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Successful community at LGK : an examination of social capital online

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SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY AT LGK: AN EXAMINATION OF
SOCIAL CAPITAL ONLINE

A Thesis

Presented to

The Faculty of the Department of Communication
San Jose State University

In Partial Fulfillment

Of the Requirements for the Degree
Master of Arts

By

Sarah M. Vital

August 2004

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A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Andrew Wood", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Andrew Wood

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Deanna L. Fassett", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Deanna Fassett

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Shawn Spano", written over a horizontal line.

Dr. Shawn Spano

APPROVED FOR THE UNIVERSITY

A handwritten signature in black ink, appearing to read "Pamela C. Strehl", written over a horizontal line.

Abstract

SUCCESSFUL COMMUNITY AT LGK: AN EXAMINATION OF SOCIAL CAPITAL ONLINE

By Sarah M. Vital

This study seeks to identify social capital as a fundamental ingredient to successful communities based online. Using Hymes' (1962) ethnography of communication method of discourse analysis, this study looks into a moderate sized online community for members' discursive expressions of trust and reciprocity, two vital elements of social capital. The data for analysis was the word for word content (or Act sequence) of one month's worth of threads (or speech events) posted to the Let's Go Kings "Reality Hipcheck" message board. Analysis of the community members' discourse revealed four recurring communicative practices that demonstrated the existence of trust and reciprocity within the community. A subsequent user questionnaire revealed how these practices contributed to the members' satisfaction with and commitment to the community.

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Obviously, the first on my list of acknowledgments has to be Michael Zampelli and the rest of the gang at Let's Go Kings. Thank you for allowing me to use your space and communication for my research; thank you for your participation and assistance in this study; and, most of all, thank you for creating a space that is a joy and pleasure to "hang out" and chat.

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For my coworkers at the Library at Saint Mary's College of California, you all deserve praise for your patience with me during the last few years. Special accolades to the following indispensable individuals: Linda Wobbe, for your care and support during the years I spent juggling work, family, and writing; Diane Nolting, for picking up the slack when my mind was just elsewhere; Velde Elliot for getting all of my Interlibrary

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Finally, I dedicate this thesis, and all the work behind it, and the promise it provides, to my family: My parents, David and Kathleen, whose years of sacrifice and support have made me who I am and will be; my sister and brother-in-law, Jennifer and James Troupe, who have shown in the last year what it means to really struggle, work hard, and achieve the unimaginable; and to my three nephews, Timothy, Donnell, and Aadam, the future is yours and, if anything, I hope this work shows you what is possible with hard work, determination, and a little healthy hubris.

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Chapter I: Introduction

In the summer of 2000, I was both excited and distressed to learn that my longtime favorite hockey player had signed a contract to play with the National Hockey League's Los Angeles Kings. At first, I was disappointed that he was to play for my home team's most hated rival, but after browsing the Internet for fan reaction, I was happy that finally he was going to a place that had a passionate fan base with a strong web presence. Since he had never played for my home team, I had followed his career through official team publications and news media outlets. Both are good sources, but neither come close to the frankness of popular public opinion.

Within hours of the signing announcement and among the first websites I happened upon, letsgokings.com became my new number one source for information. Let's Go Kings (LGK) is a website dedicated to the team, owned by a fan, and powered by the impressive participation of a large group of fans. The site began in August of 1996, when founder Michael Zampelli started to create the kind of place for fans to go to learn and talk about hockey that he wished existed when he first arrived on the fledgling World Wide Web. Using his homegrown computer knowledge, accessible web space provided by one of the many free web hosts, and his insatiable interest in the Los Angeles Kings hockey team, Zampelli's personal project has grown into the Kings' largest online fan club.

In the past nine years, LGK has grown to include over 3,400 members who are active and passionate in their love of the Kings and loyal to other members. Because the

site is directed towards a geographical subject, most members reside in the same general vicinity and many of them have met in person. Many members meet in a designated spot during each home game, and the site sponsors monthly ice hockey games, numerous “watch parties” throughout the year, an annual trip to Las Vegas for a preseason hockey game, and many other random gatherings. Many friendships have been forged among the members, including two members who met while sharing rides to games and went on to marry. They recently welcomed their first child. And these friendships and meaningful interpersonal connections among members are not limited to those who have met in person, and not limited to hockey. Many times, members share personal stories or tragedies, and other members, many of whom have not met face-to-face, offer sympathies and make offers of assistance. Whether it is giving advice on what cell phone service to pursue or offering sympathies and support for a member who has lost a loved one, the LGK community members are there to help others in need, even if they appear as just names on a screen.

Initially, I had no interest in the LGK community, and came to the site mainly to see any pictures or features written about my favorite player. In my early days on the Internet, I had explored the message boards on America Online and was left disturbed and unsettled by the interactions. I saw these message boards as harsh, scary places, filled with invective and personal attacks on both members and subjects. I was not the only person to have had these early experiences. In fact, many researchers have focused on this negative aspect of online communication. The lack of social cues and relative anonymity on message boards can provide an arena for abandoning social norms and

encouraged users to participate in antagonistic behaviors they may very well not have in real time, face-to-face interactions. Online communication thus becomes a playground for the anti-social. And my early experiences were a testament to that thinking.

As such, I swore off reading or participating in the perceived unpleasant atmosphere of online message boards or chat groups. However, five years later, the very active message boards at LGK piqued my interest, and after a few months, I gave in to my temptation and took a peek. The environment was much different than I had witnessed in my early experiences, and I was happy to see a community of respectful, knowledgeable fans. After almost a year of “lurking”—or reading posts without responding—I registered and began participating in the dialogues as well. After a year or so of participating in “hockey talk,” I went over to the “off-topic” discussion area and encountered a whole new world.

As Baym (2000) discovered in her study of an online soap opera fan community, topics well detached from soap operas continually made appearances within the community’s speech. Some members who came to the community only for soap opera talk voiced concern over this distracting trend. Instead of eliminating off-topic messages, members created ways to inform others when a message was not on topic thus warning those non-interested parties to skip the discussion. The off-topic discussions were so important and enjoyable to so many members that eliminating them was both impossible and undesirable. LGK also had problems of non-hockey talk seeping into the main hockey forum, and as the membership grew and the boards became cluttered, the site administrators created an off-topic forum, called Reality Hipcheck (RH), in an effort to

separate the two distinct themes of interaction that had taken hold. The creation of the new forum meant that those interested only in hockey related topics would not be annoyed by political debates or personal messages, and those who wanted more from the other members than just the latest hockey stats also had a place to be unfettered by talk of team line-ups and trade rumors.

Over the years, and through the acceptance of off-hockey topics and social gatherings, LGK has grown to become a legitimate community, at least in the terms established by early online community researcher Howard Rheingold. Rheingold (1993) established the accepted definition of a “virtual community” when he said that an online environment became a community when enough members engaged in interactions with emotional attachments and personal relationships. And there is no doubt that LGK has met or exceeded these principles.

Social Capital

Communities based online have been legitimized as “real” communities using many different theories related to communities. Some of these other studies have confirmed Rheingold’s assertion that online communications can lead to real human feelings, but like Baym (2000) says, most of these studies have focused on anecdotal evidence or “autobiographical accounts of online life” (p. 2). As such, her study of a soap opera fan community online, while still ethnographic and qualitative in nature, focused on more measurable and specific instances of community. One such measurable,

specific aspect of community that is not studied in online communities is the recently popular and much discussed idea of social capital.

The concept of social capital was brought to popular and scholarly attention by the 2000 release of Robert Putnam's landmark book noting the collapse of the American community. In *Bowling Alone*, Putnam (2000) explained the decline of American community life by pointing out the coinciding decline in social capital, or the "connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them" (p. 19). That is, he found that social networks and community participation in America are at an all-time low. Both formal civic participation, such as voting, political involvement, and religious services attendance, and informal social gatherings and connections are down. Neighborhood restaurants and lunch counters, long hotbeds of social interactions between "regulars," have given way to anonymous fast food chains. Card games or bowling matches among friends, neighbors, or club members have given way to solitary video games, and going out to the movies has been replaced by home videos. Putnam (2000) also found declines in altruism, philanthropy, and generalized trust and reciprocity. Large-scale donations to charity or fundraisers, while dollar-wise have increased, have not kept pace with inflation of salaries and spending on personal goods and recreation, and in many ways, have decreased significantly. Further, perceptions of honesty have steadily declined, as seen in measured quantitative surveys, as well as qualitative examples, such as the increase in unlisted phone numbers and the near extinction of hitchhiking. Further yet, reciprocity too has declined, as seen in the dramatic drop in voluntary census returns and equally

dramatic refusal rates for answering opinion surveys. And as many American drivers can attest, “road rage” and aggressive driving are of epidemic proportions, and even more disturbing, drivers ignore traffic laws much more now than ever before. Putnam (2000) provides a shocking example when he cites a study that tallied stop sign observation at a suburban New York intersection in two different years. While 37% of drivers made a complete stop in 1979, just 15 years later “97% made no stop at all at the very same intersection” (p. 143). Many different factors can answer for these disturbing figures, but the negative effect such egocentric behaviors have on a healthful and productive society is undeniable.

In a larger sense, what all of these statistics prove is the importance of social capital to a successful community and society. Putnam has argued this idea throughout his career, and the striking numbers and stories offered in *Bowling Alone* made the strongest case yet for social capital as an important, and measurable, aspect of successful communities. Obviously, without social capital, a community degenerates and declines, and this is why looking at the existence of social capital in a community is so vital to the examination of community.

Online Communities as Social Capital

Not all of the statistics in *Bowling Alone* are dire. In fact, Putnam pointed to three areas where participation did not decrease, and in some case, where it actually increased. Among those areas were small groups, such as support groups and self-help groups, and social movements, like the ever-growing environmental movement. The third area he

discusses is telecommunication. Telecommunications not only bucks the trend of declining membership, it has in fact increased at a dizzying pace, especially when considering the growth of the Internet. Putnam concedes that it is much too early to assess social effects of the Internet and computer-mediated communication (CMC), but does lay out what he deems “potential advantages and disadvantages of computer-mediated communication for American civic life” (p. 171). Namely, these advantages include the increase in communication networks.

Putnam does, however, believe that CMC and online communities have a place within the discussion of social capital. This is seen as he gives some examples of the “many different shapes and size” of social capital:

Your extended family represents a form of social capital, as do your Sunday school class, the regulars who play poker on your commuter train, your college roommates, the civic organizations you belong to, the Internet chat group in which you participate, and the network of professional acquaintances recorded in your address book. (Putnam, 2000, p. 21)

Many features of online communication make it possible for Putnam and others to legitimately consider it as a form of social capital. And accordingly, many new research studies have begun to focus on the relationship between online communication and social capital. Shah, Kawak, and Holbert (2001) studied the influence of the Internet on social capital, namely whether people who participated in online political debates also participated in physical debates. Preece (2002) focused on how Internet communities helped to enrich social capital, in this case camaraderie and friendship, throughout the world following the terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001. These two studies concluded in ways to suggest that online communities were supplemental to physical

communities, or at the very least a tool with which physical communities could build social capital.

Most notable among studies in online communities and social capital, and similar in focus of online communities as tools of social capital in the physical realm, is the article by Wellman, et al. (2001). In this study, which asks most basically “does the Internet increase, decrease or supplement social capital,” the researchers looked at whether participation in online communities led to any changes in a person’s physical community. Wellman et al. (2001) conclude that their results “suggest that the Internet is increasing interpersonal connectivity and organizational involvement” (p. 451). This is mainly due to the increased ease of communication and interaction the Internet offers to the busy American. But again, this major study only focused on online communication and communities working as a tool to supplement or adjust social capital in physical communities.

Statement of Purpose

While previous research has begun to see online communities and online communication as an accepted form of social capital, researchers fail to examine social capital within online communities. With so many different research studies pointing affirmatively towards online communities meeting the same standard definitions as traditional off-line communities, why not look to how social capital is manifested in online communities as well? In other words, since social capital is such a vital ingredient

in a successful off-line community, examining social capital within an online community is the next step in identifying successful communities based solely online.

In this study, I attempt to pick up just where research has left off. Using the Let's Go Kings online community, I observed and recorded the interactions of the members in one of the most active message boards and examined their communication for signs of social capital, namely trust and reciprocity. These observations helped to determine if social capital in fact does exist in this online community in the same ways as if the community was based off-line. I guided my analysis by the following research questions: (a) How do members express feelings of trust, or what do members say that indicates levels of trust? and (b) How, in a text-based environment, do members act in ways that benefit others and the community in general? From careful readings of all of the threads collected, I found four communicative practices employed by the members, and in the analysis I used emblematic threads to draw out and discuss how these practices reflect social capital.

I chose to use LGK in my research because of my experience with the community. And I chose the Reality Hipcheck forum because of the wide range of topics and relatively smaller, more manageable number of participants. As mentioned, I have been at least a viewing member of the community for four and a half years, and have participated regularly off and on for three years. When I put an academic spin on my observation of and participation in this community, I realized that I had unintentionally begun ethnographic research. In my time online at LGK I have learned the "characters" of the regular posters, I know what to expect from the other members, and I even know

some of the inside jokes. Understanding random references and innuendo is also something that I am able to do because of my time spent in the community. This deeper understanding I have for the community rules and norms, as well as the various participating members, allowed me to provide more background information and write a richer sociocultural description. Both of these factors helped to build a stronger analysis.

Chapter II of this project reviews literature related to the main concepts of this study: Computer-mediated communication (CMC), online— also known as virtual— communities, and social capital, giving special attention to the tenets trust and reciprocity. Chapter III moves on to an introduction of the method used in this study, reviewing ethnography, discourse analysis, and the ethnographic method of discourse analysis, ethnography of communication. The chapter also presents the methodological framework, or how the study was conducted. Chapter IV presents the results, findings, and analysis of the research, introducing the communicative practices reflecting social capital, and an examination of emblematic instances within the collected communication. And finally, Chapter V features a summary of the research and implications of the findings. Also, I examine strengths and weakness in the research and make suggestions for future research in the area of online communication and social capital.

Chapter II: Literature Review

This study examines social capital and, through discourse analysis, seeks to discover how it is manifested in an online community. The areas of literature related to the analysis include studies in computer-mediated communication (CMC), online community, and social capital. Beginning this literature review is a discussion of the basic interpersonal principles of CMC. This review then moves into a reappraisal of research on virtual communities. Finally, some of the most influential and important work in the area of social capital, emphasizing its major tenets of trust and reciprocity, are identified.

Computer-mediated Communication

Doug Engelbart changed the digital paradigm when he suggested that instead of being just a data processing machine, a computer could be used for group communication and gaining access to a wider range of people. Even early research had shown that "the vast majority of people surfing the Internet... are there 'in search of social interaction, not just sterile information'" (Smolowe, 1995, p. 20). Yet many people have remained skeptical about such interpersonal interaction over a digital medium, speculating that the lack of nonverbal cues and absence of face-to-face (FtF) negotiation will prevent true, heartfelt emotions and connections. The following review identifies two main criticisms of CMC as an interpersonal communication medium, and then answers these criticisms.

