Investigating the Impact of Offline Interactions on Members of Online Communities

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**Abstract**

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Members of online communities are increasingly participating in offline meet-up events and offline meetups are an increasingly important aspect of participation in many online communities. Prior research has shown these interactions are highly valued by community members, especially in video-sharing communities such as YouTube and online link sharing communities like Reddit. However, little is known about the impact such offline meetings have on the productivity and participation of members within the communities, and what research has been conducted has provided conflicting results. This research utilizes the lenses of Legitimate Peripheral Participation and Media Synchronicity Theory together to clarify prior inconsistent findings and investigate how offline interactions impact the productivity and participation of members of online communities. This was done through a multi-year process of ethnographic fieldwork including in-person and online participant observation, the collection of a decade of Reddit comment and posting data, 42 semi-structured interviews conducted both online and in-person, and a detailed case study of one YouTube collaboration channel. Overall members of offline communities showed a great deal of value in offline meetup events, describing them as critical and central elements of being a member of their

respective community. As a result, there are clear impacts on individuals from their participation in offline meetup events, resulting from increased frequency of communication and a shift in their media choices to facilitate new and changing relationships with other community members. Individuals' participation within their original community is also impacted – although not their continued membership – as they shift away from the medium hosting that community to develop their interpersonal relationships with other members. Curiously, despite clear evidence of the impact of offline interactions on individuals, members of these communities are often at pains to not exclude other members who do not, or cannot, attend such events. Claiming that offline interactions are not required for participation in a community, or a senior status within it. This work holds clear implications for the future of designing for online communities, particularly for platform that host such communities, and ensuring the right sort of communication tools are available to members at the right times in order to facilitate member interaction not just with the community but also with other members. This in turn will inform design techniques for platforms to limit user-attrition and encourage longevity, growth, and productivity in these communities. From a theoretical perspective this dissertation observes unique processes occurring within the Legitimate Peripheral Participation of group members moving through a Community of Practice that are not part of the traditional theory and offers potential explanations for these observed deviations as a jumping off point for future research. Additionally, it is also the first work to combine the theoretical lenses of Media Synchronicity Theory and Legitimate Peripheral Participation and as such offers a unique perspective into the media choices of individuals as they move through a Community of Practice. Future work from this research can look to uncover more around the active denial of users over the demonstrable impacts of meeting in person.

# **Table of Contents**

# Tables and Figures

# Dedication

To my grandmother, Agnes. Whose love and support guided this journey to its start.

And

To my daughters, Eleanor and Molly, and my wife Joanna. Whose love and support saw this journey to its end.

# Acknowledgements

*Now the labourer's day is o'er;*
*Now the battle day is past;*
*Now upon the farther shore*
*Lands the voyager at last.*

- "Hymn", John Ellerton

My greatest thanks to the city and people of Seattle, for hosting me these many years. The beauty of the Pacific Northwest and the hospitality of her people can never be understated.

Next, I wish to thank those strangers who became forever friends and provided so much love, support, and guidance through these years, especially in those early days. To the occupiers of the house on NE 52nd St for shaping my first year in Seattle and making it so memorable, but especially to Rose Voorhees. To the countless members of the UW FIUTS community, especially Randy Eng and Damaris Laker. And to Emma Hinchliffe and the Hinchliffe family, for bringing stability, kindness, compassion, and madness to my life.

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I returned to England a better man than I left, in no small part to all of you.

Thank you all.

"*Things are only impossible until they're not.*"
-    Jean-Luc Picard

# Chapter 1: Introduction

## 1.1    Background

Online communities, sometimes referred to as virtual communities, are networks of individuals – usually centered around a common interest – who interact primarily through a software platform supported by the Internet. A platform is a service which hosts digital content through the use of a variety of hardware and software applications (Bottcher, 2018). In this research a platform refers to the software service on which online communities are hosted, either wholly or in part. Online communities have existed since the earliest days of the Internet. From the humble beginnings of Usenet newsgroups in the late 70s through to the monolithic social networking sites of today. Individuals have joined these online communities for many diverse reasons, including a desire to discover and exchange information, a want for friendship, a need for social support, or simply just for recreation & entertainment (Ridings & Gefen, 2006). Often, however, the motivations behind members' continued participation in a community evolve over time, and the reasons that brought them to the community originally may not be why they continue to be involved (Lampe et al., 2010). Prior research has investigated these motivations,  and their variations among different types of communities (Bogers & Wernersen, 2014; Brown & Capozza, 2006; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007), however recently a new norm in participation in online communities has begun to emerge – the desire to meet up with other community members in-person.

These in-person 'offline' meetup events are becoming increasingly more common, and a wide variety of online communities have started to organize large national and international conventions (or "cons"), in response to the demand from their members; these include meetup

events such as World of Warcraft's "Blizzcon" and the Harry Potter community's "Leakycon". The desire for offline meetups isn't restricted to the social and entertainment based communities either, productivity-based communities also have offline events such as Wikipedia's "Wikicon" and the offline conventions organized by large cyberinfrastructure projects designed for the purposes of distributed scientific collaboration by researchers (Randall, Diamant, & Lee, 2015). Prior research has shown that members of online communities – regardless of the subject matter of the community – have both a desire and an expectation for these offline meetup events to occur. In fact, community members view such interactions as an integral part of membership; helping to bolster the communities they are centered on, through increasing interactions and feelings of community (Carter, 2005; Rotman et al., 2009; Rotman & Preece, 2010). However, there has been limited and often conflicting research concerning what effects such offline meetings have when individuals return to interacting online – including effects on both the communities as a whole, and on the individual community members. Prior studies have uncovered a mix of outcomes from these types of in-person interactions, and the way they affect future participation in the community among members; including uncovering decreased participation in the community (McCully et al, 2011), both increasing and decreasing participation levels among different individuals (Chan, 2011), and no change in participation levels (Michinov & Michinov, 2008). Given these conflicting results, there is a need to discover exactly what effects such offline interactions may have on the relationships and activity patterns of individuals and groups. Online communities have been shown to drive positive change within community members, through providing artistic outlets (Buter et al., 2011; Kuznetsov & Paulos, 2010; Salah, 2010), emotional & peer support (Davis et al., 2015; Ellison et al., 2007; Setoyama et al., 2011), and skills development (Black, 2006, 2007; Campbell et al., 2016; Evans et al., 2017). With increased productivity &

participation among community members driving success in online communities (Hiltz, 1984; Lin & Lee, 2006; Preece, 2001), it is important to understand how the offline interactions of community members may in turn affect the productivity and participation in those communities. Therefore, this research seeks to clarify prior inconsistent findings in this area and investigate how in-person interactions and meetup events can affect the productivity of content producers, the relationships and social ties between community members, and how individuals in these communities come to value face-to-face interactions. The results of this research will clarify the specific impacts that offline meetings have on online communities, particularly for communities that most value offline meetings as part of membership. Additionally, these results will help inform design techniques to limit user-attrition and encourage longevity, growth, and productivity in these communities.

## 1.2    Problem Statement

Research into the motivations for participation in online communities has previously established a desire by members to meet and interact with each other in an offline setting, and this type of interaction has been shown to be an integral part of membership in many online communities (Carter, 2005; Rotman et al., 2009; Rotman & Preece, 2010). However, despite the importance placed by users on these interactions, little is known about what effects such meetings have on community members - and on communities themselves - once individuals return to interacting online. Additionally, what limited research does exist on this topic has shown conflicting results. Research by Sessions (2010) indicated that offline interactions among community members increases participation in the community and strengthens social ties. However, other studies have shown participation in the community actually decreased following offline interactions (McCully et al, 2011), or have found mixed (Chan, 2011) or

unclear results (Michinov & Michinov, 2008). With such a high value placed on offline interactions by members of online communities, it is critically important that these inconsistent results are clarified, so that nuanced understanding can be formed of the processes, outcomes and impacts involved after the conclusion of offline meetup events. In doing so, it is possible to better construct the organization of these events and, more critically, the design of the platforms that host the online communities, to better facilitate the changes in relationships and interactions that occur following offline meetings. This will in turn allow these platforms to mitigate some of the possible negative consequences of offline interactions, such as user attrition or decreased productivity, and to encourage and facilitate the processes that lead to increases in user productivity and participation within the community. This is especially important in productivity-based large-scale projects such Wikipedia or Cyberinfrastructures, where impacts on participation and productivity can have real impacts on the development and dissemination of knowledge and furthering of scientific discovery.

## 1.3    Purpose of Research

Due to the conflicting and unclear outcomes of previous studies, and the high value placed on offline interactions by members of online communities, this research will aim to clarify our understanding of exactly what the effects of offline interactions are on members of online communities and the platforms that host those communities. This research will build upon prior qualitative studies to investigate how offline interactions influence productivity, participation, and interpersonal relationships for members of online communities. Which will in turn allow for a better understanding of users' motivations to meet offline; and why they come to value such interactions. Our results will enable us to create a richer, more nuanced understanding of how offline interactions influence members of these communities through an in-depth

qualitative study, which will be triangulated with quantitative data analysis. The study proposes the following research questions:

RQ1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

RQ 2: What impact does community members meeting offline have on the platform on which they originally interacted?

## 1.4 Research Goals

This research will build upon past studies of online communities, mediated communication, and distributed work; in order to increase our understanding of a progressively more important aspect of membership within online communities – meeting offline. There are two primary goals of this research, the first is to construct a well-framed understanding of what drives individuals to value offline interactions as an integral part of the experience of being a member of an online community, in order to understand how their participation changes over time. This will allow us to answer additional questions around what individuals take away from such interactions, which in turn will help us to achieve the second overarching research goal, below. It will also assist future researchers and user experience designers in the creation of new online platforms, which more easily meet the expectations and desires of their users by facilitating the creation and organization of such events, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the online community.

The second goal of this research is to explore, understand and clarify the impacts that offline meetings have on online communities and their members. This research will build on previous studies by clarifying their conflicting results and presenting a rounded and robust understanding of the effects on productivity, participation, and interpersonal relationships that offline meetings may have. These results will assist content-hosting platforms in gaining a better understanding of the online as well as offline motivations of their user-base. The results would also aid in informing future design techniques to limit user-attrition, and encourage longevity and growth in these communities, and ultimately create an environment that would allow content-producers to maximize their productivity.

Through the completion of these goals, this research will be invaluable to future researchers and professionals. By developing our understanding of the motivations of members of online communities- and the effects of offline meetings on the communities and the individuals – it is possible to better design and re-design systems to enable the potential positive consequences of these meetings; and mitigate any negative ones. Not only should this satiate the desires of community members, but it will also serve to create an environment of increased productivity and participation within a community. In productivity-based communities, such as Wikipedia or large distributed infrastructure projects (cyberinfrastructures), such an environment will allow for improved access to information, better analysis and dissemination capabilities, and a real tangible benefit for the way knowledge is developed, and for scientific progress.

## *1.4.1 Field Sites*

To conduct the planned research, this study will focus on two main research sites, each with their own unique, but comparable, communities. These sites are the video-sharing website YouTube, and the news aggregation website Reddit.

### 1.4.1.1 YouTube

YouTube is a vast video-sharing repository founded by three former employees of PayPal. Originally launched in 2005, YouTube was bought less than 18 months later by Google for $1.65 Billion. Today, YouTube is one of the most popular sites on the internet, welcoming an average of over 34.4 billion visits every month (Similarweb.com, 2023), and the site takes in over 500 hours of video every minute (up from 60 hours in 2012). The nature of YouTube allows anyone to upload content, as a result individuals can participate in the site either actively as uploaders & commenters, more passively as so-called "lurkers" (Merry & Simon, 2012), or even anti-socially as "trolls" (Buckels et al., 2014). The site provides members with user-pages (known as channels), and a variety of communication tools akin to those found on most large online social networking sites (Rotman et al., 2009). YouTube is not generally discussed in the context of online communities, but as Rotman et al. (2009) discuss, the rich communication tools offered to users on the site provide a cohesive user community.

The population being studied within YouTube is known as the 'Nerdfighters'. This community has existed since 2007 and centers around two brothers, John and Hank Green, who produce YouTube videos and are known collectively by their channel name 'Vlogbrothers'. The community that has grown around John and Hank dubbed themselves the 'Nerdfighters' based on an in-joke from one of the early Vlogbrothers videos. The Nerdfighters are prolific content

producers, with thousands of individual Nerdfighter YouTube channels and projects in existence (Green, 2022).

1.4.1.2 Reddit

Reddit was founded in 2005 as a social networking and news aggregate website, dubbed the "front page of the Internet" by its creators, and in recent years it has become one of the most popular sites on the Internet (Similarweb.com, 2023a) with over 1.8 billion visits per month. Reddit allows its members to post text-posts of their own construction or links to external content, which is relevant to the topic of a specific section of the site (known as a subreddit). Subreddits (each of which starts with the prefix 'r/' and are known colloquially as "subs") exist for all manner of different topics from, r/steak to r/HarryPotter, and can have tens of thousands of active subscribers who vote on content posted to the sub as well as post comments and replies. Anyone can view content on Reddit, but an account is needed to post or vote on content. The design of Reddit means that it shares a lot of similarities with YouTube, such as allowing individuals to engage with content on the site passively as a 'lurker' and the site is well-known for the presence of 'trolls' in its comments sections (Bergstrom, 2011). Each user has their own user page, which contains a record of their posting activity; a 'trophy case' of achievements they have received during their time on the site (such as having a verified email); and points (known as karma) they have received from upvoted submissions.

The population within Reddit that shall be studied for this research will be r/Seattle, one of the largest and most active subreddits based on a geographical location. r/Seattle was created in 2008 as a subreddit dedicated to news and topics centered around the city of Seattle, Washington, in the United States. It is a well-established and highly active community with

almost 500,000 members, this makes it one of the most subscribed municipal based subreddits, behind New York City's subreddit (r/NYC) which has almost 700,000 subscribers. Although the subreddit is ostensibly for city of Seattle, links and topics posted to the sub often cover many other municipalities and locations throughout the state of Washington, especially as many of the nearby location-based subreddit's have considerably smaller subscriber counts. Despite this, the greater Seattle area - and the things that happen within it - remain the core common interest of r/Seattle as the community works together, with a shared purpose, to keep each other informed and entertained by the goings on within their local community.

# Chapter 2: Literature Review & Research Grounding

## 2.1    Introduction

Although online communities have existed for over 40 years, there is a limited amount of literature available that specifically addresses the intersection of individuals' online and offline interactions. What research does exist in this area tends to focus on situations in which traditionally offline communities transition to online settings, or hybrid environment where individuals work online and offline together in professional settings. It has only been in the last few years that researchers have taken to look specifically at the relationships between online and offline interactions within online communities.

In this section, I will begin by introducing the concept of online communities, as well as their definitions and typologies, before providing a brief overview of the theories found in the literature of the types of computer mediated communication that occur in these communities. Following that, I will discuss the current body of research into offline interactions in online communities, highlighting the conflicting nature of the conclusions presented within it. This will then lead into the following chapter where I will put forward the conceptual frameworks through which I will present the research findings of my dissertation, highlighting how each framework can be utilized as a lens for viewing the offline and online interactions of members in online communities.

## 2.2 Online Communities

In the broadest sense, an online community is a group of people who interact and work together with a common purpose, usually with a shared identity, towards a shared goal. (Kim, 2000) While the first online communities can trace their roots back to the Usenet groups of the 1970 and 80's (Lueg & Fisher, 2012), the first discussions and theories concerning these types of communities occurred even earlier. Licklider and Taylor (1968) were the first to describe the notion of socio-technical networked communities, depicting a future of "interactive communities of geographically separated people", working together or individually, and pursuing a common interest. Although never using the specific term 'online community', Licklider and Taylor were the first to provide a working definition of what would today consider an online community. They also envisioned what a future containing such communities would look like, going so far as to claim participants in online communities would be happier, as those "with whom one interacts most strongly will be selected more by commonality of interests and goals than by accidents of proximity" (Licklider & Taylor, 1968. p. 40). They also go on to suggest that communication in online communities of the future will be effective, enjoyable, and productive, utilizing highly responsive and capable technologies to enable such communication to occur. It was not coincidence that the authors were also senior figures at the Department of Defense's Advanced Research Projects Agency (ARPA) and led the development of ARPANET – the precursor to the modern Internet.

It was not long after the creation of ARPANET that the first communities started to appear on the network. When microcomputers began to become more prevalent in the 1970s and 80s these communities bloomed from a handful of scientists and defense contractors, to tens of thousands of connected individuals utilizing Bulletin Board Systems and platforms like Usenet

and the WELL (Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link) (Rheingold, 1993, 1996; M. Smith, 1992). Licklider and Taylor envisioned an idealized future for these communities, even suggesting that eventually we "will be able to communicate more effectively through a machine than face to face." (Licklider & Taylor, 1968. p. 21). Over the years, these ideas have been both supported and challenged, with other authors contesting that online communities and computer mediated communication (CMC) could never live up to the ideals of Licklider and Taylor's futurist claims of the '60s, while still others espoused such communities' positive benefits and potential to improve the way we work and live (Brooks, 2010; Etzioni, 1999; Grieve et al., 2013; Setoyama et al., 2011; Warkentin, Sayeed, & Hightower, 1997; Wellman, 2005). Despite the benefits and drawbacks of online communities still not being fully understood, Kozinets (1999) predicted in the late 90's that over 40 million people would participate in online communities by the year 2000, and that once an individual connects with others online it is "likely that they will become a recurrent member of one or more of these gatherings and increasingly turn to them as a source of information and social interaction". With the advent of social media sites in the mid-2000s this prediction seems to come to fruition, with today around 79% of all online adults having Facebook accounts (Pew Research Center, 2016), over 330 million unique users utilizing Reddit (Reddit, 2020), and almost a third of all the people who have access to the internet using YouTube (YouTube, 2017).

Despite the modern popularity of social networking sites and online communities, there are still conflicting arguments surrounding the efficacy and overall benefits of online communities, CMC, and face-to-face communication, and they are not the only disputed aspect of the literature either; there is also little consensus among authors as to how to define online communities themselves. Although Licklider & Taylor's (1968) definition of an online

community was the first of its kind (though they never use the specific term 'online community' in their work), future authors have continued to carve out their own ideas for what constitutes an online community, and how to best define it.

### 2.2.1 Defining Online Communities

The first explicit definition of an online community came almost 20 years after Licklider and Taylor (1968) first described the concept of what would eventually become online communities, when Starr Roxanne Hiltz became the first to use the specific term in the book "Online Communities: A Case Study of the Office of the Future" (Hiltz, 1984). In her book, Hiltz analyses the impact of the introduction of a computerized conferencing system into an academic community. She chose to coin the term 'online community' to demonstrate the idea of "a new kind of professional and technical community; one that is defined not by working together in the same physical space, but by common membership in a computer communications network." (Hiltz, 1984. pg. 30). But Hiltz stopped short of providing a concise definition for what an online community was; that wouldn't happen until the work of Howard Rhiengold almost 10 years later, although he chose to describe these entities as 'virtual communities' (Rheingold, 1993). Rhiengold's definition has had a lasting effect and is one of the most often cited definitions of an online community, describing them as:

> *"Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace."*
> (Rheingold, 1993. pg. 5)

Rheingold later revised this definition to include more specific concepts:

> *"Virtual Communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people*
>
> *bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. [They are] a group of people*
>
> *who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and*
>
> *ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks."*
>
> (Rheingold, 1996. pg. 414)

In the years that followed Rheingold defining the terms 'online community' and 'virtual community', many different types of already existing group-based Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) became encompassed by those terms, whereas previously they had been referred to simply and informally by the technology that supported them (Sproull & Arriaga, 2008). These included the aforementioned Usenet groups (Lueg & Fisher, 2012), Internet Relay Chat (IRC) systems (Werry, 1996), email-lists, discussion forums, and Multi-User Dungeon's (MUD's) (Bartle, 2004). To most people 'online community' fits Rheingold's definition – and more broadly what is being discussed in these sections – perfectly, especially today; almost 30 years after the term was first coined. However, the use of the term 'online community' in academic circles brought with it some baggage, namely the history, complexity, and extensive pre-existing scholarship that comes with the term 'community.' As Fernback (Fernback, 1997) discusses, "community is a term which seems readily definable to the general public but is infinitely complex and amorphous in academic discourse. It has descriptive, normative and ideological connotations, [it] encompasses both material and symbolic dimensions" (Fernback, 1997. p. 39). As such, since the 1990's there has been much discussion between academics about how the Internet would affect our ideas of community, and how

exactly to define online communities. This has led to the production of numerous definitions in addition to the ones previously discussed, a summary of the most relevant definitions can be found below:

*Table 1: A Summary of selected definitions of Online Communities*

| Author | Definition |
|---|---|
| Licklider & Taylor, 1968 | "Consisting of geographically separated members, working together or individually, pursuing a common interest." |
| Hiltz, 1984 | "A new kind of professional and technical community; one that is defined not by working together in the same physical space, but by common membership in a computer communications network." |
| Rheingold, 1993 | "Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, for form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace." |
| Rheingold, 1996 | "Virtual Communities are cultural aggregations that emerge when enough people bump into each other often enough in cyberspace. [They are] a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas though the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks." |
| Preece, 2000 | - **People**: who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating<br>- A shared **purpose**, such as an interest, need, information exchange or service that provides a reason for the community.<br>- **Policies**, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws that guide people's interactions.<br>- **Computer Systems**, to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness |
| Sproull & Arriaga, 2008 | "A large collectivity of voluntary members whose primary goal is member and collective welfare, whose members share a common interest, experience, or conviction and positive regard for other members, and who interact with one another and contribute to the collectivity primarily over the Net. |

For the purposes of this research, no single definition of an online community that appears in the literature fits this study perfectly. The closest approximation of a panacea definition for this research is that of Preece (2000). *People, purpose,* and *policies* are integral parts of online communities, however Preece's forth element to her definitions – that of *computer systems* – does not adequately fit the environment of online communities that also meet offline. Computer systems are of course integral parts of any online community, but Preece implies that they are a backbone support element in creating a sense of togetherness, a role which could well be shared – or even superseded - by the offline interactions at the heart of this study. Therefore Preece's definition may best be amended with part of Rheingold's (1996), namely: "*[They are] a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas though the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks.*" (Rheingold, 1996. pg. 414). As a result, for the purposes of this study, online communities are defined as:

> *A group of **people**, who work together and interact socially with a **shared purpose** and a common set of both formal and informal tacit **policies.** People may take on various roles within the group over time as they move towards a set of both common group goals, and individual personal goals. They are supported by **computer mediated technologies** and, as desired, **face-to-face interactions** with other members of the group.*

## 2.2.2 *Typologies of Participation*

As well as developing definitions and schema for classifying online communities, researchers have also investigated the types of participation which take place in those communities.

Kozinets (1999) was one of the first scholars to put forward a typology of participation, labelling participants either: tourists, minglers, devotees or insiders. Later, Kozinets revised this schema to add 4 additional types of community members (Kozinets, 2010) while also changing 'tourist' to the more common term 'newbie'. Kozinets' full typology is based on two spectrums, strength of communalities and centrality of consumption activities (see Figure 1, below), each role is defined as:

*Table 2: Summary of typology of community members from Kozinets (2010)*

| Participant Role | Description |
|---|---|
| Newbie (formally 'Tourist') | Have only passing interest in content / central activity of the community, weak social ties, and low skill levels |
| Mingler | Follow on from 'newbies', they have stronger social ties and readily socialize within the group, but they still only have a passing interest in the central activity of the community |
| Devotee | The opposite of 'Minglers', they have a high level of interest in the central activity of the community, but weak social ties and only shallow interactions with other community members. |
| Insider | Insiders are those with strong social ties and high levels of social interaction within the community, as well as high interest and aptitude for the central activity of the community. |
| Lurker | Lurkers are active observers of a community but do not participate. They consume information and learn about the central activity of the community but have no personal connections with other members. Lurkers may become 'newbies' in the future, but it is not a guarantee. |
| Maker | A maker is an individual so well vested in the central activity of the community that they can become "active builders of online communities" and use their personal connections and expertise to start a new splinter community. |
| Interactor | These are individuals from other communities which are closely related to the central activity of the community who come into contact with the community. Kozinets uses the example of local in-person *Star Trek* fan clubs connecting with online *Star Trek* communities. |
| Networker | Networkers come from outside of the community (from another community with related subject matter or one with related membership) to interact and build social ties with community members. |
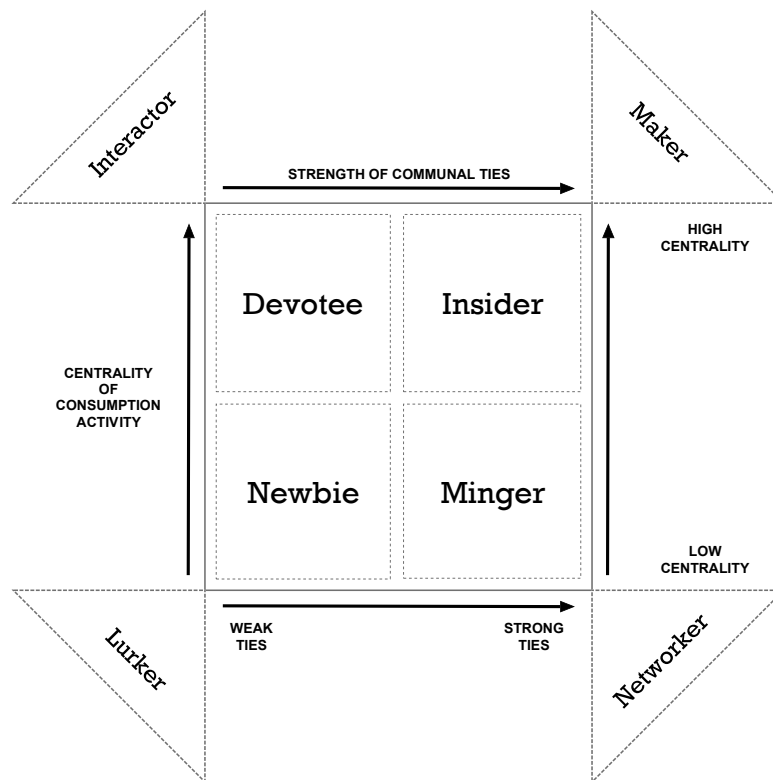
*Figure 1: Types of online community participation (adapted from Kozinets (2010))*

Bryant, Forte and Bruckman (2005) in their paper 'Becoming a Wikipedian' put forward another typology when discussing the roles which users take on in Wikipedia - an online collaborative community centered around peer production. While their work is primarily focused on how individuals come to participate in the Wikipedia community, they do discuss several types of users in the context of the Wikipedia Community of Practice. In Communities of Practice, individuals participate in the community to different degrees depending on many different aspects, including length of time in the community, technological skill level, and subject matter knowledge (see Chapter 3 for more detail on Communities of Practice). These different degrees of participation within Communities of Practice result in the emergence of different participant roles. These roles closely relate to the types found in the work by Kozinets (2010), for example the Community of Practice may have novice members who do not actively

participate in the creation and dissemination of information, but still actively absorb it. This is the same lurking behavior described in Kozinets work. However, the typology found in Bryant et al.'s work is not formally put forward as one by the authors, but rather is constructed from their work laying out the roles individuals take within the Community of Practice. These roles are defined as:

*Table 3: Summary of typologies of community participant roles, adapted from Bryant et al (2005)*

| Participant Role | Description |
|---|---|
| Lurker | Lurkers browse articles on Wikipedia (therefore sometimes they are referred to as readers) this is usually the first stage of participation in the community where individuals do not participate but instead absorb information both about the subjects they are reading, but also about the workings of the site, its administration and the patterns and rules of its editors |
| Editor | Editors are the standard, normal user, they make edits to pages on Wikipedia. Usually, they are small changes at first as the users transition from the lurker stage and learn more of the nuances of the process of making edits and the accepted protocols of the community. They are the novices of the Wikipedia community. |
| Caretakers | As editors become more familiar with the site, they move on just from making changes to pages on topics they are familiar with to taking 'ownership' of pages. In the context of Wikipedia this means that monitor pages, or large sections of the site, for changes by other users. This enables them to care for the pages, monitor for vandalism and use their knowledge and develop skills to make sure community guidelines are being followed. |
| Expert (Wikipedian) | The expert users in Wikipedia are often referred to as Wikipedians. They will have been editors on the site for some time and have become very familiar with the intricacies of the community and potentially developed ties to other members. They are not just concerned with the quality of individual pages, but with the overall health of the site and the community. |
| Administrator | Over time some Wikipedians may become administrators. Administrators on Wikipedia have more privileges than standard members, they can lock articles so they cannot be edited, for example. But this position is not elevated above other editors, and nor is it difficult to obtain, users are voted into this role by other users. One primary difference however between administrators and most Wikipedians, is that administrators are more concerned with the health of the site overall than with editing articles, in this sense they are kind of a 'meta-user' – a watchdog over the community. |

### *2.2.3 Defining Platforms*

The concept of a platform pre-dates the computer age. Ignoring the terms connection with physical structures, traditionally platforms have been denoted as places for public discussion or where individuals can voice their views and spur action among their peers (Schram, 2018). In technological terms, platforms form the basis upon which other services run, they have been denoted as being a group of "enabling technologies that are used as a base on which other applications, processes or technologies are developed" (Queensland, 2018).

Most usually in the context of online communities and digital services, a platform is a service which hosts digital content, through the use of a variety of hardware and software applications (Bottcher, 2018). In this research a platform refers to the software service on which online communities are hosted, and or through which interpersonal communication between community members is facilitated. Platforms may host many communities and communities may spread across many platforms (and off platforms too through real life interactions). Therefore, when I refer to a platform in this research I am referring to a software service, such as Facebook, YouTube, or Reddit which acts as the virtual meeting space for members of online communities.

## 2.3 Computer-Mediated Communication

Humans have long used technological devices as a means through which to mediate their communication. From fire beacons, to semaphore, to the telegram, these methods have become more complex over time, and increased the number of people they can reach. It is of little surprise then that a mail service was quickly implemented into ARPANET after its creation

(Sproull & Kiesler, 1993) and that in the advent of the information age, computers are readily used as a means for mediating communication.

