Data are drawn primarily from milk staff, donor, and recipient interviews, but are also informed by in-person and virtual fieldwork.

Discourses of Filth.

> One of our core philosophies is we trust women to be smart enough to make decisions for themselves. We find it based on misogyny in general that people want to say that our milk is "dirty." (Kimberley, Administrator, Human Milk 4 Human Babies)

Discourses of Filth about the gendered body are not unique to milk banking/sharing, but they are pervasive and show up in distinct ways that elucidate the industry's hiddenness. Jennifer, Outreach Director at Mother's Milk Bank, tried to make light of dealing with the "dirtiness" of breastmilk when she quipped, "If there's a liquid coming out of us, it can't be good!" Jennifer's attempt at parody notwithstanding, this comment underscores the fact that women's bodies (especially those that drip and leak) are too often marked as inappropriate or filthy.

Thirteen maternal participants navigated subtle and explicit judgments suggesting milk banking/sharing was "dirty." As a result, their behavior and language were disciplined in specific ways. Joëlle explained that in order to "keep up" her supply to donate, she frequently pumped at work, but was not provided accommodations. Her physical labor was relegated to dusty, crowded storage closets. Emma's husband and mother-in-law could not grasp her investment in milksharing, struggling with its moral ambiguity. "[My husband] was never breastfed," she said, "so, they didn't understand my reasoning for donating. They said they 'supported' it, but would always say, 'Wait, why are you doing *this*?!' but I thought that was clear. It was important to me." Wendy's husband struggled with the social stigmatization of donor milk. "He thought it was fucking weird," Wendy said. "He was like, 'But that's *your* milk going into [the other baby's] body…' He did *not* like it." Each of these cases exemplifies a key marker of "dirty work."

Twenty maternal participants spoke of times they were able to resist Discourses of Filth due to loved ones' instrumental support which rejected notions that their involvement as a donor/recipient was inappropriate, gross, or problematic. Jade and Beatrix described how their moms were intermediaries, dropping off or collecting donations on their behalf. Sabrina's husband regularly sterilized the pump she used to produce donor milk, and their children imitated her pumping by wearing nursing covers with their dolls. Lina's grandparents kept their freezers stocked with donor milk and her 88-year-old grandma kept a log and prepped donor milk for days she babysat. Wendy's brother-in-law made his self-owned coffee shop available anytime she met a recipient for an exchange. Polly's husband picked up donations after she underwent emergency surgery. Each instance validated participants' identities as donors/recipients, and more important, as moms.

While heartwarming, stories of resistance still remind us that there is a powerful, disciplinary force *to be* resisted. Charlie, a Human Milk 4 Human Babies recipient, was surprised her family did not "turn up their noses" or shame her use of donor milk. She was moved to tears as she recounted,

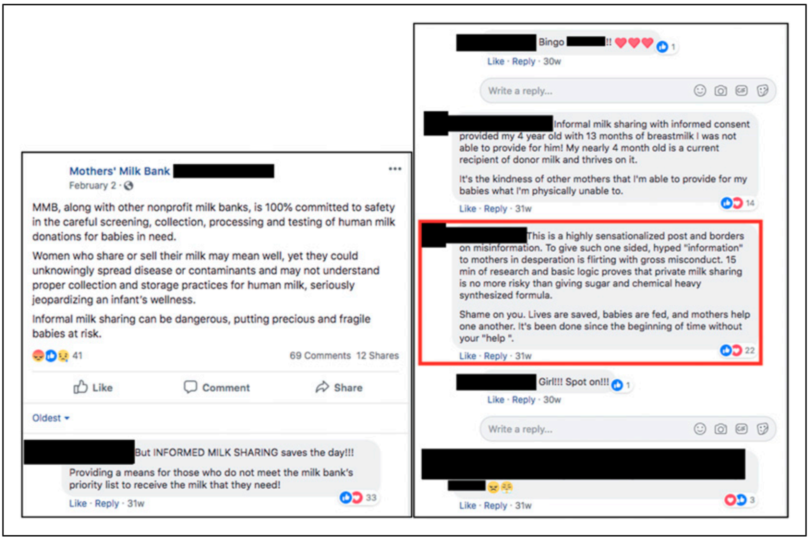
> I thought [my dad] would react in a negative way and shame me for it, but he actually didn't. He completely understood why I sought out donor milk and never acted like it was dirty or gross or questioned my intentions and capabilities. // He knew this was important to me, so he supported me, even coming on a business trip with me to prepare all the donor milk and feed my son while I was in meetings.