The first major criticism of CMC involves that lack of nonverbal and supplementary verbal cues. Most early research of CMC focused on these social context cues deemed essential to interpersonal exchange, yet missing from CMC. This “cues filtered out” perspective (Culnan and Markus, 1987) argues that because such important social cues, such as gestures, facial expressions, and vocalics, were absent from text-based communication, CMC, as an interpersonal communication medium, is not as rich as FtF. There is substance to such reasoning. Nonverbal behaviors have long been credited with successfully reinforcing, improving, and advancing verbal communication. For instance, Mehrabian and Wiener (1966) found that ninety-three percent of social meaning is communicated through nonverbal channels. Later estimates charge that “no more than 30 to 35 percent of the social meaning of a conversation or interaction is carried by words” (Birdwhistell, 1970, p. 158). If that is correct, it seems obvious that CMC is incomplete as a communication medium, as it strips the interaction of important nonverbal and verbal cues.

The social presence theory also writes off CMC as an inherently impersonal medium due to the limited channels of communication. Social presence, that is, the perceived communion of the communicating participants, is typically conveyed by context and nonverbal cues. Media rated high in social presence are warm, personal, and sociable; just the opposite, those low in social presence are cold, impersonal, and unsociable (Short, Williams, & Christie, 1976). And Hiltz, Johnson, and Turoff (1986) indicate that with fewer nonverbal cues, CMC “conveys less social presence than FtF discussions” (p. 228). Hence, CMC is less warm and sociable than its FtF counterpart.

Not only does the lack of social cues effect the communication process, making it less sociable and warm, but missing cues can also effect the communicator. Keisler, Siegel, and McGuire (1984), citing the often used deindividuation theory, suggest the lack of appropriate social context cues lead to uninhibited behavior by increasing feelings of anonymity and decreasing self-regulation. In other words, being anonymous can lead a person to dispense with manners and act in a way that is contrary to accepted social practice.

The most commonly discussed anti-social behavior online is flaming. Flaming, “the practice of sending intended or perceived hostile messages in mediated context” (Wood & Smith, 2001, p. 88), is well documented, but researchers do not agree on the causes of unpleasant exchanges in CMC. Popular reasoning concludes that communicators in a computer-mediated environment are so stripped of their own social identity that they rebuke all social norms and constraints and lash out in coarse and rude manners. Other researchers, invoking the social presence theory, argue that because of the lack of important nonverbal cues, “computer conversations are more impersonal, more blunt, and more likely to produce the kind of friction that leads to flaming” (Thompson, 1996, p. 301). Either way, critics suggest the very nature of CMC leads to disagreeable, anti-social behavior, making CMC an undesirable interpersonal communication medium.

The second major criticism of CMC as an interpersonal communication medium is that of missing physical identifiers. Not only are nonverbal cues left out of CMC, but the communicators’ physical identities are also hidden. This critique is best illustrated by

the famous *New Yorker* cartoon featuring canine computer users saying “On the Internet, nobody knows you're a dog” (Steiner, 1993, p. 61). And because so much of communication is gained not only by the words and gestures used by an individual but also by identifying the individual, CMC is again lacking.

Identity online is not bound by physical attributes, as they tend to be in FtF communication. Whereas important markers, such as age, race, and sex, are determined by seeing the person in “real life,” online identities depend on the other person to set forth the image by which he or she wishes to be perceived and identified by others. This leaves plenty of opportunity for misrepresentation and outright lying. Many horror stories have been shared regarding false identities. The most common examples involve “gender bending,” or assuming a different sex or gender than one has. Particularly discussed at length is the issue of men posing as women in order to gain trust or closeness from other women (e.g., Stone, 1991; Turkle, 1995). According to Spears et al. (2002), this gender swapping “is an example of a powerful group exploiting the identity manipulation potential afforded by the Internet” (p.101). The flip side shows women assuming male identities in order to gain respect from her counterparts in the traditionally male dominated digital environment, or to escape unwanted attention (Tamosaitis, 1995). In both cases, communicators take advantage of the absence of physical contact to lie about their true identities. And with no visual “proof,” nothing keeps people from lying about their identities.

While critics have been outspoken about the ills of CMC, other researchers have found positive answers to the negative review. In regards to the first major criticism, that

CMC interactions are stripped of verbal and nonverbal cues, communication is not as lost as it seems at first. People are aware of the limited channels of communication and compensate by using the available channels as effectively as possible. Often times, people are clearer in their use of language. Chesboro and Bonsall (1989) support this idea:

Computerized communication possesses the advantage of focusing attention upon the written word, inviting extraction of as much as possible from this source of communication. The mode also allows or forces users to employ words concretely, vividly, and meaningfully. (p.118)

Additionally, people tend to complement their textual message with additional textual qualifiers. Emoticons, the “text-based cues designed to reveal the emotional intent of a message,” include the infamous “smileys,” as well as spelling vocal utterances, stress on words by capitalization, and literal description of physical actions are a few examples (Wood & Smith, 2001, p. 88). While emoticons are not the same as, nor can they replace, the real emotions conveyed through face to face interactions, they do represent the same function: to provide complimentary social context cues and convey a semblance of emotion.

The second major criticism of CMC as an interpersonal communication medium is that identity is little more than someone’s creation of an image. From an exchange, you can, “at best, only hope that a correspondent might turn out to be as you imagined. Yet you may well be chatting with someone masquerading as a different sex and different age” (Stoll, 1995, p. 58). However, Wood and Smith (2001) suggest research shows “although experimentation with identity is possible, it is neither encouraged nor the norm

for the presentation of self” (p. 56). In other words, just because lying is possible, it is not always done.

Sometimes hiding physical identity can have its advantages. By making physical features invisible, an interaction may become void of any unnecessary or harmful stereotyping. People in FtF situations may shy away from interactions with people who look a certain way even though they may have much in common. But through CMC, as Wellman (1997) explains, the “relative lack of social presence online fosters relationships with people who have more diverse social characteristics than might normally be encountered in person” (p. 191). In CMC, the content of communication is what brings people together, regardless of physical or social characteristics. And instead of focusing on someone’s physical characteristics, the main focus of a communication interaction can be on the topic at hand, not any prejudices towards race, sex, or physical disability one may have.

In conclusion of literature related to CMC, it is important to understand that much research has done a disservice to the real communication experiences of people online. New research perspectives, while continuing to focus on the comparisons between FtF and CMC, take a more positive spin on interpersonal and computer-mediated communication. Fresh comparisons between FtF and CMC show that interpersonal interactions can take place over computer networks. For instance, Walther and Burgoon (1992) showed that “interpersonality” is possible with CMC; it is simply slower than tradition FtF exchanges.

But even these continued comparisons between CMC and FtF continues to be a disservice. For instance, Culnan and Markus (1987) identify that the “cues filtered out” perspective suggests that CMC should be compared to the standards set by FtF interactions, thereby ignoring that maybe “electronic media have capabilities not found in face-to-face communication” (p. 431). While spending time trying to prove shortcomings of CMC in interpersonal communication, or by defending CMC against criticism, the interpersonal communication that is occurring is being, in large part, ignored.

In many ways, negative criticisms are either overstated or exaggerated. The shortcomings of CMC as an interpersonal communication medium can be, and have been, overcome by computer users. And even if CMC and FtF are not “functional alternatives” (Flaherty, Pearce, and Rubin, 2000), the fact remains that people are using the Internet for interpersonal reasons. Many recent surveys and studies have looked to put actual numbers to the growing phenomenon of online interpersonal communication, and a release from the Pew Internet and American Life Project indicates that “84% of Internet users, or about 90 million Americans, say they have used the Internet to contact or get information from a group” (Horriggan, 2001, p. 2). Of those, 23 million Americans are said to be “very active” in online communities, communicating with a group several times a week. These vibrant social systems existing online deserve to be examined on their own.

*Online Community*¹

The word community is not easy to define. It encompasses many different ideas and concepts. What is community to one person, does not necessarily translate as community to someone else. Bernard (1973) contends, “three characteristics are usually agreed upon as a minimum (for the distinction as community), namely, locale, common ties, and social interactions” (p. 4). Of all definitions, these three characteristics are present in all discussions of everyday, physical community.

Internet users who have sought out social interactions on computer networks have also come together to create communities. These communities based online are known to scholars and general public alike as virtual communities. Rheingold (1993), leading researcher and proponent of communication technology, provides the key definition of virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feelings, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (p. 5). This definition closely resembles the aspects of community in the physical world. Members of virtual communities interact with each other and share common interests. The only aspect lacking from this definition is the idea of a common location.

But despite the seeming consistency in definitions of community online and off, virtual communities are not wholly accepted as a positive phenomenon. More specifically, the right to refer to them as “communities” has been called into question

¹ While authors of previous works cited here use terms such as “virtual community” and “cybercommunity,” I will use the term “online community” as a synonym in the discussion.

often. Snyder (1996) regards the use of “virtual community” as a misnomer: “Things that are really real are real, and things like virtual communities are not really real” (p. 92). He justifies the statement by asserting “Internet communities lack defining characteristics of communities” (p. 92). Doheny-Farina (1996) also cautions against considering online interactions among groups a true community. He argues, “a community is bound by place, which always includes complex social and environmental necessities” (p. 37). Not only does this research dismiss communities based online, it even slights the people that participate in online communities. Snyder (1996) continues on his dismissal of virtual communities by suggesting “the Net derives from a world of antisocial people who have difficulty relating to others” (p. 92). This idea is reminiscent of early criticism of CMC in general. Researchers again use earlier theories of the Internet and computer networks as being inherently cold and unsociable media, this time to dismiss the communication occurring through this medium.

While those arguments against online community and Internet users are passionate and strong, they are also exaggerated and misleading. Harsh criticisms such as these are often based on anonymous chat rooms or drop-in messages boards where interactions are casual, irregular, and fleeting. As Bird (1999) reminds, “it is hardly surprising that these offer little sense of community; one would not expect to find community in a dark bar where people drop in and out wearing masks, either” (p. 52). But not all communication online takes place in anonymous forums. Every person has a different experience when communicating online, some good and some bad.

Anecdotes reveal a wide spectrum of experiences. Some report their lives changing in remarkable ways as a result of participating in online

communities. Others describe empty chat rooms, unanswered messages, shallow comments, excessive advertising and junk mail. Some tell stories of receiving empathy and support from total strangers, while others report being victimized by unwarranted verbal attacks. (Preece, 2000, p. 26)

And instead of being limited to anonymous and transitory chat rooms, other online communication takes place in well established, sociable groups, where participants are more tied to the group, and more responsible in their behavior. Fernback (1999) reveals that, as opposed to evanescent chat rooms, “cybercommunities are characterized by common value systems, norms, rules, and the sense of identity, commitment, and association that also characterize various physical communities or other communities of interest” (p. 211). The WELL (Rheingold, 1993) and Echo (Horn, 1998) are some examples of the old hand “cybercommunities” Fernback described. These well-studied online groups have established respectable reputations as communities, through the commitment, friendliness, and sociability of the members. Other smaller communities have formed over the years, and many researchers have turned to the smaller groups to examine in detail what makes these groups “communities.” Watson (1997) examines a 50,000 person strong community based around the music group Phish and concludes that the group and other online forums maintain community by “the continued interaction of participating members” (p. 104) and the “seemingly continuous presence of other people there” (p. 105). Baym (2000), in her study of r.a.t.s., an online group of soap opera fans, stresses the “importance of self-disclosure, social support, a welcoming attitude, and a genuine friendship” (p. 181) as core values, and the consistency of norms and conventions over time as proof of the success of this online community. Many other

studies and articles, as well, reflect anecdotal evidence of friendly participants, established rules, and other facets of successful communities existing online.

As is the case with CMC and FtF, comparing and contrasting real life and virtual communities is wasteful. Just as the Internet is not a replacement for face-to-face communication, online communities, too, lack some important social and interpersonal aspects and cannot be seen as a substitution for “real life” community. But instead of focusing on differences and criticizing the lacking aspects of online communities, it is more important to look at these communities as separate entities unto themselves. Further, as Baym (2000) laments, when turning to previous scholarly research “one tends to find instead autobiographical accounts of online life or ideological arguments about whether these groups are ‘real’ communities” (p. 2). Further research needs to move beyond the anecdotal evidence and focus on finding specific aspects of online communities that can answer why they are successful. And one of those specific aspects that has been lacking in online communication research is social capital.

Social Capital

Social capital is an important, yet elusive, concept. The importance lies in the concept’s ability to explain and interpret the basic building blocks of successful social networks. The elusiveness is due in large part to the lack of a firm definition. Social capital cannot be, or at least has not been, defined in a simple statement. Instead the definition is rooted in and embedded within several traditions. Closest to a traditional “definition,” social capital can be summarized as the norms and social relations within a

social structure that enable the citizens to act in ways to better achieve their goals as a group or community. More specifically, Putnam (2000) suggests that social capital “refers to the connections among individuals– social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (p. 19). This has been the most often accepted and used description of social capital.

As Coleman (1990) explains, social capital is not a single entity, but rather several entities that have two characteristics in common. First, social capital consists of some aspect of a given social structure, and second, it facilitates certain behaviors or actions of individuals in that social structure. Hence, social capital is productive, “making possible the achievement of certain ends that would not be attainable in its absence” (Coleman, 1990, p. 302). Social capital makes a successful society a possibility; without it, societies fail.

Robert Putnam brought the idea and concept of social capital to the forefront. In his 2000 book *Bowling Alone*, Putnam establishes the loss of social capital in America, illustrated by, among other things, the decline in civic participation. In his work, he concludes without this civic participation, trust and reciprocity, two elements vital to effective societies, are undermined and the society’s ability to solve problems and sustain prosperity deteriorates.

The statistics in *Bowling Alone* certainly are startling. But is it true, or accurate, that social capital really is on the decline? Or, could the changes seen in daily life reflect not a real loss of social capital but rather a shift in the way it is expressed? Lemann (1996) tends to agree that Americans are not becoming less civil, only they are being civil

in different ways: “The dire statistics in *Bowling Alone* reflect merely a mutation rather than a disappearance of civic virtue, because civic virtue has found new expressions in response to economic and social change” (p. 25). He continues: “From bowling leagues on up, many of the declining associations Putnam mentions are like episodes of *The Honeymooners* seen today— out of date” (p. 25). Here, Lemann answers the statistical decline by suggesting Americans have simply outgrown the “traditional” means of social involvement.

One place civic involvement and interpersonal interactions have shifted is online. Putnam tackles this idea, giving it an entire chapter in his book. In it, he concedes that the Internet is one of the organizations that is “against the tide” of social capital disappearance. After all, “social capital is about networks, and the Net is the network to end all networks” (Putnam, 2000, p. 171). More specifically, Putnam concludes that telecommunications and the Internet can “substantially enhance our ability to communicate; thus it seems reasonable to assume that their net effect will be to enhance community” (p. 171). Improving or increasing communication can only help in creating networks and ties within the community.

These next few sections will look deeper at two important aspects of social capital, trust and reciprocity, and review research that defines these ideas as well as examines their existence in the online environment.

Trust. Trust is such an important and pervasive thing in life that defining it can be a challenge. Naquin and Paulson (2003) concede, “whereas its importance is frequently noted, trust has historically proved to be an elusive construct with multiple

interpretations” (p. 114). In everyday conversation, people tend to use trust so interchangeably with belief and truth that it has come to have a positive connotation. And while trust does fall back on positive attributes like integrity, the real backbone of trust is consistency in behavior.