Computer-Mediated Communication (CMC) has been defined as the very specific notion of "synchronous or asynchronous electronic mail and computer conferencing, by which senders encode in text messages that are relayed from senders' computers to receivers" (Walther, 1992) to the more general idea of "any communication patterns mediated through the computer" (Metz, 1992). December (1996), aware of the fact that CMC can be viewed from a great many intellectual perspectives, defines CMC in a non-specific yet detailed way as "the process by which people create, exchange, and perceive information using networked telecommunications systems that facilitate encoding, transmitting, and decoding messages" (December, 1996. pg. 14). However, for the purposes of this research, Computer-Mediated Communication shall be defined as:

> *"An umbrella term which refers to human communication via computers. Temporally, a distinction can be made between synchronous CMC, where interaction takes place in real time, and asynchronous CMC, where participants are not necessarily online simultaneously."*
> (Simpson, 2002. pg. 414)

Much of the early research that looked at Computer-Mediated Communication centered on organizational contexts and how to utilize CMC to improve productivity (Daft & Lengel, 1986; 1983; Hiltz, 1984; Markus, 1992; 1994; Sproull & Kiesler, 1986). Over time, additional studies began to investigate the social relationships within online communities, these studies found

that such relationships prosper well online, and these results helped to bolster further research into the roles CMC plays the context of online communities (Baym, 1998)

CMC research is driven by the desire to understand the effects Computer-Mediated Communication has on the messages we exchange, on how we construct them, and on how we understand them. As Walther (2011) describes it, the focus of CMC based interpersonal communication research is to understand:

"How does the Internet affect the likelihood of having relationships? With whom? And how do we manage these relationships? How do disclosures and affectations influence others and ourselves, and how do online interpersonal processes affect the instrumental and group dynamics that technology enables? How do we exploit existing technologies for relational purposes, and how do we evade the potential dampening effects that technologies otherwise may impose on relational communication? How do technology developers incorporate features into communication systems specifically designed to support and enhance relational functions?" (Walther, 2011. pg. 443-444)

Despite the rapidly changing nature of technology, and the communications theory that tries to understand its usage, there are a great number of established theoretical frameworks in the literature. Even though the field of CMC research is relatively new – especially compared to the fields of psychology and sociology, from which many of its theories are closely related. Several of the more significant and regarded theories of CMC that are relevant to research in online communities are noted below:

*Table 4: A Summary of selected theories of Computer-Mediated Communication*

| Author(s) | Theory |
|---|---|
| Short et al., 1976 | *Social Presence Theory*<br>Theory that CMC provides for a lack of social presence in the form of non-verbal cues, and that so it creates communication that is impersonal and depriving users of the intimacy provided by a physical co-presence. |
| Lea & Spears, 1992; Reicher et al. 1995 | *Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects (SIDE)*<br>SIDE theorizes that without non-verbal cues, it is difficult to detect individuality and to develop meaningful interpersonal relationships in an online space, as a result users will become more sensitive to group norms. |
| Walther, 1992 | *Social Information Processing Theory (SIP)*<br>The theory puts forward the idea that users who use CMC for interpersonal interactions and those to interact face-to-face have the same needs and seek the same rewards. The aim of the theory is to explain how, over time, individuals develop the same impressions and relations with others through CMC that they would in face-to-face interactions |
| Walther, 1996 | *Hyperpersonal Communication Model*<br>The hyperpersonal model puts forward the ideal the multiple concurrent processes in CMC can have the effect of creating communication that exceeds the desirability and intimacy of traditional communication through users being allowed to present themselves selectively, over-attribute similarities to others and tailor their message exchanges more readily. |

## 2.4    The Intersection of Online Communities with Offline Interactions

A good deal of prior research has investigated the differences between offline and online teams.

Studies that have asked fundamental questions in the field of distributed work, such as does

distance matter (Olson & Olson, 2000)? Or how comparable is work performed by co-located

teams compared to distributed ones (Straus & McGrath, 1994)? These studies, which often look at two teams performing the same tasks, have shown that there is little difference in the effectiveness of these groups, merely in the time taken to complete the task - which is often concluded to be due to the limitations of the media (Walther, 1996). However, despite this large body of research into online communities, teams, and distributed work, and the comparison to traditional co-located interactions, little research has looked specifically at individuals and groups who meet online and then go on to interact in an offline setting; and especially what impact these interactions have once individuals return to interacting online.

Studies that have specifically looked at offline interactions between members of an online community have found a number of reasons behind why the members of those communities chose to meet offline (McCully et al., 2011). Such reasons include offline meetings helping to bolster communities through increasing interactions between members, as well as increasing feelings of community (Carter, 2005), and more generally a feeling that offline interactions are a crucial part of the experience of being a community member (Rotman & Preece, 2010). McCully et al. (2011) - in one of the few studies that specifically deals with the effects of online participation after offline meetings - note that users often join online communities for reasons other than social interaction but remain because of the social interactions they encounter when taking part in these communities. Other studies have shown that encouragement, positive feedback and recognition of work are all elements that affect the willingness of users to continue to participate in online communities (Burke et al., 2009). But face-to-face interactions are still a critically important element in the success of these communities. Common ground research, for example, has shown that face-to-face cues are extremely important in building relationships and trust among group members (Clark, 1996). Although Dennis and Valacich

(Dennis et al. 1998; Dennis and Valacich, 1999) have argued that perhaps it is not being face-to-face all the time that is so important, but merely using the right communication channel for the right task. Additionally, research by Donath (2007) has shown that individuals often place value in in-person meetings due to it being harder for others to fake some aspects of their identity, as well as that when individuals meet face-to-face they exchange cues that facilitate their interaction, which increases their effectiveness when working together. Walther (1992) argues that these signals and cues may be developed over time between individuals communicating through mediated interactions, but face-to-face meetings make the development of such cues considerably quicker. Research also suggests that the lack of such cues in online interactions may be the motivation behind the desires of individuals to meet offline, as they wish to strengthen the ties of friendship they have hereto developed online. (McCully et al., 2011; Walther, 1996).

Sessions (2010) found that prolonged interaction online increased the likelihood of individuals engaging in face-to-face interactions, and showed how offline meetings served as a vitally important aspect for an online discussion group; which led to its members feeling more connected and wanting to engage with other members more outside of the online environment. Other research has also shown similar results, in that members of online communities who have met offline often go on to communicate with those they have met using methods of communication that are outside of the scope of the site (Parks & Floyd, 1996). Walther (1992) even showed that members of a virtual team felt closer to their virtual teammates if they worked with a co-located partner, and in Carter's (2005) study of an online community known as CyberCity she found that two-thirds of the participants had met offline, with some even later getting married.

Prior research has therefore established that there is a desire among members of online communities to meet in person. In the early days of online communities and distributed work, these offline interactions were viewed as a way to augment the experience of online participation, rather than be a critical part of it (Preece, 2000b). However, over time the desires and priorities of members of these communities has begun to shift from hands-off information gathering and dispensing activities, to more emphasis being placed on the development of relationships (professional, platonic, and romantic). As a result, today many community members view offline interactions with other individuals in the community to be not only necessary and desired, but a "natural and significant part of community life" (Rotman and Preece 2010, P. 330).

### 2.4.1   The Impact of Meeting Offline

In spite of the large body of research into online and offline teams, and online communities, there is still a dearth of information available concerning the specific consequences and impacts of meeting offline for members of online communities, as well as for the communities themselves. This is despite research showing evidence of a paradigm shift towards community members' coming to highly value offline meetup opportunities (Rotman & Preece, 2010). It should be noted though, that the value individuals place on offline meetings, such as that described by Rotman & Preece (2010), is centered around feelings of increased membership in the community, rather than a relation to friendship formation or strength of social ties. In fact, prior research has indicated that strength of social ties & levels of intimacy in social friendships are constructed independently from the medium that facilitates the friendship (Mesch & Talmud, 2006). Additionally, research has shown that the sustainability of online communities

over time centers not on users being able to maintain interpersonal connectivity or social enhancement, but rather on them being able to derive a purposeful value from the community, which in turn drives self-discovery for the user (Cheung & Lee, 2009). This indicates that the impact of offline meetings on online communities is centered around aspects other than the interpersonal relationships between users.

Although there are not a great deal of studies investigating the impacts of offline interactions, some limited research does exist, albeit with sometimes contradictory findings. Lin (2007), for example, conducted a study into a Taiwanese online community that suggested offline interaction was a key variable related to the success of an online community. Sessions' (2010) study of Metafilter, mentioned above, showed the building of social ties and the positive overall effect on a community as a direct result of meeting offline. And the previously mentioned McCully (2011) study also found that members felt closer after their offline meetings, as suggested by other research mentioned here. However, that study also pointed to a possible negative unintended consequence of meeting offline - the reduction in online participation. This negative impact on participation was also pointed to by Chan (2011), in his study of university students in Hong Kong using online learning communities. Finally, in a similar study to Chan's, Michinov and Michinov (2008) were unable to find any clear positive or negative impact on productivity or participation in an online community as a result of offline interactions. It is these mixed findings, and the lack of any clear theories around the impacts of offline interactions, coupled with the increased desire of community members to participate in offline which is serving as the impetus for this research.

# Chapter 3: Conceptual Frameworks

In this chapter I will examine the main conceptual frameworks that will form the theoretical lens through which this research will be conducted. These two theories are Media Synchronicity Theory and Legitimate Peripheral Participation. I will first lay out each framework, providing background and a detailed description of how they are implemented in research. I will then examine how each theory can be utilized as a lens through which to examine offline/online interactions and be utilized to conduct this research study.

## 3.1    Media Synchronicity Theory

Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) is, at its core, a theory concerned with the utilization of the best technologies available for the specific task individuals are attempting to undertake. Created as a direct response to the perceived shortcomings of Daft and Lengel's (1986; 1983) Media Richness Theory (MRT), MST places the emphasis on the communication process that is taking place, and matching that task to the appropriate medium for communication (Dennis et al, 2008; 1998; Dennis & Valacich, 1999).

### 3.1.1  Background

In order to fully appreciate the contribution of, and impetus behind, the creation of MST it is necessary to first examine the theory that sparked its creation, Media Richness Theory (MRT). MRT was briefly discussed in the previous chapter, here I will revisit some of that material and expand on it further in order to provide a thorough basis for the transition from MRT to MST.

3.1.1.1 Media Richness Theory

Media Richness Theory is itself routed in the ideas of another theory, Social Presence Theory
(SPT). SPT is at its most basic level concerned with classifying media along a linear spectrum,
depending on how well the media facilitates a sense of social presence, or rather how successful
it is at making a user, or users, aware of the other parties involved in the communication process
(Sallnäs et al., 2000; Short et al., 1976).

Building on the ideas of SPT, Daft and Lengel (Daft & Lengel, 1986; 1983) formulated a theory
of Media Richness. MRT, like SPT, classifies media along a linear spectrum, stating that media
exist in different levels of 'richness' from in-person face-to-face interaction as the richest
medium, down to basic communication devices such as letters, posters, and statistical
documents as the least rich medium (Daft & Lengel, 1983). Daft and Lengel define richness to
be the "ability of information to change understanding within a time interval" (Daft & Lengel
1986, p. 560), stating that the selection of a medium for communication should be determined
by the nature of the task being undertaken.

For tasks with high levels of ambiguity (i.e., it is not known how the task should be
approached), MRT posits that the best media to use are those with the highest levels of richness.
While tasks that have high levels of uncertainty (i.e. there is a lack of relevant information and
a need to gather more data) require media low in richness (Dennis & Valacich, 1999). The core
concern of MRT is to avoid waste (caused by using a too rich media) and miscommunication
(caused by using a media lacking in richness), by finding the ideal match between the
requirements of a task and the richness of available media for optimal task performance (Daft
& Lengel, 1983).

Since its inception, MRT has been revised several times (J. McGrath & Hollingshead, 1993), due to a multitude of studies that have continued to produce inconsistent results in regards to MRTs effectiveness at producing optimal task performance (DeLuca 2003; Kock 2001; Lee 1994; Markus 1994; Yates & Orlikowski 1992). For example, DeLuca (2003) showed that groups followed the predictions of MRT in selecting rich, synchronous media in the early stages of a project, but then switched to asynchronous media of a lower richness towards the end of the project; contradicting MRT. It was because of this growing body of evidence that Dennis et al. (1998) proposed that, in fact, the research had failed to find support for MRT and that a new theory of media choice and task performance was required.

### 3.1.2 Towards a Theory of Media Synchronicity

As a result of this contradictory evidence for MRT, Dennis and Valacich (Dennis et al., 1998; 2008; Dennis & Valacich, 1999) proposed a new theory that moved emphasis away from the richness of media and instead focused on synchronicity. This new theory was coined Media Synchronicity Theory (MST), and it rejects MRT's assumption that the most effective task performance is attained through selecting media of appropriate richness, instead focusing on the capabilities of media to support synchronicity. MST states that optimal performance will occur when there is a match between the synchronicity of a medium and the required synchronicity of the communication processes involved ( Dennis et al., 2008).

In MST, synchronicity is defined by Dennis et al. (2008, p 581) as "a state in which individuals are working together at the same time with a common focus". A media is therefore synchronous when it enables that state to occur, and asynchronous when it is incapable of doing so.

However, the capabilities of a medium do not drive synchronicity, as individuals are fully capable of using synchronous media in an asynchronous manner, although not vice versa. This means that although individuals require synchronous media to work synchronously, they may in fact work asynchronously on that media (Miranda & Saunders, 2003). As a result, MST proposes selecting media not at the task level, but rather based upon the communication processes involved in completing the task (Dennis & Valacich, 1999).

In MST tasks are broken down into the twin processes of *conveyance* (transmission of information to enable an individual to create a mental model of the situation) and *convergence* (gaining a shared understanding by utilizing already processed information to create shared meaning) (Dennis et al., 2008; North-Samardzic et al., 2014). Settings with high levels of synchronicity lend themselves to increased levels of interaction and an improved ability to come to a shared understanding. As such, convergence processes are more suited to synchronous settings. Conversely, settings with low levels of synchronicity allow individuals to exchange data with increased time between transmissions to enable information processing, development of a mental model of the situation,  and an understanding of the larger context; as such, asynchronous media are better suited for conveyance processes (Kerres & Witt, 2003; Randall, 2011). Therefore, Dennis et al. (2008, p. 581) define Media Synchronicity to be "the extent to which the capabilities of a communication medium enable individuals to achieve synchronicity".

In addition to the two core tenants of conveyance and convergence, Dennis et al (2008) added five additional principles to MST concerning the capabilities (defined as "potential structures provided by a medium which influence the manner in which individuals can transmit and

process information" (Dennis et al., 2008)) of the media being used for communication, and a further additional principle concerning familiarity and communication over time:

**P1**: Communication performance will depend on the fit between a medium's synchronicity and the fundamental communication processes being performed. Successful convergence requires higher synchronicity whereas conveyance requires lower.

**P2**: Transmission velocity improves shared focus, which will have a positive impact on a medium's capability to support synchronicity.

**P3** Parallelism lowers shared focus, which will have a negative impact on a medium's capability to support synchronicity.

**P4(a):** Media with more natural symbol sets (physical, visual, verbal) have a greater capability to support synchronicity as compared to media with less natural symbol sets (written or typed).

**P4(b):** Using a medium with a symbol set better suited to the content of the message will improve information transmission and information processing, and therefore will have a greater capacity to support synchronicity.

**P5**: Rehearseability lowers shared focus, which will have a negative impact on the medium's capability to support synchronicity.

**P6**: Reprocessability lowers shared focus, which will have a negative impact on a medium's capability to support synchronicity.

**P7**: Although individuals working together on tasks will benefit from both high and low synchronicity media, their need for media synchronicity will depend on their level of familiarity with each other, with the task, and with the media. That is, the higher the familiarity, the lower the need for synchronicity.

### 3.1.3 MST and Offline/Online Interactions

Media Synchronicity Theory has been the subject of a number of studies since its original proposal (Chan, 2011; DeLuca & Valacich, 2005; North-Samardzic et al., 2014; Randall, 2011), however none of these studies takes into account a purely offline context, and only one (Zhang et al., 2008) discusses the inter-relation between offline and online interactions.

Although there is scant research into MST and purely offline contexts, offline communication is an ingrained element of MST in many forms. A number of low-richness media that Daft and Lengel discuss (1986; 1983) and low-synchronicity media talked about by Dennis et al. (1998; 1999) are offline media; such as bulletin boards, statistical documents, and of course face-to-face interaction. The perceived importance of face-to-face interaction in MST follows on from its origins in MRT, where face-to-face interaction was seen as the best form of communication, due to its high levels of richness and multiplicity of cues (Daft & Lengel, 1986; Daft & Lengel, 1983). In its initial form, MST suggests there are situations in which online communication cannot be as effective as offline interactions. For example, in the case of miscommunications it is posited that only face-to-face communication has the synchronicity and multiplicity of

cues to facilitate the resulting processes of clarification and repair following such misunderstandings (Dennis et al., 1998; Dennis & Valacich, 1999; Zhang et al., 2008). However, research by Randall (2011) suggests that the elements of media capabilities that were introduced into MST by Dennis et al. (2008) point to the opposite of this effect. Randall discovered that many of the media capabilities that were posited to have negative effects on groups, were actually valued by individuals as positive elements. For example, reprocessability and rehearseability allowed users whose first language was not English (the primary language of discussion in the context of the study) to correct misunderstandings and miscommunications very easily. In this case, the asynchronicity introduced by the medium being used for communication allowed for a more rapid production of shared understanding and mitigation of miscommunication. This allowed those individuals to look over what had been said and to correct errors they had made before they caused confusion.

Although MST has been put forward as a theory concerning computer mediated communication, there is in fact there nothing specifically within MST that forbids the theory from being applied in a purely offline context. The processes of conveyance and convergence still need to occur whether individuals are interacting across vast distances, or in the same room. For example, within academic reading groups individuals engage in conveyance processes as they take in information from academic papers and form a mental model of the situation being described – utilizing both the paper and their wider knowledge of the subject matter. Individuals then come together within the reading group and engage in convergence processes, the mental models of each participant become part of the discussion and over time a shared understanding is formed of the subject material and the group's individual interpretations merge into a shared meaning.

As discussed above, Media Synchronicity Theory as a framework is not inherently situated in any particular context, either offline or online, but the example of an academic reading group shows the potential for its application in a purely offline context. Research by Randall (2011) demonstrates and supports its application in purely online contexts, as well. In fact, MST possesses an extremely useful versatility in that it can be utilized in either offline or online settings with relative ease; therefore, applying MST to a hybrid online/offline environment is not a large intellectual leap. It is not uncommon in learning environments, for example, to find students positioned within classrooms talking face-to-face while working on a shared document, such as within Google Drive. The more asynchronous nature of the shared document facility allows the individuals to engage in conveyance processes, come to an understanding and then discuss with the group they are co-present with to come to a shared understanding. That shared understanding is then processed back into the shared document, which becomes part of a shared repertoire. Such processes in MST were shown to occur through the combined use of Google Wave and Skype by Randall (2011), although in a purely online context.

Additionally, research by Zhang et al. (2008) has also utilized MST in a context that bridges offline and online communication. They investigated interactions and course performance in learning groups by looking at students' online and offline networks. In investigating these inter-relations, they found that there was a synergistic effect in learning groups for those individuals who had high offline and online centrality. Their results support the base claims of MST that certain task processes require certain media, and also demonstrate that this holds true in a hybrid setting. Further to this, Zhang et al. (2008) also showed that the additions to MST made by Dennis et al. (2008) are supported in hybrid settings. They demonstrated the limitations of

offline mediums in supporting elements, such as reprocessability and parallelism, showing they were not always the media most suited to the task process, but when coupled with online interactions that did support such media capabilities, the advantages of face-to-face interaction in supporting high levels of synchronicity were demonstrably crucial.

## 3.2 Legitimate Peripheral Participation

The theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) was first put forward in Lave and Wenger's (1991) study of Situated Learning. The theory concerns how individuals become established members of Communities of Practice (CoP) by being situated within a particular practice and having access to the established members of the community (Hildreth, 2004).

### 3.2.1 Communities of Practice

The term "Community of Practice" was first coined by Jean Leave and Etienne Wenger in their book 'Situated Learning' (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Although the term itself is only a few decades old, the phenomenon it describes has existed for much longer, and has grown into a widely used and critical perspective on learning and knowing (Wenger, 2012).

In Situated Learning Lave and Wenger (1991) define Communities of Practice as an assemblage of individuals who come together to engage in a process of shared, collective learning within a common domain, to come to a shared meaning and form a collective identity (Markus, 1992). Wenger, more recently, defined CoPs as: "groups of people who share a concern or a passion for something they do and learn how to do it better as they interact regularly." (Wenger, 2012). CoPs are therefore learning communities, but learning isn't necessarily the driving force behind CoPs, but rather can occur as an incidental outcome. In

fact, CoPs are often informal groups, brought together for no specific purpose. A large corporation for example may have many CoPs within its organizational structure, both formal and informal (Wenger, 1998). It is also important to recognize that not all communities are communities of practice. Wenger (2012) uses the example of a neighborhood to illustrate this fact, while neighborhoods are often thought of – and called – communities, they are not necessarily CoPs.

True Communities of Practice must have a shared domain of interest with a shared identity, not be simply a random collection of individuals within a loose network, as in a neighborhood. CoPs must also have community; they must interact and learn together, share information, engage in joint activities for the purpose of pursuing whatever interest is in their shared domain. Finally, CoPs need to have a practice; having shared interests makes a community, but a true CoP is comprised of practitioners who have over time gathered a collection of resources and experiences from which they form a shared repertoire (Bryant et al., 2005; Markus, 1992; Wenger, 1998; 2012). The combination of these three elements – domain, community, and practice – is what makes a true Community of Practice. But in order for these elements to be cultivated to support the continuing existence of the CoP, the community first needs to have members.

### 3.2.2  *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

There is considerable discussion of Communities of Practice in this section, as both LLP and CoPs are symbiotic in nature it is difficult to separate the two when discussing prior research in this area. However, it should be reiterated that LPP is the framework upon which this discussion is centered.

Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is a theoretical perspective concerning how individuals become members of Communities of Practice, transitioning from newcomers, to experienced members and eventually ending up as "old timers" (Lave & Wenger, 1991). As Communities of Practice do not have unrestricted access, individuals must legitimately participate in the community to break through the boundary to become members (Lave & Wenger 1991, p.35). LPP posits that effectiveness in becoming a member of a CoP lies in the forms of participation that are open to the individuals involved. If they have the ability to work and observe established community members directly then they are better able to understand the larger context of their own activities (Bryant et al., 2005). As such, in LPP, a community's old-timers allow newcomers to learn from them and begin their transition to becoming members by participating in peripheral tasks. Such tasks are often low-risk and simple, but still vital to furthering the goals of the community. Eventually, the newcomers move on from peripheral activity to full participation in the community (Bryant et al., 2005; Hildreth, 2004; Lave & Wenger, 1991). It is through these activities that the newcomers become familiar with the eccentricities of the particular community; they gain access to - and become part of - the community's shared understanding, identity, and repertoire.

Lave and Wenger (1991) use the example of Naval Quartermasters learning how to plot a ship's position to demonstrate the process of LPP. The novice quartermasters learn their roles on the job, mastering each individual task involved in plotting one at a time, before moving on to the next one, in order for them to build a collective understanding of the whole process involved in plotting a position and piloting a ship. Once they have completed that process, they are then able to man a watch on their own and pilot the ship at sea, and, more critically, into harbor – a

process that requires the assistance of five other quartermasters. It is through the initial peripheral activities involved in piloting the ship that the novice quartermasters learn the idiosyncratic practices associated with the community of quartermasters – in fact senior quartermasters commented they disliked receiving novice trainees who had attended the naval quartermaster school, as they preferred to train them from 'blank slates'. It is clear from this example the process Lave and Wenger are talking about; the novice quartermasters are newcomers, once they have completed mastering the activities involved in piloting the ship, they are members of the community. Over time they will become more experienced and rise up the ranks to senior quartermasters, whose job it is to oversee training to new novices – they have finally become old-timers, taking on roles that are central to the functioning of the community of practice (Bryant et al., 2005).

It is important to note that Lave and Wenger (1991) don't espouse the idea of CoPs holding fixed, physical boundaries with a periphery and core. A CoP is a constantly shifting amorphous concept, and the terms peripheral and full participation are used to signify the levels of engagement and involvement individuals have with the community (Hildreth 2004). Lave and Wenger (1991, P. 34) also note that peripherality "*must be connected to issues of legitimacy of the social organization and control over resources if it is to gain its full analytical potential*". Therefore it is clear that participation is the key to understanding Communities of Practice (Hildreth, 2004).

Lave and Wenger (1991) outline LPP using a set of five apprenticeships: Yucatec Midwives, Vai and Gola Tailors, Naval Quartermasters (mentioned above), Meat Cutters, and Non-Drinking Alcoholics. Each of the apprenticeships takes place in a purely offline context, the

peripheral participation in these accounts are entirely situated in a non-mediated context. The book makes completely no mention of any computer mediated technology, which is unsurprising given that online communities were a new, emerging phenomenon at the time, and neither Lave nor Wenger were theorists in the area. As a result, I shall look here not at how LPP accounts for offline communication, as that is its origin, but rather at how it accounts for online communication.

Since LPP's inception, and especially following Wenger's (1998) book on Communities of Practice, there has been some considerable study into CoPs in an online setting, and thus also LPP. This research has found support for CoPs in the setting of virtual teams and online communities (Arnold & Smith, 2003; Bryant et al., 2005; Eales, 2003; Goggins, Laffey, & Tsai, 2007; Haas, Aulbur, & Thakar, 2003; Hildreth, 2004; Johnson, 2001; Kling & Courtright, 2003; Matzat, 2010; McCully et al., 2011; Orlikowski, 2002; Rohde, 2003; Rohde et al., 2004). It should be noted, however, that virtual communities are not CoPs, or at least they do not necessarily share the same boundaries. Organizations are designed, whereas CoPs emerge from these designed organizations and communities (Johnson, 2001; Wenger, 1998). This would include some online communities, for example forums set up around specific topics, such as Maloney-Krichmar & Preece's (2005) study of a knee injury community, or any of the numerous studies of Wikipedia that integrate CoPs (Bryant et al., 2005; Morgan et al., 2013). The members of the CoPs that form from these organizations may share boundaries with the organizations, or several CoPs may exist within them. They will also inevitably utilize some of the artifacts of the organization (Johnson, 2001).

Communities of Practice have been the center of discussion so far in this section, but LPP should be thought of as an interchangeable term when (and only when) discussing the theory's applicability in an online setting. Some studies, however, have looked specifically at LPP in an online context such as Bryant et al.'s (2005) research into how individuals become members of the Wikipedia community. They showed that individuals first started interaction on the edges of the Wikipedia community as lurkers – observing the community norms, absorbing information, and learning how the community works. Individuals would then move on to become novices, editing articles about things they have personal knowledge of. As individuals started and continued to edit articles on Wikipedia they began to view the site differently, no longer as a random assemblage of articles but as *"a community of co-authors who play distinct roles and have distinct talents"* (Bryant et al. 2005, P. 9). They became true editors, the experts of Wikipedia and the builders of the community. Further to this, individuals' focus altered as well; they became less focused on the content of individual articles and instead were more interested in the overall quality and health of Wikipedia.

### 3.2.3  LPP & Offline/Online Interactions

LPP has its origins in completely offline settings. As Wenger (2012; 1998) points out, CoPs have long existed before there was a definition for them, and certainly before there was computer mediated communication. However, in recent years, research into CoPs has moved into the realm of online communities, and with it research into LPP.

As previously mentioned, there is a great deal of research that establishes the legitimacy of LPP and CoP in both offline and online environments (Bryant et al., 2005; Goggins et al., 2007). There has also been some study of CoP – and therefore LPP – in hybrid settings, where individual members interact both online and offline. The term hybrid here means the individuals are engaged in both offline and

online interactions within the same community, thus occasionally they will interact in person, and sometimes they will interact through mediated communication. The balance between how often individuals utilize one form of communication (i.e., how often they interact online rather than in person) varies within each community. Rohde et al.'s (2004) study of students engaging in online learning is one such example of a hybrid community. In that study, the students were using a community-driven social tool to interact online, as well as interacting offline as they normally would in both social and educational settings. The study found that the community actually splintered somewhat, with the creation of sub-groups – which usually housed the community's old-timers. Rohde et al. (2004) attributed this splintering to the lack of structure in negotiating common goals and a shared repertoire. However, the authors note that it is quite possible that these sub-groups were merely a reflection of offline cliques that had formed (perhaps even prior to the study) within the community of informatics students being studied. Either way, the outcomes of this study are important, as it suggests communities that involve both offline and online communication are more likely to splinter with the creation of sub-groups that impede Legitimate Peripheral Participation by removing old-timers from interactions within the larger community.

## 3.3 MST & LPP as lenses for understanding online/offline interactions

### 3.3.1 Media Synchronicity and online/offline interactions

As previously alluded to, Media Synchronicity Theory is well suited for situations where there is both offline and online interaction. Given its open nature to mediums of all varieties, including those based both offline and online, very little adaptation could improve the core of the theory for use as a lens for the proposed research. However, prior studies on MST have shown some issues with the media capabilities element added by Dennis et al. (2008). Zhang et al. (2008) discussed how reprocessability was found to have a detrimental effect on online

groups, but only some of the time, and Randall (2011) found that the negative effects of reprocessability and rehearseability did not hold true for the group he studied. Randall also found that parallelism did not impact shared focus as predicted in some circumstances. Given that Zhang et al. (2008) is a study based in a hybrid environment and Randall (2011) is one based on a purely online team, it is obvious there needs to be further research into the nature of the media capabilities. A better understanding of the core tenants of reprocessability and rehearseability is an area that would greatly aid the understanding off online and offline interactions, which should be considered when utilizing MST as a lens for this research.

### 3.3.2 *Legitimate Peripheral Participation in hybrid Communities of Practice*

Much like Media Synchronicity Theory, Legitimate Peripheral Participation is already very well suited for explaining the relationships between online and offline interactions. There is nothing in the theory, as it is outline by Lave and Wenger (1991), to question its suitability in being applied to a Community of Practice which spreads across online and offline interactions. However, as Rohde et al. (2004) showed, there may be issues that appear in these specific types of community, where sub-groups can form and a splintering of the community could occur. Further research may therefore help to identify the inherent differences of situated learning within hybrid online / offline contexts, where a Community of Practice bridges both realities. By applying LPP in these contexts it is possible to learn more about the specific processes of transitioning through the boundaries of a CoP and becoming an old-timer in these hybrid communities and identify how these processes may be different from those observed in more traditionally studied Communities of Practice which exist purely in one space.