These examples of instrumental support remind us that Discourses of Filth that obscure and discipline are not all-encompassing. Rather, powerful Discourses and norms are penetrated with capillary micro-interactions serving as pockets of resistance (Foucault, 1977).

Discourses of Suspicion. Discourses of Suspicion infiltrated milk banking/sharing organizations; specifically, suspicions around safety and intention. For Mother's Milk Bank (a nonprofit milk bank), "safety" translated to screening and processing. For Eats on Feets and Human Milk 4 Human Babies (online milksharing networks), “safety” translated to principles of informed choice and prohibition of selling. Friction across these translations emerged in every interview but are best exemplified in a 2018 social media exchange.

As indicated in Figure 1, Mother’s Milk Bank reiterated their commitments to extensive screening and processing and distanced themselves from informal markets by arguing that although moms who participate in milksharing might bear good intentions, the practice of sharing milk informally is dangerous—moms may not understand how to properly collect and store their own milk and so may be complicit in putting fragile infants at inevitable risk for disease and contamination. In a swift, passionate response totaling over 300 comments, moms condemned the post for its “scare tactics”[4] and false equivalency of milksharing and *selling* (i.e., “Women who share or sell their milk…”). They called upon the communal value and longevity of milksharing as a method of organizing and clarified that informed milksharing through online, community-based networks like Eats on Feets was safe, while the online *sale* of milk was suspicious and potentially dangerous (because it may incentivize donors to add water or cow’s milk to increase volume for monetary return).

The heated social media exchange is worth our attention. It makes clear that the problem for maternal participants did not lie in the screening, processing, and distribution of the donor milk by milk banks. Rather, the problem lay in



Mothers' Milk Bank [redacted]
February 2

MMB, along with other nonprofit milk banks, is 100% committed to safety in the careful screening, collection, processing and testing of human milk donations for babies in need.

Women who share or sell their milk may mean well, yet they could unknowingly spread disease or contaminants and may not understand proper collection and storage practices for human milk, seriously jeopardizing an infant's wellness.

Informal milk sharing can be dangerous, putting precious and fragile babies at risk.

41 69 Comments 12 Shares

[redacted] But INFORMED MILK SHARING saves the day!!!

Providing a means for those who do not meet the milk bank's priority list to receive the milk that they need!

33 Like · Reply · 31w

[redacted] Bingo [redacted]!! ♥♥♥ 1

Like · Reply · 30w

[redacted] Informal milk sharing with informed consent provided my 4 year old with 13 months of breastmilk I was not able to provide for him! My nearly 4 month old is a current recipient of donor milk and thrives on it.

It's the kindness of other mothers that I'm able to provide for my babies what I'm physically unable to.

14 Like · Reply · 31w

[redacted] This is a highly sensationalized post and borders on misinformation. To give such one sided, hyped "information" to mothers in desperation is flirting with gross misconduct. 15 min of research and basic logic proves that private milk sharing is no more risky than giving sugar and chemical heavy synthesized formula.

Shame on you. Lives are saved, babies are fed, and mothers help one another. It's been done since the beginning of time without your "help ".

22 Like · Reply · 31w

[redacted] Girl!!! Spot on!!! 1

Like · Reply · 30w

[redacted]

[redacted]

3 Like · Reply · 31w

Figure 1. Mother’s Milk Bank warning against “dangerous” informal milksharing (posted February 2, 2018). While the post and comments are public, individuals’ names and photos were still redacted per IRB protocol.

the misplaced suspicion of the maternal body and the (perhaps unintentional) wielding of "safety" as a patronizing form of discipline: Women "may mean well …" but "they could unknowingly spread …" and "may not understand proper collection and storage …" and "seriously jeopardize an infant's wellness." The contrast between fundamental convictions about best practices for donor milk is stark. Unanimously, maternal recipients felt that Discourses of Suspicion were often misplaced or uninformed—the kind of donor who would go through the uncompensated labor of pumping (the inconvenience, the discomfort, and general deliriousness of sleep deprivation) and then shares (donates) that breastmilk is not the type of person who would ever try to harm your child.