Rousseau, Sitkin, Burt and Camerer (1998) offer this different approach to the feel-good notion of trust when they define it as “a psychological state comprising the intention to accept vulnerability based upon positive expectations of the intentions or behaviors of another” (p. 395). This definition strays far from the usual meaning of trust as believing in what someone says and instead refers to taking a risk and believing only that the other person does not mean any intentional harm. This type of trust is earned through experience, and because as humans “we are creatures who reason inductively... we have a great tendency to extend our confidence beyond the evidence” (Govier, 1997, p. 8). For instance, if someone has acted consistently honest in the past, people extend trust to that person in the future.

Trust is an integral part of healthy interpersonal relationships. In terms of these friendships and intimate relations, Wood (1999) interprets trust as “believing in another’s reliability (he or she will do what is promised) and emotionally relying on another to care about and protect our welfare” (p. 249). She continues to explain that “one reason that trust is so important to close friendships and romantic relationships is that it allows us to take risks ourselves,” and intimacy can only grow if one submits his or herself to risk (Wood, 1999, p. 249). Wood (1999) also reinforces that trust must be earned over time. Individuals do not begin relationships with full trust, but rather develop trust in others as

experience reveals “they do what they say they will and they don’t betray us” (p. 320).

The more experience one has with the reliability of another, the more trust can grow and the bonds of the relationship become stronger.

Trust in online communication is usually studied in terms of electronic commerce rather than interpersonal interactions. Boyd (2003) focused on just this kind of trust, where “the truster will be an individual Internet user and the trustee will be the Internet agent trustee” (p. 394). In his study, the focus was on a commercial transaction where an individual must trust an agency to take the sensitive information in exchange only for the help or service requested. He found that just as in face-to-face interactions, trust is largely dependent on experience. The more often a person has had a successful transaction, either through the medium or with a particular agency, the more likely he or she is to complete online transactions in the future. The problem lies in establishing initial trust, and therein lies a paradox: too many messages encouraging trust and security backfire and cause people to have more concerns over the possibility of danger. Boyd concludes that gaining initial trust depends on the reputation of the trustee, the past experiences of the truster, and a fine balance between details of security measures and information of how any wrongs will be corrected. Too much information will lead the truster to have that much more trust, and too much risk on the side of the truster will lead him or her to abandon the transaction.

Boyd’s 2003 piece is helpful in providing background into the connections between computer-mediated communication and trust. However, the study again focuses

on trust between individuals and institutions. Still missing is a much more vast archive of research on trust between individuals in an online environment.

In the little research that is available on interpersonal trust online, trust is nearly always married to identity. Consequently, the main argument against trust in an online environment is based on the relative anonymity of Internet users and the subsequent ease of lying. As mentioned in the review of literature related to CMC, in an online environment, the communicators' physical identities are hidden, giving rise to reinventing oneself in a way he or she would like to be seen, as opposed to the way he or she really is. And the anonymity of the Internet makes the social norms of civility easily abandoned, and truth is foremost among the possible casualties in anonymous interactions.

But again, going back to the review of CMC literature, some research has indicated that the assumption of, as well as and reports of, mass outright lying in online communication is exaggerated. For instance, Schiano (1999), in her study of online MUDs and MOOs, reported that most people in the forums take on identities that are more idealized or perfected versions of their own selves, and not completely different identities. So, in general although it is possible to take on a different identity, people most often do not stray from their real offline identities.

Some research has also shown that anonymity itself is also sometimes overemphasized in criticisms of online communication. In the "identity continuum," where real-life identity lies at one end and complete anonymity at the other, online communicators typically fall in the middle, favoring pseudonymity over the other two

options. Pseudonyms, long used by authors, artists, and performers, give individuals a chance to hide their real identity, but also offer a chance to focus attention to an aspect of themselves they want celebrate. And pseudonyms are the first step into creating an online identity that will highlight offline interests and identity while keeping one's "real" name hidden and private.

This brings up an important, much over looked detail about identities: they are not static and inherent, but rather are created by the person in his or her communication and are changed over time, depending on station in life or interactive social situations. As Dyson (1998) reminds, "in almost any real community... people build up identities and reputations over time" (p. 298). Online identities, too, are built over time through experiences and interactions with others, so "if someone pretends to be nice online even though he's really a nasty old man, is that a fake identity?" (p. 298). Tapscott (1997) would argue no, the identity is real because he has acted in ways consistent with the person he has become known as online. In his book about children growing up immersed with digital and communication technology, he noted that trust is important in online communities and is "established when a child has a persistent identity online and participates in regular interaction" (p. 77). Tapscott (1997) continues by pointing out the difference between trust online and the popular misconceptions about the meaning of the word: "Trust is not the same as liking someone. BREEZY may not like CYBERCHICK but he trusts her because she has established an identity over a period of time. He has come to believe in her— that she is a person with an identity and who accepts the rules of N-Gen culture" (1997, p. 77). And while maybe not a true and accurate representation of

ones' offline self, the online identity, for all practical purposes, is the person. Again, this pulls trust away from the feel-good connotations of believing in everything that someone says as opposed to how he or she is acting.

Of course, this idea goes beyond just online communities in which children participate. Onyx and Bullen (2000) also agree with Tapscott that trust in someone's online identity does not necessarily mean trust in that person off-line. To them, "trust entails a willingness to take risks in a social context based on a sense of confidence that others will respond as expected and will act in a mutually supportive way, or at least that others do not intend harm" (p. 24). Again, in this case, trust does not simply mean believing what someone says about him or herself. For instance, it is not so important that you trust the firefighter gave her real name. What is important is that you can trust her to act consistently with her identity as a rescue worker and help save you from danger. The same works online. "Sasha" may or may not be a female, but if she acts consistently with her online identity, her offline self does not matter. Her offline identity isn't important to others, but rather, her consistent behaviors online allow others to take risks because they can trust her to respond in a given way.

In the end, it is important to remember that trust refers to consistency of behavior and a willingness to become vulnerable. Trust is not simply a positive, feel-good thing and not "entirely a matter of feeling and emotion" but rather "presupposes beliefs and often these beliefs are based on evidence" (Govier, 1997, p. 5). While people often associate trust with believing what someone says, it is really much less appealing, much more detached than that. It is not so important that an individual believes the story

someone tells about his or her past, but rather it is important that that individual trusts someone not to harm him or her when he or she take risks, whether crossing a street or being involved in a political debate. People gain this trust through experience, and while gaining initial trust is difficult in online communication (Boyd, 2003), there is no other way to establish trust than to take the risk and build off of positive experiences.

Reciprocity. The second major tenet of social capital is reciprocity. Most simply stated, “reciprocity is made up of a series of acts each of which is short-term altruistic (benefiting others at a cost to the altruist), but which together typically make every participant better off” (Taylor, 1982, p. 28-29). Reciprocal acts benefit most obviously the person on the immediate receiving end of the act; however, the altruist’s self-interest is also served. In some cases, the returns for the altruist are immediate and other times the returns are long-term. And the altruist need not always see returns, but just know that repayments have been made. Putnam (2000) enumerated several examples of reciprocity:

Raking your leaves before they blow into your neighbors’ yard, lending a dime to a stranger for a parking meter, buying a round of drinks the week you earn overtime, keeping an eye on a friend’s house, taking turns bringing snacks to Sunday school, caring for a child of the crack-head one flight down. (p. 135)

Each of these instances shows a person sacrificing some personal benefit for the good of others. Whether the sacrifice is measured in money, time, or attention, a person is still surrendering his or her immediate personal interests to help someone else, believing that another would do the same for him or her.

Many examples exist of reciprocity at a community level. A person may take a minute or two out of her own day to sign a petition for a new stop sign at a busy

intersection. Although she has given up her time to support another person's goal, she, too, will benefit from the safety of the new sign. That traffic sign also demonstrates an instance of reciprocity. Another community member may be in a hurry to get home, but will slow down and stop at a stop sign. He does so at the expense of his travel time, but he knows that he will be safer because of it. Further, he should expect, or trust, that others would also obey the sign and help keep the roads and intersections safe.

Reciprocity and trust are inextricably intertwined. One does not need to be repaid immediately, but rather he or she can trust that repayment for a favor will come. Of the examples above, none have immediate, concrete payoffs. Perhaps by giving a stranger a dime for a parking meter an individual may help create a more amiable neighborhood. That individual's gift may inspire the other person to help someone else, and so on. Or by carrying for the well-being of a neglected child, perhaps the person is helping reduce future crime. With community help, that child may break the cycle of addiction and crime modeled by his or her parents, and he or she may then grow to be a healthy, productive adult who can positively contribute to society. None of these things are certain to happen; and one can only have trust in other members to act in ways beneficial to all community members if reciprocity is the norm of the society in which they live.

This is why reciprocity is most often discussed in terms of the "norm of reciprocity," that is, the socially contracted obligation to return and grant favors for others in faith that self-interest will still be met. Gouldner (1960) argues that the norm of reciprocity makes "two interrelated, minimal demands: (1) people should help those who have helped them, and (2) people should not injure those who have helped them" (p. 10).

The theory is if everyone acted in ways that benefit others, self-interest would always be met by another person's actions. While sacrificing self-interest in order to help others, individuals ideally benefit by the self-sacrifices of others. But why would a person willingly sacrifice personal benefits for others? Many researchers have tackled the question and have sought answers to why humans reciprocate.

Reciprocity is so fundamental to the human condition, it is reflected in prominent social and moral codes throughout the world. Variants of the “Golden Rule,” so often cited in Confucian and Judeo-Christian traditions, are a few examples of the many similar tenets. Gouldner (1960) set the bar early when he asserted that the norm of reciprocity was universal among cultural traditions. While obligations imposed or the status of the participants varies, all cultures place an importance of repaying others in kind.

Such cultural universality indicates the inclination to repay others is innate and not necessarily taught in ethnic or religious traditions and reveals the most cited reason behind reciprocity: the basic human need of cooperation. Becker (1986) agrees as he contends that reciprocity is due in large part to the human desire to have needs met and how individuals utilize others to receive the goods of which they are in need:

We soon learn that we cannot, as a matter of fact, get what we want from others (sustenance, love, freedom) without giving something back. Even infants have a crude, faltering awareness of how to please, and what connection that has to getting what they want. By the time we are aware of ourselves as moral beings, the dispositions to reciprocate—to sustain the sort of equilibrium necessary for productive social intercourse—is deeply ingrained. (p. 82)

He continues, “the disposition to reciprocate is in fact acquired in the course of normal human development” (Becker, 1986, p. 82-83). Humans can only endure and thrive with the help of others, so reciprocation became a way to ensure survival.

In addition to basic survival, reciprocity is vital to successful personal relationships. Nowak, Vallacher, and Miller (2003) explain, “the sense of future obligation engendered by this norm promotes and maintains both personal and formal relationships” (p. 393). Most people do not think of friendships as “exchange relationships in which inputs and resource exchanges must be equivalent”; however, it can not be ignored that “children and adults of all ages consider these relationships to be marked by reciprocation, that is... the giving and taking, and returning in kind or degree” (Hartup, 1997, paragraph 8). Humans crave stability and predictability, and when individuals know they can count on a given response to a given action, they can relax. When things are stable and predictable, individuals are more able to trust.

Not only is reciprocity important to interpersonal relationship, but it is also vital to the soundness of societies in general. Nowak, Vallacher, and Miller (2003) also maintain, “when widely embraced by people as a shared standard, the reciprocity norm lends predictability, interpersonal trust, and stability to the larger social systems” (p. 393). Putnam (2000) agrees: “A society that relies on generalized reciprocity is more efficient than a distrustful society” (p. 135). When citizens of any given society know they can trust in fair and honest treatment from their fellow community members, they are much more willing to participate in that community. People are willing to sacrifice their self-interest for the good of others only if they can be certain others will do the same

for them. Selfless giving and true altruism are noble objectives, but survival mandates that individual needs be met as well.

Humans understand that no one person is completely self-sufficient and that everyone needs to rely on help from others. As much as one would personally like to handle his or her needs, he or she does need to depend on assistance from others from time to time and “reciprocation for that help— if it is a general feature of social interaction— reinforces helping behavior” (Becker, 1986, p. 90). In other words, if a society is ruled by the norm that everyone helps each other out, individuals will actively help others just as not reciprocating “would quite likely extinguish helping behavior” (Becker, 1986, p. 90). After all, helping someone has no advantages if the chance of being helped by someone else is not there.

While the importance of reciprocity in face-to-face communities has been widely discussed, this important element of successful communities has not been as investigated in the online environment. In one study, Howard (1997) examined the communications of an online community of academics and other rhetoric professionals (PURTOPOI) in an effort to see how the electronic world stacks up against the face-to-face world. Just as for an offline community, for an online community to be successful, Howard maintains, “there must be evidence that members make sacrifices or provide services for the group as long as they receive remuneration” (p. 125). In his examination, he found that the best evidence of the operation of reciprocity is seen when the sacrifices of members are not compensated.

In his study, Howard considered the payment or sacrifice made by a member to the PURTOPOI group to be in the form of time, and, in essence, money. The members of the PURTOPOI community are professional academics with busy schedules and limited time. Many expect to get the most out of their time in a professional online discussion and when their sacrifice of time is not met by acceptable professional dialogue they would leave the group. Consequently, the community would break down because acceptable repayments do not meet members' sacrifices.

However, PURTOPOI did not cease existence due to an exodus of unhappy academics streaming away from an unfulfilling professional discussion group. The earlier conclusion seemed premature and incomplete. Howard agrees as he amended the conclusion by adding that not all participants feel the need for the same kind of remunerations. For instance, many community members responded that they liked the personal conversation and "chit-chat" in the group, despite its seeming lack of professionalism, because it gave background into the other members, as well as some rest from the strict, serious academic world. With this important distinction, Howard (1997) points out an important idea: "reciprocity is not entirely dependent on a shared sense of the group's purpose or sense of identity" (p. 129). He continues: "it would be a mistake to equate the simple achievement of a group's purpose with evidence of reciprocity" (1997, p. 129). This piece is very important as it takes a key step to explain the individuality each member has, as well as his or her own sense of equitable repayment of sacrifices made.

Overall, review of the research on reciprocity in an online environment is disappointing. While examinations of online communities are numerous and frequent, few of these researchers have tackled this issue of sacrifices and remunerations in online relations. Howard and others try to explain the existence of reciprocity in online communities, but the few combined pages dedicated to this topic fall short.

Summary

No shortage of literature exists in the area of Computer-mediated communication (CMC). Criticism of CMC as an interpersonal communication medium is based on the lack of nonverbal and supplementary verbal cues and missing physical identifiers. Because communicators' identities and supplemental cues are unseen, the medium is regarded as colder and more impersonal than face-to-face (FtF) communication. Such criticism is rebuked by research that suggests communicators overcome the deficits of CMC through textual modifiers or clearer communication, and they continue on to use the medium to form interpersonal bonds.

Earlier research also points out that interpersonal relationships that flourish online are often found in whole communities that have sprung up on the Internet. Despite their lack of physical locale, many people who share common interests come together in groups based online and continue to have worthwhile and meaningful relationships. Researchers justify calling these groups "communities" because of the shared interest and affection of the members, despite the lack of common locale.