### *3.3.3  The role of LPP and MST as lenses for the proposed research*

The core aim of this research is to understand the processes which are taking place within communities that exist across both online and offline contexts. As prior research has identified conflicting results about the impact of meeting in person for members of online communities, it is the purpose of this study to clarify those results and to better understand the processes that are occurring in those communities. To that aim, this research will utilize Media Synchronicity Theory and Legitimate Peripheral Participation as lenses through which to view, and to understand more clearly, these communities.

As MST is, at its heart, a theory concerned with understanding how individuals pick the best communication media for their specific situation, it is well suited for this research. As discussed above, prior studies have proven that the core of the theory (the processes of conveyance and convergence) is both valid, and applicable to hybrid offline/online contexts. Further, although not all the specified outcomes from the media capabilities of MST that were added by Dennis et al. (2008) were not proven in research conducted by Zhang et al. (2008) or Randall (2011), the capabilities themselves were shown to be present in hybrid teams. This research could therefore lend further credence to the results from those studies and help reshape our understand of the processes of MST in offline/online contexts; as well as our understanding of how the media capabilities help individuals communicate in the most efficient and effective manner.

In utilizing Media Synchronicity Theory as a lens for this research, I will be able to more readily identify how interactions change over time and across different media for the individuals in such communities. Through utilizing the media capabilities framework of MST, a clearer

picture can be built of how those different media, and their different strengths, affect the interactions of individuals.

Given the unique context of the communities being studied in this research, their hybrid nature, and the fact that many online communities often overlap so much that it can be difficult to identify stringent boundaries, Legitimate Peripheral Participation (and with it Communities of Practice) will act as an ideal accompanying lens to MST for this research. While MST can help us to better identify the specific actions taking place through communication on different media, in simultaneously applying LPP to these processes we can also understand the effects such interactions have in the context of the larger community. Prior research has shown that hybrid communities (i.e., those which have some offline interaction as part of their context) act differently to those which exist in purely online or offline contexts. In utilizing LPP as a lens through which to study these hybrid communities, we can better understand the differences alluded to in prior research by Rohde et al. (2004), where a hybrid community splintered into online sub-groups that potentially reflected offline cliques. And how the specific actions of transitioning through a community and becoming an 'old-timer' differ in such hybrid CoPs, as well better identify how the communities of practice of such a community may differ from the defined boundaries of the community itself – or even if there exist multiple communities of practice within each of the overarching communities being studied.

# Chapter 4: Research Methodology

## 4.1    Introduction

The objective of this study is to address the research questions outlined in Chapter 1, with an aim to discover the impact of offline interactions on online communities. This chapter outlines the research methodologies and strategies which were employed in this research to meet that objective, this will serve to better introduce and understand the research design which will be presented in Chapter 5. As the literature review shows, there has been extensive research in the area of online communities and Computer-Mediated Communication since the inception of both fields. Utilizing lessons and insights learnt from that prior research, in this chapter I will outline the methodologies most appropriate for a study of this type.

## 4.2    Research Methods

As noted in the introduction, and explained in detail in Chapter 5, the primary research sites for this study were the video-sharing website YouTube.com and the news aggregation website Reddit.com. Much of the prior research on YouTube and Reddit has primarily utilized quantitative data analysis  (Basch et al., 2016; Gilbert & Eric, 2013; Gill et al., 2007; Horneet al., 2017; Pandeyet al., 2010; Singeret al., 2014; Smith et al., 2012), however for this research I will instead follow on from Rotman and Preece's (2009; 2010) studies of communities in YouTube, by adopting qualitative research methods with a grounded theory approach in order to achieve the research goals, coupled with some limited quantitative analysis.

Given the large amount of equivocality in prior research into hybrid interactions (as shown in Chapter 2) by members of online communities, qualitative methods are the most appropriate core methodologies for this study. Such methods allow for the teasing out of the intricate and

complex reasons behind the behavior of individuals in such communities and offer insights which may not be as obvious from a purely quantitative approach. Especially as the conflicting prior research on offline/online interactions predominately featured quantitative analysis. As such I primarily be utilized an ethnographic approach for this study, featuring methods such as interviews, observations, and the collection of relevant data artifacts (discussed in detail in the research design chapter), coupled with some quantitative data gathering for triangulation. During my examination of the large body of existing research into online communities during my literature review, I have identified specific offshoots of established qualitative techniques that have been shown to be appropriate in online settings in order to help inform my research design.

### 4.2.1  Ethnographic Methods

The main research methods utilized in this study were sourced from traditional ethnographic methods, such as interviews, artifact collection and some participant observation. In this section I will outline in detail these ethnographic methods and how they are utilized in this study.

Although ethnographic techniques are by their very nature adaptive and amorphous approaches dependent on the different skills and aims of the researcher adopting the approach, there can still exist an outline for conducting this kind of research. Kozinets (1998, 1999, 2010) for example, who has done extensive studies utilizing ethnographic techniques in a variety of settings, put forward an outline for a set of steps for conducting ethnography to guide researchers utilizing such techniques; especially those interested in applying a particularly rigorous approach:

*Cultural entrée*
Researchers' first step is to select a suitable online community to be investigated and then to create a series of appropriate research questions to be answered. The online access provided by studying such a community means the researcher, largely, does not have to travel long distances to gain access and can easily make observations to gain additional knowledge about the online community and the people using it.

*Data collection and analysis*
Researchers engaged utilizing ethnographic techniques primarily collect three types of data: artifacts produced directly from the community (such as message transcripts, documents, and pictures, which often include supplementary annotations from the researcher based on observations), direct observations of the community by the researcher in the form of field notes or similar devices, and interviews with participants. The researcher will choose which artifacts to collect based on the nature of their research question, their available resources, and their experience in the community and with the field of study (Kozinets, 2002).

*Ensuring trustworthiness*
As highlighted in Chapter 2, text-based CMC can easily facilitate purposeful deception, as well as create stereotypical or emphasized perceptions, and idealized self-presentation. As a result, researchers need to take into account all elements of the community in order to create the most trustworthy representation of what is being observed. In visual communities such as YouTube this is somewhat simpler as visual cues are being presented, but that does not automatically imply that a message sender is more trustworthy than one in a non-visual based medium. The study of online communities presents challenges that traditional ethnographic observations do not encounter, as such researchers must make an effort to gather as much supporting data as

possible when interpreting the messages sent by those being studied, and must also be forthright about the limitations in trustworthiness that such a medium presents (Kozinets, 2002).

*Research ethics*
The study of online communities can be an ethically tricky area. Are the communities public or private spaces, or somewhere in-between? This is a question that often does not have a simple or straightforward answer. When observing communities, researchers are not always explicitly aware of the permissions they have, unlike in an interview or being given a document by an individual. It is therefore up to the individual researcher to decide if it is ethically correct to observe the community in question. If communities are generally open without any kind of restriction beyond signing up to a standard account (which anyone can do), then it seems easy to conclude that observations are not ethically questionable. But when more barriers are introduced, such as passwords, paywalls, or restrictions to some social group (students for example), the freedom of reporting on observations becomes more ethically questionable.

*Member Check*
To reduce the chances of data being misinterpreted, community members should be encouraged to check over samples of observations made by the researcher. This will allow for a reduction in the potential for misconceptions or misunderstandings around things such as the actions of community members, usage of community specific terms, and community norms.

For the purposes of this study, Kozinets' (2002, 2010, 1999) steps were followed closely in order to secure the most rigorous possible grounding for the research findings; this was especially important as the study relies much more heavily on interviews and artifact collection than on participant observations.

In following the techniques laid out in this section, a robust and detailed picture of each of the research populations in this study was developed. Once data collection started and all the interviews, documents, and other materials were being gathered together, the next phase of the study also began as I started to analyze the data. For that phase I chose to utilize a grounded theory approach.

### 4.2.2 Informed Grounded Theory

Grounded Theory, as described by Corbin and Strauss (1998, P. 24), is "a qualitative research method that uses a systematic set of procedures to develop an inductively derived theory about a phenomenon". Essentially, grounded theory is about conducting data collection and analysis simultaneously to create theory (Charmaz, 2006).The aim being for the data to drive the theory rather than the other way around (Neuman, 2002).  As such, it would seem therefore that Grounded Theory does not fit as a form of analysis for this study, given that I have already outlined both relevant literature and several conceptual frameworks through which I will analyze the data. However, although traditional grounded theory relies on the concept of theoretical sensitivity, i.e. "the ability to generate concepts from data and relate them" (Glaser & Holton, 2004), even Glaser notes that "sensitivity is necessarily increased by being steeped in the literature" (Glaser, 1978. pg 3). Therefore, the uncertainty surrounding the prior research in this area of study still lends itself to a Grounded Theory approach. And while the lenses I have chosen to view the results through are valuable, the data may well speak to significantly augment these theoretical perspectives, or even suggest entirely different processes are occurring.

As such, I approached this research from a perspective where the process and results were completely grounded in the data (using traditional Grounded Theory methods), while at the same time being informed by existing conceptual frameworks and literature.

As outlined in Chapter 3, I have extensively researched the two theories which I utilized as conceptual frameworks for this study, however they were not applied to the data or considered until after data had been coded. Instead after the start of my data collection phase I began to open code the interview and artifacts that I had collected during my research. By the time the data collection phase was completed I had created a coding structure for the data collected and then began grouping these codes into larger themes. At this point I began to consider if the themes that emerged from the data were reflective of the conceptual frameworks previously identified, and if I detected similarities in the behaviors predicted by those theories I began to incorporate those elements into larger 'coding memos' – documents which underline the themes I have identified, how they do or do not align with existing theory, and what impact these results may have on answering the research questions. Once I compiled all my data, and completed coding and analysis, I then used these memos as the basis for discussing the results of my study and drawing conclusions from the findings.

This method, dubbed 'Informed Grounded Theory' (Thornberg, 2012), allows researchers to carefully take advantage of existing theories and research in their field, while making sure their research results are still informed primarily by the data. The primary advantage of this technique is that it allows the researcher to not be constricted by their pre-existing knowledge (by having to pretend they are working from zero) and instead enables them to leverage that knowledge in the process of conducting their research, while still being driven by the data.

In choosing to utilize this approach I approached my data analysis by viewing existing theories and literature as tools through which to analyze the data, better enabling me to identify particular nuances, patterns and peculiarities (Kelle, 2005). I was not, as Thornberg (2012) puts it, "forcing data into pre-existing concepts and theories nor replacing constant comparison and systematic coding with prejudiced and insensitive theoretical interpretations of data". But rather facing the reality of the fact that a researcher cannot be truly neutral in their approach given the wide body of literature they are inherently familiar with. Therefore, instead I chose to approach analysis by using that body to knowledge as a tool to be wielded, rather than something to try and hide from.

## 4.3    Quantitative Data Gathering and Triangulation

In addition to the research methods outlined above, some limited amount of quantitative data was also collected in the form of chat logs, subscriber counts, page views, post frequencies and other site statistics. This quantitative data served primarily as a method for supporting the data collected through the qualitative ethnographic methods mentioned above. Primarily, the qualitative data helped in informing the understanding of how meeting offline impacts future use of the platforms where individuals first meet (i.e., frequency of use, movement to other platforms), thus helping to answer answering the research questions:

RQ1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

RQ 2:   What impact does community members meeting offline have on the platform on which they originally interacted?

The collection of this data worked to augment the understanding of the information gathered using qualitative techniques, and additionally enabled the triangulation of the results of this research. As there are potentially many casual factors to explain a phenomenon, the utilization of many alternative methodological approaches helps me to better identify the specific root causes of the phenomena I was observing in this study, and to abate potential issues and challenges to the research, therefore resulting in more rigorous conclusions (Patton, 2002).

For the purposes of this study, I have utilized three of four types of triangulation identified by Denzin (1978), *data triangulation, theory triangulation* and *methodological triangulation.* Data Triangulation involves the utilization of multiple data sources in a study. For this research, I have collected data from multiple sources (as is discussed in detail in the following Chapter) in order to examine the behavior and activities of the participants being studied. In the process of collecting this data, I utilized Methodological Triangulation by employing multiple methodological approaches (both qualitative and quantitative in nature) including participant observation, interviews, and statistical analysis of site data. Finally, in utilizing the two theoretical lenses of Media Synchronicity Theory and Legitimate Peripheral Participation for this research, I employed Theory Triangulation, by using multiple perspectives through with to interpret the data.

It should be noted that the quantitative data collection mentioned above was incidental to data collected through qualitative methods, in that only data which is publicly available, or freely provided by research participants, was included.

# Chapter 5: Research Design

In the following section I will lay out the design for this study, how it has made best use of the outlined methodologies and tackled the issue of the two different settings for this research. In doing so, I will cover how my proposed research methods will map to Kozinets (1998, 1999, 2010) cyberethnographic techniques discussed in the previous chapter. The first part of Kozinets guidelines for creating a rigorous research design is the Cultural Entrée, the first element of which is to *Establish Research Questions.* I previously laid out the Research Questions for this study in Chapter One, however I will reiterate them below so as to provide an easy reference when they are discussed in the following sections of this chapter:

RQ1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

RQ 2:  What impact does community members meeting offline have on the platform on which they originally interacted?

## 5.1    Study Population & Research Sites

The second element of the Cultural Entrée is to *Find a Suitable Community to Investigate*. For my research I focused on two established communities that are primarily based on two individual platforms. These communities were selected based upon prior research on them that demonstrated high levels of offline interaction, low barriers for entry, and already established networking links to members, as well as high levels of community activity.

Each community spreads across many other communication platforms (including both social media and other services like Skype, Discord etc.), these are all touched upon in this study, but the two platforms described here are the ones where each community originated, and so shall be the focus of the start of studying each community. In each case, I utilized qualitative interviews as the primary method of data collection, triangulating those results with observations and analytic data collection from each of the platforms.

There are two communities in this study, each primarily based on their own individual platform, although there is a small amount of cross-over between platforms – which will be discussed below.

### 5.1.1 Platform 1: YouTube

YouTube is a vast video-sharing repository founded by three former employees of PayPal. Originally launched in 2005, YouTube was bought less than 18 months later by Google for $1.65 Billion. Today, YouTube is one of the most popular sites on the internet, welcoming an
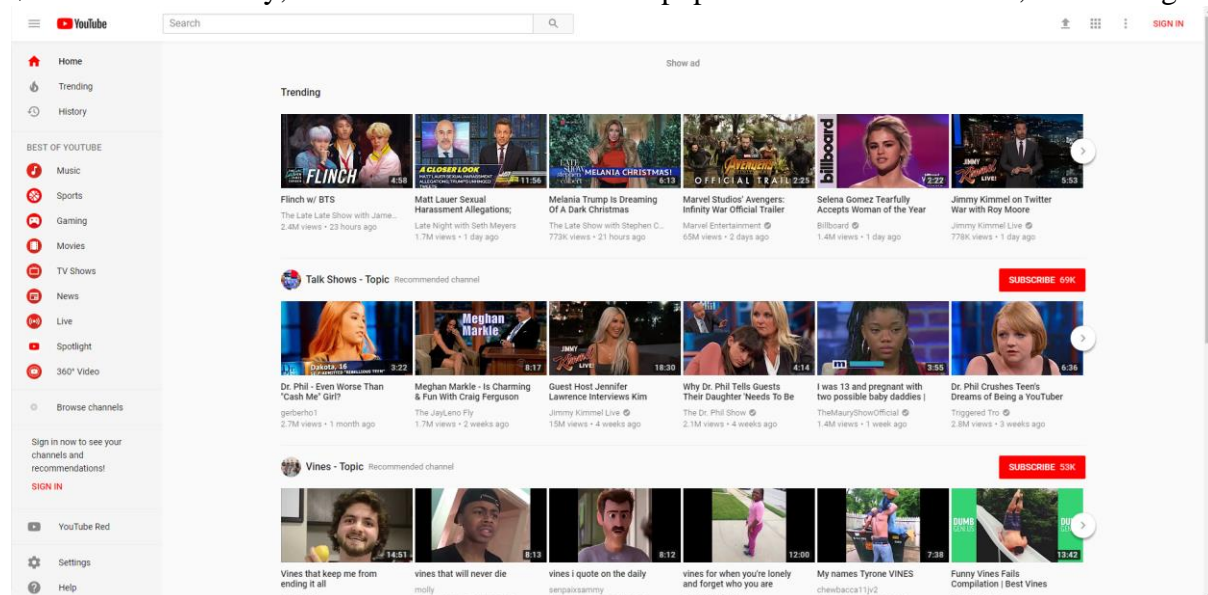


*Figure 2: The YouTube homepage*
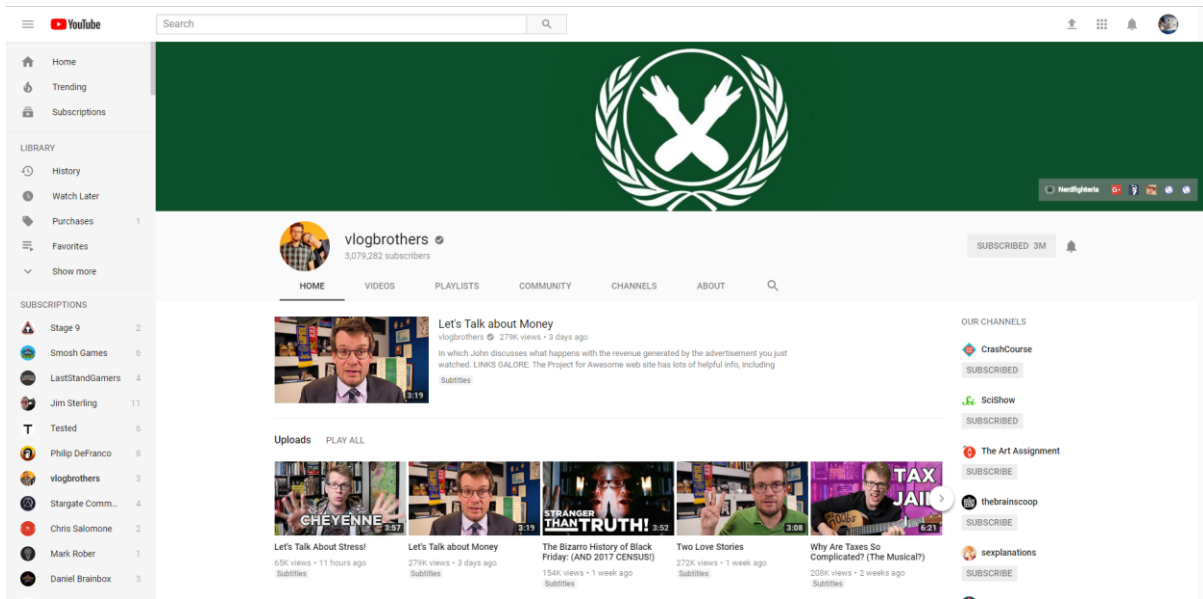
*Figure 3: Vlogbrothers YouTube Channel*

average of over 34 billion visits every month (Similarweb.com, 2023b), and the site takes in

over 500 hours of video every minute (up from 60 hours in 2012). The nature of YouTube

allows anyone to upload content, as a result individuals can participate in the site either actively

as uploaders & commenters, more passively as so-called "lurkers" (Merry & Simon, 2012), or

even anti-socially as "trolls" (Buckels et al., 2014). The site provides members (known

colloquially as 'YouTubers') with user-pages (known as 'channels'), and a variety of

communication tools akin to those found on most large online social networking sites (Rotman

et al., 2009). YouTube is not generally discussed in the context of online communities, but as

Rotman et al. (2009) discuss, the rich communication tools offered to users on the site provide

a cohesive user community. It is in the section of the site known as "People and Blogs" where

the existence of this community is most evident, as this is the category that houses so-called

video blogs, or vlogs. These are short videos, usually 3-5 minutes in length in which individuals

share details of their lives, discuss current events, review books and movies, or partake in

various other activities. It is also where Rotman & Preece (2010) found that a "thriving online

community exists" of online video content producers, although in reality the overarching community of YouTubers is made up of a great many other communities. In order to both better scale this study and more readily explore the relationships between members of the YouTube community, this research will be confined to one specific community within the larger community of YouTube.

### 5.1.2 Community 1: The Nerdfighters

In January 2007, John Green (a New York Times Bestselling author) and his brother Hank Green (an environmental blogger) created a YouTube channel called the 'Vlogbrothers'. By the end of 2007 the brothers had cultivated a huge following, with the members of the community that have grown around John and Hank dubbing themselves the 'Nerdfighters'. The Nerdfighters are prolific content producers, with thousands of individual Nerdfighter YouTube channels and projects in existence (Green, 2022). Over the years, the Nerdfighters have developed many in-jokes, words, phrases, sets of implicit rules and understandings and shared knowledge of what it means to be a Nerdfighter (Green & Green, 2009). As a community, they are joined by an interest in the content produced by John and Hank, most usually this represents an interest in their YouTube content, although members may classify themselves as primarily interested other content (such as John's books or Hank's music) which in turn led them to the YouTube content. Community members also share a commonality through charity work, which the Nerdfighters are very active in. This includes the Vlogbrothers own 'Foundation to Decrease Worldsuck' and organizing a large multi-day online fund-raising event every known as the 'Project for Awesome' which raises money for various charities. At their core however, Nerdfighters are "anyone who wants to be one" (Green & Green, 2009) and the barrier of entry is merely knowing the community exists and sharing in it. The Nerdfighters, therefore, meet

the definition of an online community as defined by both Maloney-Krichmar & Preece (2005) (taken from (Preece 2000)) and Rotman & Preece (2010):

> "A group of people with a *common interest* or a *shared purpose* whose interactions are governed by *policies* in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules and laws, and who use computer *systems* to support and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness" [Emphasis in original] (Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005. pg. 203)

> "An online community is a group of (or various sub-groups) of people, brought together by a shared interest, using a virtual platform, to interact and create user-generated context that is accessible to all community members, while cultivating communal culture and adhering to specific norms." (Rotman & Preece, 2010. pg. 320)

Members of the Nerdfighters community also display a desire to meet offline as seen in other YouTube communities, as described by Rotman & Preece (2010). In a 2013 census of the community, 70.9% of the 128,000 respondents indicated a desire to attend an offline 'Nerdfighter gathering', with 9.1% indicating they had previously attended one (Green, 2013). These numbers have remained constant over the subsequent census', in 2016 (Green, 2016), however the number of members indicating they have been to a gathering has increased in recent years to almost 15% (Green, 2022). In part due to the desire for the Nerdfighters to attend gatherings, John and Hank toured the US several times over the last decade. They are also responsible to the annual YouTube community fan convention held in Anaheim, CA

dubbed 'VidCon' (which will expand to include European and Australian conventions in 2017) and additionally host smaller community gatherings throughout the year. It is hard to determine exactly how large the community is, but the Vlogbrothers channel has over 3 million subscribers and John & Hank have a combined 6 million Twitter followers (John at 4.6 million, Hank at 1.5 million). Knowing that some of these accounts will be duplicates, bots, and inactive community members a conservative estimate could place the real number of members in the community at between 1 – 2 million, but an analysis of fake twitter accounts by Bialik, (2016) found that accounts of a similar size to John's had only around 7% fake followers, so the size of the community could be substantially larger.

A vast majority of Nerdfighters are active community members, meaning they post comments to videos, or post about the community on a variety of platforms such as Twitter, Tumblr, or Facebook. A large portion of the community are also YouTube content creators, who make videos for themselves and others on a wide variety of topics with a large variety of audience sizes (Green, 2022). As a community, members regularly meet offline or wish to meet offline (Green 2013; 2016; 2022; Green and Green 2009), and as the community is of a sufficient size for a reasonable sample to be studied, they make an excellent population for this study. Other sub-communities on YouTube, especially those with close connections to the Nerdfighters community may also be included in this study as time and research access allows. Additionally, the Nerdfighters community does have a presence across platforms (as many online communities do), which includes a presence on one of the other main platforms being studied here – Reddit – but there is no intentional crossover in the study populations.

To better understand the communities studied in this research, it is important to know what makes an individual an old-timer. Although Communities of Practice holds that there is no set 'barrier to entry' either on the periphery or the core of a community, there are core things that demonstrate mastery within the community. In the example of Naval Quartermasters this would be years of knowledge of the eccentricities of piloting a ship, in the Nerdfighters community it's a little different. As the Nerdfighters are a fan community at their core the practice in the CoP is not particularly task based. There are certainly elements of being a member that can be tasked based – such as content creation – but at the same time perfecting the art of making a YouTube video (in terms of lighting, sound, and general production values) is not what demonstrates mastery in this community. Rather for Nerdfighters the shared understanding and repertoire of the community is much more based upon the layers of knowledge of what has come before, and more importantly the context in which that is placed. For example, it is one thing to know that the term 'Nerdfighters' originated from John in the early days of the Brotherhood 2.0 project – this demonstrates expertise in the shared understanding of the community. But it's another to know that its origin comes from John mis-reading the title of an arcade game called 'Aero Fighters' whilst waiting for a flight at Denver International Airport – the knowledge of the context here represents mastery in the community.

It should be noted that I was previously an active member of this community around the time it first came to prominence (2007-2010). As I previously conducted research concerning an effort by this community to complete an online challenge set by DARPA in 2009 (Randall, 2011). However, I have not been an active member of the community for many years.

## 5.1.3 Platform 2: Reddit

The second platform that will be investigated in this study will be Reddit. Reddit was founded in 2005 as a social networking and news aggregation website, dubbed the "front page of the Internet" by its creators, in recent years it has become one of the most popular sites on the Internet (Similarweb.com, 2023a) with over 1.8 billion visits per month. Reddit allows its users to post text-posts (referred to as self-posts) of their own construction or links to external content. Posts on Reddit must be assigned to a specific section of the site, and these sections (known as subreddits) are centered around a specific topic of interest. subreddits (each of which starts with the prefix 'r/' based on Reddit's URL structure and are known colloquially as "subs") exist for all manner of different topics from, r/steak to r/HarryPotter, and can have tens of thousands of active subscribers. Users of Reddit (known as 'Redditors') can subscribe to any public subreddit they choose and then vote on content posted by others to those subs, as well as post comments and replies. As of mid-2022 there were just over 130 million subreddits with the number increasing every day.
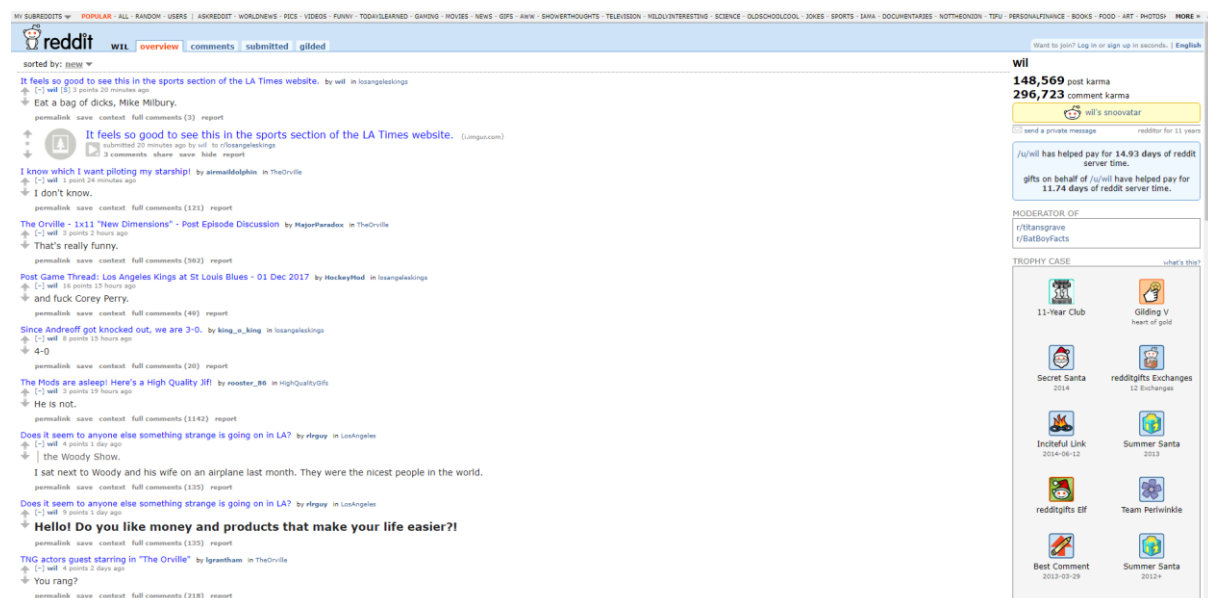


*Figure 4: Reddit Front Page (Classic View)*

Anyone can view content on Reddit, unless a specific subreddit is locked from public view, but an account is needed to post or vote on content. Experienced Reddit users moderate subs (redditor's refer to them generally as 'mods'), the creator of the sub is a moderator by default and they may then assign additional moderators as they wish. Mods have broad discretion in moderating their subs and are free to set rules for posting and commenting at will. They are able to ban users from their sub as well as delete content submitted to the sub. All mods are bound by site-wide rules however, such as rules against promoting violence, and must ban and report users who violate these rules. Mods must also make sure their subs stay within the site-wide rules and in the past some subs have been banned for promoting negative stereotypes or violence against certain groups. It is the administrators of Reddit (the 'admins) who govern the site-wide rules and subreddit moderators, occasionally they will also step in and suspend and ban individual users who commit particularly heinous infractions as well (or try to evade subreddit bans by creating multiple accounts).



*Figure 5: The Reddit User page of actor Wil Wheaton (Classic View)*

The design of Reddit means that it shares a lot of similarities with YouTube, such as allowing individuals to engage with content on the site passively as a 'lurker' and the site is well-known for the presence of 'trolls' in its comments sections (Bergstrom, 2011). Each user has their own user page, which contains a record of their posting activity; a 'trophy case' of achievements they have received during their time on the site (such as having a verified email); and points (known as karma) they have received from upvoted submissions.

