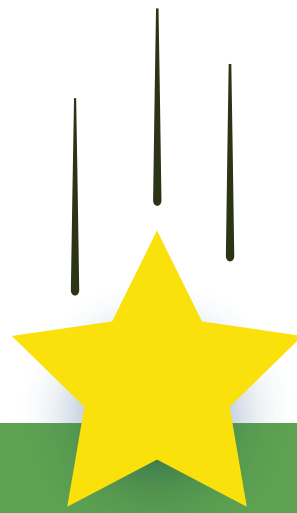


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Customer service surveys are proliferating. But when anything less than five stars is considered failure, just how fair and meaningful is our feedback?

GLOBE STAFF/ADOBE

BY **MARISSA CONRAD**

Twenty-two years ago, when Joanne Chang opened Flour Bakery + Cafe in Boston's South End, she installed a suggestion box, where she collected handwritten feedback. "I had a big bulletin board where I posted the suggestions and my responses," she says. Today, the bakery has nine locations and Chang has a higher-tech version of her box: Through a third-party payment platform called LevelUp, a random sample of her customers

receive a survey immediately after they've paid.

"As much as I cringe" when the comments are negative, she says, "I'm also kind of excited because I get to solve something. I get to figure out what the heck is going on."

I called Chang to talk about feedback because I've felt overwhelmed by requests for it. These past few years, but particularly these past few months, I've been inundated with texts and emails and pop-ups from stores and gyms and restaurants asking for stars and smiles and upward-pointing thumbs. Surveys are coming to my phone seconds after I fin-

ish a workout, to the table while I'm still eating dessert, to my inbox when I'm still in the parking lot.

"Overfishing," says George Loewenstein, a professor of economics and psychology at Carnegie Mellon University, when I ask him about the surge.

But it's not just the volume of these appeals that's striking. Brands that once asked us to air our thoughts on social media ("Don't forget to tag us!") now assure us that our opinions "will never be shared publicly." Stores that once wanted you to rate the sweater you bought now prefer you rate the

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Americans can prove Alito wrong at the ballot box

BY **MARY ZIEGLER**

When a draft opinion reversing Roe v. Wade leaked last week, there was a clear disconnect between public opinion and where the Supreme Court seems to be headed. True, polls have long shown that Americans are conflicted about the morality of abortion and generally favor some restrictions on the procedure. But when it comes to criminalizing abortion or reversing Roe, a strong majority is clearly opposed. And yet the conservative court seems poised not just to gut abortion rights but to do so rapidly, in an opinion dripping with disdain for abortion rights and setting the stage for the unraveling of other constitutional protections.

Strikingly, the draft proclaims an indifference to public opinion. In it, Justice Samuel Alito explains that the court is ill equipped to predict public reaction to its decisions and should not try. The justices' job, he suggests, is to interpret the Constitution, consequences be damned.

Many contest Justice Alito's views on of the Constitution and question the interpretive approach used in the draft. And the idea of a Supreme Court completely indifferent to public opinion would be

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UNF DIGITAL COMMONS

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new in modern US politics. For years, scholars could credibly claim that the court rarely strayed far from public opinion and faced a serious backlash when it dared to try. This court, Alito suggested, is different — it does not care — and does not have to care about what anyone else thinks.

Historically, the court has hardly been as blasé as Alito suggests. For decades, it was fair to call the Supreme Court the most democratic branch of the government, as legal scholar Jeffrey Rosen has done. Supreme Court justices based their decisions on interpretations of the Constitution, but on a range of issues — from abortion to same-sex marriage and affirmative action — major rulings tended to reflect rather than contradict popular opinion.

It's possible that things are different now because the court has changed so much. In 1992, the Supreme Court declined an opportunity to reverse Roe and

ultimately affirmed it in a case known as *Planned Parenthood v. Casey*. That 5-4 decision sent the conservative legal movement and antiabortion leaders back to the drawing board. They wanted more influence over who was selected for the federal bench — and more of a guarantee that those justices would do away with Roe when the occasion arose. At the same time, Republicans began to see a reason to pick divisive nominees of this kind. A surefire conservative could excite the base and get voters to the polls. The same could not be said of a consensus pick like Sandra Day O'Connor, who co-authored the joint opinion in *Planned Parenthood v. Casey* — or a cipher like Harriet Miers, whose 2005 nomination was ultimately scuttled by the conservative legal movement and religious conservatives.