Social capital, or the norms that make a social network work well and succeed, is a concept often used to explain why a community or larger society succeeds or fails.

Trust and reciprocity are two common entities of social capital pointed to as having great importance a society's success. That is, a society that harbors trust and reciprocity is a successful society. Those societies lacking trust and reciprocity will fail.

In this study, I hope to fill in gaps found in previous literature. And thus, in the following thesis, I will examine social capital in an online community and answer how social capital exists online and whether the existence or absence of trust and reciprocity effect the success of a community based solely online.

Chapter III: Methods

The objective of this study is to investigate whether social capital, in offline terms and definitions, is met in communities based online. Social capital requires social networks, and the norms of reciprocity and trust that come from these networks. The Internet has created online social networks (Rheingold, 1993). Now, do reciprocity and trust exist in the same way online as offline? And do social networks on the Internet function successfully because of reciprocity and trust? To answer these questions, the study employs qualitative and ethnographic methods, relying namely on participant observation, user interviews, and the discourse analysis method ethnography of communication

Qualitative and Quantitative Methods

When considering methods of social research, the discussion never fails to fall back to which nature of method, qualitative or quantitative, is more appropriate in the particular study. Several examples exist of both methods being used with great success in studying online communities. For instance, Yang (2000) used surveys to investigate the usage of the Internet and online communities by gay academics in Taiwan. Flaherty, Pearce, and Rubin's (1998) well-known article uses surveys and other quantitative methods to find the differences between computer-mediated communication and face-to-face communication. And Mickelson (1997) used surveys and interviews based on a 5-point Likert scale to see how interactions in an electronic group help parents of children

with special needs feel social support. Quantification of data can make observations more exact and explicit; it can also make analysis and summarization easier. Whether analyzing data by simple or complicated statistical means, it is hard to argue with mathematical answers to research questions.

On the other hand, qualitative methods, relying on more personal judgment and summation, are also employed in some of the most well-known and celebrated studies of online communities. Rheingold's (1993) *The Virtual Community* is just one prime example of how thick description is used to examine an online community. Other studies, such as Watson's (1997) look at an online fan community and Turkle's (1995) investigation of online identity have brought to the forefront the importance and usefulness of qualitative analysis in the study of online interactions and communication.

Many qualitative methods have shown great promise and success in research of online communities. Content analysis, often seen as the second major form of qualitative discourse analysis, was a consideration for this study, but this method does not allow for full emersion into the community, which I felt was vital to understanding the everyday language and communication patterns of the community members. While I see an importance to acknowledging the demographic and situational context of the communication, content analysis "disregards ethnographic and demographic particulars of the context and participants" (Lazaraton, 2000, p.38). Also, content analysis is a method with fixed concepts and rigid hypotheses. And while all ethnographic means do allow for some pre-existent notions, those within the ethnography of communication method are much more provisional and open to adjustment as the situations change.

In the end, with its focus on the way members of an online community use language to create the social norms that govern the community and determine their participation among other members, the qualitative method of ethnography of communication best relates this study. This method allows for me to understand the multiple realities in every situation, and to recognize my own position within those realities. Ethnography of communication, most importantly, calls for thick description of the setting, context, and participants. These descriptions outside of the actual data are vital to understanding the situation and culture of the community of study, making this method the best choice for this study.

Ethnography

The qualitative method of ethnography is a growing form of research. With roots in anthropology and sociology, ethnography has begun to appear in studies outside of the traditional ethnic or cultural research. The basic principle behind the method is full immersion within a culture or group in order to understand their realities. And because ethnographic studies are applied to cultures, it is important to first look at what defines culture.

While most celebrated and oft-used definitions of culture are similar in wording, they are also similar in ambiguity. For instance, the first sentence on the first page of Tylor's 1958 work states that "culture or civilization, taken in its wide ethnographic sense, is that complex whole which includes knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, custom, and any other capabilities and habits acquired by man [sic] as a member of society" (p.1).

More recent definitions get a bit more specific; Philipsen (1992), as he adapts from Geertz (1973), defines culture as “socially constructed and historically transmitted patterns of symbols, meanings, premises, and rules” (Philipsen, 1992, p.8). And while often used interchangeably, “culture is not another word for society: society is people and the way they are organized; culture is behavior and artifacts and the meanings we attach to them” (Van Der Elst, 1999, p.33). Taken together, these definitions work to create how culture is used in this study. That is, to be considered a culture, a group must share experiences and interpretations of those experiences as well as understand and follow basic rules of behavior. This can mean ethnic cultures that share, for instance, gender roles and religious traditions, or it can mean smaller groups or organizations, such as subcultures of a larger culture, like work-class neighborhoods, or academic clubs, fraternities, athletic teams, and the like.

The “socially constructed” piece of the various definitions of culture implies that culture is not inherently biological or invented by an individual, but rather constructed through social interaction within a group of people. Kroeber (1952) states this explicitly in his explanation of the qualities of culture: “culture...is transmitted and continued not by the genetic mechanism of heredity but by interconditioning of zygotes” (p.104). Because culture is socially constructed and socially learned, it is through observation that native group members and outsiders alike learn what the culture is made of and how it is maintained. Ethnography, where researchers embed themselves into a culture to learn through observation, is the method of research that backs this idea.

While no exact definition exists for what makes something ethnographic research, there are four basic characteristics that are typically present: participant observation, holism, context sensitivity, and sociocultural description (Stewart, 1998). The first characteristic is participant observation. Whether a general culture or a specialized group, the researcher must have first hand participatory experience within the group that provides the researcher with a rich involvement and understanding of the group. Participant observation can be employed in depth by a researcher living within a group, such as a year living with a nomadic tribe in Northern Canada to investigate religious rituals, or it can be as subtle as weekend visits to a local brewpub to analyze the socialization habits of single, young adults of a particular neighborhood. While living amongst the members of a group, the researcher is better equipped to understand the nuances of the particular group. The second characteristic is holism. This characteristic sees that the researcher is able to join several observations and make a generalized construct of cultures as a whole. For example, viewing a particular culture's reverence of Earth as the creator of life can be seen as a form of religion, a construct seen in most ethnic cultures. Humankind shares several facets of life, and holism seeks to find those common facets within a specific community. The third characteristic is context sensitivity. Whereas some experiences exist in all cultures (as noted in holism), it is important to see all experiences within a culture or group in relation to the context of that specific group. Going back to the religion example in holism, the Native American religious appreciation of the Earth as creator is specific to their culture in particular because their lives and livelihood depend largely on their natural environments and the

Earth's resources. As holism tells the researcher to find common facets of human life in a specific culture, context sensitivity seeks to find how the facets are presented differently in that culture. And finally, the fourth characteristic is sociocultural description. This characteristic sees that the researcher relays detailed description and analysis of the group studied. Malinowski most eloquently explains this idea: "The final goal, of which an ethnographer should never lose sight...is...to grasp the natives point of view" (Stewart, 1998, p.7). Anybody can view a flea market or bazaar, but a successful ethnographer will describe the methods and reasons behind the bartering and bargaining that occurs from the inhabitants' perspective.

Some noteworthy ethnographies have focused on the traditional and popular meaning of culture, that is, ethnic groups or races. Scheper-Hughes' (1979) examination of the effects of schizophrenia and other mental illnesses in rural Ireland is a well-known example. Allen (2002), too, has published a thorough analysis of the cultural identity of an Andean community through their consumption of coca leaves. Other celebrated ethnographies have employed a wider definition of culture and focus on smaller subgroups within an ethnic culture or society. For example, Bourgois's (1995) report on the gang and drug culture in Spanish Harlem and Baym's (2000) study of soap opera fans both focus on subgroups in the larger American culture.

As online communities are increasingly visible and more widely understood as communities (Rheingold, 1993), reaching the next step to identify them as cultures, or at least subcultures, is not far behind. However, difficulties arise when transferring the traditional means of ethnography to online communities or Internet cultures. Namely,

while Bourgois lived in Harlem and Scheper-Hughes in rural Ireland, online communities do not have a geographical location or setting in which the researcher can physically reside. But the lack of physical space does not take away the fact that online environments have established a functional and real “virtual space” in which most aspects of traditional communities are present (Rheingold, 1993; Fernback, 1999). And despite the lack of traditional “places,” ethnographies have already begun to focus on online communities, using the “virtual” space of the message board or chat rooms as their place of field research. Baym (2000), again, and Horn’s (1998) investigation of the “ECHO” online service are just two recent investigations of online communities using ethnographic means.

In addition to the many different areas covered by ethnographic studies, there are also different methods of ethnography, some deeply involved in the field of communication, namely ethnography of communication. This increasingly popular method grew from qualitative discourse analysis and studies of the social meaning of language. It is this method of ethnography that is used in this study.

Discourse Analysis and Ethnography of Communication

The general method of discourse analysis is conceptually broad. The method sees that language is not a “neutral means of reflecting or describing the world,” and that there is a “central importance of discourse in constructing social life” (Gill, 2000, p. 172). The first approach focuses on the language used, looking for patterns and variations in vocabulary, structure, and functions. The second approach focuses more on the use of

the language, and not so much the language used. And the third approach sees language as a product of a society or culture, and uses the patterns in language to explain a social context.

Rather than a method in itself, discourse analysis is the name for the many different approaches to studying texts. In fact, at least 57 varieties of discourse analysis exist (Gill, 2000). Some researchers, using what they generically call discourse analysis, have done studies in a wide array of social topics. An example is a study of how the change in use of language plays a role in the changes in the lives of ex-criminals rehabilitated in Jewish religious academies in Israel (Timor and Landau, 1998). But, it is generally more accepted that discourse analysis is not an “off the shelf” form of analysis. That is, there is no one right way to analyze discourse, and several more traditional forms of analysis are employed. For instance, Sharkey and Stafford (1990) use conversation analysis to explore how individuals who were blind since birth use cues to indicate turn taking in communication. And Tracy and Tracy (1998) argue their case for the grounded theory of discourse analysis in their examination of rudeness and face attacks in 911 emergency calls. Another common method employed under the umbrella of discourse analysis, and the method chosen for this study, is ethnography of communication.

Introduced by Hymes (1962), the ethnography of communication (originally called the ethnography of speaking) focuses on the ways communication influences group members to view their world. Or as Lazaraton (2002) introduces, this qualitative approach is “an anthropological approach to language and culture which views discourse as a reflection of cultural and social reality” (p. 39). The most important aspect in

Hymes' communication theory is that different social groups have different ways and means of communicating, and that a group's communication practices are vital to creating their social reality.

Ethnography of communication does not focus solely on the explicit, word for word communication of a community, but also gives attention to contexts and demographics. Or as Philipsen (1992) states,

The ethnographer might document all observable instances of speech behavior in a community, noting not only that speech occurred or not, but also where, by, and with whom, in what language(s) and dialect(s), in which verbal forms, about what topics, as part of what interaction sequences, and with what observable consequence. (p. 7)

Philipsen (1992) continues with explaining the importance of finding patterns and themes in a group's communication: "An ethnographer of speaking is a naturalist, who watches, listens, and records communicative conduct in its natural setting. The ethnographer describes what is to be found in a given speech community as well as what regular patterns can be observed" (p. 7). These communication patterns work to shape the community's social systems, rules, and realities.

Central concepts and units of analysis of Hymes' approach are speech community, speech situation, speech event, and speech act. The speech community is the general group in which the studied communication takes place, or the "community sharing rules for the conduct and interpretation of speech," while the speech situation is just that, a more particular situation (Hymes, 1974, pp. 55-56). For instance, Aoki (2000) studies Mexican Americans in the small, agricultural town of Biola, California, as a speech community; a speech situation, as seen by Ray (1987), can be the different

communication practices at church, home and the workplace. The speech event and speech act are similar, but vary in the level of extent. The speech event refers to the specific activity such as a party, while the speech act would be a joke told at the party (Hymes, 1974, p. 56). The difference is in the scale. Jokes are just one of the many “acts” that occur at an “event,” such as a party.

In addition to being aptly descriptive of a method focused on studying a group’s communication, “speaking” conveniently works as an acronym for the criteria used to analyze a speech act. Hymes (1962) suggested that a speech act should be analyzed by using the following criteria: Setting, the time and place of a speech act; participants, the actors in a speech act, such as sender and receiver; ends, or the expected outcomes of the speech act; act sequence, the actual content and words said; key, the tone the message has; instrumentalities, or the medium used during the act; norms of interaction and interpretation, basically referring to the beliefs and rules of a community; and genre, the variety of communication that occurs, such as a speech, a conversation, or theatrical reading.

Ethnography of communication is conducted in many different ways. For instance, Ray used the “SPEAKING” grid in almost an outline form to answer each criterion in turn for each speech act he studied. For example, he identified “store talk” as a speech event, and went down the grid filling in the answers to each criteria: Setting (S) was Chestnut Flat store; Participants (P) were teenagers and adults, almost exclusively male; Ends (E) of the conversations is simply informal socializing; and so on. Others, like Dollar and Zimmers (1998) and Philipsen (1992) embedded the criteria

within their analysis and produce more traditional studies. In these cases, the researchers did not explicitly outline the criteria from the grid, rather they folded them in with the analysis.

Not only do ethnographers of communication vary in their presentation, they are also known to cover a wide variety of speech communities. Ethnic cultures are often studied and described in ethnography of communication studies. For instance, Vanci-Osam (1998) used ethnography of communication in her analysis of Turkish curse utterances. Taking each criterion in turn, like Ray, Vanci-Osam used the SPEAKING grid to draw out the speech acts of cursing and examine them as important sources of cultural identity in Turkey. Also, much use of the method has taken place in studies of teaching English to non-English speakers. Toohey (2001) studied the language socialization of six nonnative elementary school students, by triangulating her data from observations, field notes and taped interactions among the children. Her analysis focused on the differing situations that arose during different speech acts, and bringing attention to possible interventions to prevent further marginalization of these children. Both studies focused on how a culture used communicative acts to shape their culture. Whether through expressing social class through word usage or expressing dominance by “besting,” the communication of the culture defined the social norms and rules.

But like other ethnographers, ethnographers of communication have extended their research to include subsets or specialized social groups within a culture. For instance, Philipsen (1992), an influential figure in ethnography of communication, used the method to describe “the patterns and functions of speech in a working-class area of

Chicago” (Weatherall, Gallios, & Pittam, 2001, p.368). And Dollar and Zimmer (1998) used ethnography of communication to examine how social identity among young adult street people is established through communication. Rather than focusing on the larger society, these researchers chose to focus on groups within a larger society that have taken on features that are unique from the larger society.

Methodological Framework

In order to understand a community, one must become familiar with the community members and the roles and rules socially constructed within their group. Consequently, this study uses qualitative and ethnographic methods to look within the community and richly describe the community’s rules and roles. To supplement participant observations, the study employs two other methods to enhance scholarly validity: the ethnography of communication method of discourse analysis and a user survey. The major concepts of these methods will be reviewed in the context of the study.

Initial research questions for this study relate to the ways members express the key elements of social capital. Namely, (a) How do members express feelings of trust, or what do members say that indicates levels of trust? and (b) How, in a text-based environment, do members act in ways that benefit others and the community in general?