Discourses of (In)adequacy. Discourses of (In)adequacy marked the corporeality of donors and recipients. Here, we use parentheses to indicate the stark contrast between states of inadequacy and adequacy. Maternal participants who received donor milk were marked as victims of dysfunctional, misbehaving, inadequate bodies—states they internalized as guilt. What is more, some recipients were not just made to feel guilty by another; guilt was a pre-existing condition carved out by Discourses that defined their body by its incapabilities. For example, when their breastfeeding journeys took a surprise detour, leading them to scrounge for milk, recipients like Louise and Nina felt betrayed. Louise struggled to reconcile "the picture" of expectation versus experience:

> I had a lot of self-guilt. My mom guilted me too. She said that wasn't supposed to happen, that even though he was getting breastmilk, he was supposed to be latching and he was missing out on bonding. I had a huge amount of guilt. // I mean you're scrounging for food for your baby. But a lot of guilt also came from me. You have a picture in your head of what it's supposed to be like. I don't know if you can't not have that picture, whether you see it from social media or TV or what you see walking down the street … but you have a picture. And if it's not meeting that picture, if for whatever reason your body throws that surprise at you, you're upset with it. It wasn't supposed to do that.

Nina was painfully confused by the messages she felt her body was sending:

> At four weeks postpartum I got my period, which is super unusual. I knew what little supply I had would drop because of the hormone shift. I asked my lactation consultant to be honest with me. "Is it because I'm not breastfeeding a lot right now? He's latching, but I hardly have any milk. What's going on?" What she said crushed me. "Your body thinks that your baby died based on your low volume of milk production … it wants to have a period to prepare for another

> baby." But my baby didn't die. I was still pumping. I'm trying everything I could … to get my period back so easily was a huge slap in the face.

"Moms who rely on donor milk" manage a complex variety of feelings associated with inadequacy. In contrast, donors were lauded as altruistic heroes whose bodies were sites of the power of motherhood, more than adequate in their capabilities. Recipients heaped praise upon moms who donated their breastmilk: the donor was dedicated, understanding, attentive, a godsend. She was Wonder Woman. "Just the fact that she took the time to be able to do that … that's what sticks out the most. And the sheer amount she was giving," Polly shared. "I just thought it was beyond admirable." Even without explicit praise from others, maternal participants who donated their milk were enabled to experience transformative states of peace and gratitude by calling upon existing Discourses that marked their bodies as not just adequate, but "super." Margaret explained, "I felt very peaceful. I found gratitude like, 'Wow, my body can actually do this. My body can feed six-plus babies, antibodies and all.' That's pure, liquid gold."

The bifurcation represented by the parentheses of (in)adequacy is important. Whereas we might expect Discourses of Adequacy to be fully positive, participants' stories reveal that such Discourses did not exist in a vacuum. Discourses of Adequacy also disciplined recipients' bodies by exclusion. The body that is not marked as adequate is not markless; it is *in*adequate.

Remarkably, the confluence of these disciplinary Discourses shifted at the organizational level. The sororal network sustaining the organization of donor milk situated participants as agents of one another's success and created space for recipients to resignify feelings of inadequacy. Identifying as a "donor" or "recipient" democratized strength and pride, lessening the disciplinary power of Discourses of (In)adequacy. Charlie shared, "Being able to allow other women to help me feel strong by feeding him was very empowering. It takes a special person to do that." Stories like Margaret's and Charlie's show that despite the exhausting labor of oversupply or internalized guilt around low supply, participation in milk banking/sharing provided an avenue by which to heal themselves—to acknowledge and appreciate their body, rewrite its image, and understand that the embodied performance of motherhood meant so much more than their own volume of production. Despite the fact that the unexpected and unknown terrain of breastmilk donation was consuming, anxiety inducing, emotionally jarring, and sometimes desperate, the outcome was powerful. Loretta tearfully recounted:

> It's the one thing I'm most proud of in my entire life and it changed my perspective of me as a mom immensely. In my eyes, I had failed at my birth. I

> had failed at breastfeeding. I was not going to fail [finding donor milk]. And when I look back, I know, "No one could have done this better."

Enacting Concealment (RQ2)

In the last section, we showed how Discourses of Filth, Suspicion, and (In) adequacy functioned to discipline members' corporeality and participation. In this section, we trace their capillary consequence by exploring participants' perceptions of organizational actions and activities that evidenced concealment of milk banking/sharing. In doing so, we illustrate how these actions and activities are connected to Discourses of Filth, Suspicion, and (In)adequacy.