Although Reddit has its roots in being a news aggregation website, which is reflected in its mantra as the "front page of the Internet", recent research has found that since its inception in 2005 the site has diversified and transformed to become a true community. Singer et al., (2014) performed a longitudinal study of Reddit over 5 years, examining the evolution of submission types, diversification of subreddits, and users' perceptions of external links, types of content and subreddit themes. They found that "Reddit has transformed from a dedicated gateway to the Web […] to an increasingly self-referential community" (Singer et al., 2014. pg. 6). Ludwig (2014) in their study of constructive rhetoric on Reddit, notes that "Reddit has succeeded in constituting a strong, collective identity for its members" (Ludwig, 2014. pg 78), even going so far as to state that:

> "The fact that users would call themselves redditors suggests that Reddit is more
> than just a website that people visit from time to time, it is a significant part of the
> users' lives and their identities, at least when they are acting within the community."
> (Ludwig, 2014. pg 78)

Much like YouTube, Reddit exists as a large community that contains within it many other online communities, in the form of subreddit. Over time these subreddit have developed from serving as a means to categorize and comment on external links, to a series of well-defined self-referential online communities, with common interests (the topic of the subreddit) and shared goals (which differ from sub to sub but can include information sharing, educating, problem solving among others (Moore, 2017)). Unlike in YouTube, these communities are much more easily delineated thanks to the subreddit structure. Although communities may exist across subreddits (just as the Nerdfighter community exists across many YouTube channels), specific communities of shared interest/purpose tend to focus around one core sub. For this research I will investigate one such community, based around one of the largest and most active geographical subreddits, r/Seattle.
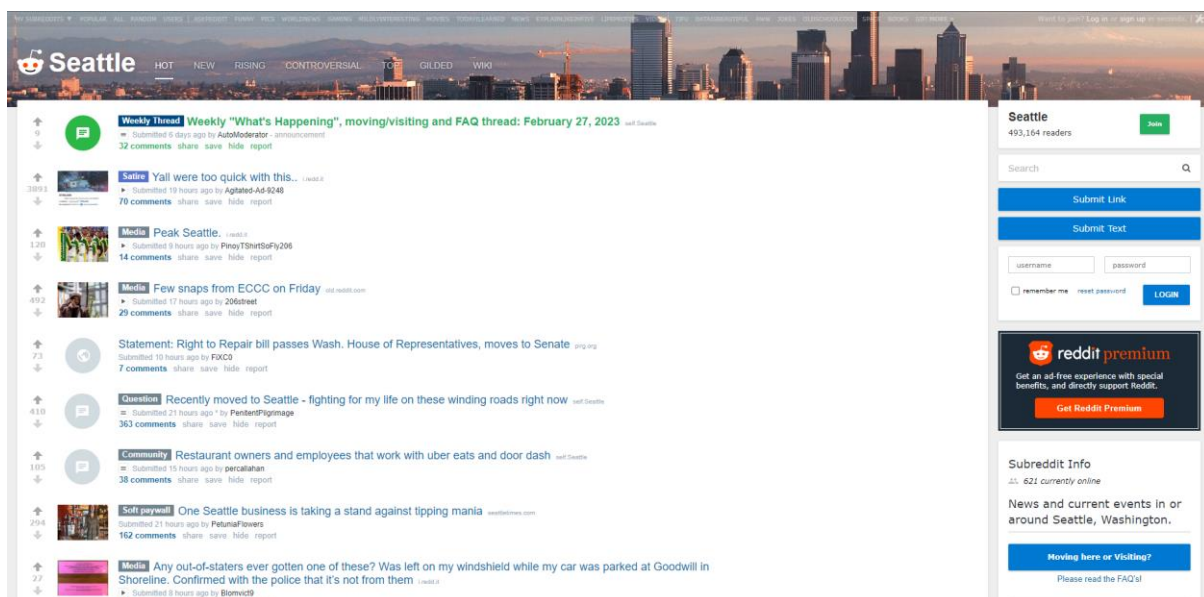


*Figure 6: r/Seattle Subreddit (Classic View)*

## 5.1.4 *Community 2: r/Seattle & r/SeattleWA*

r/Seattle was created in 2008 as a subreddit dedicated to news and topics centered around the city of Seattle, Washington, in the United States. It is a well-established and active community

with over 500,000 members, this makes it one of the most subscribed municipal based subreddits, behind New York City's subreddit (r/NYC) which has 700,000 subscribers. Although the subreddit is ostensibly for the city of Seattle, links and topics posted to the sub often cover many other municipalities and locations throughout the state of Washington, especially as many of the nearby location-based subreddit's have considerably smaller subscriber counts. Despite this, the greater Seattle area - and the things that happen within it - remain the core common interest of r/Seattle as the community works together, with a shared purpose, to keep each other informed and entertained by the goings on within their local community. As the community has existed over 10 years, it has developed its own set of implicit rules and a shared understanding, as well as many in-jokes and references, coupled with more formal rules and policies which are defined by the moderators of the sub. Therefore, similarly to the Nerdfighters, the r/Seattle community meets both Maloney et al's (2005) and Rotman and Preece's (Rotman & Preece, 2010) definition of an online community.

In a similar fashion to the Nerdfighters community discussed earlier, in order to better understand the Seattle Reddit community, it is important to know what makes an individual an old-timer in this Community of Practice. Here the Seattle Reddit community is somewhat differentiated from the Nerdfighter community in that its practice is loosely tasked based – being centered around information sharing activities. Namely informing and discussing the happenings around the Greater Seattle area. In this case becoming an old-timer of the Seattle Reddit Community of Practice requires multiple dimensions of mastery, as those at the center will need to understand the intricacies and shared understanding of the geographic city of Seattle and the Seattle Reddit subreddit(s), and to a lesser degree the overall Reddit platform as well. Therefore, along with having access to the shared understanding of the Seattle

Subreddit which informs them of things like infamous Redditors, how bananas are used as a unit of scale, or the subreddit split (discussed below), old-timers will also need to know how to craft posts and replies within the established community norms of Reddiquette[1] and Moddiquette[2], and the subreddits rules and guidance (available on the wiki pages that sits within the subreddit) in order to display true mastery in this community.

5.1.4.1 Subreddit Split

At around the mid-point of the observation stage of the study (September 2016), there was an incident that caused a large number of users from r/Seattle to move on mass to another subreddit: r/SeattleWA. The reasons for the split are complex and will be discussed further in the following chapters. However, the main cause for the split was the moderation practices of one particular r/Seattle mod, as a result the only significant differences between r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA are user numbers and activity levels – the purpose of both subreddits remain the same (as stated previously in relation to r/Seattle).  The split did cause a significant change in the dynamics and activity levels of r/Seattle and as a result a decision was made to pivot away from studying just r/Seattle to also encompassing r/SeattleWA in this research, and to treat them together as different bodies within the larger 'Seattle Reddit community'.

Prior to the split the r/Seattle community was very active, with the site seeing an average of around 7,000 unique visits and 65,000 pageviews a day – which is a little higher than the average for a sub of its subscriber level at the time (Reddit, 2016). Since the split r/Seattle has seen its member count and unique visitor counts increase, but its activity levels have sharply

[1] Reddiquette is an informal expression of the values of many redditors, as written by redditors themselves
[2] Moddiquette is an informal set of guidelines for moderators of reddit written by community members

decreased from what they were pre-split – seeing about 40,000 page views a day at the end of the observation period. Meanwhile r/SeattleWA, which first started in 2012 as a protest subreddit aimed towards the practices of the head mod of r/Seattle, had only 500 members before the events around the split in September 2016, by the end of that month it had over 10,000 subscribers, and after a second large exodus of users in January 2017 it had increased to well over 20,000 subscribers. By the end of 2017 that number had increased to over 44,000 and the sub was seeing 6-7,000 unique visitors a day, with around 70-75k pageviews daily. Overall, this suggests that while r/Seattle has a larger userbase, partly thanks to its age and that it has until recently been seen as the 'default' Seattle sub, it is currently much less active than r/SeattleWA.

Members of both the r/Seattle & r/SeattleWA community regularly met regularly offline, a large number of local events are posted on the subs where members often meet up, and there are dedicated meetup events such as the weekly 'Capitol Hill Board Game Nights', other assorted community events and the large annual Global Reddit Meetup Day, which the community hosts local events for. Many of the regular meetup events transitioned to r/SeattleWA with some of the more active Seattle Redditors, however usually offline events are cross posted to both subreddits. The exception to this is the Global Reddit Meetup Day, for the 2017 meetup day two separate and competing meetup events were held in different parts of the city.

The large number of active members between the two subreddits, and large number of individuals attending meetup events, make this community an ideal size, and an excellent population for this study. As with the Nerdfighters community, some other subreddits with

close connections to r/Seattle & r/SeattleWA may be included in this study as time and research access allows.

## 5.1.5  Research Sites

This study facilitated the conducting of research in both offline and online settings. The specifics of how research was conducted are discussed in the Data Collection Methods section (5.3, below). Here I will briefly describe the specific research sites where I conducted many of the interviews in this study. I will also briefly discuss how I established myself in the other primary research site: the online communities themselves. Lastly, I discuss the particular eccentricities of conducting research in both an online and offline setting.

### 5.1.5.1 Offline Research Site 1: VidCon

VidCon is an annual fan convention event for online video content creators and fans (www.vidcon.com). It was started in 2010 by John & Hank Green of the Vlogbrothers, as essentially a 'YouTube convention'. The first VidCon was held in the basement of a Hyatt with under 1500 attendees, now VidCon takes up the entire Anaheim Convention Center and has upwards of 75,000 attendees.

VidCon isn't much different from other fan conventions, like those for Star Trek fans, Harry Potter fans, or the famous San Diego Comic-Con. There's a large 'show floor' with hundreds of booths selling merchandise, advertising content and/or services, as well as spaces for games and places for attendees to relax. Around these there are various 'panels' many of which are held simultaneously at spaces around the convention center. These panels vary in size from housing 100 people to rooms that can accommodate several thousand. They cover all manner

of things, from specific content creators talking about their channels, to general panels on things like LBGTQ+ issues within the community. Surrounding all of this, there are also opportunities for attendees to meet with creators one-on-one to get photos and autographs.

This event takes place over a few days with a huge amount of content going on, often simultaneously and with tens of thousands of attendees present, it can be very, very chaotic. Generally, VidCon is attended by 'YouTubers' (encompassing both fans and content creators), although strictly speaking the even isn't limited to 'YouTube' (YouTube is a sponsor by not the organizer) practically there isn't a competing video service in existence presently. There are also a contingent of industry representatives from various platforms (e.g., YouTube, Instagram, Samsung etc.) that attend the event.

5.1.5.2 Offline Research Site 2: NerdCon: Nerdfighteria

NerdCon: Nerdfighteria was a one-off event held to celebrate the 10th anniversary of the Vlogbrothers YouTube channel and the start of the Nerdfighters community. The event took place over 2 days, with around 3,000 – 3,500 attendees, which is a relatively small number for a fan convention. Prior to NerdCon: Nerdfighteria there had been two other events under the 'NerdCon' nomenclature, both of which were known as NerdCon: Stories. These events (held in 2015 and 2016) were centered around writing and writers and although they had cross-over with the Nerdfighter community, they were not centered around them.

Unlike VidCon or NerdCon: Stories, NerdCon: Nerdfighteria was a dedicated convention for the Nerdfighter community. It took place from February 25-26th 2017 at the John B. Hynes Veterans Memorial Convention Center in Boston, MA. The event ran in a similar fashion to

VidCon, or any other fan convention, featuring multiple (often simultaneously held) panels on varying subjects relevant to the community, such as 'Women in Nerdfighteria', 'YouTube through the Years', or 'Old Nerdfighters Meetup'. There was also a large show floor with merchandise booths, and several large events designed for all attendees (like the opening and closing ceremonies).

5.1.5.3 Offline Research Site 3: Nerdfighter Gatherings

Nerdfighter gatherings is the term used for meet-up events that happen in the Nerdfighter community. These range in size from book-signings and musical performances with hundreds or thousands of attendees, to informal meetup events between dozens of Nerdfighters. These events are local in nature, rather than national (taking place, for example, on stops during a book tour), most usually differ from fan conventions in that they don't have a formal program of events other than the specific themes of the events (book signing, general meetup etc.). However, there is a Nerdfighter newsletter curated by Hank & John that contains updates on local Nerdfighter gatherings, which are updated by local groups on the Nerdfighter wiki (https://nerdfighteria.info/).

5.1.5.4 Offline Research Site 4: Global Reddit Meetup Day

The Global Reddit Meetup Day is an annual event held during the summer where Redditors are encouraged to meetup with each other in their cities or other locales. While the event is advertised site-wide and supported by the Reddit admins, the Global Meetup Days are organized by subreddits themselves. As these meetups are local in nature, they usually center around geographical subreddits, although small subreddits that have a topic around a locale may also organize an event (e.g., r/Mariners or r/Seahawks).

Reddit has been supporting the Global Reddit Meetup Day since 2009, and as each subreddit is different, they vary in composition and activities, but most usually they involve meeting up at a specific location for food, games, and chat. These events are, as a result, less formal than something like VidCon, but for larger subreddits they can have attendees in the hundreds.

Both r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA hold separate Global Reddit Meetup Day events in different parts of the city of Seattle. Attending both events led to an exposure to both sides of the community, however attendance at both (specially the r/SeattleWA) events was somewhat reduced during the observation period as the Seattle Solstice Parade occurred on the same day, leading many Redditors to decide against travelling to the meet up events, either because of traffic or conflicting schedules.

5.1.5.5 Offline Research Site 5: Casual Reddit Meetup Events
The nature of Reddit allows for the creations of ad hoc meetup events at almost any time. Whereas small Nerdfighter gatherings can also happen on short notice, they often require at least some planning, but Reddit meetups usually take the form of someone creating a post about being somewhere and asking people to join. In the early days of Reddit, when the site was less popular than it is now, this often took the form of a user posting about how they were having a BBQ or a small party and inviting fellow Redditors to join them (this event is rarer now, due to the large number of people on the site).

Although small ad hoc meetup events do still happen, they are usually centered around other events (i.e., Seattle Women's March Reddit Meetup). There is additionally a regular

reoccurring meeting specifically in the Seattle subreddit community, which is the Capitol Hill Board Game Night. This event takes place weekly and has done so for years, usually drawing a crowd of a dozen or less. It is the only regular reoccurring meetup event in the community, other than the annual Global Reddit Meetup Day.

5.1.5.6 Online Research Site Activities

At the outset of this study, I registered a new account on YouTube and Reddit, where I openly identified myself as a researcher conducting a research project. Once I had spent a short time establishing myself in the YouTube and Reddit communities I began to actively engage with others in the community. I subscribed, commented, and interacted with other YouTube and Reddit users at will, immersing myself in the communities and identifying subjects (both individuals and groups) for study. Especially those who spoke of a desire to meet offline, or who talked of an upcoming offline gathering they were to be attending. During this process, I collected data in the form of written field notes. These field notes will comprise of early observations in the community and significant events, but detailed day-to-day observations were not made in the long term. I also made the effort to log in to YouTube and Reddit at least once daily and, following from the example of Carter (2005) varied the times I did so, in order to gain maximum exposure to community members from other countries or with vastly different schedules. Although given the somewhat asynchronous nature of the commenting and upload/submission systems on both sites that was not strictly necessary.

<u>5.1.5.7 Conducting Research in Multiple Settings</u>

One of the more unique aspects of this study is the multiple settings for the research. It is not unusual to encounter research that tackles both offline and online settings (Carter, 2005; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005; Matzat, 2010; McCully et al., 2011; Michinov & Michinov, 2008; Sessions, 2010; Shen & Cage, 2013; Xie, 2008), however in most cases the account of offline interactions comes from interviews conducted in mediated settings, or data gathered online, and the researchers never themselves interact offline with participants.

In this study, I gathered data both online and offline utilizing a number of techniques outlined in this chapter. There were some risks associated with this however, such as the possibility that I could suffer overstretch in such an expansive environment or suffer from information overload. But by following the examples of the prior research described above - in order to gather the richest data from the online setting - then these risks associated with interacting with both settings were sufficiently mitigated. In fact, it could well be argued that by following the example of the community and interacting with participants in both settings in a naturalistic manner - the same way most community members do – I performed a truer form of ethnography than previous studies that have only tackled offline interactions from a distance.

## 5.2    Applying Theoretical Frameworks to Study Populations

The theoretical frameworks identified in Chapter 3 were applied to the communities - and the platforms on which they are hosted - which were identified in the previous section. While those frameworks were thoroughly explained earlier, it is important to specify exactly how they fit in with, and apply to, the communities being studied here.

### 5.2.1 Fitting LPP to the selected communities

As stated earlier, LPP has been previously applied in hybrid communities, i.e., communities where members interact offline and online (Rohde et al., 2004), as well as numerous other completely online and offline contexts (Bryant et al., 2005; Goggins et al., 2007). LPP is widely applicable in the context of this study, and with the identified communities. The nature of LPP means that the processes of individuals engaging on the peripheral of a community as newcomers who learn the practices and policies of a community as they become established members is present within all types of communities. There are always caveats to this, of course, such as in brand new communities where old timers and newcomers are the same individuals, however this would not apply in either of the communities under study.

There may well be a question as to what makes LPP so applicable to this study, when it can generally be applied to *any* online community. The reason why LPP is so well suited to this study is because I will be investigating communities which exist across contexts and potentially across platforms. This means the boundary of the online community will likely not encompass just one platform, or just one communication context (i.e., face to face, text-based, video). LPP does not care about platforms, nor does it care about the medium through which individuals are communicating, the boundaries of the communities within LPP are often amorphous and ill-defined and there is a large body of research dealing with LPP and communities of this type, especially Bryant et al. (2005) who studied an analogous community to the ones in this study in Wikipedia.

Reddit and YouTube are well defined platforms and the Nerdfighters and r/Seattle are both established communities, as such LPP fits very well as a lens through which to investigate how

members of both those communities communicate with each other, share information and establish themselves as community members. Neither community is anticipated to be a better or worse fit for the LPP framework than the other. It should be noted however that should both of these communities display the amorphous boundaries that can exist in communities which sit across platforms, there is a significant risk that LPP may fail to help us fully understand the behaviors of community members. This is because while there is a significant body of research on similar communities in the LPP literature (see Chapter 3), trying to identify the behaviors and interactions occurring between members of communities with large, shifting boundaries that sit across platforms may prove extremely resource intensive. As a sole researcher this means there is a risk that the research may not meet its full potential should it prove beyond my capabilities to truly understand the entire context of the community. This is not likely to result in a failure of the research but could well be a significant limiting factor in any research conclusions.

### 5.2.2  *Fitting MST to the selected communities*

Unlike LPP, much of the prior research which utilizes MST, has concentrated on its application in purely online contexts, and has not investigated the application of the theory in hybrid environments. However, as previously discussed in Chapter 3, MST is theoretically compatible with face-to-face interactions and the lack of prior research in such environments is both a risk and opportunity. This study can work to fill a gap in the literature on MST and hybrid communities, while also being aware that such a lack of prior research may mean the theory is not as applicable as theorized or suggested from the literature review.

Given that the nature of this research is to understand the impacts of meeting in person and the potential changes in communication patterns and media choices which may occur, it is my view that MST is extremely applicable to this research. The core of what is hoped to be achieved through this study is an investigation into impacts of offline interactions and MST will aid in understanding those impacts through the lens of how individuals choose to interact with others online and offline. By using Media Synchronicity Theory as a lens for this research it should be possible to better identify the specific actions taking place through the choice of different communication media by individuals within the communities being studied. MST helps us to understand and interpret those choices and how the action of changing communication media can have a profound meaning on what an individual is trying to achieve in their communication with others.

As stated previously, there are inherent risks with utilizing a theory that has never been applied in a setting such as the one proposed within this study. However, these risks should be minimal given both the review of the literature and the researcher's prior history of investigating online communities utilizing this theory as a lens. It should be noted however, that while LPP should be applied any differently between either of the communities under study, there is the possibility that MST may in fact not be equally applicable across both YouTube and Reddit. This is because the primary communication medium in each community is different, although many people that will be interviewed in this community may interact in text-based form with other users (comments sections for example) YouTube is ultimately a video-based medium as opposed to Reddit being primarily text-based. Although it is not anticipated that this difference would impact the quality or results of this research significantly, there is certainly a risk that this difference between to the communities could create research results that are not

straightforward to interpret or make it difficult to offer direct comparisons across communities. However, since the anticipated event which may cause a change of action in future communication will be the same in both communities (namely face-to-face interaction), that should work to create a common baseline which will minimize this risk, but there is still the potential for this to be a limiting factor in this research.

## 5.3    Participants & Recruitment

Participants were recruited and interviewed primarily during a period of 16 months beginning with in-person recruitment of YouTube participants in June 2016 at VidCon 2016 in Anaheim, CA. Prior to this, several other participants had been recruited from the YouTube community as part of a pilot study at VidCon 2015 – the results from those interviews have been incorporated here. Two additional phases on in-person recruitment occurred when the researcher attended NerdCon: 2017 in February 2017 in Boston, MA (interviewing YouTube participants), and at the Reddit Global Meetup events in Seattle during June 2017. Recruitment took two forms:

1) *Casual recruitment through networking at meetup events.* This recruitment occurred through direct communication with participants at meetup events, via attending panels, talks and other events. As well as discussing the research with individuals in the common lounges and other shared spaces. Individuals were informed of the purpose of the study and asked either to be interviewed during the event, or to provide a contact email so that interviews would be conducted after the event had ended (this was often the case with this type of recruitment, as individuals tended to have established, full schedules).

2) *Advanced recruitment through posting on social media.* Following difficulties in recruitment during the pilot study (mainly because individuals willing to participate in interview were unavailable during meetup events due to a tight, established schedule), recruitment posts were made on community social media pages in advance of the meetup events (See Appendix A-3 for social media post content). These posts were made on social media pages linked to the communities & on appropriate subreddits (i.e., r/Seattle, r/SeattleWA & r/Nerdfighters). Through these posts I was able to schedule interviews more easily around participants in advance of the events, and this method proved the most successful way to recruit participants.

Although the primary purpose of both recruitment methods was to interview individuals in-person, these methods also allowed for the scheduling of online interviews for individuals who either were unable to be interviewed in-person due to scheduling, or who wished to be in the study but were not attending the particular event where I was conducting my interviews. Participants were primarily selected using convenience sampling, with some participants recruited through snowball sampling. No demographic information was collected from participants, although Reddit users were asked for their user handles in order to allow for anonymized collection of their post frequency, this user data was destroyed once that was collected. Additionally, all contact information for participants was deleted once data collection had ceased, in accordance with the Human Subjects application for this research.

A total of 41 interviews were conducted for this study, 20 from YouTube community members, 20 from Reddit community members, and one interview from a member of both communities (who was recruited as a YouTube participant and revealed themselves to also be a Reddit

participant mid-interview). The 20 YouTube participants also include 5 members of one specific collab channel which was used as a case study in this research. A summary of the participants is available in Table 5, below.

*Table 5: Details of Study Participants (n=41)*

| Interview ID | Pseudonym | Gender | Community |
|---|---|---|---|
| Y-R-001 | Olivia | Female | YouTube / Reddit |
| Y-001 | Sarah-Jane | Female | YouTube |
| Y-002 | Zoe | Female | YouTube |
| Y-003 | James | Male | YouTube |
| Y-004 | Kathryn | Female | YouTube |
| Y-005 | Ron | Male | YouTube |
| Y-006 | Alex | Non-Binary | YouTube |
| Y-007 | Dana | Female | YouTube |
| Y-008 | Laura | Female | YouTube |
| Y-009 | Kara | Female | YouTube |
| Y-010 | Ellen | Female | YouTube |
| Y-011 | Aeryn | Female | YouTube |
| Y-012 | Samantha | Female | YouTube |
| Y-013 | Nyota | Female | YouTube |
| Y-014 | River | Female | YouTube |
| Y-015 | Astrid | Female | YouTube |
| Y-016 | Myka | Female | YouTube |
| Y-017 | Tom | Male | YouTube |
| Y-018 | Jessica | Female | YouTube |
| Y-019 | Leslie | Female | YouTube |
| Y-020 | Molly | Female | YouTube |
| R-001 | Felicity | Female | Reddit |
| R-003 | Mark | Male | Reddit |
| R-006 | Justin | Male | Reddit |
| R-007 | Ben | Male | Reddit |
| R-008 | Selina | Female | Reddit |
| R-013 | Craig | Male | Reddit |
| R-014 | Sebastian | Male | Reddit |
| R-016 | Eliza | Female | Reddit |
| R-017 | Natasha | Female | Reddit |
| R-018 | Veronica | Female | Reddit |

| R-019 | Ann | Female | Reddit |
|-------|------|--------|--------|
| R-020 | Alice | Female | Reddit |
| R-021 | Kate | Female | Reddit |
| R-022 | Molly | Female | Reddit |
| R-075 | Luna | Female | Reddit |
| R-078 | Andy | Male | Reddit |
| R-081 | April | Female | Reddit |
| R-090 | Helen | Female | Reddit |
| R-091 | Chris | Male | Reddit |
| R-101 | Jerry | Male | Reddit |

## 5.4    Data Collection Methods

In this section I will discuss the specific data collection methods I used to examine the communities studied. I will also outline how each of the selected methods has aided me in answering the research questions and following Kozinets cyberethnographic techniques.
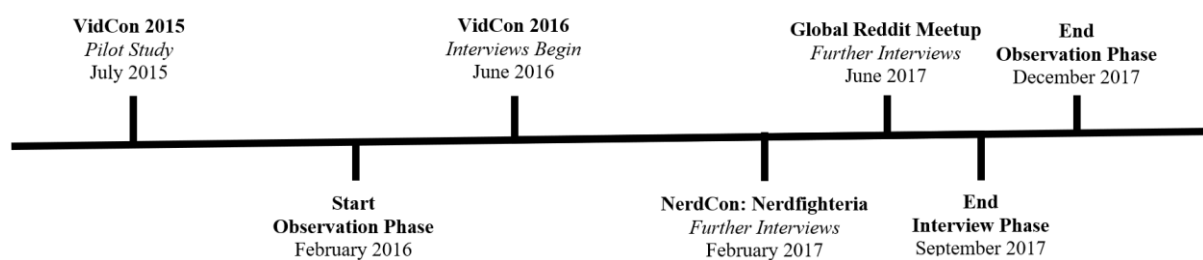


*Figure 7: Study Timeline*

### 5.4.1  Pilot Study – VidCon 2015

In order to assess the viability of this study, I conducted a brief pilot study at VidCon 2015 in Anaheim, California. Given my extensive knowledge of the Nerdfighter community, due to both a general familiarity with the community and having previously studied members for my Master's thesis (Randall, 2011), conducting the pilot with Nerdfighters seemed a logical jumping off point.

The aims of the pilot were primarily to assess the robustness and any potential short falls in the interview protocol, and to better understand the feasibility of conducting interviews in the unique environment of a fan convention, such as VidCon.

The pilot study resulted in 3 complete interviews (primarily due to scheduling issues), and I was able to glean some valuable insights into the direction of my research from them. This was additionally bolstered by my observations at the event and the few other interviews I conducted after VidCon and the formal conclusion of the pilot study.

What I discovered from my participants was a great value placed on offline meetups, and an approach from participants which viewed such interactions as of a high importance. Interestingly, interviewees were reticent to specifically call out offline interactions as 'necessary' or 'required' aspects of participation in an online community when asked directly, but in conversations around the subject they did indicate that individuals could not have the same community experience without attending such events.

It was also clear from my interviews that the online communities I am looking at are not restricted to one medium alone. Participants mentioned platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, Discord and Tumblr as touching on the communities, and although participants were mostly coming from one community (one participant bridged both the Reddit and YouTube communities), I would widely expect this to be true of both communities, and may be required to adapt my interview protocols to probe more into the significance of community presence on platforms other than the one on which they first emerged.

Finally, another interesting and potentially highly significant result from my pilot study was the suggestion from participants of a change in platform use following real life interactions with individuals they had first met online. Several participants mentioned specifically about how meeting someone in real life had the effect of changing how they interacted with those people, namely that they would change the medium of interaction from the one they had met on, for a variety of reasons. This has the potential to be a very important research finding as user attrition in online platforms is a significant interest for technology companies and pinpointing a particular cause could provide valuable insight in how to address such attrition.

The insights gleaned from my pilot study should aid me greatly in being able to be ready to conduct my dissertation research efficiently and better tailor my interview protocols to the kinds of emergent themes I have identified here. Therefore, following the conclusion of the pilot study, I have reassessed my data collection protocols and am prepared to begin the full study in earnest, which will begin with the community observation phase.

### 5.4.2 Observations

The first method of data collection utilized in the study was observations, this is also the final element of Kozinets Cultural Entrée, and an important element of Ensuring Trustworthiness. Prior to any other research method being utilized to collect data, the researcher conducted some limited observations in each community being studied.

These observations occurred in two main stages. Firstly, there was participatory observation of the community prior to engaging in interviews, and second there were detailed observations of

in-person meetup events. Although the period of participation in the community formally lasted for 18 months, detailed field notes were only made during these stages, although I continued to be a participatory member of the community the entire time. Occasionally notes were made in the intervening periods, and after the interview stage. As such these observations are somewhat limited compared to a full participatory observation, which would include detailed notes from the entire period of participation / observation, but they should none-the-less be highly valuable.

Observation of both communities allowed me to gain knowledge about the context of the communities. The first phase of the observation was to establish regular, active engagement in the communities on each of the previously defined platforms. I started the observation period by only engaging passively, learning more about the current states of the communities, important topics, in-jokes, acronyms, discourse etc. I also observed how the communities spread over to other platforms, created accounts for those platforms (if I was not already signed up), and spread my observation time between all relevant sites. I then began to engage in the communities more actively, through talking to individuals, posting content, comments, and replies. Field notes were made during this time to record these observations concerning any insights, highlights, or obscurities I observed.