Consistent with the previously discussed four basic characteristics of ethnography, this research features participant observation, holism, context sensitivity, and sociocultural description. I have been a participating member of the community for

three years, and in my role as the researcher, I have used my years of participant observation to help understand and explain the happenings of the community. This close involvement also allows for deep, sociocultural description of the interactions among community members. In this study, I expect to identify both holism and context sensitivity. Interactions among members should be consistent with other research findings from studies of similar online communities, yet constrained to the individuality of the community. Further, while findings will be unique to LGK, the general concepts should be applicable to other online communities.

The field research takes place at the Let's Go Kings (LGK) community, the online home of the unofficial fan club of the Los Angeles Kings hockey team. More specifically, this study focuses on the "Reality Hipcheck" (RH) forum, the forum dedicated to non-hockey talk. The webpage for RH is much like a table of contents. Once a member initiates a thread by posting a comment or question, all posts relating to the original are contained within that thread. Any member can initiate a thread, and the placement of the thread in the list is determined by the time of the last response.

To gather material for analysis, over a one-month period, threads within RH were collected. Printing the threads captures the conversation of the members and other information, such as system-generated data (the date the member joined the community, the number of posts they have made, and the date and time the message was posted) and member provided content (avatars and signature quotes). Because both thread creators and site administrators have the authority to delete threads, it is possible that some of the discussions were lost before they could have been saved. But during that span, 140

threads, consisting of over 5,000 separate messages, or posts, were collected. One hundred twelve different members posted messages in the forum during the data collection period. While the focus of this study was on the textual communications of the members of LGK, my long experience and participant observations supplemental to the set period of data collection help to set the stories behind the data.

Additionally, to validate assumptions and to get members explanations of their feelings, LGK members were asked to participate in a short, online questionnaire. The questionnaire consisted of seven open-ended, general questions about members' willingness to participate in different conversations, and their opinions of other members' participation (see Appendix A). Specifically, members were asked about whether they feel safe to ask for advice or share personal stories, why they provide advice to others who ask, and how they feel they know who to rely on and trust. The questionnaire was posted as a thread in RH, and a site administrator added a "sticky" to the thread, keeping it at the top of the board and therefore more visible to members. Responses were invited either publicly in the thread or privately via private message (PM) or email. Twenty-one members responded to the questionnaire. Among the respondents was an even mix of veteran members and "newbies," or those who have joined the community more recently.

Moving toward actual analysis of the communication of LGK members, this study employs ethnography of communication. In the case of this study, the use of speech and speaking becomes a confusing issue. Hymes' original method referred to spoken communication. Later, researchers moved away from the verbal aspect, changing the name of the overall method from ethnography of speaking to ethnography of

communication. They did not change, however, the several references to speech and speaking within the method. Since the communication in this study is in a written language medium, “speech” and “speaking” by definition do not apply to the situation. For discussion in this study, I have changed all “speech” references to “communication” to help alleviate confusion. However, the parts of the “SPEAKING” acronym still stand as helpful criteria. So instead of changing this core feature in the method, I would simply like to re-emphasize that word “speaking” here is used solely as the acronym for the eight criteria in ethnography of communication rather than in reference to verbal communication.

To begin, the communication community of this study is Let’s Go Kings, and the communication situation is the social, political, and light-hearted discussions of the Reality Hipcheck forum. This forum viewable only by registered members, and is restricted to members who answer that they are over the age of 18. Each thread within Reality Hipcheck is a communication event, and each post within a thread is a communication act.

Many of the criteria in the SPEAKING grid are already answered in the study. For instance Setting (S) is the Reality Hipcheck forum of the Let’s Go Kings community; Instrumentalities (I) is the time delayed written conversation of an Internet message board, or BBS (Bulletin Board System); and Genre (G) is an informal conversation or social chatting. The rest of the criteria varies amongst communication events and acts, but will generally fall into categories. The Participants (P) are the active members of LGK’s RH forum. For Key (K), the tone will vary depending on topic and

contributors, and while online communication limits nonverbal cues, tone can still be judged by use of the wide selection of “smileys” available on this particular BBS, and the use of text modifiers, such as bold or all capital letters. The Ends (E) include the various intents behind threads, or what the member wanted to get out of the communication, whether help, opinions, or simply the opportunity to share something.

The unit of analysis of this study lies with the Act sequence (A). In this study, the Act sequence (A), or the actual word for word content, is the most vital element for determining how the members use communication to view and establish their social reality. I used close reading of actual communication in the collected threads, as well as past participant observation, to see examples of how the culture and social reality of LGK are expressed through members’ communication. With this close reading and participation, distinct patterns in the group’s communication, or communicative practices, representing how members trust and reciprocate began to emerge. These practices will be introduced and discussed in the analysis chapter.

The participants of this study are individuals who participate in the LGK community for the dialogue and friendship. The community and the members’ communion existed before this study was conceived, and they have not participated in the LGK community knowing or expecting to have their communications used in an academic research study. As such, it is important to discuss concerns for this study and the steps taken to remedy any problems.

Concerns

While the method of this study poses no undue harm to the participants, several areas need first be addressed before continuing. Privacy and informed consent of participating members was of utmost importance, as well as maintaining my own standing in the community.

I asked for and was granted permission from the LGK Webmaster, Michael Zampelli, to use his created space as a place for my study. Also, I sought and was granted approval for the University's Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board (see Appendix B). Before asking for feedback on the questionnaire, I posted a message to the board introducing my study and why I chose the LGK community. Also included in the message was an outline of the methods, and highlights of the objectives. I informed both Mr. Zampelli and the other LGK community members about my intent to use aliases and strip all quotes of any identifying information.

The second major concern I had was approaching the community with a proposal to use their communication in a study. Having been a participant at LGK for over three years, I was at an advantage in sorting through the discourse as I have experienced the tone, styles, and characters that make up the communication. At the same time, and especially ironic in that this study focuses on trust, I faced the challenge of maintaining the trust I have earned. Assuaging fears that some members may see my own contributions as a set-up or a tool to elicit specific responses for my study was of great importance. To help redirect any of those feelings, I answer that concern in my posted introduction. I mentioned that my intention to study the group's communication came

long after my initial involvement, and my study was not a motivator for my participation in discussions. Further, I offered that while I do have some preconceived notions, no set hypothesis to prove exist, thus there is no advantage for the discourse to be swayed or lead in a certain direction nor is there a need to load questions to insure “proper” answers.

I chose the community because of my familiarity, but also because I felt it was an example of a successful community. This study is an examination and critique of how social capital contributes to the success of LGK. As such, my intent is not to criticize or disparage the community or its members. In my years of participation, I have grown an appreciation and respect for the LGK community. And in order for me to involve this community, it was important that I take great steps to maintain confidentiality and respect.

Summary

While quantitative research methods have benefits, I chose to use the qualitative method of ethnography of communication for this study. The chosen method allows for observation and descriptions of demographic and situational contexts outside of the data collected for a more rich understanding of the culture of the community.

The study takes place at the Reality Hipcheck forum at the Let’s Go Kings online community. A month’s worth of conversation threads, or speech acts, were collected and the Act sequence (A), or the actual text of the conversations, was closely examined for instances of trust and reciprocity. One hundred-forty threads were collected. To supplement and validate assumptions gleaned from the analysis of the conversations, a

questionnaire consisting of seven open-ended questions was posted on LGK. Members were invited to respond publicly or privately. Twenty-one members responded.

After close reading of the threads and answers to the questionnaire, plus my extended participant observation, four distinct communicative practices representing how members of the community trust and reciprocate emerged. These practices will be discussed in length in the next chapter.

Chapter IV: Analysis

In reviewing the discourse in all threads (or communication events) collected in the Let's Go Kings Reality Hipcheck forum during a one-month period, several communicative practices began to emerge. While each communication event differed in regards to topic, length, amount of participation, and other factors, trust and reciprocity among members could be seen in these distinct practices. Careful and repeated reading of all communication events uncovered four of these recurring practices. These practices include (a) requesting advice and opinions, (b) relying on the predictability of character, (c) offering unsolicited warnings, announcements, and advice, and (d) sharing personal stories and tragedies.

Among all of the communication events, there were specific emblematic moments for each practice. While most communication events included at least some characteristics of most or all of the practices, these events embodied all that a specific practice offered. This analysis introduces and explains each of the four practices through these emblematic moments.

Requesting Advice and Opinions

Though early research tended to be critical of the Internet's ability to host a warm, sociable, trustworthy environment, stable communities have shown they are able to enjoy trust among members. This is seen at the LGK community by the member's willingness

to ask for advice or help. In the 140 threads used for analysis, 20 were written with the expressed intent to elicit help from other members.

While most advice related to purchases or computer help, one longtime member posed an ethical dilemma regarding one of the female students in his class. Lidstrom5² relayed the story of the 20 year-old college student who had confided in him on some personal issues. He revealed that they had talked about personal matters before and after class, and that he had spent a half an hour on the phone with her, “just talking about relationships and love, etc.” Lidstrom5 then asked the members for their opinions and advice on the situation:

Needless to say, this girl is totally “my type.” Smart, gorgeous, motivated... It’s tough to be impartial. I’m starting to get worried that I’ve overstepped the bounds of the teacher/student relationship by too much. Just consoling her, have I crossed the line into unprofessionalism? Where is that line? Should I totally back off, or have I not crossed that line yet? I’ve told my wife about all this and she thinks I’m totally lame because I haven’t put the moves on this girl, yet, LOL. Of course, I’m not going to do that – I just want some opinions about where “crossing the lines” lies.

The situation is serious. While he admits not forming a physical relationship with this young woman, which undoubtedly raises issues in his employment, any relationship outside of the classroom can cause a lot of damage to both parties if not handled properly.

²All actual screen names of LGK members have been changed. Keeping with the theme of LGK as a fan club of a National Hockey League (NHL) team, each member’s name has been replaced by the name and jersey number of randomly selected players of the NHL.

In looking for ways to find the boundaries, Lidstrom⁵ turned to his LGK community.

And the community responded.

Brisebois⁴³: I would say you did cross a line. Your job is to [teach her], you should maintain your professionalism at all times... Perhaps you should just back away at this point and tell her to speak with family and friends about her personal problems but if she has questions about [the class] you'll be happy to help her. I'm sure your intentions were good, well I think your intentions were good :)³ but you should probably stick to teaching

Hossal¹⁸: As a teacher in a CC, I must say you are playing with fire. We have VERY strict rules about student-teacher relationships.... If you never really thought of teaching as a career, then by all means feel free to tempt fate.... But for me, for example, I'm not throwing away everything I've worked for (and all the mountains of money and respect that teaching provides me :) [laughing smiley]) just to get laid.

Niedermayer²⁷: And I echo the statements of those that posted. If you are asking the questions, you have crossed the line already. The difficult discussion will be telling her you can't be her confidant anymore. Good luck!

Others responded equally as adamantly that he had not crossed the line:

Sundin¹³: I don't see anything wrong in what you are doing. I don't (think) there is a rule that says you can't be a friend with a student.

³ The technology behind the system that runs the message boards at LGK is advanced beyond what can be represented in a static, print document. All emoticons (or "smileys") are graphical and many are animated. As these emoticons are used to convey meaning in the communication, I will add them whenever present. Most will be represented by the standard colon-close parenthesis representation. If a particular emoticon's graphical or animated nature is more elaborate and meaningful to the communication, a description will be added in brackets.

Gaborik10: I am amazed at the responses here. Lidstrom5, she needs to talk, doesn't want to talk to her parents and you were there for her... You are helping a fellow human, good job, but just keep it clean and hands off. If you had just blown her off and she goes and kills herself and/or her boyfriend you are a freaking insensitive bastard for NOT listening. Damned if you do, damned if you don't.

Whether for or against Lidstrom5's personal relations with his student, members took the story seriously and offered their heartfelt advice. Thornton19 even offered her own experience about blurring the line between professional and personal relationships. And while many members were critical of the relationship, there was no name-calling or personal attacks. Lidstrom5 was in a position most members disagreed with, but they were all supportive enough to offer their advice and support rather than simply berating his decisions.

Another example of asking for advice comes from Lehtinen26. A few weeks earlier, Lehtinen26 had asked members about their experiences with the many different cellular phone service providers and had used the stories to help in his search for the best deal. In the thread he started called "Cell phone search update, its [sic] down to 2...", Lehtinen26 recaps his search thus far, and asks for last minute input:

Once again, thanks in advance for all of your help! I was pleasantly surprised with the amount of valuable information the last topic sparked, and I hope this one will do likewise! Thanks for helping a fellow Kings fan save enough money to possibly go to more games this season, or at least I can call and give my buddies the play by play! :)

Lehtinen26's experience with the members in an earlier thread had provided him with evidence that they mean no intentional harm, enough so that he was willing put himself in a vulnerable position again. As most cellular phone contracts are expensive and difficult to escape, he is taking a risk putting so much stock into the opinions of the members. But he trusts the members and their knowledge enough to proceed with using their advice.

One could argue that these are unique examples. However, this type of situation is repeated several times throughout the month long data collection. Members had problems or questions, and other members offered answers. For instance, Foote52 needed help in setting up high-speed Internet access. Four other members responded with advice or hints in the public forum. Mogilny89 asked for thoughts on a new movie release. Four more members offered their positive reviews. And in another case, Turco35 requested advice on purchasing a new car. Sixteen public responses were made.

In a few instances, the member contributed in the post the reasons for posing the question or request to the other LGK members. Alfredsson11, for instance, appealed to the technologically inclined members in his request for help troubleshooting his computer:

Well I figured a bunch of you were computer guys
so maybe you could help me... Any hints? Thanks.

Here, he offers his reason for bringing his query to this group. From past experiences viewing threads dedicated to computer talk, Alfredsson11 felt the community was home to some qualified computer experts. Seeing that they had previously offered solid advice, and possibly being a beneficiary of helpful tips before, he trusted that the group would help him with his latest dire computer trouble.

When asked in the questionnaire how members feel they know who to trust, the answers varied. Some responses indicated trust in the safety and worthiness of advice received varies on the advice itself:

Federov91: In most cases, it is common sense. Does their advice seem honest? Does it seem like they know what they are talking about? Is it practical?

However, more members responded that they base their trust on the answering members themselves:

Kariya9: A person's ability to write intelligently is a very good indicator of their ability to think intelligently.

Lemieux66: Because most of them don't candy-coat their answers.

Daigneault36: I know most of the posters, if I don't know them I would decide whether or not to trust them on how informative and thought out their post on the advice is

Ciccone39: I trust the ones who have been posting longer more. Simply because I've seen their thoughts over a longer period of time.

Myhres74: It depends on how they treat me and the vibe I get from them.

Some members have gleaned trust from past and present experiences. How one member responds to a query and to the person asking is of great importance to whether their advice will be seen as sound. Members who are logical or well spoken in their responses get more credit, as will members who have been a part of the community for a long time.

As reviewed in the literature review chapter, research in online communication has been critical of the medium's ability to promote and maintain a trustworthy environment. Often cited are the missing nonverbal cues that are so important to successful communication. Researchers critical of online communication often point to the many publicized stories of people lying about their identity or committing fraud in online environments. As such, people are understandably leery of opening up and allowing themselves to become vulnerable to the potential, and well-publicized, dangers that exist online. However, as seen in the rise of online help and support groups, some trusting in the goodness of others is in fact beginning to take hold in more stable online environments. That is, while people do, and should, remain cautious about interactions in anonymous chat-rooms, more established and respected communities enjoy honest and open communication among members. And these members are more willing to make themselves vulnerable to potential danger because the positives of the interaction outweigh possible negatives.