Fieldwork and interviews revealed three organizational actions and activities that evidenced concealment of milk banking/sharing: (lack of) education moms received about breastmilk donation before birth, circumstances that led to discovery of the resource, and strategic responses from milk banks. First, the depth of education moms received about breastmilk donation from key providers left much to be desired. Milk staff lamented that one's OB/GYN or pediatrician may be largely unaware of milk banking/sharing organizations. According to milk staff, this commonly occurs when the physician does not have admitting privileges to a hospital with a NICU donor milk program.

Both milk staff and maternal participants went on to note that even if one's provider is aware of such organizations, they may not find sufficient value in the practice. It is possible the physician finds donor milk in an age of formula to be unnecessary or harbor suspicions about donors' intentions and issues of overall safety. August, a milk donor, said pediatricians she interviewed "were not particularly well-versed in lactation or infant nutrition … they immediately jump[ed] to supplementation." Sabrina, another milk donor, also expressed her disappointment when she said, "I hate how much information [on having extra milk or not having enough] you have to find from being in a support group because the pediatricians or 'OBs' don't tell you." Here, Sabrina is not suggesting that physicians intentionally withhold information; rather, she is pointing out that milk banking/sharing is not (typically) included in the repertoire of resources physicians offer to their patients experiencing difficulties with lactation. Dr Danni (an academic, nurse, and lactation consultant) concurred:

> I don't know of any pediatrician that supports milksharing. It's easier to say, "Please have a can of formula," instead of saying, "These are your options. What do you feel most comfortable with?" And for moms that have an over-supply … I can't even fathom how much milk gets dumped or thrown away and lost because of misinformation, not knowing resources, or not knowing options. It's really a matter of knowledge is power … knowing there is a need and knowing there is a way to support.

Interestingly, fieldwork revealed that even if the practice of milk banking/sharing is known and valued, the knowledge may not be prioritized. During the first author's observation of a "Breastfeeding 101" class for expectant moms at the local lactation support organization, milk banking/sharing were written-but-unacknowledged footnotes. The PowerPoint slide on breastmilk donation was the first to be skipped when class time ran short. Another day, while the first author was helping log and ship donor milk stored in the organization's deep freezer, women attending a weekly "mom's group" were confused as to what the first author was handling and intrigued to discover the organization also dealt with donor milk. When the moms asked what was being taped-up in giant, insulated FedEx boxes, they were wide-eyed with shock as the first author showed boxes bursting with bags of frozen breastmilk. In sum, when providers are unaware of milk banking/sharing, do not value the practice, or do not prioritize that knowledge, moms are less likely to learn about or benefit from it.

Second, milk banking/sharing is not widely known to the broader public and so did not register for moms as a pre-existing resource. The majority of maternal participants discovered the modern practice through chance conversations with an in-law, friend, or neighbor or by stumbling upon it in an online mothering group. Yet, this discovery did not occur until they found themselves at the tipping point of excess or sudden scarcity; until they were at the point of anxiously seeking advice, direction, or support. Only one participant knew of the industry before giving birth because she worked in a NICU with an existing donor milk program.

Milk staff found that although the overall industry has grown (number of HMBANA-accredited milk banks, size of milksharing networks, and percentage of NICUs dispensing donor milk), they continue to have to fight for visibility as they attempt to resist and remove the stigma around the lactating maternal body and shirk the disciplinary power of Discourses of Filth, Suspicion, and (In)adequacy that render the industry less visible. Sherry, Director of Mother's Milk Bank, shared how a lack of visibility affects their success:

> At any given time, there's a finite number of lactating moms and there's an even smaller number of lactating moms who have excess milk, and an even smaller number of those moms who are aware of the opportunity and the need that milk banks have for their milk. The challenge is being sure that second group of moms who have excess milk know about us, know what it can mean if they donate milk, and what we do with it and the lives that we can change and save with their milk. That's by far the biggest challenge.

Sherry's comment reminds us once again that milk banking/sharing is far from ubiquitous compared to other body product exchange industries, such as organ or blood donation, which are highly publicized, encouraged, and widely considered to be noble pursuits. Milk banking/sharing contends with a unique form of hiddenness that provides its organizations and members with no benefit. Success wholly depends on the finite number of lactating moms who *also* have excess milk and who are *also* aware of the opportunity and need for donor milk. What is more, their function depends on the existence of NICU donor milk programs and on community knowledge of the practice, so parents-in-need can actualize support. The industry is challenged because its organizations are hidden despite wishing otherwise.