This enabled me to build a footprint in the community that other users could see, with the aim of ameliorating any potential concerns from individuals as to my motivations for research as I reached out to for interviews in the future. The first part of this participant observation was performed prior to any interviews taking place, and with the author having a pre-existing relationship with both the communities being studied, a pre-built knowledge base of the

community existed prior to conducting interviews. This knowledge base, coupled with the new information I gained over the early observation stages assisted me in being able to verify behavior and established norms, as well as other claims, made by those being interviewed. This phase also included artifact collection, as I worked to collect any relevant data (videos, conversation threads, chat transcripts etc.) that came up during my observation. Once I felt that I had established (or re-established given my pre-existing relationship with these communities) a sufficient knowledge of the communities and their current state of existence I began to reach out to individuals for interviews. At this stage I began attending in-person meetup events to conduct interviews, I also took the opportunity to conduct observations during these events, for the smaller regularly held events (like the Capitol Hill Board Game Night in the Reddit community) I conducted observations prior to reaching out for interviews. Once again recording my observations with field notes.
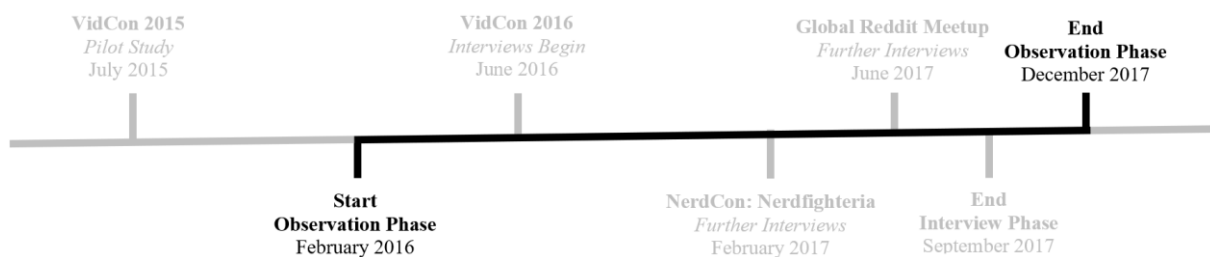


*Figure 8: Study Timeline (Observation Phase)*

By engaging in the community for a period before conducting interviews with community members, I gathered a full in-depth understanding of the processes, practices, and shared norms of the community. This pre-contact observation period also worked to influence the creation of my interview protocols and helped in the conducting of the semi-structured interviews with participants.

The total period of primary observation for the communities before the beginning of the interview phase was approximately 5 months, starting in February 2016 (see Figure 8). This is the period for which detailed field notes were written, subsequently field notes were more limited and were only made in detail when concerning specific events within communities or when attending meetup events. I continued my observations during the interview stage and beyond, but I did not continue a stringent adherence to engagement time per week following the conclusion of the interview stage. I formally concluded all observations in December 2017. These observations helped me to gain a detailed understanding of the workings of the communities being studied. Through this I was able to gain knowledge of how individuals within the community placed value on the community; what it means to be a community member; how individuals primarily interact with each other; and how the offline interactions which individual community members may, or may not, take part in have an impact on themselves, others, and the community as a whole. These observations greatly aid in answering all the research questions, but will be of most use in the answering of RQ 1:

RQ 1:    How do members of an online community come to value face-to-face interaction in an offline setting as part of the experience of being a community member?

### 5.4.3  Interviews

Interviews are a well-established qualitative method for eliciting insight and perspectives from individuals, with minimal risk of coloring that insight with the researchers own opinions (Patton, 2002).  Interviews are also a critical part of Data Collection in Kozinets ethnographic techniques, and served as the primary method of data collection for this research (Kozinets,

2010). I conducted a series of semi-structured interviews with individuals within each of the communities being studied (see Appendix B for interview protocol). These interviews were conducted both in-person and online, depending on a variety of circumstances such as the availability of the individual to be interviewed or their geographical location, with a preference for interviews to take place in-person.

Following the 5-month period of dedicated participant observation mentioned previously, I began to contact individuals about the possibility of being interviewed around their interactions in offline settings. I did this by reaching out to people within the online communities, and by attending advertised offline events and requesting to speak with willing community members I met there. As much as possible I attempted to reach out to attendees of the in-person events through online recruitment prior to the events themselves. I did this by posting on social media sites connected to the communities (or in the case of Reddit, on Reddit itself) with a link to a signup sheet, which contained information about the study and my role as a researcher. This recruitment tactic was chosen because approaching individuals at the in-person events to organize interviews proved difficult in the pilot study as attendees tended to have very full schedules already planned out and found it difficult to find time to be interviewed.

As mentioned previously the interview protocol that was utilized in the pilot study was implemented almost fully for the main set of interviews. However, questions around romantic relationships were removed, and the formal term 'relationship' which is appropriate in an academic context will be replaced with the more colloquial term 'friendship'. This was done based on the reactions to the pilot study of the use of the word 'relationship'. 'Friendship' was chosen because as a colloquial term it is generally understood to encompasses many of the

same features as plutonic relationships, such as mutual trust, shared values and reciprocal liking

(Bauminger & Kasari, 2000; Berman et al., 2002; Matthews, 1983)

The meet-up events I attended to conduct interviews in-person were VidCon (2015, 2016), NerdCon: Nerdfighteria, and the Global Reddit Meetup Day 2017 (see figure 9). Although I attended the smaller local meetups in both communities, I ended up not conducting any interviews during those events, instead only conducting observation. Interviews began with a reiteration of the consent materials (mostly these I had already provided to interviewees when
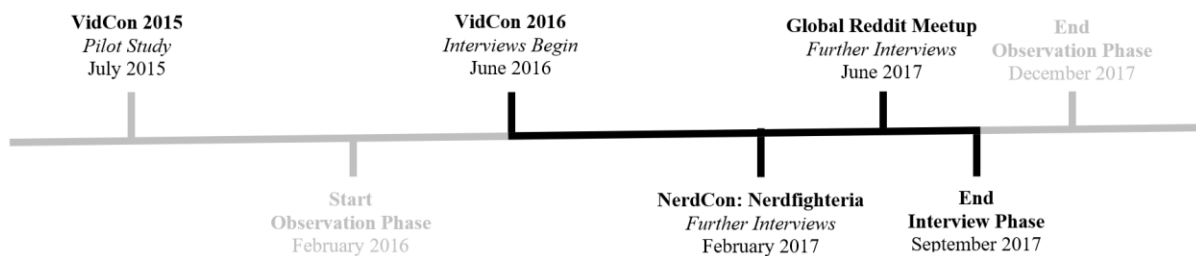


*Figure 9: Study Timeline (Interview Phase)*

the interviews were arranged in advance) and gathering verbal consent from the participants to be interviewed and recorded (see consent materials in Appendix A). Once the interviews began in earnest, they lasted between 30 to 60 minutes. Interviews began with participants providing me with a summary of what specific experiences they had meeting individuals in real life, whom they had first met online. Sometimes these stories were two-minute-long accounts of several events from a high level, but most often interviewees provided detailed accounts of several impactful meetup experiences. From there participants were asked a variety of questions about their participation in the specific community they were a member of, including questions around their attendance of offline events, their relationships with other community members, and how meeting individuals offline has affected their online behavior and subsequent interactions. Interviews were conducted in varying semi-public locations,

dependent on the participant, such as quiet corners of hotel lobbies, parks, or isolated areas of the convention centers. Each interview was audio recorded and transcribed by the researcher; participants were given a modest honorarium as a "thank-you" for their time in the form of a gift card. Before I started the formal interview phase, one round of data collection had already been completed in the form of a number of qualitative pilot interviews conducted during Vidcon 2015. Data collected at this event primarily served to better enable the formulation of more effective interview protocols for future interviews, and to better understand the logistical constraints of conducting interviews at large-scale meetup events. The data collected during the pilot study has been incorporated into the final research results.

As well as conducting interviews at the in-person events, I also conducted several interviews with participants online. These interviews utilized a variety of mediums including telephone calls, Skype call and Google Hangouts. Interviews were conducted online primarily when participants who were willing to take part in the study were unable to do so at the in-person meetup events due to scheduling conflicts, although several interviews were conducted with individuals who were not attending the specific meetup event I was recruiting for but were interested in the study due to their relevant past experiences. These interviews progressed in much the same way, consent materials were provided in advance and reiterated to participants before the start of the study. The largest difference between the online interviews and the in-person interviews was that these interviews were entirely private and not conducted in semi-public spaces. Several online interviews took places following VidCon 2016, and NerdCon, but the majority took place in the summer of 2017, following the Reddit Global Meetup Day.

These interviews provided much of the core detail about how individuals felt concerning offline meetup events. How they value them, what their experiences are, how they feel they have been impacted by them, and how such meetups fit within their use of the platform. Much of this information is deeply personal, subjective, and difficult to tease out from statistical analysis or observation from a distance (although such techniques can help to inform findings from interviews). As such, the information which was gathered from these semi-structured interviews is crucial in understanding the impacts offline interactions have on interpersonal relationships, and on the reasoning behind individuals' actions post-meetup (changing communication channels, ending relationships, changing levels of participation etc.). The question protocol for these interviews can be found in Appendix B. These interviews will aid in answering all the research questions, but will form the core understanding necessary to answer RQ 1:

> RQ1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

### 5.4.4  Collection of Artifacts

During the observation phase I also collected several relevant artifacts related to the communities, including chat transcripts, conversation threads and a detailed data repository of comments and threads in the Seattle subreddits.

Where possible artifacts such as records of posting activity, message logs from offsite interaction between members and other appropriate artifacts were collected by myself. This

included both public and private artifacts. Public data gathering was conducted through scraping data from the sites, as well as from searching for specific materials. Private data was gathered only when directly offered by individuals being interviewed, and only with their direct permission, and the permission of all those involved in logs. All identifying information in any form of collected artifact has been anonymized for publication.

In conjunction with the interviews, I also collected participant activity data within YouTube, including viewing, video posting, and comment posting frequencies, to triangulate the qualitative data concerning their productivity and YouTube usage. Some of this data was collected from YouTube's video specific statistical data related to the participants video postings. Where possible, I analyzed the YouTube quantitative data from a "pre/post" stance, considering how their behavior changed as a result of the offline interactions. This method relied on an accurate timeframe of when interviewees first attended meetup events being sought, and this information was not available, or not disclosed by all participants. However, for those for whom such a timeline can be identified, much of the relevant quantitative data is publicly available. Similar usage data was sought from Reddit also, this data was readily available as a constantly updated archive of all Reddit post and comment activity exists in Google's BigQuery service and was easily accessed for this research.

A limited amount of quantitative data was also collected in the form of chat logs, subscriber counts, page views, post frequencies and other site statistics, serving to support the data collected through the qualitative ethnographic methods, which was the primary data collection method. In gathering data from a wide variety of sources, using both qualitative and

quantitative methods, I was able to better triangulate claims made by interviewees, as such claims could then be corroborated by collected quantitative data, such as message logs etc.

### 5.4.5 Case Study

Finally, in addition to conducting interviews with members of both communities who participated in offline interactions, I also conducted several interviews which centered around specific cases in the YouTube community. Unlike Reddit, YouTube plays host to a particular type of group activity, namely the running of so-called 'collab channels'. These are single YouTube channels in which multiple individuals share an account and upload videos on predefined days or under different conditions, depending on the specific rules that have been devised by members of the collab.

Collab channels provide a specific instance of a kind of sub-group within the larger Nerdfighter community which presents a particularly interesting case. These groups are formed either online or offline, but for this research I looked at a case where a group formed first online before any offline interactions occurred. Given the complex nature of these groups, a case study was undertaken to pick apart some of the specific underlying processes which are being observed and identify any differences between members of these groups compared to individuals in the large community. Case studies are the perfect method for investigating several instances of these groups as this method allows for an empirical inquiry of a group within its real-life context where there is a blurring of boundaries and multiple sources of evidence for the inquiry (Yin, 2009). The case study group was selected based on the researcher's familiarity with the group from a prior study (Randall, 2011), and access to data that had previously been provided by group members as part of an unpublished research paper.

The Case Study utilized the same methods as previously discussed, but with more emphasis on interviews and document collection and less on observation. Once I had chosen the collab channel for research I contacted the members and conducted a series of interviews with those that were willing to participate. After interviewing the participants, I conducted an analysis of the YouTube video uploads using publicly available YouTube data which was used to determine activity levels (such as frequency of comments, video view counts, frequency of uploads etc.). Many of the details for understanding the impact of offline interactions came from the interviews, and individuals' perceptions of the effects off meetup events. The YouTube data was used to triangulate these perceptions, as well as using other data provided by participants (such as in-group chat logs from messenger services) in order to construct a case of how offline interactions affected the particular group within the larger community of Nerdfighteria.

No case studies were conducted in the Reddit community, as prior observations and literature review did not indicate the existence of any sub-groups of the same nature beyond the subreddit level.

### 5.4.6  Research Ethics

Following on from the final part of Kozinets ethnographic framework, this study involved a number of checks to ensure all research was conducted ethically and with minimal impact upon participants.

I was completely open and honest about my behavior. Where possible I stated my nature as a researcher in any account profiles I set up, and directly in any correspondence sent to community members. Additionally, when approaching individuals at offline events I was fully forward about the nature of why I was attending the event, and that I was conducting research into the community in question.

All research activities were approved by the Institutional Review Board of the University of Washington. As such, all materials approved for use in this research have human-subjects approval and participants were given contact information for the UW HSD department, should they have had any questions or concerns surrounding the research. Approval documentation for this research is available in appendix A.

All identifying information that was collected on participants in the study was retained only until the data analysis phase was complete; it was then destroyed. All references to participants in the completed research were fully anonymized and permissions to utilize any online posts were sought prior to the destruction of identifying information.

## 5.5    Data Analysis

As laid out above, both qualitative and quantitative data was gathered in the duration of this study, with qualitative data providing the bulk of this. Following the collection of data, an extensive analysis phase was entered into, where data was transcribed, coded, and analyzed to help form an understanding of the impacts of offline interactions on members of online communities. Quantitative data was also analyzed after collection and used to triangulate and verify the results of the qualitative research where possible.

## 5.5.1  Datasets & Collection Rationale

A large quantity of data was collected for this study, which provided a challenging environment in which to conduct thorough and accurate analysis. After the completion of the data collection phase, as outlined in the previous chapter, the following types of artifacts were collected:

- Field Notes
    - Reddit Observations (pre-interview)
    - Reddit Observations: Subreddit Split
    - Reddit Observations: Meetups
    - YouTube: VidCon 2015
    - YouTube: VidCon 2016
    - YouTube: Nerdcon (2017)
- Interview Transcripts
    - YouTube Interviews: Vidcon / Nerdcon
    - YouTube Interviews: Case Study
    - Reddit Interviews


- Reddit Comment/Post Data
    - Full dataset for 2008-2017
- Case Study Interaction Data
    - Tweets between members
    - Skype chat transcription

This data was collected for the purpose of having a primary data source that would serve as the bulk of the data analysis and from which themes can be pulled out, interpretations made, and from which an understanding can be formed. Secondary data sources served to triangulate and backup these primary sources. For this research the sources are grouped by the platforms outlined in the previous chapter and the primary and secondary sources are as follows.

### Reddit

**Primary Data:** Reddit Interview Data / Field Notes

**Secondary Data:** Reddit Comment / Post Data

### YouTube

**Primary Data:** YouTube Interview Data (VidCon/NerdCon) / Field Notes

**Secondary Data:** Case Study Interview Data / Case Study Interaction Data

The rational for using the above artifacts as primary and secondary sources is to, where possible, use quantitative datasets to triangulate qualitative artifacts. In the case of Reddit, the raw Reddit post and comment data was collected from 2008 through to the end of the observation phase (December 2017) to enable analysis of the size of the community, frequency of meetup events and to understand user activity over time in correlation to their attendance at meetup events having collected their Reddit usernames during interview. For the YouTube dataset this same kind of triangulation was not possible due to there being no way to collect data concerning users raw interactions on the platform beyond the posting of videos which is only part of the way in which individuals interact on the platform (the other being comments within YouTube videos). As such a specific case study was undertaken of a specific collab

channel using a number of available datasets across several platforms, this acted as a way to triangulate the qualitative interview data, using quantitative and qualitative data from a specific case.

### 5.5.2  Collecting and Collating

The process of collecting the data for this research took place over several years. The first data points in the study were the field notes collected during the pilot at VidCon 2015, although many artifacts collected over the proceeding years actually pre-date this – including Reddit posting data and some of the material collected from the YouTube Collab channel.

Fields Notes were taken contemporaneously in many different forms, most usually through the iOS notes application, before being formalized and written up into word documents and stored in a secure Dropbox folder. Likewise interview notes and other documents and artifacts were – where possible – also stored securely in the same folder.

Following the second VidCon in 2016 I had amassed a considerable amount of data including interview transcripts, event field notes and participant observations. Towards the end of the summer of 2016, I began to review this data and reflect on what had been gathered to that point. Although the salient points of my observations and interviews were meeting my expectations and recollection, it was apparent that the rich data should be analyzed more formally to make sure nothing crucial was missed at this stage. As such, I decided to begin to collect this data centrally to begin my analysis. Although the bulk of my interviews were not planned until 2017, I felt beginning a cursory analysis at that phase would allow for any obvious patterns

that might emerge to be addressed in-situ if possible, and therefore allow me to make changes to my interview protocol as needed.

I therefore began to collect my data into the Atlas.Ti qualitative data analysis software tool to review my findings thus far. Over the following months I added documents to the Atlas file as required and continued to open code the data I had collected (see below) until I had finally completed the data collection phase of my research where-in I began one final review of the data at a high level before moving on to process the data further and analyzing these artifacts.

### 5.5.3 Open Coding

As previously mentioned, the first stage of analyzing the rich quantity of qualitative data I had amassed during my research was through the process of open coding. Although I am utilizing a slightly different analytical lens through informed grounded theory in this study, the principles of codifying this data are the same as in a more traditional grounded theory approach. In this case the first stage of analyzing data is through a set of 'initial coding' strategies, as outlined by Charmaz (2006) this process "sticks closely with the data" as you begin to "code words that reflect action". This open coding allows you to engage in "the analytic process though which concepts are identified and their properties and dimensions are discovered in data" (Corbin & Strauss, 1998). Essentially in this stage I began to identify what the data is suggesting, and from who's perspective (Charmaz, 2006).

This process began with a review of my notes and interviews sentence by sentence. As more data was added over time, I reviewed that new data and revisited old, in a process of continual iterative open coding. Through this approach I was able to create discrete codes that were

comparative and thoroughly grounded in the data, while also remaining free of any groupings, themes or categories (Charmaz, 2006). By de-constructing the data down to the sentence level and closely examining it for differences and similarities, I was in a position to create a list of codes which served as a basis for identifying specific concepts on which to build my future analysis and create unique analytic insight (Emerson et al., 1995; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Patton, 2002). The concepts, or categories are the first step towards the creation and understanding of the underlying theories of action that are observed during the research (Pickard, 2013).

Given the length of time between my initial data collection and the end of my data collection phase, open coding also took a role in leading the direction of some of my future data collection. Although I had not yet progressed beyond pulling basic concepts from the data, much of which fell into line with expectations (offline interactions, activity levels, experiences, emotions, etc.), this iterative open coding did lead to dynamic changes in my data collection to probe interesting data points which began to clearly emerge. For example, in interviewing members of the Reddit community it became clear there was a gender aspect I had not considered that was emerging from the interviews. Codes concerning gender dynamics and 'creepiness' – especially linked with safety – resulted in my altering future interviews to probe these areas and pull out more data in this area. By revisiting and reflecting on what I was coding and how I had coded continuously, I was able to create a sort of 'living' codebook that remained relevant through my prolonged data gathering phase.

### 5.5.4 Axial Coding

After having collected a substantial portion of data during my data collection phase and conducting a significant amount of open coding, I began to review my codebook to start the task to grouping the code categories I had developed into sub-categories before eventually developing these into themes. This process was dubbed Axial coding by Strauss and Corbin (1998) because 'coding occurs around an axis of a category, linking categories at the level of properties and dimensions' (Corbin & Strauss, 1998, pg. 123). In this stage the task at hand is exploring the condition, context, and consequences of an identified phenomena, in order to create an understanding and identify patterns in the data (Pickard, 2013). Through this axial coding process the questions of 'who, what, when, where and why' are answered as the data begins to show relationships and links between categories and sub-categories, allowing the researcher to form a more nuanced understanding of the developing theories that are emerging (Corbin & Strauss, 1998; Miles & Huberman, 1994; Pickard, 2013).
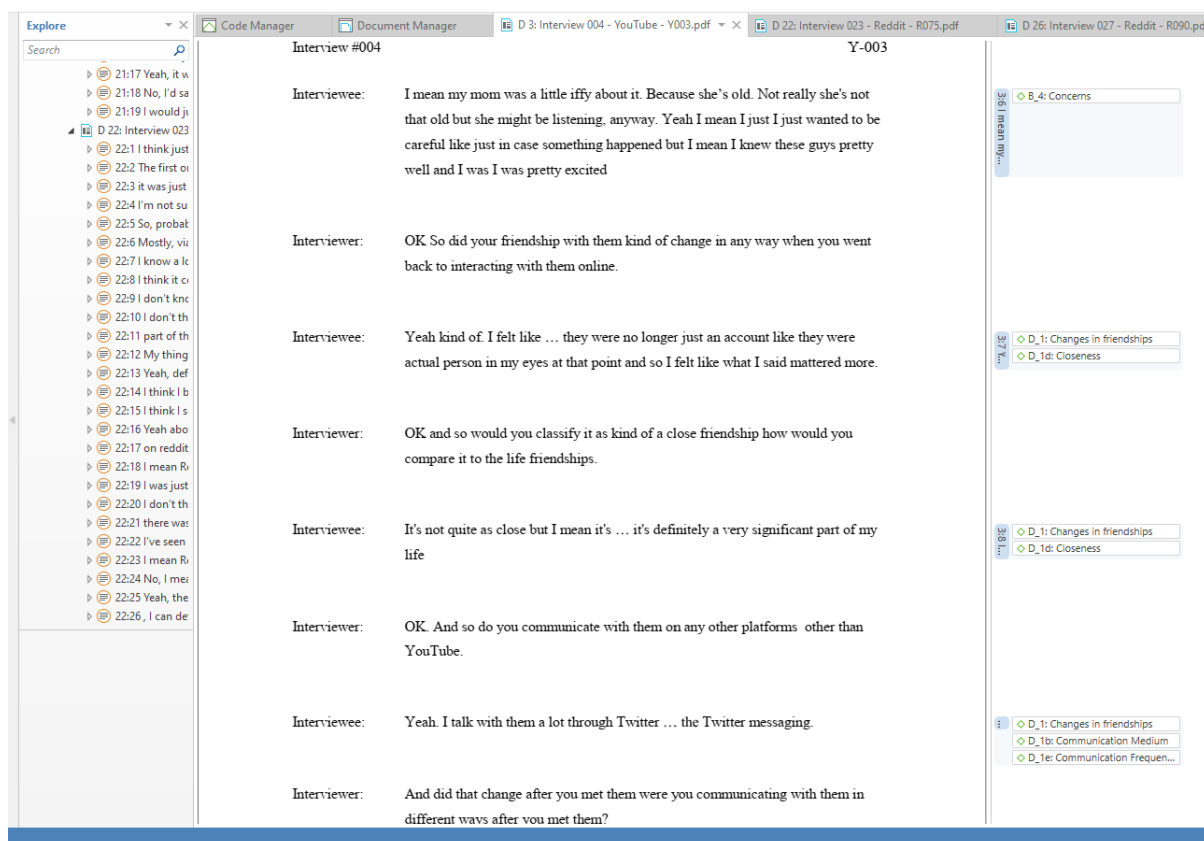
*Figure 10: Example of an interview coded in Atlas.Ti. Open codes have been grouped into themes at this stage, e.g., 'Changes in Friendships' represents a theme comprising of code such as 'Communication medium changes' and 'Communication frequency changes'.*

## 5.5.5  In-Depth Analysis

As I continued my data collection and coding tasks, I began to form a large codebook with a number of different groupings to serve as the basis for my analysis. Through the coding process a series of themes began to emerge and surface themselves from the groupings of the categories and sub-categories I had identified. At this stage I began to revisit the data once again and explore the connections between the groupings in order to construct a series of memos to outline the ideas and theoretical connections I was seeing in my data.

Memo writing is a well-established tool for constructing theory and understanding from qualitative data, balancing the need to analyze vast quantities of rich information with the need

to keep the researcher grounded in what they are seeing (Miles & Huberman, 1994; Pickard, 2013). It's easy to get lost in the weeds of your analysis, and memoing is an important conceptual tool to allow researchers to establish a strong narrative of the story they are trying to tell through their data. As described by Glaser (1978. pg 83-84) memoing is "the theorizing write-up of ideas about codes and their relationships as they strike the analyst while coding … it can be a sentence, a paragraph or a few pages … it exhausts the analysts momentary ideation based on data with perhaps a little conceptual elaboration.". It is important to note, however, that memos are sufficiently different from the codes and categories which inform their creation. Memos should not be confused with data points collected by the researcher, rather they are a record of the researcher's interactions with that data – their thoughts, feelings, and insight – used to frame their understanding of what the data is telling them.

As such, the memos produced during this stage formed the foundation of my understanding of the actions of the individuals I was observing and interviewing. Using the informed grounded theory approach previously discussed (Thornberg, 2012), my data collection and analysis involved a clear sensitivity for the frameworks of LPP and MST, while also being open to identifying new means of action in the behaviors and actions of these participants. Over the core 18 months of data collection, my analysis drove me to not only more deeply understand the drivers behind in person interactions for members of online communities, but also helped me uncover and explore aspects I had not foreseen, such as how such interactions might be shaped by the gender dynamics of those individuals taking part in meetup events.

## 5.5.6  Quantitative Triangulation

Although qualitative data has formed the bulk of what was collected during this research, I made sure to collect as many artefacts as possible that could help in triangulating and verifying the observations and stories of my participants. As such I collected a large amount of data from Reddit, including a complete post and comment history from the beginning of Reddit (in 2005) until the end of my data collection phase, which was stored and analyzed in Google Big Query. This data was sourced primarily from the subreddit r/bigdata which supported much of my quantitative data collection and analysis phase as the sub had already collected much of this data set and contained a great many resources on potential ways to analyze it. The posting and comment data was used, where possible, to trace the posting data over time of users who were interviewed as part of this research. This was used to identify if their perception of their interactions on the platform matched what they were saying in their interviews. Additionally, the Big Query data allowed for an analysis of the frequency of meetup event posts, their activity and follow-up posting as well, as a means to identify how meetup events might impact the subreddits overall.

In addition to this I also collected a key dataset surrounding the group at the center of my YouTube case study. As YouTube does not allow for an easy way to identify user interactions in the comments over time, it was necessary to find a different source of quantitative information to extrapolate how YouTubers interactions might change over time following in-person meetups. This is the reason behind the case study of a YouTube collab channel which features in this research. As part of this case study, I was able to collect Skype messaging transcripts and Twitter posting data from members of the group, which covered a period of roughly two years surrounding a large meet-up event between all members of the group. This

data was analyzed and used to triangulate the results of interviews which the members of that collab channel.

### 5.5.7 Summary

Through the collection of a wide variety of artifacts from Reddit posting data, to interview and field notes, I was able to conduct a deep analysis of the actions of my study population. In the following chapter I will lay out the findings of this analysis, before discussing how these findings might relate to the identified framework or work to ground the creation of new theory concerning the actions of individuals who meet in real life, after first interacting online.

# Chapter 6: Findings

In this chapter I will present the findings from the data collection and analysis phase outlined in the previous chapter. This includes illustrative excerpts from field notes, interviews and other sources that will serve to represent the wider corpus of gathered data and the themes identified in my analysis. As such, excerpts shown here are presented as the best examples from similarly coded data to provide the best insights into the interactions of participants and communities concerning offline meetup events.

First, however, I will re-visit and review the research questions and theoretical lenses identified earlier in this work. I will then present the findings in each of the selected communities before providing an overarching summary of the findings presented here as they apply more broadly.

## 6.1    Research Questions – Revisited

At the beginning of this work, I laid out the research questions which form the core of this study, they are:

RQ 1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

RQ 2: What impact does community members meeting offline have on the platform on which they originally interacted?

There are two primary goals of this research. The first is to construct a well-framed understanding of what drives individuals to value offline interactions as an integral part of the

experience of being a member of an online community, and to understand the impacts that offline meetings have on online communities and their members. The second is to understand how the drives and impacts uncovered in RQ1 might impact future participation on the original interaction platform, and how communication media and frequency might change based on those impacts.

Answering these questions will enable us to more fully understand what individuals take away from offline interactions. It will also assist future researchers and user experience designers in the creation of new online platforms which more easily meet the expectations and desires of their users. It will do this by facilitating the creation and organization of such events, while at the same time maintaining the integrity of the online community.

## 6.2    Theoretical Frameworks – Revisited

In this research I am utilizing a type of grounded theory known as *informed grounded theory*, the philosophy of this analytical method is remaining open to being driven by the data but simultaneously maintaining an awareness for existing theory; in this case two specific theories.

*Media Synchronicity Theory*

Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) is a theoretical framework concerned with understanding how individuals pick the best communication media for their specific needs in a certain situation. It posits different communication media can be used in different phases of understanding, from communicating information to forming a shared understanding (Conveyance and Convergence in MST). MST also describes in detail different communication processes that relate to the capabilities of the communication media that make it particularly

well suited for this research. Utilizing MST as a lens through which to investigate this research will allow me to more readily identify how interactions between individuals change over time and across different communication media.

*Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is a theory concerning how individuals become members of Communities of Practice over time. In LPP individuals progress from newcomers, to experienced members, and eventually become a community's 'old timers'. As Communities of Practice do not have unrestricted access, individuals must legitimately participate in the community to break through the boundary to become novice members. In these cases, newcomers to a community are guided by established members and old-timers, learning from them about the ins-and-outs of the community. Through these activities newcomers become familiar with the eccentricities of the community; they gain access to - and become part of - the community's shared understanding, identity, and repertoire. Eventually, the newcomers move on from peripheral activity to full participation in the community. By applying LPP to the context of offline interactions it is possible to learn more about the specific processes of transitioning through the boundaries of a CoP and becoming an old-timer in these hybrid communities. It is also possible to identify how these processes may be different from those observed in more traditionally studied Communities of Practice which exist purely in one space.