As seen through their discourse, LGK members, too, enjoy a community where they feel safe among other members. The members have communicated their reality of trustworthy interactions and information through their willingness to post requests for advice and opinions. Some go so far as to share their happiness and satisfaction with advice received, further establishing the trustworthiness of the community. The subsequent answers to the questionnaire corroborate this.

Ultimately, trusting behaviors at LGK are based on what some members consider their own "common sense." Trusting other members to provide sound advice or help also

grows from experience. The ability to trust another member is inextricably tied to the ability to rely on a member's consistent past behavior, especially their perceived willingness and commitment to help other community members.

Relying on the Predictability of Character

As seen in the previous examples, members of LGK have demonstrated a more traditional understanding of trust. The members have used past experience with the community to judge that members do not mean to cause intentional injury to those who are vulnerable. These past experiences are vital. Without them, there could be no trust. Humans crave predictability and reliability and will more easily extend trust to those who have shown themselves to be consistent in the past.

LGK members show that they, too, are more willing to trust in the earnestness and honesty of a member if he or she has acted consistently. In fact, of the 120 threads used for the analysis, 32 had very obvious references to members' characters or past experiences with members. Even characters that were judged negatively were still appreciated if they were consistent. This way, community members knew whom not to trust with sensitive information or one's feeling of comfort and security. This idea is seen well in a discussion that arose in a thread regarding cosmetic surgery. In this thread, Thornton¹⁹ posed a question to the group polling other members on their thoughts and opinions of breast implants and augmentations.

I would say that the California standard is to have full perky tatas. Usually that is only achieved by implants. What is the general feeling about implants? Love them, hate them,

don't care? I'm interested in hearing any stories that you might want to share.

The thread included simple answers to the question, some personal stories, and an inevitable debate. But what made the thread stick out so much was when the communication began to focus on a perceived lapse in a particular member's usual behavior. Lidstrom5 offered a seemingly thought out and supportive offering to the discussion only to be met by other members questioning his motives.

Naslund19: What did he say? Someone mind telling me whether it had any substance or was merely a post cluttered with veiled insults? I can't see it, but im [sic] playing the odds...

Thornton19: Yeah, I'm not sure about that Lidstrom5 sometimes. Actually, I think he spoke from his heart

After discussions continue with advice, stories, and debate, Thornton19 again returns to Lidstrom5's seeming change in character:

The no insult was pretty amazing... Is this a kinder Lidstrom5? I'm sure he will have something less than nice to say later but I think every now and then he and I can get along. :)

In his time at LGK, Lidstrom5 has acted consistently enough to give these members an idea of his identity. His consistent behavior allowed members to extend their confidence in his identity as antagonist to assume his future responses will be further in the vein. When he fails to respond in a way the members expect, it shakes their opinion of his identity. With the smiley attached to Thornton19's message, her response to Lidstrom5 after his perceived break in identity is light-hearted; but nonetheless, his failure to act consistently was called into question, and her trust in him was shaken, if only

momentarily. Forsberg21, however, has become so accustomed to Lidstrom5's antagonist approach that she denies that any change is real, and still sees his response, as innocent as it seemed, as a veiled insult or attack. In doing so, Forsberg21 showed that she protects herself from harm perpetrated by Lidstrom5 by keeping her guard up and being defensive against his communication, no matter what the tone appears to be.

Awhile after the above responses, Lidstrom5 responded back to the criticism he was receiving:

I think my character is being maligned again, but I'm not sure. If there was any insult construed in my original post... well, I'm sorry. I certainly didn't intend for there to be any. I was trying to be objective and give an opinion, same as anybody else. I kind of think maybe I've become the Tie Domi of this board, getting penalties based on reputation rather than fact... you know, "TWEET! Penalty, number 5, two minutes for being Lidstrom5."

By Tie Domi, Lidstrom5 refers to a player well known to hockey fans. Domi had built his career on edgy and often borderline legal plays, and much later in his career was still called for penalties by referees on their assumptions that he did commit a foul because he has consistently in the past. Upon his defense, Thornton19 offers her appreciation for his claims of no malice.

I did not see or take any insult in your post Lidstrom5... I'll take your support like a great wonder bra... LOL...

Forsberg21 is not so easy to dismiss Lidstrom5's defense or admit any wrongdoing by her assumption of ill will. She explained to Lidstrom5 why she is so quick to be critical of him, despite his claims of no malice in this instance.

Forsberg21: Its [sic] easy to fall into the habit of assumption of your intent to offend when you do it so often. I can take your insults most of the time and even do so with a smile and a chuckle but I never enjoy being called a "puta!" I gave you the opportunity to apologize and you continued with your insults and name calling [sic]. I don't appreciate it and it makes it difficult to take other "veiled insults" with a grain of salt.

Forsberg21 is referring to a past interaction with Lidstrom5 in which they argued and name-calling ensued. Forsberg21 also alludes to a past history of Lidstrom5 insulting her. Since she has felt her past experiences with Lidstrom5 were less than complimentary and even disrespectful, she carries that assumption about his character into other interactions either with Lidstrom5 himself, or in viewing his interactions with others. Forsberg21 obviously has issues with Lidstrom5, but rather than just taking his behavior personally and refraining from further engagement with him or on the board in general, she "(takes his) insults most of the time and even (does) so with a smile and a chuckle." Lidstrom5's consistent behavior has established an identity in Forsberg21's eyes, and because of that, she trusts him to act a certain way. She accepts her vulnerability in continued interaction on the board because she knows to expect possible negative feedback from at least this one particular member. Forsberg21 has also chosen to deal with protecting herself from undue harm by keeping her guard up against that member because she trusts that he will not behave positively or generously towards her.

Tapscott's (1997) quote that "trust is not the same as liking someone" (p. 77) is clear when reviewing the dialogue between Forsberg21 and Lidstrom5. But despite their mutual dislike for one another, they both continue to participate in the community and

often interact with each other. Their continued reciprocation to the community and each other is possible not because of a friendship or a pleasant bond, but rather because they have both established their identities in the community and have both made decisions on how to deal with the other members.

There are other examples of this type of trust through the threads collected for this study. Other threads have shown similar responses to other members based on a history of consistent behavior or responses. For instance, Brodeur30 is known throughout the community for his particular political views. He often espouses a specific platform and in political debates is a consistent proponent for less taxation and less government interference and control. This theme shows up in a thread started as a question to why gas prices had been rising so quickly and so high in California.

Brodeur30: Hmmm, high taxes and lots of regulations that only apply to (our) state- not too different then our budget problem is it?

Modano9: Let's just take that additive out and use leaded gasoline. That would be cheaper for us consumers.

Hasek39: I think that would be a bad idea. Why would you even consider something like that?

Modano9: I am joking. I was pointing out to mr. antiregulation [sic] that this is a regulation everybody uses.

Brodeur30's consistent sharing of politics has gained him trust; that is, other members trust he will offer the anti-regulation point of view. Through his history of consistent behavior, Brodeur30 has gained a reputation as being in favor of less regulation, so much so that that opinion has become a mark of his character. He has become "mr.

antiregulation,” and he can be trusted to offer the same type of response to political debates.

And again trust in the predictable responses from members was brought up in a thread dedicated to discussing and debating, or downright arguing, about United States President George W. Bush. The question posed in the thread was “if you had a time machine and could change your vote... would you still vote for the same guy for President?” To this thread, Sakic19 responds:

I think the BIGGER question here is - How many ways can the same people on this board start up the debate of how bad a president Bush is, was and will be...

The thread became one of the longest collected during this study, going on for 60 printed pages and participated in by 30 different members. While it was the only politically themed debate thread that occurred during the collection of data for analysis, extended participant observation reveals that particular members would have particular responses. The end of the post was dominated by a one-on-one debate between two members on opposite sides of the political spectrum. There would be no doubt that, should the names be deleted, most members would know instantly which answers belonged to which member.

Many answers in the questionnaire put importance on previous experience with other members on their level of trust. Again, when asked “how do you know which members, if any, to trust?” many responded that their experience helps them.

Pronger44: I’ve been a part of this community almost from the beginning, I read the board every

day. You can tell who [sic] to trust by the earnestness in their posts on a regular basis.

Cheechool4: I tend to form opinions about members and how consistent their value system is with mine. That comes from understanding their thought process, their values, their views on different things. I also look for some consistency of their behaviors, even if their opinion may differ from mine on some issues.

Trust is not a given in any circumstance. Trust can only be gained through experience.

LGK members, too, learn to trust other members rather than just assume trustworthiness.

Through consistent experiences, members are able to extend their trust to another member in the future based on behavior, either positive or negative, he or she has demonstrated in the past.

Offering Unsolicited Warnings, Announcements, and Advice

Not only do members actively and copiously respond to requests for help, they offer hints and help that they think might benefit others, even if no other person has asked. This practice of offering unsolicited advice, announcements, and warnings was seen often. Whether offering a movie review after seeing the latest Hollywood release or warning others of some potential danger, members look out for others in the community and share their knowledge and experience to help others. Over half of the 120 threads collected were started with the purpose of making some announcement. These 65 threads ranged from a warning of a shark attack at a popular local beach to announcements of 40-cent cups of coffee at a regional coffee chain to a message breaking news of U.S. Marines arriving in Liberia.

Completely unrelated to any conversation thread, Pronger44 posted a warning about a potentially harmful computer virus. This member had experienced problems with her computer and had investigated possible causes, only to find out it was due to a virus that could be stopped by simply downloading a security patch. After remedying her own system, Pronger44 posted a message to the board about the threat in a thread titled “Windows Virus Alert.”

If you’re running Windows, download this security patch³

Nothing major happened to my computer but apparently the virus allows someone to run any code on your computer. For me, it just shut down 5 or 6 times before I figured out that if I enabled the firewall, I could stop it long enough to get the patch downloaded. Here’s some other info: centralcommand.com

Here, Pronger44 offered her warning as well as her own experience with the virus. Her commentary about her experience was helpful to other members who recognized the symptoms as something they, too, were experiencing. In fact, the first two responses were from other virus victims. Jagr68 added to the thread a bit more information about what to do with the patch once it was downloaded. The third response was from a member who wanted more information.

Iginla12: Can someone tell me if the symptom of the virus is a window that says “all info not saved will be lost” something like that and then the computer shuts down?

Iginla12’s question was answer within eight minutes.

Hejduk23: that's the one I've been getting for a week. I caught it for the first time a while ago. Im [sic] (downloading) that patch now.

Hejduk23 returns to the conversation moments later with questions about installing the patch properly:

ok, I just installed the patch and ran it, then rebooted. After starting back up, I got several error messages, including the iedriver.exe(?) failing to run. What gives?

Jagr68 who had earlier offered additional information about installing the patch offered his insight on a possible cause of the errors. And Iginla12 went so far as to offer a link to a website on troubleshooting the installation of the patch.

Towards the end of the thread, the original poster, Pronger44, offered her reasons for the thread:

I'm not always so good about downloading the Windows updates. Probably could have avoided the whole thing, but oh well. Hopefully this will help some of the rest of you that don't download the updates right away.

While she had already expended her own resources to diagnosis the problem and employ a fix, Pronger44 offered her experience as a warning to others. Pronger44 did not have to post the warning, but she chose to share the information she had with the other LGK members in hopes of sparing them some of the grief she had experienced.

The thread shows Pronger44's involvement and care for the digital safety of fellow community members, but it also shows other members concern and willingness to

³ In this post, the words "security patch" were hyperlinked to the webpage providing the advertised patch. Other links throughout this analysis are indicated by the standard underline.

help as well. Pronger44 began the thread, but many other members provided further information and even some individual assistance to members with questions. Members helping other members and sharing advice how to avoid, or at least alleviate, a serious problem, was the sole purpose of this thread.

There are many other examples of these types of helping behaviors found in the threads collected from LGK. Because most of the members are located Southern California, local warnings and announcements are helpful for many members. For instance, a thread titled “Emergency Broadcast System just activated!!!!” announced to the community a potentially dangerous situation in their offline setting.

Heatley15: It says tune to channel 3 on every channel of my cable for details... but on channel three it gives no details.

Another member offered a quick answer: “Flash flood warning.” A little later, another member responded affirmative to the flood warning answer. So here, a member brings to the attention of board members that the Emergency Broadcast System has been activated; other members quickly filled in the reasons. While it proved not to be a serious problem, the thread creator thought enough of the other members of the LGK community to go online and post the warning. And even though the danger was not immediate to anyone in the community, members did voluntarily offer their reasons, either to further the warning or assuage fears.

Advice wasn’t the only thing shared among members. Several examples of this theme came in the shape of announcements that other members may find interesting. For instance, Sundin13 posted photos from his recent vacation and encouraged other

members to visit the destination. As the Recall Election approached, Brodner³⁰ posted a variety of quotes and links to news stories about California governor Gray Davis. And Heatley¹⁵, Hull¹⁷, Hatcher², Deadmarsh²⁸, and Selanne⁸ each posted announcements of concert dates or new musical album releases.

Seeing examples of how members offer to help and inform others is evidence that such seemingly selfless behavior does exist online. For reasons why members behave this way, the questionnaire was invaluable. The answers provided, in their own words, why members choose to sacrifice their resources for the good of others. And their answers were the definition of reciprocity. When simply asked “why do you provide advice or opinions to other members,” most answers followed a similar theme:

Marleau¹²: No harm in helping someone, right?

Gaborik¹⁰: I have had many different life experiences and if someone can benefit from my mistakes, why not help out.

Daigneault³⁶: I have always liked to help people and it makes me feel good when I can help.

Sturm¹⁹: If someone can avoid the same mistakes I have made and learn from them, all the better.

Some members, such as those above, are being selfless. They offer their time and energy to help others avoid the same problems they have encountered. Like Pronger⁴⁴ in the “Windows Virus Alert” thread, these posters have information that can keep someone from suffering as they did and they choose to share their knowledge. Some, like Daigneault³⁶, help because it makes them feel good. Their short-term altruism, that is,

their offering advice and help, is rewarded by positive feelings about one's self or purpose.

Other members are more pragmatic, revealing they help because others have helped. Returning to the literature review of reciprocity, Howard (1997) maintains "there must be evidence that members make sacrifices or provide services for the group as long as they receive remuneration" (p.125). LGK members felt that way as well, as Federov91 eloquently states:

Many of these people have responded in kind when I had a question or needed help. When they see a fellow community member with a problem, I see these members responding with true concern and care. Friendship and a sense of community has [sic] to be built on both giving and receiving. It doesn't work as a one way street.

Federov91 offers, "over time, I came to realize that this is a community I would like to be a part of." His two years of observation revealed that the members were a caring group of people quick to offer help. And only after the community proved itself to be a reciprocal environment did he begin to participate. Other members may not yet have experienced receiving help from others, but they still help others themselves because of the established norm of reciprocity in offline culture.

Damphousse25: I'd hope others would do the same for me if I asked, so why not?

Much like offline behavior, Damphousse25 hopes that helping behaviors are present in the community and offers help to others with the expectation that his favors would be returned.