Third, organizations' strategic responses evidence the far-reaching effects of obscurity and the challenges of scarce supply. During a fieldsite visit to Mother's Milk Bank, the first author witnessed Donor Relations staff curate novel outreach strategies to counter the effects of disciplinary Discourses that marked members' bodies and obscured milk banks' existence. Staff set up breastfeeding stations at local flea markets to normalize public lactation (addressing broader perceptions of filth); hosted "milk drives" mimicking well-known blood drives (dismantling suspicion by generating interest and familiarity); and re-focused their online presence toward thanking specific donors (acknowledging the labor involved in breastmilk donation), testimonials from NICU recipients (challenging feelings of inadequacy by offering narratives of sororal support), and scientific reports on the benefits of "liquid gold" (signifying breastmilk donation as evidence-based practice). Seasonal campaigns also kept up supply. Jennifer, Outreach Director at Mother's Milk Bank, shared that in late autumn, when illness and holiday bustle cause a drop in inventory, nonprofit milk banks encourage donors to "make room for turkey in the freezer … pack up frozen milk and send it our way!"

The enactment of concealment is not surprising given the power of disciplinary Discourses. When a practice is marked "filthy," it is rendered suspect. When a practice is rendered suspect, it is shrouded or shunned and becomes less visible to others. The continued lack of visibility affects accessibility of the resource and reinforces stigma associated with the practice. As a result, potential donor milk is "lost," potential recipients' bodies remain inadequate, and the resource struggles to endure—undersupplied and underdiscovered. Similar to the ways in which breastfeeding is a "hidden routine of domestic labor" (Carroll, 2015), milk banking/sharing is a hidden routine of domestic labor and body product exchange.

Discussion

This study explored how organizations involved in breastmilk donation, banking, and exchange experience concealment in unique, unintentional ways. The findings build a case for differentiating between hidden organizations and what we term *obscured organizations*. In the following pages, we theorize the obscured organization and situate it among conversations around agency, stigma, and contemporary capitalist economies.

Theorizing the Obscured Organization

In the Results, we identified three prominent Discourses of power manifest in milk banking/sharing—Discourses of Filth, Suspicion, and (In)adequacy—and illustrated how these Discourses disciplined or otherwise enacted power upon members. Further, we explored participants' perceptions of organizational actions and activities that evidenced concealment of the industry. We suggested such actions and activities were rooted in those same disciplinary Discourses.

The focus on discipline and processes of power (Foucault, 1977, 1988) informs the study of hidden organizing because it makes apparent that we must look beyond "communicative enactment" or "intentionality." If discipline is working (if social forces act upon discursivities and condition subjectivities) it is probably largely invisible—the effect being an industry, network, or resource obscured as if by fog or smoke. The concealment experienced by milk banking/sharing organizations may appear to exemplify theories of hidden organizing, except for the fact that their being largely unknown is not internally motivated or communicatively enacted, even in response to conditions of external scrutiny or judgment. In short, the existence of milk banking/sharing is not intentionally shrouded as theories of hidden organizing would suggest (see Scott & Kang, 2017; Stohl & Stohl, 2017).

Taken further, nonprofit milk banks and milksharing networks do not eschew pressures of transparency or engage in traditional concealment practices like selective discretion or secrecy (see Scott, 2015). As outlined in the results, the success of milk banking/sharing organizations hinges on the finite number of lactating moms with excess milk who are aware of the need for donor milk; diffusion of such awareness depends on broad knowledge of the practice/resource. Milk banks' function also depends on the existence of NICU donor milk programs, which while increasing, are not ubiquitous. Milk banking/sharing's concealment at the public level (i.e., little public awareness or recognition of the practice) challenges its success and exists in stark contrast to expressiveness at other levels (e.g., participants' openness about membership or community outreach by relevant organizations). Unless one's circumstances of birth and breastfeeding support necessitate participation, people have the outsider's privilege of not having to know, navigate, or think about any aspect of the topic, which carries immense community consequence. The obfuscation of breastmilk donation harms precisely those who could benefit from it.