## 6.3    Reddit: An overview

The first of the two communities I looked at was Reddit. Although fieldwork from the Nerdfighter YouTube community happened simultaneously with Reddit data collection, Reddit was the first of the two communities in which I completed fieldwork.

To re-iterate, Reddit was founded in 2005 as a social networking and news aggregation website, in recent years it has become one of the most popular sites on the Internet with over 330 million unique users. Reddit allows its users to post text-based of their own construction (known as self-posts) or links to external content. Posts on Reddit must be assigned to a specific section of the site, and these sections (known as subreddits) are centered around a specific topic of interest. Subreddits (each of which starts with the prefix 'r/' based on Reddit's URL structure and are known colloquially as "subs") exist for all manner of different topics from, r/steak to r/HarryPotter, and can have tens of thousands of active subscribers. Users of Reddit (known as 'Redditors') can subscribe to any public subreddit they choose and then vote on content posted by others to those subs, as well as post comments and replies. As of mid-2020 there were just over 2.1 million subreddits with the number increasing by around 1500 every day.

### 6.3.1  Initial observations of r/Seattle

The Reddit community chosen for this research was r/Seattle. As outlined in Chapter 5, r/Seattle is an ideal research environment for this study due to its reflection of a real-life established community - especially given the researcher's location in Seattle, WA.
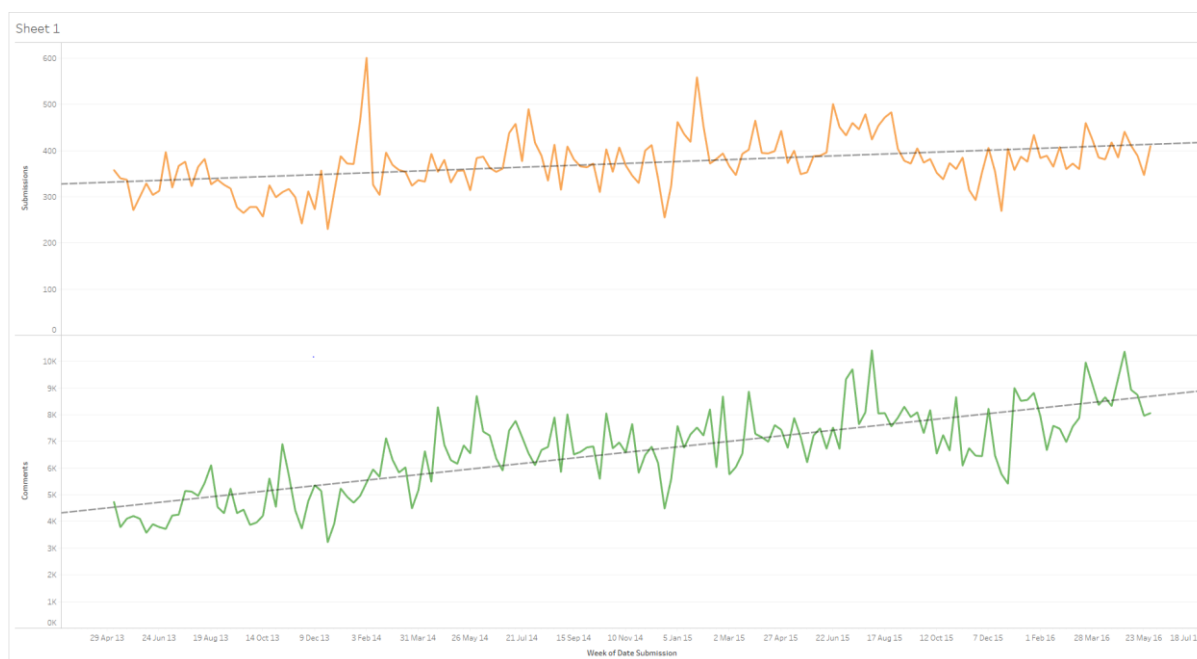
*Figure 11 :r/Seattle total post activity (top) and total comment activity (bottom) per week for the 3 years prior to the observation phase*

Observations began at the start of February 2016. At this point r/Seattle had over 80,000 subscribers and was a very active community. Detailed fieldnotes were collected daily, and I attempted to vary the time of day at which I checked the site to gather a well-rounded look at the site. After several weeks of observation, I began to move away from recording detailed daily notes, as patterns of behavior and understanding were starting to become repeated. Instead, moving to collate observations from throughout the week into a weekly summary observation, this enabled me to better highlight new observed behavior, rather than it being lost in the noise of the same observations seen repeatedly. However, although the pattern of data recording changed site visits remained a daily, or almost daily occurrence and notes were taken throughout the observation period.

It quickly became apparent in the first days of my observation that this community was very active, in the first month I noted over 1600 posts, 30,000 comments and 52,000 upvotes, which

works out to an average of 57 posts, 1094 comments, and 1800 upvotes per day. Coupled with this, there was a significant amount of activity which mentioned in-person meet up events and/or activities.

Various types of in-person meetup events were posted; in February events included:

- *'r/Seattle Ultimate frisbee meetup is Saturday (2/6) at 2pm **Maple Leaf Park**'*

- '*Looking for a place to play board games with 5-7 people.*'

- '*Feb Museum Meet-up*'

- '*Monday Capitol Hill Board Game Night: 7:30 pm at The Elysian*'

Community events varied significantly, from more informal and looser 'looking for a place to play boardgames' to more regular meetup events, like the weekly 'Capitol Hill Board Game Night' and the monthly 'Museum Meetup' - which used Seattle's monthly 'first Thursday free entry' to museums program as a platform to host meetup events. Regular meetup events such as these would prove an excellent place to make observations within the community and interact with community members once the first phase of the observation was complete. In the meantime, the online interactions in the threads about these events helped me identify some of the key players in the community.

> "I've noticed a thread come up about a meetup already, seems like they have regular 'museum meet up days' where members of the community go to a Seattle museum on the first Thursday of the month (when many museums in the city are free), seems very interesting and I may have to attend one of these for my observations in the next couple of months."
> - *Fieldnotes, February 7th, 2016*

Although meet-up events were the key focus of my investigations into the community, another equally important part was discovering the identity of the community itself. As previously established r/Seattle meets the both Maloney et al's (2005) and Rotman and Preece's (Rotman & Preece, 2010) definition of an online community. An important part of which is having established norms, practices, terminology, and regular members – these are also important parts of a Community of Practice. Therefore, I spent much of my observations understanding these elements, one of the most critical of which was understanding the members of the community. In the first weeks of observations, I began to note the regular events, key players, in-jokes, and community parlance that tended to float to the top of most comment threads. This enabled me to begin to form a more structured understanding of the community. Many of these elements were mirrors of real-life pet peeves and stereotypes about the city. Many comments, for example, mention the (in)famous 'Seattle Freeze' phenomenon about how hard it is to make friends in Seattle due to the populace being more introverted and generally standoff-ish (Philipsen, 2010). The 'Seattle Freeze' is widely talked about in r/Seattle, as there are many posts from transplants to the city (the subject of transplants is also one discussed at length on r/Seattle) and in social circles outside of Reddit as well.

As well as a reflection of in-jokes and references found in the larger Seattle community outside of Reddit, r/Seattle also has many in-joke references of their own. Sunset photos, for example, are a particular hot point among community members. The community pages, especially in summer, are often filled with pictures of beautiful sunsets over the Olympic mountains, much to the disdain of many community members. Another often brought up community reference

is around the spelling of Capitol Hill and Pike Place Market[3] – which are often misspelled by newcomers – if a user makes a mistake spelling one of those places then they will be sure to get many comments correcting them – and dozens of threads of jokes and further community references about it.

Sometimes these in-jokes are weaponized against newcomers to the community by established community members and old-timers, especially if the newcomer is asking a basic question about the city (one that anyone who has lived here for a while would know). The newcomers can be told to "go post a sunset picture while you're at it" or some other cliché in-joke about the community. Although most of the time these 'newbie' questions are just ignored by the community and/or they are referred to the subreddit's wiki FAQ pages for people new to the city. However, when this kind of 'pile-on' of new members does happen it's usually not particularly mean spirited and their question will get answered. Many community members simply like to use those posts as a place to gripe and joke with each other.

These references and in-jokes are complemented by specific internal references to the r/Seattle community itself, as well as the larger Reddit community. Comments about infamous Reddit posts, Reddit users, or r/Seattle events of the past were common. These don't always have reflections in the community – i.e., they're not necessarily based on anything to do with Seattle – but are still critical aspects of establishing r/Seattle as its own Community of Practice.

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[3] Often misspelt 'Capital Hill' or 'Pike's Place Market' by newcomers

## 6.3.2 Old-timers and times of change

In the early months of my observations, it was easy to establish who the oldest old-timer in r/Seattle was: Careless. Careless was the 'top mod' of r/Seattle, taking over the sub several years before the observations when another moderator left. Although the community still had more senior moderators assigned to it (Reddit places seniority in terms of moderation on the oldest moderator account) over time they had all left and their accounts became dormant – so Careless was left in charge. In my first casual observations I did not notice Careless, he did not contribute often other than through 'mod actions' (removing posts, banning users etc.) and almost every comment he made was quickly and heavily downvoted. He was not popular. What ended up drawing my attention to Careless was a strange and significant undertow in the community. Established members would make comments with subtle hints towards mod actions they didn't agree with or 'alternate places to go', sometimes newcomers would find their comments quickly deleted after protesting and their accounts banned. References to Careless were always negative, often spiteful and sardonic but equally vague. Users were in equal parts fearful, angry, and exhausted by this particular mod's actions. After some time looking more closely at Careless' mod actions and utilizing some third-party tools that let you see deleted and removed comments, I managed to finally establish a sense of what was happening in the community. Careless was abusing his position and the old-timers and established members were not happy.

 r/Seattle's old-timers were users like u/AmericanDerp, who was also a mod but considerably more popular than Careless, or 'Barbie' a user whose first account 'u/Barbiedreamherse' was eventually banned site-wide but ran through a considerable number of alts (usually named after some derivation of her original account) to continue contributing. These members helped

newcomers understand the rules, knew (and introduced newbies to) community in-jokes and references, and generally admonished Careless to a point (or in Barbies case beyond it, as she was eventually banned from r/Seattle). Their actions showed the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation in action, as they guided newcomers, defended established members, and fought for the community against a force they saw as undermining the spirit of the subreddit.

> "A LOT of polarizing opinions on [topical news story] how people feel about [it] here. Even a few 'uninformed' newbies to the community and/or city being looped in by some of the 'old timers' about exactly what he's about and, of course, their own opinions of what they think about that."
> - *Fieldnotes, February 11th, 2016*

> "The last notable post from today is a post about Seattle slang. This one is super interesting because it's a big hub for sharing local knowledge. Yes, there are some snarky comments and jokes, but outside of that it's an interesting insight into the community, talking about sayings and phrases from the area and the state. A lot of sharing behavior, educating other users, confirmation of things others are saying and uncovering of meanings about things. Really interesting stuff, even if the base of it is just about how people from Eastern Washington say 'pillows' like 'pellows'. What I'm seeing here, is definite community re-enforcement and sharing behavior. There's also a lot of newcomers to the area, transplants as they are called, coming in and commenting about terms and phrases they've heard and wanting to learn the understanding of. You see this in posts that talk about areas of the city too, people teaching the history of the city to people unfamiliar with it and a lot of sharing of 'backstory' about the city and area."
> - *Fieldnotes, February 16th, 2016*

It was clear from their interactions with others on the subreddit that these individuals were truly old-timers through both the engagement and guidance they demonstrated to newer members of the community, but also through their demonstration of mastery in the Seattle Reddit Community of Practice. Often their comments and posts were making clear references to

almost esoteric knowledge that sits within the community's shared understanding (such as a lack of bananas in grocery stores indicating the significance of a local event – which originates from a post about one incident during one snowstorm in one particular winter). Demonstrating their true mastery of the lore within the community. Further they also showed their mastery in post creation and commenting behavior, generally sticking close to the guidelines of Reddiquette and often admonishing those that strayed from those loose rules. They were also very skilled in understanding both the word and the spirit of the subreddit's rules, making sure not to step over the line into areas that might bring down mod actions[4] on to them. And they were also particularly proficient at walking the fine line of supporting the community and its members while also standing up to issues that they – and many others – had with Careless. A pitfall that many more novice members of the community fell into, leading to their getting banned from the subreddit.

About 5 months into the observation phase, prior to interviews starting, there was a noticeable drop in subscribers of r/Seattle. The sub still had tens of thousands of subscribers, but a drop-off occurred outside of the normal fluctuations in subscriber count. Activity on the sub remained largely steady, but it was clear that some regulars were being less active. Due to the moderation efforts of Careless, the reason for this subscriber drop was not immediately apparent. Given the events that were to follow in the coming months I never identified the exact action that caused this – although I suspect it was the introduction of a new rule banning mention of other Seattle subreddits – however this event did lead to my finally uncovering the subreddit that Careless had been so careful to remove any mention of: r/SeattleWA.

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[4] Mod actions can include limited time bans and permanent bans from the subreddit. Although mods are not able to ban individual accounts from the platform as a whole.

"The number of bans from Careless seems to be going through the roof this week. Lots of newer users asking questions about this 'other sub' they've heard of too, often followed by older members giving cryptic answers to leave [sic] them into the right direction (but not outright telling them for fear of being perm banned by Careless)."
- *Fieldnotes, July 17th, 2016*

r/SeattleWA was formed by several former members of the r/Seattle community (mostly old-timers), led by a user named u/Rattus. It had been started years earlier but was essentially inactive before the point that things started to turn against Careless. Up front this sub pronounced itself to be the 'real' Seattle sub and a heaven for free speech and hands-off moderation. A community of Seattleites run by the community. They put forward rules the community voted on, nominated mods (other than the top ones who formed the sub), and were a very active group with daily chat threads that were highly active. But the community was small (with, for the moment, limited in-person events) and although there was feverous activity it was by a limited user-base, and the sub was still dwarfed by r/Seattle.

After a 'bump' in activity on r/SeattleWA in July things returned to normal briefly, but it was clear the negative undercurrent against Careless was continuing and ramping up. Removed posts became a more common sight, efforts in transparency by Careless faded quickly and these removals were often not given context. At some point in mid-
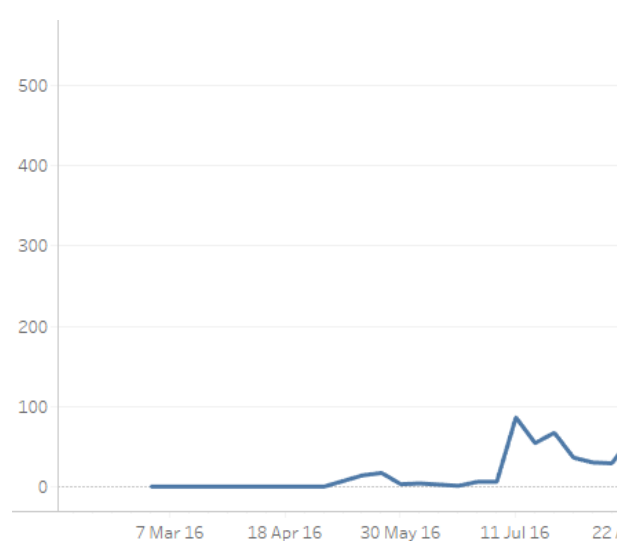


*Figure 12: r/SeattleWA comment activity March - June 2016*

August users posting on r/Seattle would receive an automated message to cross-post on r/SeattleWA which brought things more to a head (although the Reddit admins shut this down due to Terms of Service issues). At this point the community became very introspective. Discussions often centered on users' expectations of the platform and other users, what they wanted to see, discuss, and experience as members of this subreddit. Further posts about 'mod abuses' sprang up, some were deleted, others were allowed to remain.

> "Can we talk about r/seattle moderator abuse?
>
> The current moderator team […] is flagrantly violating the established principles of Reddit modiquette[5]. The moderator team here needs to be held accountable to reddit standards.
>
> - In particular these tenets are being violated:
> - Please try to respond to all of your moderator mail
> - Please be open to the viewpoints of other moderators in your subreddit and try to reach a consensus on difficult tasks
> - Please keep a unified front when addressing users officially
> - Please try to inform users when you remove their content
> - Please don't remove content based on your opinion
> - Please don't act unilaterally when making major revisions to rules, sidebars, or stylesheets
> - Please don't take moderation positions in communities where your profession, employment, or biases could pose a direct conflict of interest to the neutral and user driven nature of reddit
> - Please don't ban users from subreddits in which they have not broken any rules."
>
> *- u/seattle_is_pyongyang, September 26th, 2016*

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[5] Moddiquette is an informal set of guidelines for moderators of reddit written by community members

> "Many of us received 24 hour reddit bans for "brigading" in the previous post even though I know that I, for example, have (until now) been a long time r/Seattle subscriber (one of the top 200 all time posts is mine), entered the thread directly from the front page of r/Seattle nowhere else, and legitimately voiced my opinion in that thread. This is flagrant abuse of mod power and absolutely unacceptable."
> - *u/SangersSequence, September 26th, 2016*

In the end, Careless' 'rampage' as a mod was extremely helpful in establishing an understanding of the community norms (both in current form and group expectations) and discovering the established members and 'old-timers'. But it was perhaps most useful in identifying the boundaries of the Community of Practice of the Seattle Reddit community, especially when around 6 months into my observations a large chunk of the community broke away from r/Seattle entirely.

### 6.3.3  The Great Subreddit Schism

Moderation is often a hot topic on subreddits. Users are often unhappy with the decisions made by mods or the rules of the subs, but the mods are ultimately in charge of these decisions and have all the power over regular subscribers to the subreddit. Reddit also creates a hierarchy even among the mods, as the moderators with the longest tenure in the position supersede those who have been mods for less time; with the creator of the sub always at the top (unless they choose to give up the mod position). r/Seattle is no exception to these policies and over the years it has developed many rules (posted in the sub's sidebar) about what content, behavior, and etiquette was allowed and what was banned. In the time since its creation, the mod team of r/Seattle has also changed significantly. A small team of mods built up over the years, but with accounts becoming inactive, mods disappearing, and senior mods officially handing over

control to others before going inactive, eventually one particular mod was left in charge: u/Careless[6].

Careless' time as the head mod of r/Seattle has involved several controversies and many users felt that his moderation was heavy-handed. He banned any posts that may have been discussed previously (like where to get the best burger in the city, or questions about moving to Seattle), posts that he personally felt were 'low effort', and anything that might be posted for commercial benefit – even if it was extremely relevant to Seattle.

Of all the rules imposed by Careless the most controversial was the non-commercialization clause (due to how it was often unevenly applied), and the so-called 'Rule 7' (referring to it being the 7th rule listed on the sub sidebar) which banned any mention of 'competing' subreddits. The non-commercialization rule was supposed to stop the sub becoming a place for people to just sell things, but many users were frustrated by the way that any link to anything that could be seen as a money-making enterprise would be banned (YouTube videos with ads could even be banned because someone was making money), while other times posts with obvious commercial links were allowed. But it was the formal introduction of Rule 7 that was one of the big turning points against Careless. After months of references to other Seattle subreddits being removed, Careless made it official that these references were not allowed by introducing Rule 7. Ostensibly this was a reaction from Careless to a joke sub – r/SeattleCircleJerk – many members of whom were also mods or old-timers in r/SeattleWA. The circlejerk sub actively antagonized Careless but generally stayed to their sub, and Careless

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[6] Almost all users in this research are referred to by pseudonyms, however Careless' infamy in the community is so well known it would be impossible to not identify them here

claimed they had 'doxxed[7]' him, which there was little proof of. The community was in uproar at the introduction of Rule 7, but it largely fell on deaf ears and Careless continued on, choosing not to engage with the community on the issue after introducing the rule. This tactic seemed to work initially, as r/Seattle retained much of its userbase, with only a few users leaving the community.

What exactly made Careless implement Rule 7 formally isn't known, but it was during this time that a sort of cold war was happening between r/Seattle and its upstart cousin r/SeattleWA. Users on r/Seattle would make subtle references to r/SeattleWA, others would directly reference the sub (usually with recently created alt accounts) to be almost instantly banned and their comments deleted (Gordon, 2017). It's likely these actions drove Careless to make his unwritten rule written due to users noticing the ever-larger number of deleted comments on the sub. As told by one former member of the r/Seattle moderator team the situation got to the point of ridiculousness:

> "The funniest one I saw was someone posting a picture of a sunset—r/Seattle is notorious for sunset photos getting posted ad nauseum—with 'r/SeattleWA' Photoshopped on top. Mostly, it's people wildly abusing the English language with awful jokes to get the word out past automated tools.")
> - *u/AmericanDerp (Gordon, 2017)*

Eventually, the cold war between r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA broke out into an open rebellion.

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[7] 'doxing' or 'doxxing' is the act of releasing personal identifiable information about an individual online, such as their phone number, name, or address.

One of r/Seattle's newer mods – u/AmericanDerp – who had been brought on to try to reduce tensions, discovered that Careless was using his position as head moderator to promote his own businesses and was using the sub for financial gain; potentially using other alt accounts in the effort. After finding this out u/AmericanDerp brought it to the attention of the r/Seattle mod team, one of whom – some suspect u/AmericanDerp themselves – became so outraged they released all that data and r/Seattle's automod script all over Reddit.

> "All hell broke loose, many mods were banned, and suddenly everyone began finding out about r/SeattleWA. That was the iceberg moment."
> - *u/AmericanDerp (Gordon, 2017)*

The automod script, which is used to help moderators on Reddit automatically execute certain actions – like deleting comments which contain certain text – proved definitively that Careless had tried to actively stifle any mention of other subreddits by having automod remove all references to them. The bigger scandal, however, was the proof that Careless had used his
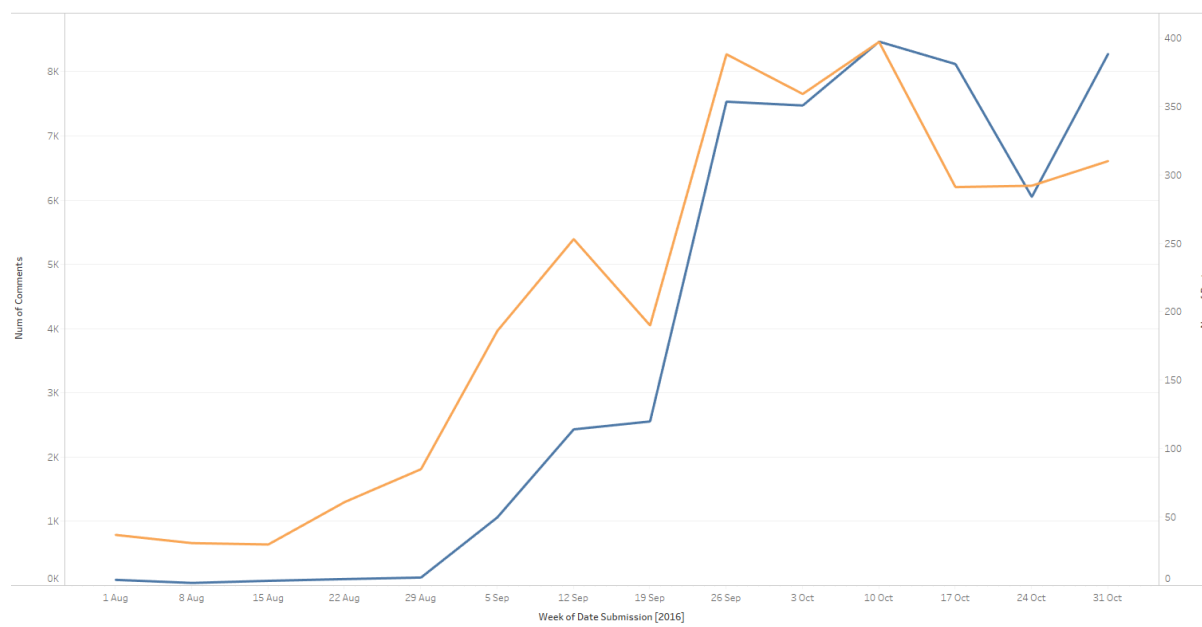


*Figure 13: r/SeattleWA comment & posting activity August - October 2016*
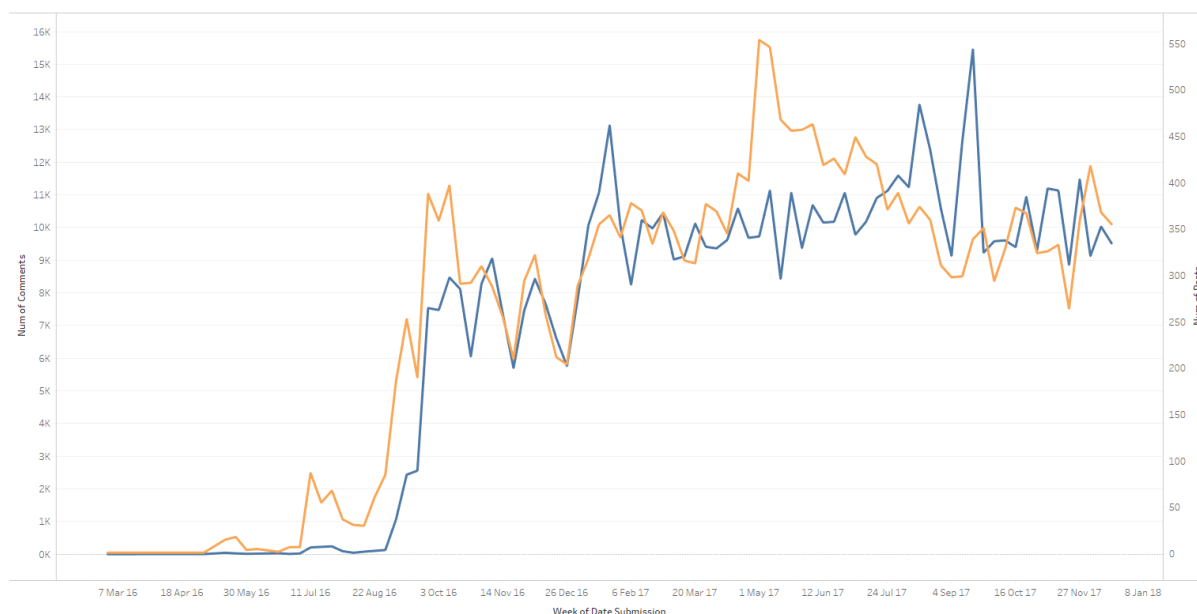
*Figure 14: r/SeattleWA comment & posting activity February 2016 – December 2017*

position to advance his personal business interests – against his own sub rules – which drew particular outrage from the community.

The information dump occurred during a Labor Day weekend, and with posts about what had happened popping up all over Reddit (including a particularly active post in r/Subredditdrama) r/Seattle subscribers were suddenly able to discover references to r/SeattleWA in parts of the site that Careless didn't control. Over the month of September Careless tried various forms of damage control, including the removal of Rule 7 and eventually the removal of himself as a mod of r/Seattle, but it was too late. At the end of the month more posts and revelations by old-timers in the r/Seattle community and former mods occurred – including accusations against Careless of harassing female users (including at meetup events) – and this caused an even bigger jump in active users from r/Seattle to r/SeattleWA. In July 2016 r/SeattleWA had 500 subscribers, but by the end of September 2016 that number was up to over 10,000.

### 6.3.4 A nomadic community

The fallout from the events of September 2016 continued to reverberate throughout both r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA over the following months and years. It was clear by the end of the observation phase that the impact of the incident was not a temporary one. An analysis of posting and comment activity across both subreddits over the duration of the observation phase shows that prior to the events of September r/Seattle averaged around 411 posts and 8,304 comments per week, whereas r/SeattleWA had a negligible amount of both in comparison (comments in the hundreds and 20-50 posts at most). Between October 1st, 2016, and the end of the observation phase in December 2017, r/SeattleWA averaged 342 posts and 9,459 comments per week. This is illustrated starkly in figures 15 & 16, where shift in users is visually evident from one subreddit to the other. In fact, over the 15 months that followed September 16th, r/SeattleWA's activity (i.e., post and comment numbers) continued a slow and steady trend upwards, whereas r/Seattle was continuing a steady decline in activity.

However, it is clear that there wasn't necessarily a direct switch in activity from one sub to the other (r/Seattle still maintained an activity level of around 130-140 posts and 4-5 thousand comments per week) and the subscriber count across both subs was drastically different. r/Seattle had tens of thousands more subscribers, but r/SeattleWA had seemed to take something from these events that could not easily be replaced – the Community of Practice.

Communities of Practice are not restricted to the boundaries of one specific platform (Lave & Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), often they can sit across multiple different elements and thrive.
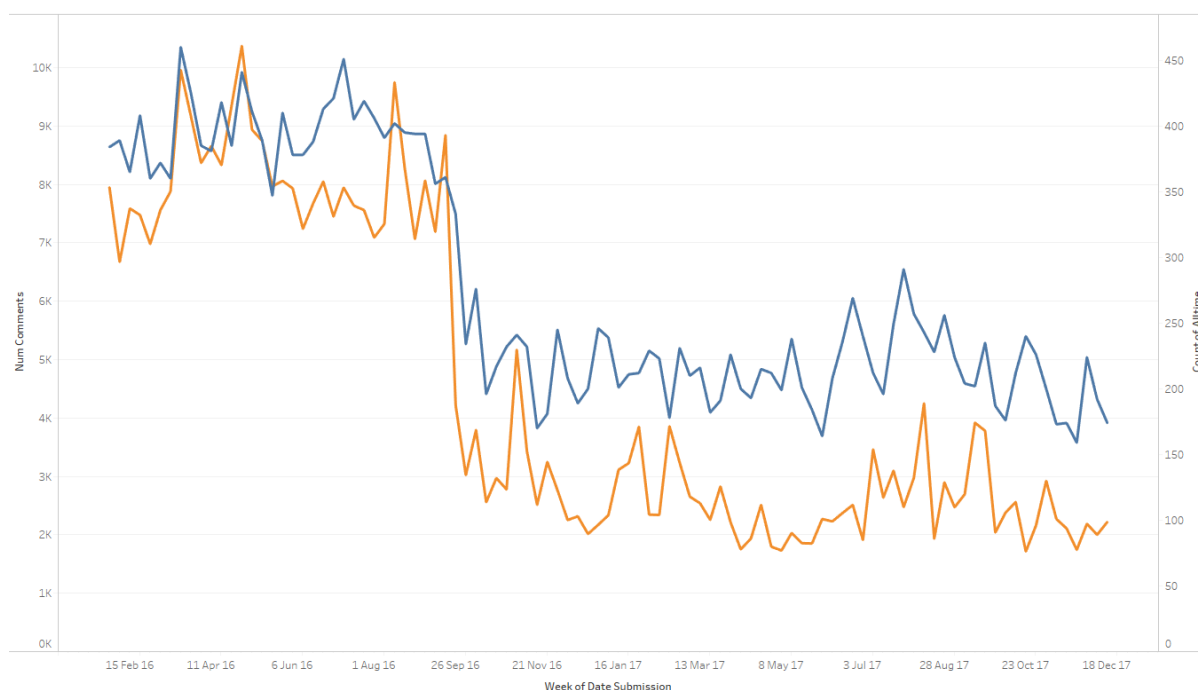
*Figure 15: r/Seattle comment & posting activity February 2016 – December 2017*

In the splitting of the subreddits this was demonstrated amply as the established community members and old-timers shifted from interacting primarily on r/Seattle to r/SeattleWA. But the activities levels of r/Seattle also show the Seattle Reddit CoP does not necessarily sit in one subreddit at a time, or even in one sub alone. The fact that r/Seattle remained active demonstrates this well, but the core of the community – its established members and old-timers did move and so r/SeattleWA became the new foci of the Seattle CoP.