These featured threads, as well as many other threads not discussed, are examples of how willing LGK members are to share information and initiate conversation. If there is something a member finds interesting or informative, he or she voluntarily takes the time to post the warning, story or link so others can benefit. Members do so because it has become the norm of the community. Others have shared in the past, so newer members continue on with the tradition.

Not only do members share information about general news and information, they also share personal information about themselves. Some deeply personal stories and other more light-hearted anecdotes are also common at the LGK community.

Sharing Personal Stories

Also in the same vein as the rise of support-groups online, some members are willing to share intimate details of their offline lives. My time at LGK has shown me many personal stories, many of them moving enough to remember long after they are posted. For instance, after sharing the news of the expected birth of her second child, one member sadly reported the extremely premature birth of her son and his death just minutes after delivery. Another member chronicled the terminal illness of his elderly mother, and her eventual death. I, too, felt compelled to share the story of my sister and brother-in-law's serious accident in June of 2003. In fact, I remember that the first week of June featured so many different story-sharing threads I titled my own "My sad story this time."

During the data collection also there were examples of personal stories, many sad, being shared. While many threads featured at least some personal narrative, 11 of the 120 collected threads were dedicated solely to sharing stories. Member Palffy33 offered this story of the death of his friend's teenage son:

Hey all, sorry to bring this down for a bit, but the old Ontario rink had a loss this week. On Sunday night, my friend was taking his two kids to hockey camp when he had an auto accident... (his son) was declared brain dead Monday and life support was turned off last night...

So to everyone, when you hit your knees tonight, throw a little love to him and his entire family, for those who survived will need it just as much as (the son), and take the time to realize that we're all here for an unknown length of time, so treat every moment and person close to you with the preciousness it deserves.

It took a lot of courage for Palffy33 to share a story as intimate as the one he did. He left himself vulnerable to cheap shots or disparaging remarks that can be easily made by the nameless, faceless others in the community.

As cited by the deindividuation theory (Keisler, Siegel, and McGuire, 1984), online communicators, because of the lack of social cues, can act in uninhibited ways, dispensing with manners and acting in ways that are contrary to appropriate social behavior and norms. While this incivility is possible, it was not seen at LGK during the data collection. Those who did respond to Palffy33's thread did so in a supportive manner:

Amontell1: This is one of those things in life that we can't explain or understand. Why someone so young, with endless potential, is taken so

soon. My thoughts and prayers are with the family and friends.

Momesso32: My heartfelt prayers go out to (the) family. Believe me, I know exactly what they are going through. My brother, was also 15 at the time, died in a car accident as well... Times like this you wonder why anyone so young would be taken away so soon.

Antoski19: hey Palffy33, Im [sic] sorry to hear about your loss. I have never met him or his family, but anything like this tragic [sic] pulls at my strings. My prayers go out to all his loved ones.

Demitra38: I will certainly pray for them tonight.

Although they may have not met Palffy33 in person, or may not always agree with him in debates, the story was personal enough and elicited enough feelings for members to respond with their own personal stories, or at the very least offers of thoughts and prayers. Those members not comfortable enough to sharing their thoughts in the public forum were able to direct their comments to Palffy33 via private message, as some in the thread indicated they did.

The previous thread was the most somber personal thread posted during data collection, but there were other examples of members posting happenings from their personal, offline lives. For instance, Guerin13 shared the story of her apartment building catching fire.

As if this week wasn't unbelievably unpleasant already, today the roof of my apartment building caught fire. My apartment is safe and sound, but the Fire Marshal has "red tagged" the building until it can be deemed inhabitable. Hopefully,

I'll only be out a day or two... Somedays [sic],
you just got to laugh. :) [rolling laughing
smiley]

Unlike the previous thread that was very serious and somber, Guerin13 was keeping an upbeat sense of humor. Some members offered best wishes, and others, reflecting Guerin13's upbeat tone, offered humor:

Jagr68: that sucks... hopefully you will be back soon

Pronger44: Hey, come meet us at the game Saturday. At least we'll entertain you & get ya out of the house for awhile. Oh wait - you're already out of the house! :) [snickering smiley]

Another member, who had met Guerin13 at one of the many offline events, even offered her a place to stay. A day later, the thread concludes with another message from Guerin13:

Thanks for all the good wishes, folks. I'm happy to say that my landlady called today and everyone gets to go home... Kisses to Shanahan14 for letting me crash on her couch.

In sharing her latest life drama, Guerin13 enjoyed some consolation, as well as humor and compliments, from other members online, and a place to stay offline. Other LGK members did not let her personal story pass without offering at least something for her in return, whether as far as a temporary home or just kind words.

When asked in the questionnaire about their comfort with sharing personal stories, or the reasons why they do, the members responded to the warmth and perceived caring of the community.

Blake4: I consider this bunch my online family :)

Damphousse25: I used to come here as a non-member and read a lot of posts and it just seems like it's generally a good group of people.

Cheechool4: I feel comfortable because I feel like I've connected with enough members to feel some level of safety.

Despite the lack of cues, and the findings that because of the lack of these cues CMC "conveys less social presence than FtF discussions" (Hiltz, Johnson, & Turoff, 1986, p.228), LGK members do respond that they are able to have warm, sociable interactions with other members online.

However, not all members do share personal stories with other members. Those who answered that they either did not share personal stories or do not feel comfortable doing so did not elaborate on their reasons. Their motivation for keeping discussions impersonal could only be assumed. Other members, while not willing to share personal stories in the public forums, do admit to taking personal discussions directly to another member via private message (PM).

Myhres74: I don't share anything personal. If it's something bad then I wouldn't want it to be public for everyone to see. If it's something personal, I'll do it through a PM.

Tkachuk7: Highly personal stories I generally would not share, except for maybe a PM between a member I have a trust level with

And there is some safety in the relative anonymity of the community:

Marleaul2: I have no problem sharing personal stories. It's not like I'm giving out my phone number and address to anyone.

Gaborik10: I am not going to meet most (people who contribute) here

Other members, especially those who have been in the community longer or have made contact with other members offline, had opposite responses. That is, they were more guarded about what they said in terms of personal revelations:

Pronger44: I meet a lot of these people, so I don't have much anonymity here anymore. I used to do more of it and the main reason was because it was basically anonymous. This made it much easier, but for me those days are over so I monitor how much I share now.

Without the anonymity, some members felt less comfortable with sharing personal things. Contrary to the ideas that anonymity of the Internet makes online environments less trustworthy and more hostile, Pronger44 reveals opposite feelings. To her, the anonymity gave her more safety, keeping her true offline self protected by her online presence. By going offline, she has, in essence, shared sensitive information, and now she no longer feels the safety provided by anonymous participation.

During the data collection, many members shared personal information about themselves, whether in a thread dedicated to marking a tragedy or milestone or simply through self-disclosure in a random conversation. Some felt safe to disclose personal feelings or experiences because of the safety net provided by anonymity, while others did so out of a feeling of camaraderie and friendship with their "online family."

Hybridization

Each of these discussed threads represents one practice specifically. However, these threads were not limited to only one practice. Several different, or even all practices, can be found in most threads. Again looking at the outlined emblematic threads, many different practices emerge throughout the discourse.

Just for example, beginning with the first featured thread, established for asking advice and opinions, more comments were made referring to one member's experience with another, and assumptions made because of the stability of that character. In Lidstrom5's thread requesting advice on how to handle a personal relationship with one of his students, he is met with a bit of pessimism. Lecavlier4 questioned whether he would offer the same help to a student who he did not find attractive, to which he vehemently denied the student's looks had anything to do with his lending a sympathetic ear. Desjardins37 does not believe his denial, and is met by another member's sarcastic rebuttal.

Moreau18: always nice to see people assuming the worst in others. Its [sic] so refreshing.

Desjardins37: Hey, no assumption. Just an opinion based on his posts.

Like featured in the threads used to represent the practice of relying on the predictability of character, this thread as well features members trusting in other members to behave or respond in a specific way based on past behavior.

Further, the inappropriate and explicit responses and offers of "advice" in Lidstrom5's thread were not taken seriously both because the obvious inappropriateness of the response, and also by the reputation and established identities of those respondents.

Student-teacher relationships make for a serious subject, for sure, but the potential sexual implications appealed to the more prurient side of some members and provided a perfect opportunity for those members to make light of the situation or offer their own sarcastic “advice.”

Allison41: Just send her my way... I can teach her (everything) she needs to know about the LSAP or whatever the hell Im [sic] gonna lie to her about just to get in her pants. I’ll even take some pics for ya so yer [sic] getting something out of it!

Murray27: Have your wife drop by class and kick her ass. You would have a full on cat fight...This of course leads to lesbian sex.

Gonchar55: You crossed the line when you didn’t bang her... but that’s just me.

These examples and some other even more sexually explicit responses were so over the top as to not be taken seriously by anyone, especially when considering the posters’ contributions in other threads. Each of the above posters have gained reputations for crude input. Odelein24, too, did not respond to the thread with any serious advice, but rather with crude humor and language more explicit than belongs in this study, much like he had in most other threads in which he participates. Even his avatar and signature file, or the graphics and quotes he chooses to be included in all of his posts, are ambiguously sexual in nature. Here is another case where members can trust another to act consistent with an established identity. In this case, Lidstrom5 knew not to take any “advice” from Odelein24 seriously, as he, as usual, was responding simply for the shock value.

In another thread, relying on the predictability of character was the focus of the analysis, but the purpose of the thread was requesting advice and opinions. In this thread, a member acted out of character, and other members questioned the authenticity of the seemingly incongruous statements he made. But Thornton19 created the thread to elicit opinions on cosmetic surgery. And while discussion went on to included questioning Lidstrom5's true identity and intentions, the bulk of the thread provide ample opinions and advice for Thornton19. These two threads are just examples of how a thread modeling one practice can also feature other themes as well. This is not limited to only the emblematic threads, but also exists in the many threads collected but not featured in this analysis.

Summary

Close reading of the content of each thread, as well as extended participant observation, revealed four recurring communicative practices: Requesting advice and opinions, relying on the predictability of character, offering unsolicited warnings, announcements, and advice, and sharing personal stories and tragedies. Among the threads, there appeared several emblematic moments for each practice. These moments were used to demonstrate the practices.

While there were four distinct practices, no one message was limited solely to one practice. Most threads exhibited two or more practices. For instance, one thread could be initiated to ask for advice, but several examples of relying on the predictability of character are mentioned or a personal story would be shared. More complete summation

of findings, as well as a review of implications and areas for future research will be discussed in the next chapter.

Chapter V: Discussion

Let's Go Kings demonstrates many of the attributes of a successful community. Going back to Rheingold's (1993) famous definition of what makes an online group a community, LGK has proven itself to be a community. All the pieces are present in LGK's online environment: "social aggregation," "public discussion," "sufficient human feelings," and "webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." Membership continues to grow, and participation is also steadily climbing. March 9, 2004 set a new record for most members online at one time with 749. Many members continue to take their friendships offline and meet at the many events. And just during the writing of this discussion two more members who met through the site have exchanged wedding vows, and the first "LGK couple" announced the expectation of another child.

Members speak of their fondness for the community and fellow members often. When asked in the survey why they participate in the community, many members answered to their affinity for other members:

Myhres74: It's fun, entertaining, something to do. You make online buddies.

Kariya9: Everyone here has a common interest and a lot of them are pretty damn funny.

Lively, successful communities are not built from the top down, but instead are created by the community members themselves. And the research in this study shows how the LGK members, through their communication, have built the community that they so love.

Summation of Findings

While Putnam's research has revealed a lot of evidence that trust and reciprocity are vital to successful communities, the analysis of the discourse in the Reality Hipcheck forum at the Let's Go Kings online community has revealed the importance of these factors in the success of communities based solely online as well. The research and analysis reveal that there is a great deal of trust and reciprocity among members of the LGK community, expressed through specific communicative practices of the members. In this study, I have presented these four documented practices: Requesting advice and opinions, relying on the predictability of character, offering unsolicited warnings, announcements, and advice, and sharing personal stories and tragedies.

First, requesting advice and opinions was a common occurrence. Twenty threads were initiated by members seeking advice or opinions from other members on a wide range of subjects. This is also where reciprocity is seen so clearly, for without participation, the continuance of the socialization wouldn't happen. Members have seen through experience that when questions are asked, other members do answer. In fact, during data collection, no question that was posed to the group was unanswered. Members feel they can trust the input of others, but give varying levels of credence to input based on the importance of the topic. Members are much more willing to take advice on something small, such as a movie review or computer help, while being more careful about major purchases, such as a new car or a cellular phone service. Overall though, members expressed that they do trust that others will provide reliable information and not intentionally inflict harm.

Second, the number of times that the reliability of the characters or identities of other members were referenced was phenomenal. LGK is not a transient chat-room, but rather a community based on established memberships. As such, members begin to know one another. Through the experience of interacting with each other and simply the time spent reading the overall discourse of the community, members learn particulars about other members. They learn to know what to expect from each other and reference these established identities throughout their communication.

Members place importance on this knowledge of each other. When asked how they knew who to trust and ask for help, no one mentioned that they trusted a member more based on his stated physical location, or what occupation she claims in her personal profile. These offline characteristics were not important online. There can be no proof of the validity of statements of offline selves, so they are disregarded. Instead, the overall response suggested that members trusted other members who were veterans to the community. This is not to say that new members were assumed to be inherently wicked and malicious, it is just that members place more confidence in the communication of people they have come to know, and more specially come to know as stable, respectable individuals.

At one time, all members were “newbies,” and only through time spent communicating in the community, and only by creating a stable and predictable identity, did they become established and respected community members. It is true that some members have gained less favorable reputations. Whether they are known to regularly complain and antagonize, or simply because their opinions or beliefs are not among the

community's mainstream, many of these members still enjoy respect from the community and are seen as trustworthy sources of information.

Third, offering unsolicited warnings, announcements and advice was by far the most common occurrence seen throughout this research. The community's overall discourse is related to hockey and the Los Angeles Kings professional hockey team, but the Reality Hipcheck forum was created for the everyday chitchat and conversation that was inevitably sneaking into the hockey talk. Reality Hipcheck was advertised as the place to "talk about other subjects besides hockey," and became the forum where members went to talk about things they just had to share with others. Weird and wacky news stories or new album releases are common communications, and everyone benefits. Whether a member gets a much needed chuckle from a posted link to one of the many funny stories or weird news item of the day, or a cheap cup of coffee after reading an announcement of a 50 cents per cup promotion at a local cafe, members benefit from the sharing of information.

And finally, fourth, sharing personal stories was the final communicative practice noted in this research. This practice sees the ultimate in online trusting behavior: dispensing with anonymity and sharing personal, offline details with other people online. Through experience, members have formed connections with others that are sound enough that they feel safe revealing personal details. Some members who have strong enough feelings of camaraderie within the community initiate public messages announcing momentous occurrence in their offline lives, both happy and sad. Some examples of personal sharing have revealed intensely personal details and glimpses into

some of the most intimate moments of members' offline lives. There have been stories sharing news of a move to a new physical community, the acquisition of a new car, and even the death of close family.