But Justice Alito may have another reason not to care about public reaction. It is just as likely that he and other conservatives on this court think they can do what they like on abortion without bringing about a truly significant reaction. They may feel

confident in this belief because of what happened after the court let stand SB8, the Texas law that bans abortion at six weeks and lets anyone sue for at least \$10,000 any time that someone performs, aids, or abets an abortion that takes place after that point in time.

SB8 was a huge story — one that prompted unprecedented action from the Justice Department and sizable donations to abortion clinics and abortion funds, and the court's reputation has certainly taken a hit — but the law did not have major electoral consequences. Many commentators point to the failed re-election bid of then-incumbent Governor Terry McAuliffe of Virginia, who leaned hard on his support for abortion rights, as proof that support for Roe was not a winning issue. That reading of McAuliffe's loss may be inaccurate — his opponent, Glenn Youngkin, focused on pledges to ban critical race theory in public schools, not on abortion — but it's nonetheless clear that McAuliffe's arguments about abortion were not enough to win over voters. If people are angry about



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It is foolish to think that the court can have the last word on abortion.

what the Supreme Court does on abortion, that anger has not yet translated into specific election results, much less into court reform. It is easy for the conservative Supreme Court majority to say that it doesn't care about public reaction when so far there has been less backlash than many expected.

There are any number of theories about who leaked the draft of Alito's opinion in *Dobbs v. Jackson Women's Health Organization*, but regardless of that person's motives, the draft is serving as another trial balloon — and in more ways than one. A truly major backlash would shake up elections this year and in 2024. And Justice Alito's protestations to the contrary, a public outcry could influence how the court views future cases, such as those involving interstate travel for abortion or arguments that abortion itself is unconstitutional.

Because the conservative justices have been telegraphing since December that Roe will be gone, the court has made public indifference almost a self-fulfilling prophecy. Many people can-

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experience of buying the sweater. And everything, now, is “microfeedback,” a reaction based on a single workout, a single flight, a single mascara purchased online.

Is all of this really helping brands serve us better, as they say? Or is it serving them better — another way to be in constant touch, a way to surveil employees, even a way to capitalize on our loneliness? Where is all of this feedback going?

I like Chang's story because it illustrates two things. One, it shows how feedback works when it's working well, especially at a small business. Two, it helps explain why I've been asked for so much of it recently.

The LevelUp service that Flour uses is only one of the third-party payment platforms, including Square and Toast, that offer feedback features. As business on these platforms rises, so does the number of surveys sent. Toast, for example, launched Toast Guest Feedback in 2019, and this April roughly 30,000 restaurants used its feedback feature, according to a publicist for the company. All sellers on Square are automatically enrolled in Square Feedback, which sends a survey with every receipt, and “we've added a lot more sellers the last couple of years,” says Saamil Mehta, who heads the company's point-of-sale team.

Mike Brucklier, director of operations at Flour Bakery, points out that COVID drove more businesses to use these kinds of online payment systems. And with more customers ordering online, he says, “we don't get to see them as much. I'm sure it's like this with everyone. Now, you have this other opportunity to reach out and get some feedback.”

Chang and her team receive anywhere from 500 to 1,000 pieces of direct feedback a month. They read it all and reply to all quibbles, usually the same day. In April, when a woman complained that a cake she ordered didn't have the same decorations as the one pictured on the ordering app, Chang could look at when and how the order was placed. “I reached out to our visual marketing director and I said, ‘Hey, Kate, you know, this guest was right,’” she says. “So we're going to take another picture of the cake for when you order it on the app.” She also contacted the woman to give her a refund, something she couldn't have done if the complaint had been left anonymously on a public forum like Yelp or Tripadvisor, she says.