Milk banking/sharing is also not concealed so members can avoid the stigma of involvement (as with brothel workers; Blithe & Wolfe, 2017). Results showed that identification as a "donor" or "recipient" allowed maternal participants to strategically reclaim and redefine biological, social, and economic life. Nor is the industry hidden so nonprofit milk banks and milksharing networks can escape regulation or rules of law. In fact, because the FDA only regulates the composition of formula and fortifiers produced by for-profit milk banks (Fentiman, 2009), nonprofit milk banks voluntarily ascribe to HMBANA's extensive member guidelines and milksharing networks have developed their own strict protocols to better ensure safe, informed practice. The relationship between stigma and concealment diverges from hidden organizations that shroud themselves via their own agency or for their own benefit, strategic or otherwise.

Given this different type of being unknown, we developed the concept of the *obscured organization* and propose it as a complement to Scott's (2013) *hidden organization*. We define the obscured organization as one that experiences enforced degrees of concealment. The word "enforced" is meant to indicate that such an organization does not eschew transparency or benefit from obfuscation and so does not intentionally shroud its existence or that of its members, yet still experiences hiddenness. Most important, the obscured organization may be comprised of stigmatized members or practices subject to disciplinary Discourses of power from which the organization may or may not provide refuge.

This working definition is supported by the study results. Our analyses show that despite being obscured, milk banking/sharing organizations are desperate for visibility, which they depend on for day-to-day function, success, and survival. Yet, lack of public knowledge regarding the practice (and therefore, the specific organizations that facilitate that practice) is compounded by the stigmatization and disciplining of the lactating body. Hence, donor milk was not known to moms as a pre-existing resource; it was only discovered to exist at the tipping point of excess or sudden scarcity. This is different from other organizations one might not encounter until a need arises. For example, even if one is not in need of a cancer support group or is unaware there exists a domestic violence shelter in a particular area, the resource itself is widely familiar and therefore would not qualify as an obscured organization. In contrast, we found that milk banking/sharing as a practice writ large was little known and seldom acknowledged. The very existence of milk banking/sharing as a process or industry was deeply obscured.

The concept of obscured organizations provides several key contributions for organizational communication theorizing. First, specifying "obscured" versus "hidden" is more than just semantics; primarily, it begs attention to larger issues of power. The intentional concealment of member identities, organizational activities, or processes suggests some amount of agency, and therefore some power or purpose in hiding. The term "obscured" suggests a lack of agency and clarifies that concealment may not be intentional or desired. The current case would have us ask, "Who benefits when milk banking/sharing is obscured?" It could be that external stakeholders like formula manufacturers or for-profit milk banks benefit due to their profit-based financial models and relative ease of access and use.

Second, the concept of the obscured organization further centers the bodies being organized and highlights the politics of the embodied. Society praises mothering as the ultimate fulfillment of destiny (Jones, 2021) but chastises related needs or performativities (e.g., comparing uncovered breastfeeding to "whipping out your genitalia," offering just two weeks of maternity leave, or turning up one's nose at the idea of sharing breastmilk). The "obscured organization" also encourages us to consider how everyday people play a role in re-creating stigmatized features of an organization and its members, often dissuading a three-dimensional, empathic understanding of an organization's processes or its effects. Said another way, when an industry or practice is obscured, even well-meaning people may have difficulty engaging in perspective-taking or showing empathy. For example, a male executive who has little knowledge of the physical labor of pumping may not know that a lactating employee needs ready access to an electrical outlet. The practice is stigmatized, disciplined, and obscured, so he does not ask questions (or think of the right questions to ask). Likewise, medical educators do not think to wonder why the PowerPoint slide on milksharing is so passively given up for lack of time.

Third, the concept of the obscured organization could highlight entities more prone to challenges of visibility because they do not fit cleanly within the contemporary capitalist economy. In the case of milk banking/sharing, society remains generally uncomfortable with female-led organizing and gendered discourses regularly constrain and discipline women's professional identities and make them docile in organizational contexts (Trethewey, 1999). But contemporary corporate and scientific interests still frequently "employ metaphors of intimacy and maternal goodness" to "circulate, represent, and profit from breastmilk at the expense of women" (Hassan, 2010, p. 211; e.g., Erb, 2015). In contrast, neither type of organization analyzed in this study inscribed breastmilk as a marketable commodity or object of economic value. The financial structure of nonprofit milk banking is not designed to "line pockets" and milksharing networks passionately resist implications of governed property in the monetization of the lactating, maternal body. For Mothers Milk Bank (a nonprofit milk bank), breastmilk was precious medicine; for Eats on Feets and Human Milk 4 Human Babies (milksharing networks), breastmilk was a gift, communal resource, and form of sororal support. Therefore, milk banking/sharing is marked on two fronts: it experiences more resistance as a form of female-led organizing and does not aim to earn profit through its operations and contribute to the contemporary capitalist economy. Without "playing the game," it is difficult to achieve the benefits of a more visible economic feature.