Others are admittedly more guarded about public messages, but do admit to private messages with other members regarding personal information. While I cannot answer to the conversations that happen between individual members via private messages, I can say that upon my public announcement of my sister's serious accident, I received many private messages from members, not only with words of encouragement, but also personal stories of their own. Additionally, every message I received was "signed" with the member's offline given name, not just their online screen name. And even more special was one member who shared with me his personal home phone number, just in case I needed someone to talk to in person.

Private messages, while not a focus of this study, deserve a further mention. For members who have established strong bonds, the Private Message (PM) function of the board is a significant channel of communication. Pairs of members are encouraged to take private conversations that do not affect the community in general off of the boards and to PM. Such dyadic chatting is seen as rude, much like it would seem rude for two people in a small group to talk amongst themselves and ignore everyone else. And far from being undermining to the group's cohesion, these private communications undoubtedly enhance the feelings of community. Though it does not follow the practices laid out in this research, participating in and sharing personal conversations via PM nurtures the "sufficient human feelings" Rheingold found defining of community.

Another key idea that was learned from the research in this study is the hybridization of communicative practices. No messages can be categorized in only one way. Messages are reflective of different practices all at once. Whether a thread is initiated to request advice or offer an unsolicited announcement, inevitably members responded with their own personal stories, thus blending two or more practices. Just for example, when Lehtinen²⁶ asked members for their input and advice on cellular phone providers, Schneider²³ responded with a personal story. She did not offer whether she found that the service of a particular company was reliable or not; rather, she added to the discussion that she felt the company behaved shamefully and unethically when they refused to waive cancellation fees for a family member who was critically injured. Members responded to Schneider²³ with commiseration and condolences, but the personal story did not detract from the purpose of the thread. Lehtinen²⁶ garnered enough opinions and advice, including Schneider²³'s input, to make a decision.

Further, consistent with the ideas that trust and reciprocity are inextricably intertwined, the communicative practices seen in the discourse at LGK reflected a mix of trust, reciprocity, or both. At first it seems that asking for advice would fall under trust, as the member who posed a question will become vulnerable to bad advice or outright attack from another member. However, there is also a case for reciprocity here as members sacrifice their own resources to offer to help another member who asks because that is the norm of the community. For instance, Lidstrom⁵ trusts the community enough to share the touchy subject of teacher-student relations and trust that other members will not intentionally give him bad advice or offer personal attacks on his character;

Lidstrom5 also trusts that other members will reciprocate his effort and offer advice.

Lidstrom5's initial message was nearly a print page in length. He took time to provide background into the story, asked specific questions, and added parts to the story that he felt were necessary to get the audience interested. The effort he put in was in faith that it was not wasted. He trusted that his story would garner a response, and other members did in fact answer the call. What resulted were 23 printed pages of insightful discussion, enjoyable banter, and even a few off-color jokes, or the kind of thread that makes Reality Hipcheck at LGK a place in which so many people choose to involve themselves.

Implications

The research for this study has revealed several implications, not only for the topic of social capital, but for researching online communities as well. Summarized in the following are the four implications.

Social capital. Robert Putnam's theories on social capital are related back to the practical. Putnam sees social capital in the same tangible, measurable view as physical capital and human capital. Just as a hammer can be physical capital and a college education can be human capital, social capital is seen also as a specific thing. Social capital relates to connections among individuals, and is explained by bowling leagues, religious observance, and civic clubs. This research does not, and in fact could not, focus on such tangible results, as interactions in an online community are not as concrete as the interactions described by Putnam. Rather, this study sought to find ways that social capital existed in the "virtual" online environment.

What this research found is that online communities express trust and reciprocity not simply through the specific actions described by Putnam, such as petition signing or church attendance, but through general communicative practices. These practices showed how these vital elements of a successful society are present in LGK, as well as being the vehicle in which the community members communicate the reality of their community.

Social trust. The statistics in *Bowling Alone* were a disturbing portrayal of the United States declining into a socially mistrustful culture. This study debunks that generalization and shows that people are still willing to trust in the goodness of others. Members of the LGK community illustrated that even despite the barriers cited as inherent in computer-mediated communication, even they felt that other members were trustworthy.

Rather than raising a red flag and lamenting the loss of trust among members of society, this research shows that trust is simply shown differently. It is true that there is not blind trust, where one person believes all that another says. People are much too cautious to become completely vulnerable. But people are able to trust in people they have grown to know. LGK members demonstrated that through the process of communication and the experience of interacting, people are able to learn enough about others to know when and how to trust. For instance, the members have learned enough about Odelein24 to know that his responses are always inappropriate and his insights and anecdotes are not to be believed; however, his dubiousness is what makes him

trustworthy. The members can trust that his communications are to be comic relief and not serious or reliable information.

While not as warm and fuzzy as popular notions of trust, the behavior and communication of LGK members showed that people are still willing to become vulnerable. Trust was not assumed, but was gained through experience. Members did not jump into the community and blindly believe all that was said. Instead, they slowly began to open up and risk vulnerability, but they did so cautiously. And while Putnam (2000) points to the rise in unlisted phone numbers as proof Americans have less trust, the LGK members showed that the number may be unlisted but can and will be shared with someone who has earned enough credibility to be granted that sensitive information.

Declining significance of physical space. The research in this study continues to backup earlier suggestions that the significance of a common physical place in the definition of community is reduced in online environments. Early definitions of community focused on “locale, common ties, and social interaction” (Bernard, 1973, p.4). When the locale aspect was missing in the community-like groups that spouted up online, Rheingold (1993) downplayed the physical space and suggested a group was a community when the social networks were made up of individuals with similar interests and “sufficient human feelings.”

The lack of a physical space is the most contentious debate about the legitimacy of “communities” based online. While researchers debate back and forth, groups based online are the number one judge of the authenticity and legitimacy of their online group as a community. And the lack of a physical space was not only not a problem at LGK,

the members ignored the deficit and continued to use concrete nouns to describe the group, namely referring to LGK as a “place.” Time and again, in discussion and in interviews, members use words attributed to describing physical locales in their explanation of their online world:

Damphousse25: This place is interesting, full of characters and opinions that I wont [sic] encounter reading ESPN.com

Daigneault36: It’s a fun place, a place to take a little mini vacation during the hectic work day

These people have made clear that the lack of physical space does not negatively effect the members opinions of LGK as a community. Though “virtual,” they still describe LGK as a community or a place, just as they would have if the community was based offline.

The community’s reference to their virtual space as a place illustrates the declining significance of a physical space in community. And just as proximity alone does not make a group a community, the lack of proximity does not preclude a group of like-minded people interacting online from being a community,

Online ethnography. The research in this study was based on the principles of ethnography. Many critics have questioned ethnography’s usefulness in online environments, again, citing the absence of a physical space for emersion. But in doing the research, I demonstrated that the lack of physical space is not a significant deterrent to defining an online group as a community. And further, I found the four basic principles of ethnography– participant observation, holism, context sensitivity, and sociocultural description– firmly intact.

Participant observation was the most obvious principle present in this study.

While it may not be a physical location, I, like Daigneault³⁶ in an early quote, find LGK to be a place: a place to get away from a boring task at work, or a place to find out some interesting news, or even a place to get riled up reading a heated political debate. Signing on to the site and entering the RH board may not be as exotic as setting up a camp among a tribal people in Brazil, but I was entering into a place with its own set of rules, roles, and reality.

Another principle of ethnography, holism, is also present in this research. Holism is the principle that sees that several observations in one online community broadened and generalized into constructs of cultural practices in all online communities. One construct, for instance, is the idea of the “troll,” or a poster who intentionally agitates other members. The specific instances of argumentative or aggressive behavior can be joined together to form the idea that in all online communities certain members will take on the role of antagonist. Most online communities do, in fact, see some evidence of a member being the troll. And at LGK, too, there was evidence of specific members who regularly and intentionally antagonize others.

The idea that what makes a troll in one community does not make a troll in another is an example of context sensitivity, another principle of ethnographic research. While most communities have their own trolls, the ways in which posters reflect troll qualities varies depending on the content and focus of the different online communities. Because LGK is a community originally created for fans of the Los Angeles Kings hockey team, troll-like qualities include members purposely rooting for opposing or rival

teams. Additionally, the general political climate of Reality Hipcheck is of a more conservative leaning. Some of the more intense debates have arisen when a member posts a thread that has radical liberal opinions with the intention of antagonizing the majority. These trolls, while typical in online communities, are considered trolls because of behaviors seen to be antagonistic based on the norms of LGK specifically.

And in relation to sociocultural description, the interaction I had with members in the questionnaire was invaluable. It was easy for me to interpret my own meanings into why people have chosen to join the LGK community. But ethnography prescribes that while my own opinions were valuable, other members' opinions in their own words help to focus on the culture of the community from a wider perspective. Asking members to clarify why they trusted the community enough to ask for advice or share sensitive details and sharing their reasons was much more valuable than making assumptions based on only my observations.

Overall, I found that ethnography was well suited for this research and other research in online environments. The four principles were easily met and helped to guide my research and analysis in the most valuable directions. A physical space is still an important aspect, but the "virtual" place must not be underestimated in its power to house distinct communities and cultures.

Limitations

For unknown reasons, not as many members answered the questionnaire as expected. I responded to my own post lamenting the few responses, and a member

answered that the lack of participation could have been because of the wordiness of the initial request for input:

Maybe if you just said it's a research paper and you need as many people's input as possible, it would be easier for most to understand. Once I saw words like reciprocity, supplementary, hypothesis, thesis... well I figured I'd do the simple part and answer the questions

Of course, because this thesis is more than a simple research paper, the participants needed to be fully informed of the scope and purpose of the study. In this case, the comprehensiveness of the agreement to participate may have made members nervous. Much like Boyd (2003) suggested, requiring a group to invest too much trust backfires, and leaves them more apprehensive of a transactions. The posted agreement, while clear about the lack of risks, may have made the questionnaire sound more dangerous than it was, making many members reluctant to participate. I did feel confident enough in the amount of feedback received to proceed with the study, but more direct input from members would undoubtedly been even more informative and beneficial.

Another limitation of this study lays in the fact that I was not able to view all communication among members. First, site administrators and members who have initiated a post or thread both have the ability to also delete that post or thread. Whether the content violated site rules or the initiating member changed his or her mind about posting, some discourse may have been lost before it was collected. Second, much communication between members occurs via Private Message (PM). As discussed earlier, these messages are sent privately to a particular member and are not viewable by the public. This private communication, while a major component to the community's

communication, is essentially invisible to me as a researcher and could not be included in the research. I know from my own personal experience within the community that great communication occurs through private messages and undoubtedly much could be learned from this discourse. It is a too bad that this rich content cannot be used.

Areas for Future Research

This research examined just one community. As ethnography maintains that cultures have both holism and context sensitivity, the findings of this study must be supported with more research in other online communities. Informally, the practices uncovered in this research can be applied to other online communities I have visited or have heard about from other online community members. However, the four should be validated using other communities in controlled investigations. Using other communities, varying in size and subject, future researchers should examine a group's discourse to see if the four communicative practices are employed. Examining a community that has failed will also help to prove the importance of these practices.

For the more practical application, ways that community developers can implement these practices should be examined. With the growth of institutionally based online communities, especially used in distant learning, ways to create successful communities is gaining more importance. But as mentioned earlier, the community members initiated the behavior. Further research can determine if and how the practices can be put in place by community developers to create an online community with these practices set as community norms from the beginning.

Conclusion

Let's Go Kings and I have had a long journey, and over the past year we have drifted apart. My favorite hockey player, the reason I found LGK in the first place, has since been traded to a new team. And changing priorities in my life, including the completion of this thesis, have left me less and less time to participate in the conversations and debates.

And while I was away writing this thesis, the look of the board has changed, many new features have been added, and countless new members have joined in the discussion. Many times I go back to LGK now and feel like a newbie all over again. So quickly the inside jokes spread, without constant attention one easily gets lost and confused. While providing further evidence of the importance of ethnographic research in this study, the quick pace of the community also makes it hard to rejoin after a long absence. To become an active member like I once was, I would almost have to start over. Many of the same members remain, and I can still trust in them to behave as they did before I left. The heated political debates, too, remain, as do the threads reviewing movies and music albums, and updates on personal stories shared. But there are so many new characters to learn and inside jokes to understand, I feel like I may never regain the same sense of my own standing in the community.

Let's Go Kings has provided me personally with endless entertainment and enjoyment. And through this study, LGK offers a glimpse into how members of online communities build and express social capital. The members do trust and reciprocate, and thus, the community remains successful.

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Appendix A

Cover Letter and Questionnaire

Attention LGK Community:

After the years I have spent reading and participating in the LGK forums, I have seen many instances of members trusting and helping each other. I, too, have felt free and safe to share my own personal stories, and to respond to requests for opinions or advice. When I was faced with the task of choosing a topic for my Masters thesis, I thought of these feelings of trust I felt at LGK, and developed this study.

This study is a review of how trust and reciprocity (that is, the mutual participation) make LGK so successful as a community. To supplement my observations (in the Reality Hipcheck forum only), I'd like to ask for members' opinions on the following.

1. Do you feel safe asking for help or advice from other members?
2. Do you feel confident in advice you received from other members?
3. How do you know what members, if any, to trust?
4. Why do you provide advice or opinions to other members who ask?
5. Why have you chosen to participate in this community? (that is, why do you take the time to read through threads and compose messages)
6. Do you feel comfortable sharing personal stories? If so, why do you feel comfortable?
7. and, If you do share personal stories, why do you do it?

Please note that while I do have some set ideas going into the research, I don't have a set hypothesis. So, I will not be leading discussions in any way, or setting things up to

ensure “proper” answers. There is simply no right or wrong opinion here. I am just interested in LGK community members’ honest opinions.

You can respond to this thread, or you can choose to respond to me privately via PM or email. PLEASE REVIEW THE POST TITLED “Attention LGK members” BEFORE RESPONDING!! Your response will be considered informed consent to participate. Be assured that if your quotes are used in the study, your name will be changed and all other identifying information will be removed.

Thanks in advance for any help!!

Sarah

Appendix B

Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board Approval Letter

San José State
UNIVERSITY

**Office of the Academic
Vice President**

**Academic Vice President
Graduate Studies and Research**

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Voice: 408-283-7500
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To: Sarah Vital

From: Pam Stacks,
Interim AVP, Graduate Studies & Research

Date: March 24, 2004

The Human Subjects-Institutional Review Board has approved your request to use human subjects in the study entitled:

“Successful Community at LGK.”

This approval is contingent upon the subjects participating in your research project being appropriately protected from risk. This includes the protection of the anonymity of the subjects' identity when they participate in your research project, and with regard to all data that may be collected from the subjects. The approval includes continued monitoring of your research by the Board to assure that the subjects are being adequately and properly protected from such risks. If at any time a subject becomes injured or complains of injury, you must notify Pam Stacks, Ph.D. immediately. Injury includes but is not limited to bodily harm, psychological trauma, and release of potentially damaging personal information. This approval for the human subjects portion of your project is in effect for one year, and data collection beyond March 24, 2005 requires an extension request.

Please also be advised that all subjects need to be fully informed and aware that their participation in your research project is voluntary, and that he or she may withdraw from the project at any time. Further, a subject's participation, refusal to participate, or withdrawal will not affect any services that the subject is receiving or will receive at the institution in which the research is being conducted.

If you have any questions, please contact me at (408) 924-2480.

cc: Dr. Andrew Wood