Recently, Chang received a survey response from a customer who wanted a refund because she didn't get the heel of bread that sometimes comes as a bonus with a salad order, depending on supply. “I just thought, I'm not going to refund you the whole thing because your free thing wasn't included,” Chang says. “But then I had a second thought, which is: This guest is very upset.” Her husband and business partner, Christopher Myers, believes that the customer who complains is the best customer, because they're telling you what they need. “Everybody else, we're kind of guessing,” Chang says. She refunded the price of the salad.

Last August, Solidcore, a fitness studio with 81 locations nationwide, launched a feedback feature in its booking app. After every class, a pop-up prompt asks clients to rate the visit on a scale of 1 to 5 stars, right below the name and photo of the instructor.



DAVID L. RYAN/GLOBE STAFF

‘I get to figure out what the heck is going on.’

JOANNE CHANG, *seen here in a Flour Bakery in January 2020.*

Customer feedback requests are commonly generated by payment systems such as Square.



DAVID PAUL MORRIS/BLOOMBERG

A team reviews the data in aggregate, says CEO Bryan Myers. If a class or coach is getting consistently low ratings, the head coach at their studio will sit in and give suggestions, he says.

In theory, aggregate survey scores can be a useful signal to a business that something is awry. “They allow you to see where things are deviating from the norm,” says Leela Srinivasan, chief marketing officer of checkout.com. BluePearl Speciality and Emergency Pet Hospital, a veterinary hospital with more than 100 locations nationwide, is a good example: It aggregates the 8,000 to 9,000 post-visit survey scores it gets every month to evaluate its prices and other aspects of its services, says BluePearl's chief marketing officer, Joo Sangrene.

But when I'm evaluating a particular employee's service — versus, say, the price of an X-ray — the precedent set by Uber, which has booted drivers off its platform for having an average of four stars, makes it feel churlish to leave any number that deviates from perfect.

If the score isn't a five, it's — “a problem?” Solidcore's Myers says, finishing my thought.

“I do think it's like that,” he continues. “Every experience should be five stars. And that's what we should aim to be providing.” By now, he thinks, it's become a social norm to say “I'm not gonna give anything less than a five unless something was really bad.” If someone left one of his coaches a four, it probably *would* signal a significant problem.

In 2018, BuzzFeed News published a chilling article about how ratings can put employees at the mercy of fickle or downright hostile members of the public. Many servers said they had shifts cut after receiving low ratings on the survey provided by Ziosk, a pay-at-table tablet used in chain restaurants such as Olive Garden and Red Robin. Customers in many cases may be rating servers poorly because of situations out of their control, like a backed-up kitchen.

Loewenstein, at Carnegie Mellon, worries about feedback blowback. “I think these types of questions generally are for the purpose of improving service,” he says. But in some cases, “it is a little creepy, when you start to think that you're performing this kind of monitoring, almost spying role.”

It's also possible that some of these surveys are designed to manipulate us.

Pankaj Aggarwal, a professor of marketing at the University of Toronto, studies brand anthropomorphism, a phenomenon by which people start to see brands as human beings — and sometimes even feel less lonely after an interaction with a brand. (A fast-food chain that tweets as if it's your funny friend is a good example.) Phrases such as “How'd we do?” are “subtly moving you towards humanizing the company,” Aggarwal says.

“So it's not a store anymore, it's the people behind it, right?” You feel as if the brand is friendly; maybe you feel better about making another purchase. “Emotional loyalty,” he calls it.

What really matters in the end, says Srinivasan, of checkout.com, is that merchants act on the feedback they receive. “If you're going to ask for it, it implies that you intend to listen to it and do something about it,” she says. Unfortunately, “the reality is that a lot of folks . . . are not good enough at looking at the feedback granularly enough to take those actions.”

In April, Srinivasan received a feedback email unlike any she had seen before, from Delta Air Lines.

“Video feedback is one of the ways that we help to bring the experience of our customers to life,” it read and asked her to push a blue button with a video camera icon and record a few words about the most memorable part of her recent flight, “good or bad” (not to be shared publicly, the text promised her).

“Even for a feedback fan like me,” Srinivasan wrote in a LinkedIn message, “that's a bit much.”

Marissa Conrad is a freelance journalist based in New York.