Alongside these key contributions, it is also important that we ensure the theoretical significance of applied research through "parameter setting" or explaining how findings are especially relevant and/or constrained (Keyton et al., 2009). In such an effort, it is important to ask about contexts or situations in which the phenomena of the obscured organization may be especially resonant or applicable. We believe the concept of the obscured organization may be especially applicable to grassroots organizations, such as those that use the word "collective" (e.g., parents who homeschool, progressive moms who gather in a conservative community, or Black women who manage attention deficit disorder). Parameters of the obscured organization include the fact that its being unknown is not the aim of its members—which poses challenges to its membership—and the likelihood that one or more external stakeholders may benefit from its obfuscation.

Practical Implications

This study makes visible an otherwise obscured (and by extension, under-explored) industry. The importance of educating the public on the resources available for moms with excess breastmilk or those struggling with lactation should not be underestimated. As noted in the results, only one maternal participant knew of milk banking/sharing before giving birth (and only because she was employed in a hospital that used donor milk). Most discovered the industry by chance conversation or with an in-law, friend, or neighbor, an online mothering group, or by witnessing the first author preparing donor milk for shipment. Regardless of one's proximity to breastfeeding, the silence created by the stigmatization of the lactating body is pervasive. More donations may be available and more recipients might find relief if milk banking/sharing were openly and widely discussed in medical, familial, and other support settings. At the institutional level, nonprofit milk banks would do well to educate themselves on the purpose and protocols of community-based milksharing to avoid contentious encounters like that depicted in Figure 1 and better understand how to tailor outreach and field conversation in ways that resist larger forces of concealment. At the community level, having knowledge of this topic—even if our circumstances of birth or breastfeeding do not necessitate our participation—opens spaces of support for those who could benefit from the resources milk banking/sharing have to offer.

Limitations and Future Directions

Alongside the study's strengths, limitations reveal promising directions. First, this study focused on maternal donors/recipients, all of whom engaged with donor milk for their biological children. Given the cix-sex-ness of milk banking/sharing, it is important that future studies seek out gay fathers, those who hire surrogates, or adoptive parents to explore the nuances of their experiences. Second, future work should approach the racialization and class dynamics of the modern industry in a more tactical way and consider specific dynamics of the lactating body, such as the aging body and the corporate body. As the concept of the obscured organization is refined, it would also be important to know how obscurity complicates understandings of socialization or identification. For example, is there any danger to outing obscured organizations given members' proximity to stigma? Do other obscured organizations face any dis/advantages resulting in paradox? Finally, we believe a methodological tool like *discourse tracing* (LeGreco & Tracy, 2009) could further elucidate understandings of obscured organizations by identifying a rupture point signaling discursive (re)organization and analyzing resulting changes. Such an approach might ask researchers to explore how institutions first mobilized in response to modern-day needs around (in)effective lactation and how various Discourses affected structural conditions across for-profit, nonprofit, and grassroots sectors.

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Notes

1. As noted in Jones (2021), Mother's Milk Bank is one of the largest nonprofit milk banks in the U.S. At time of publication, Mother's Milk Bank had 74 collection sites in 23 states with more in development (Sakamoto, 2017).
2. Both groups are public, so did not require formal approval for witnessing everyday activity in the group. However, official permission was granted by group administrators to post the call for interviews.

3. The parenthetical breakdown of donor/recipient interviews amounts to more than 37 because four moms experienced milk banking/sharing as both donors and recipients. For example, Peyton received donor milk in the hospital when her son was born prematurely and her milk had yet to come in; later, she donated excess breastmilk due to naturally high production. Celeste initially donated her excess milk through Eats on Feets, but later relied on donor milk when she was diagnosed with cancer and unable to keep up production. Hence, these moms are counted twice in the participant breakdown (once as donors, once as recipients).
4. Online administrators interviewed were not aware of any reports of illness or disease transmission as a result of milksharing in their network.

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