Of the top 10 most active members in r/Seattle by post and comment activity (prior to September 2016), 8 of the 10 became active members of r/SeattleWA in the months following September 2016 (active here defined as being within the top 100 contributors). Looking at the list of the top commenters in each subreddit, many made the move across to r/SeattleWA, but a few of the top commenters in r/SeattleWA were from new accounts or accounts which were not active in r/Seattle. This can mostly be accounted for by accounts that were previously

banned in r/Seattle (and/or were using alts in r/Seattle because their main accounts were blocked) resuming their place in the community after the switch occurred.

*Table 6: Top commenters in r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA (red indicates users not in the top 100*

| r/Seattle Top Commenters 9 months before Sep '16 | | r/SeattleWA Top Commenters 9 months after Sep '16 |
|---|---|---|
| ChefJoe98136 | | AmericanDerp |
| my_lucid_nightmare | | JohnDanielsWhiskey |
| gjhgjh | | ChefJoe98136 |
| MrsWhatsit-75 | | ycgfyn |
| AmericanDerp | | it-is-sandwich-time |
| irerereddit | | my_lucid_nightmare |
| t4lisker | | RainierRancor |
| meaniereddit | | MrsWhatsit-75 |
| YopparaiNeko | | meaniereddit |
| themandotcom | | Bear771 |

Comparing user activity data, contemporary Reddit posts, and interviews with community members, it seems clear that in the months following September 2016, the core of the Seattle Reddit community shifted away from r/Seattle and moved to r/SeattleWA. The community never truly belonged to a single subreddit anyway, interviews revealed that the Seattle Reddit community existed in several locations across a few different platforms – and offline interactions – but the core of the community was always on r/Seattle until the split.

## 6.4    Reddit: Offline interactions in the Seattle Reddit community

Despite the events of September 2016, there remained a constant in the Seattle Reddit community – offline meetup events. A few of these events were recurring irregular events, such as the annual Global Reddit Meetup Day – where subreddits across the site are

encouraged to host in-person events – and more regular meetups, such as the Capitol Hill Boardgame Night. Interspersed with these were more ad-hoc meetings, hosted on the fly or at short notice, such as "come hang out with me in Gasworks Park" or "the Seahawks won the Super Bowl let's party" posts. In this next section I will examine these meetup events and their role in the Seattle Reddit Community of Practice.

### 6.4.1  Motivations for attending offline events

During my interviews, I asked participants to reflect about their motivations for attending offline meetup events for the first time. Pure curiosity – often towards the concept of meeting people from an online community in the 'real world' – was a common factor among interviewees. For some, they just like the idea of meeting new people (and people from the online world) in general.

> "Any opportunity where I can meet people in real-life, I'm OK with."
> - *"Mark" (Participant R-003)*

Often this desire to meet new people and forge new friendships through offline meetups was driven by being new to the city. Many interviewees discussed experiences of being new to Seattle, or being isolated in some way, and finding the subreddits as places where they could tap into the Seattle community. The subs enabled them make connections in ways they either didn't know how to in real life or weren't able to.

> "I guess that this was my first summer in Seattle and so I was kind of looking for some community or people or something to that effect, because of course I had my fellow graduate students that were in the program with me, but [they were] more like … more colleagues or something like that, there wasn't any of them that I felt close to, so I was … I had the time and I thought I should look for some friends of the types that I had, I'd moved from Los Angeles to Seattle, so of the types that I had in Los Angeles."
> - *"Alice" (Participant R-020)*

One participant, Justin, particularly stood out in this regard. They discussed their experience of going to the Seattle Pride Parade with other Redditors they met in the Seattle subreddit. None of their friends were involved with the LGBTQ+ community and so they had no one to go with and they didn't want to go alone. As a result, they tapped into the Seattle Reddit LBGTQ+ community to find people to go to the event with.

> "In a way [Reddit] provides kind of an instant friendship because I didn't have any friends in real life who wanted to go to this event, and I didn't want to end up going alone. So, I was able to meet other people online to go with … at this event … I'd say it is just kind of comforting that there's just always someone there online I guess, maybe they're interested in the same stuff and it's easier to connect with people."
> - *"Justin" (Participant R-006)*

Justin's description of an 'instant friendship' was a recurrent theme among participants. Interviewees also discussed the feeling that the Seattle Reddit community was a diverse and interesting community that was both reflective of Seattle and a reflection of themselves as an individual.

"I don't know how much you know about the Reddit community but it's an interesting community, with all kinds of people that have all sorts of different interests and shapes and sizes and colors and whatnot. It's really … what I would describe as a community, at least online, so I thought you know it's interesting to see what some of these people are like in real life, and so I was kind of curious about that."
- *"Ben" (Participant R-007)*

"It's really neat because the Reddit people kind of are a group within that but aren't closed off to the rest of it, so the online community is part of the real-life community, but it doesn't exclude people who aren't part of the online bit."
- *"Craig" (Participant R-013)*

Participant 'Ben' even noted that this might well be because of the nature of the Seattle subreddit being based on a specific geographic location.

"There are some subreddits – any of the geographical subreddits – I think absolutely it's good to have a community and it's good to have venues or opportunities to see that these are real human beings and that these are real people and to get together."
- *"Ben" (Participant R-007)*

Many participants also discussed the relative ease of finding people with similar interests in a similar location to themselves through Reddit; allowing people to "find their tribe" (*Selina – Participant - R008)* as one participant put it. Many participants inferred that Redditors are more likely to be 'their kind of people' simply through being the type of person to use the platform. But it was also widely evident from talking with Redditors that they valued not just the wider Seattle Reddit community (and the people that use it), but also the sub-communities within it. Be that communities focused on specific interests or sub-cultures, gender, identity, or other

factors. The Seattle subreddits allowed individuals more straightforward access to these communities within the larger Seattle community than they feel they might get elsewhere.

> "Part of the draw of going to a Reddit meetup, I sort of knowing that ok this is weird to go meet a bunch of random strangers, but I also know that we have this thing in common, like I know that we have this shared hobby, more this shared sort of cultural thing that we use and so I think that it's a really interesting way to meet people."
> - *"Luna" (Participant R-075)*

> "Those ones I don't attend as regularly, a lot of times they're a little more specialized, like I noticed that a group gets together, and they cross-stitch and crochet and knit and things like that', and I don't do those things, so I don't go. But there are … I think there's a book club and stuff like that."
> - *"Kate" (Participant R-021)*

As well as there being a consistency among participants around motivations to attend offline meetup events, it also became apparent through my interviews that there wasn't any notable difference in attitudes towards offline meetup events based on length of membership in the community. Those individuals who were established community members had very similar motivations and opinions towards meetup events that newcomers did. Although some old timers did note that the nature of meetup events had changed somewhat over time, and that the smaller, more personal, ad hoc meetup events were becoming less common as the community has become larger.

> "As far as casual BBQ type meetups, yes absolutely and when the community was smaller than it is now you would see a lot more people post about regular events like these where people were like 'hey I'm having some people over if you're looking for something to do, you're welcome' they get their address and it felt pretty safe doing so."
> - *"Selina" (Participant R-008)*

Overall, the motivations for attending meetup events were varied but mostly fit into the two categories of:

- Curiosity – a desire to see what offline events are all about

- Finding your tribe – wanting to spend time with likeminded people and make friends

These motivations were consistent across both newer and older members of the community – with newer members often straddling across both categories. They also represent individuals probing deeper into the Community of Practice, especially in regard to 'Finding your tribe' as the tribe can be analogous to the CoP.

After examining the reasons why people attend offline meetup events, I next considered what people get out of these events – and what significance they hold to them.

### 6.4.2  Outcomes and Significance of Meetup events

For many interviewees, the outcome of attending offline events was the formation of friendships, relationships, and social ties with other members of the Seattle Reddit community. These offline meetup events became significant parts of their lives and integral to their feelings of membership in the community.

Whilst meet up events are largely not centered around Reddit specifically – except for the Global Reddit Meetup Day – participants noted that the online activities of the Reddit

community often form a core part of what it is to attend those offline events; indicating that the

two are closely intertwined experiences:

> "When you're at the events people make jokes about what's posted, or like 'I can't wait until somebody posts that other event again' or somebody makes a post about biking or about housing rents going up. So, people do make these jokes about what is posted. And I think that its good because then somebody looks forward to … oh I can't wait for that next post, I don't think that it's vital, but it's important, or it's needed."
> - *"Mark" (Participant R-003)*

Further to this, the meetup events hold a significance in putting a 'name to a face' for

community members. By interacting with others in person, the experience of being a member

of the Reddit community builds to a new level – giving members' feelings of comfort, trust,

and an overall stronger sense of community. For attendees, beyond the initial trepidation that

often comes with first-time attendance, the events feel "normal" and match their expectations

of what it is to interact in person with the kind of people they're talking to online.

> "I think it helps build community, I think for a lot of people that it's … especially if you're new to the city, you don't really know anybody and this is a way to meet people that you actually talk to on the Internet, and you know that they're all from here … I guess."
> - *"Natasha" (Participant R-017)*

> "The thing I was worried about was am I going to go there, and people are just going to be talking about memes and nothing but Internet stuff, because that sounds not very fun, but it wasn't like that at all it was just like a normal … I kind of felt like I was at a party at someone's house, kind of like meandering around and mingling and meeting people and chatting with people."
> - *"Luna" (Participant R-075)*

For many in the Seattle Reddit community the outcome of attending the offline meetup events is interacting with other community members in a distinct, but still "normal" setting – one that doesn't feel forced, awkward, or particularly different from interacting online.

But beyond these feelings of normalcy in attending these events, participants often talked of offline meetups as not just something that is a regular part of the Seattle Reddit experience, but also something that enhances it. Participants tended to speak of this passively when discussing the importance of specific events – like the board game night – in their lives. For example, when speaking about how they formed new personal connections through those events.

For some, attending offline events was necessary to get the full rounded experience of being a member of the Seattle Reddit community.

> "There's a different, there's like a group within the community that only attends meetup, and they don't post on the Reddit very much and vice versa there's probably a lot of people that only post on the Subreddits and don't go to the meetups, so I think that it's kind of important to do both to experience the full community."
> - *"April" (Participant R-081)*

For others attending events was less about having a full experience and more about humanizing each other when interacting on a platform that has a reputation for being a somewhat harsh environment.

> "I think it's a very important experience because meetups can help folks be reminded that there are actual people behind those usernames and probably if more folks attended meetups there would be less inclined to trolling and such, some trolls are always going to troll, but you know."
> - *"Chris" (Participant R-091)*

The inclination across those community members I spoke with, both implicitly and explicitly, is that attending offline meetup events changes something for individuals. Whether it be putting names to faces, helping people to find their tribe, or humanizing each other; attending an offline meetup event adds something to being a member of the Reddit Community you can't always get by only interacting online. This makes offline events not just a significant part of the community, but an integral one that adds to the experience of being a community member.

> "Personally, I like it because it does facilitate a deeper level of connection and communication, as I said, being able to see the other person's name at least helps when you're talking to them."
> - *"Chris" (Participant R-091)*

> "I think that the thing about Reddit meetup events is that you get a lot of people who are given kind of the opportunity to be a version of themselves that they don't allow themselves, so they don't feel allowed to be in other spaces, they're able to be closer to that online person that they present and sort of nerd out and I think that's really important and I think that a big value to meetups is not only making Reddit more human focused, but making the face-to-face interaction more compatible with the kind of people who are attracted to Reddit."
> - *"Craig" (Participant R-013)*

Generally, participants noted positive attitudes towards offline meetup events after attending (there are some exceptions to this – which will be discussed later). Experiences also served to reinforce to participants that they felt part of the community. Most interviewees also discussed attending multiple events and subsequently meeting up repeatedly with groups they'd met through the offline events.

"Yeah, there were a couple of people that were really active in terms of comments and making the posts and stuff, that were clearly organizers and that's how I came to find their usernames, there was also one or two people that it was my second or third meetup and it was their first and they were like, I'm really nervous and I was like, hey you guys meet me at this place at this time and we'll go together so it's not as nerve-wracking to walk in by yourself, and so I found out their usernames because we actually talked briefly on Reddit and then met up and went together"
- *"Luna" (Participant R-075)*

"I could go to this meet up in Seattle and we'd talk about things that were relevant to Seattle, we'd talk about things that we had seen on Reddit as well so this crossing of both worlds at the same time … I did have such a good time there that I've attended every single global meet up since then without missing a single one, as well as doing smaller get together."
- *"Chris" (Participant R-091)*

"I would just say that I do owe weirdly enough a huge part of my social life and my life in Seattle to Reddit, so I'm just grateful that it existed as a thing and I really enjoyed being a host of the meetup, I'd just say that overall I have a pretty positive outlook on those things, despite the isolated incidents of those people eating my games or being a creeper or whatever, my overall impression is positive, very much so.."
- *"Ann" (Participant R-019)*

Finally, it is also worth noting another significant aspect of attending meetup events, and that is romantic relationships. While I have mentioned previously that community members have made and developed friendships through the offline meetup events, for several of the participants it also played a significant part in forming romantic relationships.

"Well, I did meet my significant other at a Reddit meetup, so that's probably relevant."
- *"April" (Participant R-081)*

> "Through the meetup I was able to form a little small subset community and it was wonderful and I made so many close friends and relationships, and I really valued the time … I enjoyed it … I've enjoyed the ones that I've gone to, I think people can get a lot out of it."
> - *"Ann" (Participant R-019)*

Somewhat like motivations for attending, the outcomes and significance of meetup events vary. But the overall theme of the outcomes of attending offline meetup events remains similar: a positive feeling and increased sense of belonging to a community. What mostly seems to vary is the strength of feeling and impact. For some individuals, the impacts are significant, mostly through relationship formation (both friendships and romantic relationships) and stronger ties to the community. For others, the significance of meetup events is not as strong, but still feelings of normalcy – that meetup events feel like normal, and integral, parts of belonging to the Seattle Reddit community – and positivity are prevalent among even those individuals.

Interestingly, participants often went out of their way to note that going to an IRL event was not a gatekeeping activity (i.e., that those who don't attend them are 'less' than those that do). But their actions and comments about the events often state otherwise.

> "So not everybody can attend these meetups so it's not vital […] I don't think it's vital, but it's important."
> - *"Mark" (Participant R-003)*

> "I enjoyed it and I think that it's a valuable thing, I wouldn't say that it's a necessary thing […] I've enjoyed the ones that I've gone to, I think people can get a lot out of it but I wouldn't say that people who say 'oh I wouldn't show up to a Reddit meetup' is necessarily missing out, they might have just decided that it's not for them."
> - *"Ann" (Participant R-019)*

It seems that there is generally a feeling that attending offline meetup events gives attendees 'something' that those who don't attend them don't have. But at the same time those that don't have that 'something' aren't any less members of the community. Although in practice a great many of the active old-timers in the community do attend at least some Reddit meetup events – or have done in the past.

While most participants' experiences with attending meetup events were very positive, and seemed to have definite positive outcomes, there were some individuals who noted experiences that were less positive.

### 6.4.3 Negative experiences and outcomes

Despite the majority of experiences shared by participants being positive, there were some notable negative experiences and associated outcomes shared by community members. Many of these experiences were minor annoyances, or small one-off negative interactions with other community members. However, there were some more notably serious negative interactions that were shared by participants.

As mentioned above, many of the negative experiences noted by participants were minor incidents of pettiness or rudeness directed at them by others in the community. In some cases, this stemmed from a disconnection between participants understanding of a person's online persona compared to their real life one (and also, some rudeness).

> "I saw like really reasoned comments and really kind of this mature disposition, but in real life they were so petty, and I got to see that. Like they engaged after a while with their own friends, it kind of gave them this license to be pettier and then it just … is someone with you is with your cause, it's like do their values align with yours and then you actually get to know them over time and that's just not who they are as people."
> - *"Felicity" (Participant R-001)*

Or just general instances of individuals not getting along with other users when meeting in person. Which may be exacerbated by the expectations – as noted in earlier sections – that user's had 'found their tribe' within this community. Therefore, when interactions with others who 'should' think and feel the same way don't go as expected, it seems users encounter increased negative outcomes.

> "There was l girl who … I can't remember what her name was, but she for some reason she wanted to compete with me, like I saw another girl that had similar interests to me, but she was really rude to me the whole night and kept trying to compete on different sci-fi things, and … she was like, do you even use Reddit, you don't seem like you're nerdy enough to be here, and that was really weird to me, but that's the only really negative experience I've had personally. I thought everybody was pretty cool."
> - *"Luna" (Participant R-075)*

There were also instances of the inverse of this phenomenon happening, where participants met people at real life events whom they got on with and then once they discovered their Reddit username realized they were presenting a very different personality online.

> "That's definitely happened, and I think the unfortunate thing is sometimes people are like in person you think 'oh this person seems really neat' and then you learn their handle, and you're like 'oh but they're kind of a jerk online."
> - *"Craig" (Participant R-013)*

But by far the most prevalent type of negative incident that participants discussed was that of female community members being approached inappropriately by men at meetup events.

> "Sometimes I think that – and I don't think this is necessarily a Reddit problem – it could be explored more as an aspect of how men treat women, there are definitely some times when I have gone to a meetup expecting, hey I'm going to hang out with this group of people it's going to be pretty evenly distributed and we're going to relax and have a good time, and I end up feeling kind of cornered or you know claustrophobic, sort of the descended upon by a man who cannot pick up on certain social cues that hey maybe this lady doesn't want to talk to you right now, even if I say things like hey I do not feel like talking to you right now and you know that can get kind of hairy, I've definitely left meetups before I intended to, or before I planned to because I was experiencing that kind of behavior and the safest thing for me to do, and the sane thing for me to do in my opinion was to just leave the situation."
> - *"Selina" (Participant R-008)*

Incidents like these are unfortunately common both within and outside the Reddit community. Female community members often talked of odd, uncomfortable, or even unsafe incidents that occurred during meetups; and members also talked about having to act or behave differently at meetup events because of prior bad experiences.

> "I will not go alone; I will make sure my husband goes with me. And at one of the meetups, we went to … I think it was a trivia night or something, it wasn't anything crazy but it was at a bar and as soon as my husband walked away this guy just kind of stalked me all night, he knew I was with someone, he knew my husband was there but any time my husband left to go get a drink or go to the restroom or anything, he was just there. And he would not leave me alone. He wasn't mean, he wasn't hurtful, but he was unsettling because he wouldn't stop after I said 'hey, you know you seem like a nice guy, I'm here with my husband, I'm not interested' you know, just leave it alone. And every time he would leave he would be like' oh, looks like your husbands gone, you're alone now' that's not ok, and I've heard of women of having … kind of similar stories of 'I don't want to go to these things alone, but I want to meet people' but there's always that one guy that just doesn't get the hint and it's not … most of the people there are very friendly and very nice."
> - *"Kate" (Participant R-021)*

In fact, one of the key incidents that led to the demise of Careless was an incident where he was said to have behaved in a derogatory manner towards women at meetup events. This incident was widely discussed by those who were said to have witnessed it and gave significant ammunition to the efforts to move away from r/Seattle to r/SeattleWA.

The female members of the community I spoke with also discussed the existence of a splinter Facebook group. This was designed to be a safe space for them to discuss and share, away from unwanted attention that they may receive in the open Reddit community. Community groups on other platforms, such as this, will be discussed later.

The final negative element which surfaced from discussions with community members is in relation to misrepresentation. Several participants talked about interactions with community members who had misrepresented themselves in various ways, for a number of reasons. Often this was individuals who hid elements of their online persona when interacting in person – for example sharing false usernames – but occasionally participants shared other stories, which were more serious.

"Yeah, so for a while I ran like a little mountaineering group that was based around Seattle and I was the one that had to try out new people, and there was one guy that wanted to climb Mt. St. Helens … he was a little strange, and I went on a day hike with him before and even though he didn't look fit and he was a little strange, I thought oh, you never know, he seems ok. But when we tried to do Mt. St. Helens it was really clear that he didn't have the experience that he had tried to portray that he had and he didn't have the fitness level, and I could see that he was having difficulty breathing and when I would ask him' hey, you don't look well, are you alright' he would not … he just couldn't admit that he couldn't deal with it. Until he finally did, he through a fit and was just bizarre, and I came home and noticed one of my climbing tools was missing and the guy like deleted his profile page and … it was just a really bizarre saga of things. Then after that I shut down the group, I was like you know I made some good friends here, but this is a dangerous thing, … I don't want to put myself at risk anymore, possibly with crazy people."
- *"Veronica" (Participant R-018)*

Overall, the incidences of negative interactions at meetup events were quite low. Although it is important not to minimize participants' lived experiences – and it seemed that in several cases some participants were made to feel extremely uncomfortable – none had negative experiences which gave them a generally poor outlook towards the community as a whole. There were some instances, however, where individuals did stop attending certain meetup events temporarily because of interactions with certain individuals. But this did not appear to be a widespread issue and the community was generally very positive towards community meetup events.

In this chapter I have outlined the experience shared by members of the Seattle Reddit community while attending meetup events. Outlining their motivations for attending, the significance these events have held for them, and discussing the sometimes-negative experiences that are encountered. Overall, participants shared largely positive experiences of meetup events and discussed their place in the community as something that adds to – but is

not necessarily at its core an inherent part of – the experience of being a member of the Seattle Reddit community.

In terms of Legitimate Peripheral Participation, individuals are continuing a path through to the center of the Seattle Reddit Community of Practice by participating in meetup events. Although LPP as a theory is not generally concerned with specific motivations for engaging with a community, it is telling that one of the core motivations noted here was that of 'finding your tribe', which suggests members wish to establish stronger bonds with others in their community; thus, moving them further towards the center in accordance with the processes of LPP. Indeed, the claims by individuals that attending offline meetup events 'adds something' to the experience of being a community member also lends itself to the predicted patterns of LPP in action. However, the strong suggestions by many members that you do not have to attend meetup events to fully experience the community, despite their demonstrating otherwise in their actions, is curious. This would suggest that some key elements of membership within the community are potentially optional, and participation in them is not a prerequisite to becoming an old-timer. This behavior does not fit within the processes of LPP as established in the current literature.

In the next chapter I will examine how meetup events fit into the longer-term existence of the Seattle Reddit community

## 6.5 Reddit: Long-term impacts of meetup events.

In the previous section I shared the experiences of the community members who attended offline meetup events – what drew them to those events and what the outcomes of attending those events were. In this section I will examine the long-term impacts of attending community events, and the impacts attendance has had on community members relationships, participation, and communication with the Seattle Reddit community.

### 6.5.1 Changing relationships within the community

As alluded to in the previous chapter, attending offline meetup events was often a focal point for changing relationships between community members who had previously interacted only online.

Participants evidenced two main types of relationships with other community members going into an offline meetup event:

1) No prior interaction – the individuals they meet at the meetup events are largely unknown to them, or they have had only passive interactions online.

2) Online acquaintances & friends – the individuals they meet at the meetup events include people they actively interact with on the Seattle subreddit(s). This can include both individuals they communicate with solely through Reddit threads, and those they may have interacted with online through more private communication mediums like the Reddit Private Messaging function.

For those who have had no prior interaction with other community members, it is hard to establish a change of relationship – as they have no baseline. For these individuals, the meetup events serve as the jumping off point of future relationships. From discussions with community members these interactions tend take the same trajectory as the future relationships of participants who have interacted with each other online before (discussed below).

For community members who meet others they have previously interacted online with, meetups are often a kind of nexus event where the paths of their online interactions with others meet and then change fundamentally – as do their relationships with each other.

A common path seen in participants, for example, would be an individual that interacts with other community member(s) on the Seattle subreddit(s) in passing fairly often. They know usernames and have a general sense of that person's online persona. They also most usually perceive this persona to be a fairly accurate reflection of that person's real-life self (this was described by the participants of this study, but has also been shown in other research of the presentation of self on social media (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010)). There is an established common ground, established social norms, community references and in-jokes all exist as part of that relationship, and the offline meetup serves mainly to solidify the sense of that persona and to underscore that the person they interact with online actually is the person they feel they are.

> "I do think that people are pretty consistent in their online personas versus their real-life personas, maybe a little bit exaggerated in every sense so like some reactions may be more exaggerated on Reddit than they would in person but for the most part I do believe that it's pretty consistent."
> - *"Sebastian" (Participant R-014)*

> "For me because I'm a girl on the internet it's pretty par for the course for me like, it's not kind of surprising, and it's always fine and I'm like oh I've talked to you online and now here they are in person. You know, a lot of the times they're quite similar to their online personality."
> - *"April" (Participant R-081)*

One participant even went so far as to describe their interactions with individuals online prior to their offline encounters as communicating with someone's 'more authentic self'. This indicates a belief that not only are online personas accurate reflections of real-life self, but perhaps are more open and raw than those put forward by people when initially interacting for the first time in real life.

> "I think that the interesting thing about it is, you can have like pre-existing jokes or like memories with somebody you haven't necessarily hung out with in person and it just like there's a level of instant closeness, even though you're not used to a lot of their … the things you notice when you're in person with somebody, their mannerisms, you're used to the sort of online mannerisms, but not the in-person ones, and it's really fun to see how those interplay and I think that a lot of neat friendships start online because you're not judging somebody based upon their surface mannerism or the impression they're trying to make – you know we're all trying to make an impression to the outside world – whereas the online persona, there's a lot more freedom just to express one's self as they are. So, it's almost meeting someone's more authentic self before you meet somebody in person."
> - *"Craig" (Participant R-013)*

Therefore, upon meeting in real life, community members essentially confirm their understanding of what another individual is like from their online persona. It may not be 100% accurate, different participants reported slightly different experiences here. With some feeling an instant and seamless connection, whereas others had a period of adjustment. Either way, the

offline meetup events serve an important function as a confirmation or checkpoint in the relationships between community members; to establish that everyone is who they are perceived to be online.

> "I do personally believe that people are their more authentic selves online, and kind of their more polished selves in person. And because of that I feel like I kind of avoid accidentally spending a bunch of time with someone who turns out to be kind of a jerk because I already know what their online person is, and that they are kind of a jerk."
> - *"Craig" (Participant R-013)*

Following that initial real-life meeting, the relationships between community members often change. Fundamentally, these seem to follow three main paths: the relationships become stronger, the relationships rapidly break apart, or the relationships turn romantic (which is of course closely coupled with the first path).

The changing strength of these relationships is largely shaped around individual concepts of friendship. Unlike many of those interviewed as part of the YouTube element of this research, Redditors were extremely reticent to classify other Redditors as 'friends' if they had not met them in person. Quite often the descriptions participants gave of how relationships with other Redditors changed over time and became stronger were based on the notion of how they were now 'friends' and had 'friendships'. Some participants were quite self-aware of this, even speculating that the fact that anonymity is a core tenant of the design of Reddit might be behind this.

"On Reddit, I feel like it's more anonymous, all people know you by is by your post count, and the kind of things you post and the amount of karma you have, so I don't feel like it's as personal."
- *"Justin" (Participant R-006)*

"It just doesn't make sense to me to communicate with like a personal friend through Reddit. But it's interesting, because I know like Twitter is also a more anonymous … but I talk to my actual friends though Twitter message. I'm not really sure why that is …."
- *"Veronica" (Participant R-018)*

Regardless, participants established that once they had interacted with other community members in person, that was the point at which they felt friendships forming and the nature of relationships changing. Most often this meant interactions with each other no longer being based solely around Reddit community activities, and Reddit no longer being the core communication media for their interactions (discussed further below). For some individuals this went further into the formation of romantic relationships as well.

"I've been happy to get to meet people in real life, and I'm also very outgoing as well so, more at the board game meetup, I was eager to say 'wow, this is a great game we should get together more often and play' whether it's at your house, at my place, at like Mox Café, we should get together to play more often, and from there maybe we could develop a friendship."
- *"Mark" (Participant R-003)*

"umm, honestly the first time that I did it the group that I met up with, has actually been a really close friend group over the years that we've been … since I started going to that meet up it's just kind of … you know, progressed and we've been become closer and closer friends and now we just hang out regularly we have like … camping trips that we do every year, we have the trip that we do every year and so… yeah I've had nothing but positive experiences, and that's the first thing that comes to my mind."
- *"Felicity" (Participant R-001)*

For some participants these Reddit meetups enabled them to not only form close friendships no longer based around Reddit, but also based around very niche interests they share in common as well.

> I got to talking and realized we were in similar places in life, had a lot similar long terms goals and really liked to travel and one of our common subreddits that we both like is the child-free subreddit and that kind of got it going, because that's such a niche group and it's really hard to find friends that are women that don't want children and so it was kind of a big moment for us when we realized 'oh we can make a friends that's not going to eventually disappear and have children on us, that we're never going to see again."
> - *"Kate" (Participant R-021)*

Overall, attending offline events often fundamentally changed the relationships of people who had previously interacted only online. There were some cases where relationships remained static – i.e., they did not change after a meetup event because interactions remained predominantly online (most usually this was for people that only attended the yearly Global meetup day). Or completely dissipated following an offline interaction (which was the case for the few instances where individuals had clearly misrepresented themselves). But for the majority of the 21 Reddit participants I spoke to, attending the offline event became the jumping off point for closer relationships and friendships.

### 6.5.2 Changing communication within the community

As previously noted, friendships and relationships are not the only aspects of change that are triggered by attendance at offline meetup events. As the relationships between community members change, so do their patterns and means of interaction.

Prior to attending meetup events participants interacted with other community members through Reddit. This would either be through interactions in threads across the Seattle subreddits (by commenting and replying). Or through the Reddit PM function (although this was less common). Attendance at meetup events changed this pattern of interaction, however. Community members would still interact with each other on Reddit as they had previously, but they would also add additional communication media as their relationships grew into stronger friendships (or romantic relationships).

This mainly took the form of either Facebook interactions, or text messaging/calling. Often community members would gather these contact details during the meetup event that served as the nexus for their changing relationships. Although sometimes it would take several meetup events for this exchange to occur – especially among individuals who were more cautious about how they interacted with people who are, essentially, 'strangers from the internet'.

> "What I would do is after meeting somebody after a few times, they seemed kind of call and I'm interested in hanging out with them, I'd friend them on Facebook, ask for their number or just invite them to something else, that people – especially maybe if there's a group of regulars going to an event – and say hey we're going to this thing if you want to go to it here are the details about it, but Facebook was kind of the most common, or getting someone's phone number, was the most common first step towards becoming friends with somebody that I met there, that I thought I would want hang out with outside the event."
> - *"Ann" (Participant R-019)*

"Like in most cases where you meet people, it does take one party to kind of break the ice and push the issue more, so once you grab their name, it turns into, hey I'll add you on Facebook, and people are forthcoming with their name, because I feel like on Reddit people might not want to give you their name as much, because they can be more anonymous, but if they want to give you their name for Facebook or their number for texting, it turns into more organic or what you're used to in a normal relationship, not necessarily hidden behind a handle on a website, but it has a name, you have their phone number – it's able to blossom more. So, I was able to treat it as a casual, normal, friendship."
- *"Mark" (Participant R-003)*

In some instances, community members did exchange Facebook details with each other prior to meeting in person, however this was always a precursor to an upcoming offline interaction. No participants discussed exchanging phone numbers prior to meeting in person.

A consistent pattern across participants was the choice of Facebook as a 'next-level-communication media after they have met in person. This wasn't absolute, some used other mediums like going straight to exchanging phone numbers or sharing Twitter handles – but it was extremely common. The decision to move to Facebook and other media (away from Reddit) was often described as being a more personal way to communicate, mainly due to Reddit's emphasis on anonymity.

"I think it's because all my friends, even real life and stuff, I use Facebook to connect with them and I feel like it's more personal on Facebook, but on Reddit, I feel like it's more anonymous, […] so I don't feel like it's as personal and I just felt like, I don't see the [Reddit chat function] … I don't think it has much of an advantage over texting or Facebook messenger."
- *"Natasha" (Participant R-017)*

> "Maybe with very rare exceptions that's pretty much been the trajectory, we'd meet and if the connection was good then we would exchange Facebook contact information, we become friends on […] so yes we facilitate it through that, and I'd say maybe 99.5% of the Reddit friends I have fell into that pattern."
> - *"Veronica" (Participant R-018)*

But at the same time Facebook (and similar media) did not feel quite as personal or close as exchanging phone numbers. An act that many participants indicated was very personal and reserved for a certain measure of trust that had been earned through their interactions with the other community members. As such, exchanging phone numbers and moving to texting often came later in the development of an offline relationship.

> "We both agreed that we didn't want to quite exchange phone numbers yet, at the meetup and […] she said just find me on Facebook, […] so we just exchanged Facebook messaged for a long time."
> - *"Kate" (Participant R-021)*

> "I never used Reddit messaging [after meeting someone in person], I only used [Facebook and other services] and then went to text messages from there."
> - *"April" (Participant R-081)*

6.5.2.1 Other spaces within communities

As noted in the previous chapter, there are other spaces within the Seattle Reddit community that exist outside of the platform. These spaces mostly consist of the channels that enable real-time chat functionality such as IRC or Discord. The role of these channels within the community is relatively passive, in that they serve to plug a gap in communication functionality which is not facilitated on the Reddit platform itself. Interactions on the real-time chat spaces are often not dissimilar from the side conversations that were observed through Reddit threads, largely irreverent discussions around a topic of the moment that flow freely from one subject to the next. While these spaces are undoubtably part of the community, they were only

mentioned in passing by participants, and there was no indication that participation in such chat channels was in any way necessary to be a full-fledged member of the community. This was consistent across both newer community members and established senior 'old timers' that I spoke with.

There are however other spaces on Facebook that were explicitly mentioned by participants as being at least somewhat significant to their experience of being a member of the community. First there is a general 'Seattle Reddit' Facebook group. This is a relatively small group of a few hundred Redditors, including some of those that are most closely engaged with the community. The page runs a parallel, and sometimes meta, function with the Seattle subreddit, serving as a place of commentary on the general activities of the community as a whole. The group has a relatively small size compared to the overall Seattle subreddit(s), which meant that it was largely unknown by participants, although some did mention its existence - including several established 'old timer' community members. No one I spoke with understood the origins of the group, but it was speculated to likely have been created as a reaction to the activities of Careless before the splitting of the subreddits. Recently this page was closed and replaced with a smaller, less active page.

> "Honestly the only reason I joined the Facebook group was that I thought it was really funny that there was a Facebook group for a subreddit."
> - *"Andy" (Participant R-078)*

> "There's also the reddit Seattle Facebook group, which I'm not super active on … and I'm not super active on Facebook so if there's stuff that gets posted there, I probably don't see it, because I'm generally not on Facebook a whole lot."
> - *"Luna" (Participant R-075)*

The other space mentioned by several participants was also on Facebook, this was a group for community members that identified as women and was called 'Ladies of r/Seattle'. This group served as a 'safe space' for women in what was perceived as a largely male dominated community. The community was an area for support on issues that predominantly impact women both directly related to the Seattle community and beyond it. Participants who were members of this space mentioned it alongside other communities that were focused on women, such as the 'child free' subreddit and communities focused on exercise for women. Participants were somewhat closed about the specifics of this group, most probably due to the researcher identifying as male. However, it was clear that the group played an important role for these participants and was an important ancillary of the larger Seattle Reddit community for those it served; especially in terms of creating closer relationships and friendships. Members of the 'Ladies of r/Seattle Group' would meetup and organize events on that group. Although the Seattle Reddit community was still a core connecting element for group members.

> "Well because it's specifically for women, which is important I think especially within the Reddit community […] it was sort of like safe place where women who have seen each other – at least in my experience – I feel like I didn't talk to a lot of women in person, there was just dudes, but I wanted to talk to women it was just the ratios were not correct. So, it was a safe place."
> - *"Molly" (Participant R-022)*

> "Well women sometimes, in Seattle especially, like women in maybe slightly more male dominated things like the craft beer community or the Reddit community or any kind of tech sector, just feel like they aren't as welcome in things, so carving out their own space to say hey there are other women like you […] but the ladies of r/Seattle Facebook group was great because it told people especially new to the city women who are interested in reddit, interested in certain types of hobbies, because there tends to be some overlap, there's a safe way to make female friends and maybe not feel threatened in space or at least feel more comfortable in those spaces and meet other women like them. It adds value, I've not interacted with it a ton, it's just kind of on my Facebook now, but I do know people in that group personally in real life and they're cool people."
> - *"Ann" (Participant R-019)*

Some participants even saw the ladies of r/Seattle as a direct counter to the general, but more male dominated, Seattle Facebook group:

> "I mean it's just nice to have it separated because a lot of the stuff that's posted on the Seattle subreddit or the Seattle Facebook at least, is just super dumb bro stuff, so it's nice if there's something that actually female driven and that there's a place to find it and it doesn't just get buried."
> - *"Natasha" (Participant R-017)*

Unlike the general Reddit Facebook group, the 'Ladies of r/Seattle' group formed their own sub-community, and participation structure within the Seattle Reddit. To be an 'old timer' in the Seattle Reddit community for those who identified as women it was highly likely, and even expected, to be members of the 'Ladies of r/Seattle' Facebook group. The group serves an integral role for those members in supporting women in the community and runs alongside Reddit. Participants who discussed the 'Ladies of r/Seattle' group indicated its function was to improve their Reddit community experience – not to supersede it – and that they were still active community members on the Seattle subreddits. Unfortunately, further investigation into the group, such as accessing the page or attending any meetups created by the group, was not

possible out of respect for members and the objectives of the group being centered around women. Members were however very open to discussing their experiences with the group, and it was most often freely bought up in conversations with participants who identified as women. Most female participants I spoke with knew of the group's existence, further solidifying its importance. As a result, although further triangulation of discussions with female community members was not possible, the veracity of their discussions of this group should be strongly understood as authentic.

In summary, the changing nature of community member's relationships following offline interactions had significant subsequent impacts on their means of communication. Most often the result was a shift from interactions predominantly (or solely) on Reddit, to moving to another communication medium with a lower expectation of anonymity – usually Facebook. Finally shifting towards interactions via a mobile device and the sharing of phone numbers for texting and calling. Texting was largely indicated as the most 'intimate' method of communication in a relationship, with participants alluding to the fact that the sharing of a phone number indicates a close relationship and a significant measure of trust. There are some instances where interactions shift to other mediums prior to a meetup event, however these were largely inconsequential for most users.

### 6.5.3  Changing interactions with the community

So far in this chapter I have covered how offline meetup events change the relationships between community members, and the ways in which those members then interact with each other after they have met in person. But offline meetup events also have significant impacts on the ways community members interact with Reddit.

While most participants indicated that the ways in which they interacted with others whom they met at meetup events did not change subsequently, at the same time they outline the ways in which their communication with those individuals moves to other mediums. So, while community members felt the way they interacted with people they first meet online did not change after meeting them in person, there is a measure of incompatibility between that understanding and the shifting nature of their relationships and communication with other community members. It is clear however, that while the manner of interaction on the platform does not change, the frequency of interaction does.

When pushed to think about this in detail, participants often then admitted that their frequency of interactions on the platform did in fact change after they began shifting some communication to other using different media.

> "I would actually say that it's decreased my posting, for sure […] so I actually probably post less because I go to these [meetup events]."
> - *"Kate" (Participant R-021)*

> "Yeah, I generally left Reddit behind, and the one thread I had with [name of friend] was sort of an anomaly because I didn't know how else to contact her and I wanted her to be my friend, so yeah it moved probably to text."
> - *"Molly" (Participant R-022)*

In some cases though, participants felt this wasn't immediate, and that their levels of interaction on the site might actually increase at first before finally decreasing over time.

"I think I became at first like a little more active in the Seattle subreddit with commenting and stuff, but [I met people offline], and since that happened, I just didn't really feel the need, to be more interactive on Reddit at all."
- *"Luna" (Participant R-075)*

This demonstrates that while not an active consideration, individuals who meet offline after first interacting online may shift away from Reddit once they begin to form offline relationships. There is no evidence to indicate a complete abandonment of the platform, and individuals often spoke of their continued interactions on Reddit after attending meetup events. In fact, most continued to attend meetup events organized on the subreddit(s) while they were also curating friendships offline with those they had met at prior events.

Community members' activity across Reddit is easy to track with access to their usernames, and participants were asked to share their usernames for this research. The aim being to identify how their understanding of their interactions on the platform after meetups mirrored their actual posting and commenting behavior. Around half of the 21 Reddit participants voluntarily gave up their Reddit username for this purpose, this was then used to gather post and comment activity data from a community archive (largely upkept by the r/dataisbeautiful community) dating back to the start of Reddit. Some individual's activity data could not be traced, mostly because their accounts had been suspended, they had previously used a third-party tool to wipe comment data, or they used several accounts to post from. Or in the case of the user previously posting under the 'Barbie' moniker – a combination of several of these reasons.

The rest of the participants were able to have their activity tracked. While this is not a statistically significant sample from a quantitative standpoint, as the data is being used to triangulate qualitative understanding it is still worthy of investigation.

Among the sample of Redditor activity around offline events that I gathered using the methods in this study, two main patterns were uncovered. One of no noticeable change, where individuals posting and commenting activity remained more or less unchanged following their attendance at offline meetup events (as self-reported by participants during interviews). The second was a noticeable change in activity and/or sentiment over time around attending offline meetup events. These changes, seen in around half of the data collected, demonstrated a decrease in activity over time (no increase was noted in any case observed) following the attendance of offline meetup events. Changes in sentiment concerned a drop-in comment activity directly or indirectly mentioning meetup events (logistics, organization, reminiscing etc.). For those community members whose activity appeared to have been impacted by offline
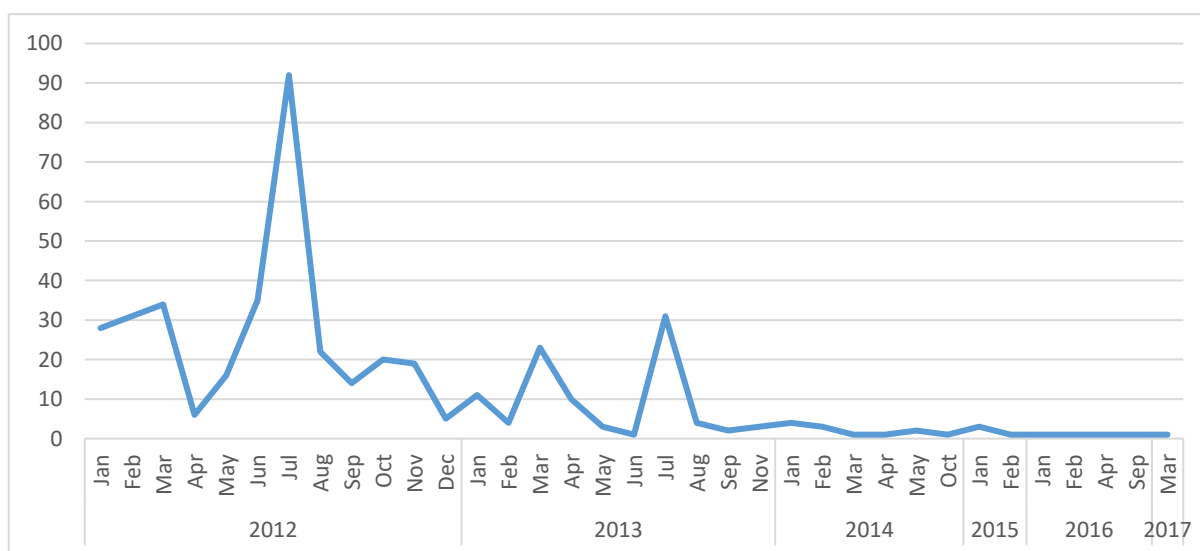


*Figure 16: Reddit activity for R-022 over time*

meetups the changes in their activity or sentiment were either gradual over a prolonged period, or extremely rapid following attending a meetup event (or several in a relatively short period).

For example, Molly (participant R-022) first attended a meetup event at the Global Reddit Meetup Day in July 2012. She also attended the meetup the following year. Prior to the 2012 meetup day Molly was making between 20-30 comments per month, immediately leading up to the meetup day this activity increased dramatically as she organized the meetup with those she was interested in interacting with in person. Following the meetup her activity crashes back to the levels seen prior to the meetup and slowly decreases over time until the 2013 meetup day – which sees another spike – after which her activity falls to extremely low levels and then bottoms out prior to our conversation at almost no posting activity at all (all activity is recorded in the r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA subreddits combined).

This lines up with Molly's own description of the impact of the meetup events she attended on her posting activity as noted in the quote above: "Yeah, I generally left Reddit behind".

Another example of a community member whose attendance at an offline meetup event impacted their future activity is Participant R-091, Chris. His post activity is similar to Mollys, in that he was very active around the Global Meetup Day, which he attended for a number of years starting from 2012. He also attended other summer events, including a number of July 4th BBQ events and other more informal summer events which were attended often by longer standing members of the community (but which have stopped being as common in recent years). The core of this activity occurred in 2012-2013 and during those years he was more active in the summer months around meetup days, but still an active community member all

year round. However, as his relationships with other members of the community grew offline he attended less meetup events, generally only attending the Global Reddit Meetup days.

While Chris' activity does not indicate as rapid a decline as Molly's, it still demonstrates a downwards trend of posting activity overtime after first attending meetup events. Prior to his first meetup in 2012 Chris had a huge amount of posting activity. However, after attending his first few events this activity started to slowly decline. In 2012 and 2013 they averaged around 300 comments per year, but for the subsequent years this dropped to below 150 comments. Each year there is a surge around meetup events, but general activity is low. In 2015 when they didn't attend any meetup events, they made less than 100 comments over the whole year.

A detailed examination of their comments over time supports this analysis of the data. In 2012 and 2013 most of the comments in the summer were around meet up activities, such as letting
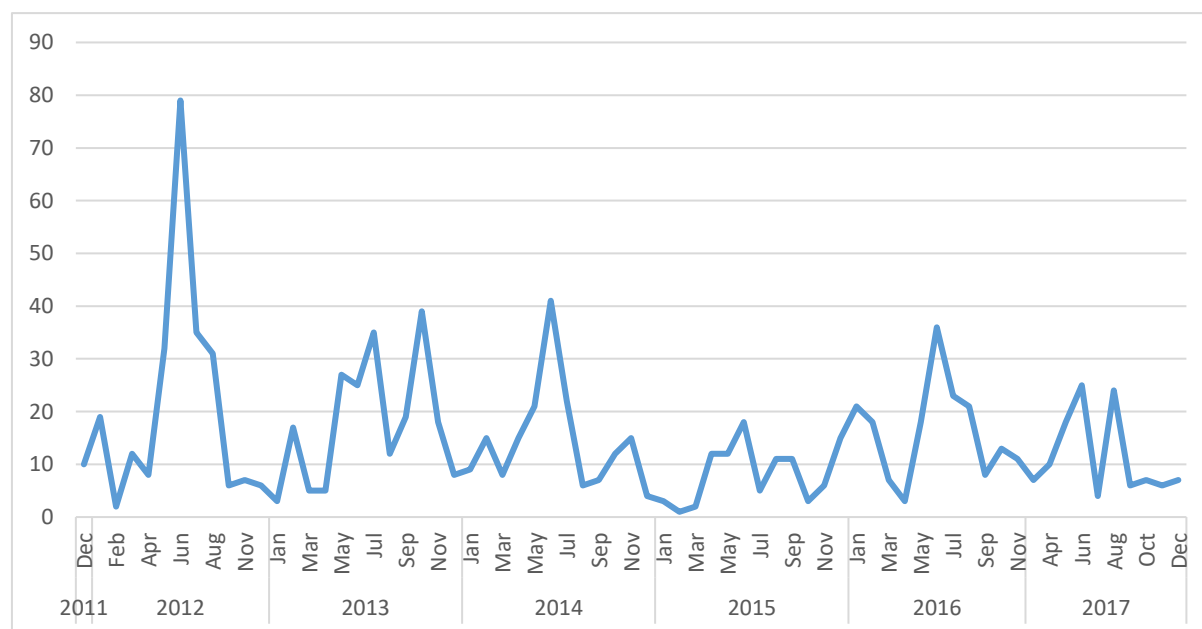


*Figure 17: Reddit activity for R-091 over time*

people know details about a number of Reddit house parties, the 4<sup>th</sup> of July party, and [8]further activity after these events (usually sharing photos and stories). Whereas in 2015 activity is a lot more mundane, talking about subjects like places to eat in the U-District, to a number of comments on an article about Earthquakes in the New Yorker. Generally, after 2014 there is a lot less conversation around Reddit meetups that are not the Global Day, except to reminisce about past events.

Participants who first interact with others on Reddit and then subsequently meet in person, change the way in which they communicate with others after those in-person interactions. Changes in relationships and methods of communication lead, in turn, to changes to the way individuals interact with the wider community. Due to limitations of the study, one-to-one tracking of the way community members interact directly with each other on the platform via quantitative data was unavailable due to being unable to collect the user data of 3<sup>rd</sup> party individuals. As such I must rely on the qualitative data around these interactions gathered from participants during interviews.

Overall, Community members do not feel the nature of their activity changes after they meet individuals in person. However, when questioned further participants acknowledge that while their general tone of interaction does not change, often their frequency of interactions with those other community members on the platform does decrease. This in turn can have an impact on their overall participation on the platform, as is seen from an examination of selection of

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[8] Verbatim extracts of comment activity would link directly back to the participant and as such cannot be posted here as they would violate the agreement with the participant upon which their username was gathered, as well as HSD guidelines.

Reddit activity data from participants in this study. Although the manner of this decrease is not absolute (around half did not see a change in activity) or always a dramatic short-term decrease.

### 6.5.4 Reddit: A Summary of Observed Impacts

In this chapter I have laid out observations and discussions with participants in this study which show a significant impact on the relationships, communication, and frequency of community interaction following attendance at in person meetup events. Participants often forged strong relationships with individuals they first interacted with online after meeting them at offline events. In the formation of these stronger ties there was also a shift in the method of communication and medium used by participants. As they began to interact on platforms that provided more personalization, closeness, and were based less on anonymity. Finally, it was observed that a secondary impact from the changes in relationships and communication media was a change in the way participants interacted with the community as a whole. For some participants meeting individuals offline did not impact their interaction with the community – even as those relationships became stronger and moved to other communication media. But for others there was a notable shift in their activity levels within the community, as they interacted less and less on the platform over time.

The results presented here also clearly show participants engaging in the predicted actions of both Legitimate Peripheral Participation and Media Synchronicity Theory. As individuals attend offline meetup events, develop relationships with other community members, and build a deeper understanding of the community, they progress towards the center of the Seattle Reddit Community of Practice. Eventually moving from novice members to experienced ones and finally, for some, on to old-timers. Similarly, attendance at offline events triggers changes

in communication patterns between community members that fall in line with the predictions of MST. Individuals engage with each other using media of lower synchronicity – especially in their early participation in the community when they are gathering an understanding of the culture and people involved. After individuals attending meetup events (clearly highly synchronous events in themselves) they shift their media choices to more synchronous mediums such as text and phone conversations, enabling them to better build shared understanding with those they have met offline.

It is undeniable that there is a definite – although not always consistent – impact on Reddit community members from meeting individuals offline that you first interact with online. And this impact is far reaching across many different aspects of both the community and the lives of the individuals involved.

## 6.6   YouTube: An overview

The second of the two communities investigated as part of this research was the Nerdfighters community on YouTube. As previously mentioned, data collection in the Nerdfighter community happened simultaneously with the Reddit data collection.

YouTube launched in 2005 as a video sharing and social media platform, the following year it was purchased by Google. Today YouTube is the second most visited website in the world with over 2 billion monthly active users. YouTube allows users to upload and share video content, as well as stream live video content. Videos on YouTube have a dedicated comments section where users can have discussions with other users about the content. The comments section allows discussion between users and threads that split out from the main comment

stream. Users can also upvote videos, subscribe to users' channels, and for many years users were able to make direct video responses to uploaded content – although this has been phased out from the site more recently. Videos can be tagged and categorized for ease of searching, and similarly to Reddit there are certain sections of the site dedicated to certain topics and communities – such as YouTube Gaming and YouTube Kids.

Users of YouTube (known as 'YouTubers') can subscribe to any other YouTuber's channel to view and comment on their content (although subscribing isn't a pre-requisite for either of these tasks). Communities on YouTube are more loosely defined than those on Reddit, they tend to center on subscribers to a single channel or a small group of channels – although some larger communities have a wider core group of content creators. Members of YouTube communities can be both commenters and content creators.

### 6.6.1 Initial observations of the Nerdfighters

The YouTube community chosen for this research was the Nerdfighters. As discussed in Chapter 5, the Nerdfighters is a large community centered around a core set of content creators with the Vlogbrothers YouTube channel hosted by the Green brothers as the primary focus. However, many other content producers are part of the Nerdfighters community and members include many others who don't make content but are active in YouTube comments.

Observations of the YouTube community included online observations and attendance at regular in-person meetup events both locally based and larger annual events. Participation and observations of the community began at the July 2015 VidCon conference in Anaheim, California. This was part of the pilot study for this research (detailed in Chapter 5). I attended

both VidCon 2015 and 2016, as well as a dedicated Nerdfighter community conference in 2017 known as NerdCon: Nerdfighteria. Detailed fieldnotes about my observations were collected during these meetup events and Interviews were also conducted at each of these events. Therefore, before the start of the observation phase I had already established a familiarity with the community.

At the beginning of the core observation phase in February 2016, the VlogBrothers YouTube channel had over 2.7 million subscribers and over 600 million video views. Videos were posted every few days by both channel members, each of which had active comments sections of thousands of comments and replies, across multiple discussion threads. In addition to this activity on YouTube, the community was also active on other platforms such as Twitter, Facebook, and a website known as 'the Ning' among community members. The Ning, which served as a secondary hosting platform for videos, as well as a somewhat active forum, was actually shut down on the first day of observations and replaced by a new website 'nerdfighteria.com'. Nerdfighteria.com did not host a forum, and instead served as a hub for listing local community groups and parts of the Nerdfighter community on other platforms (such as the popular Nerdfighters Minecraft server), as well as a record of an e-newsletter that the community distributed; a service it continues to serve to this date.

Observations online took place through YouTube. This included watching videos and the reading of comments sections, as well observations on other platforms as they came up – primarily the Nerdfighters Facebook group. Reflecting the nature of the community, initial observations centered around activity on the Vlogbrothers channel and spread out from there, through links and discussions in comment threads and on videos. This would reflect how a new

community member might become aware of other areas of the community on YouTube and other platforms.

Early observations reinforced that the VlogBrothers channel was a 'core' part of the community. The VlogBrothers channel was extremely active both in content produced but also comments made on each video. Additionally, the channel's subscriber count continued to increase by several thousand subscribers a month. However, it was also clear that many other active and popular YouTubers were key members of the community.

> "[Vlogbrothers] channel is clearly still the center of the Nerdfighter universe even after 8 years, but many other YouTubers are active in the community too. Mentions through videos by John and Hank directly, or through community members in comments refer to a great many YouTubers who are Nerdfighters. Some of these are mentioned with greater frequency than others – like the 'Charlieissocoollike' channel. It might be assumed that these individuals are more 'senior' members of the community, especially those that have been around for many, many years."
> - *Fieldnotes, February 4th, 2016*

The Nerdfighters community is much more of a tangled web than that of the Reddit community. Although both contain elements outside their core platform, Reddit is much more centralized than YouTube. On Reddit everything is contained within a number of distinct subreddits and while the interconnections between members can be complex, in YouTube it is incredibly jumbled as YouTubers do not sit within a single designated 'Nerdfighter' space. By extension it might be assumed that this makes building a community more difficult, fans of a core Nerdfighter creator like Charlieissocoolike may not even realized they are Nerdfighters. Or rather that they share the core ethos of other members of the community. However, the openness of YouTubers to cross collaborate and cross reference each other, as well as members

of the community to actually engage with each other in the comments, does work to create a defined and active community.

Meetup events in the Nerdfighters community are common and range from the huge yearly VidCon meetup to much more ad hoc local meetup events. Local meetups are usually organized by groups that have sprung up in different areas and create groups on Facebook or formally on the Ning.  These are colloquially known as 'Nerdfighter gatherings' in the community. While individual community members may interact through YouTube either as content creators or commentors, in a local context much of the organizing occurs through the Facebook platform. The context of these events can be smaller get togethers, usually situated around a specific occurrence (i.e., the launch of a book, release of a movie etc.) or simply the fact that there hasn't been a meetup for a while. In the context of the Seattle Nerdfighter group several meetups occurred over the summer for this reason alone.

Outside of the more casual and sporadic hyperlocal meetup events, the next type of common meetup event was creator based. For example, a popular Nerdfighter content creator might be hosting a gig, or a book signing, or they may even be having their own fan-event which a Nerdfighter group decided to attend together. There are also more 'official' Nerdfighter gatherings when John & Hank (either individually or together) go on tour. Several of these have recently centered around John or Hank's book releases where they go around the US visiting major cities hosting Nerdfighter gatherings which feature many content creators. Finally, the last type of common meetup event are annual conventions. The first of these is the annual VidCon convention which occurs every July in Anaheim California. VidCon is not a Nerdfighter gathering, but rather a convention for all YouTube content creators – however it

was first organized by Hank and John and therefore has very strong connections to the Nerdfighter community – who have many dedicated community events at the con every year. There has also been a one off Nerdfighter convention, known as NerdCon: Nerdfighteria which celebrated 10 years of the Nerdfighter community; this event occurred over several days in Boston in 2017.

The Nerdfighters community has been established for over a decade and during that time they have formed a defined Community of Practice; establishing norms, practices, terminology, and regular membership – meeting the definitions of an online community as established by Maloney et al., and Rotman & Preece. Much like during my observations of the Reddit community, a major part of the initial observations in the Nerdfighter community concentrated on identifying key players, in-jokes, regular events, and community terminology. Although my familiarity with the community due to prior research and the pilot study simplified this process, and I was able to form a fully structured understanding of the community early on with relative ease. Only having to bring myself up to speed with the latest developments in the community.

The Nerdfighters community is generally very welcoming, but it is also extremely complex and there are many connections between it and other communities with a big online presence – such as the Harry Potter and Doctor Who communities. There are also numerous in-jokes and references that are prevalent in the community and can be intimidating to newcomers. Although many of these references directly relate to the first year of the Vlogbrothers channel, during the Brotherhood 2.0 project, so members can quickly catch up on them. Additionally, the Vlogbrothers web content like the Ning and their new website store a glossary of terms to help users understand references. However, there is no requirement, either explicit or implicit,

for newcomers to have a knowledge of these references to participate and generally the community is very welcoming and ready to educate people in their conventions.

### 6.6.2 Old-timers in Nerdfighteria

Identifying the oldest old-timers in the Nerdfighter community is fairly simple – John and Hank as the originators of the channel are easy to identify. They are the most 'senior' members of the community by default. From there, community members who joined the community during the era of Brotherhood 2.0 tend to be the next most 'senior' members of the community, with a full knowledge of the intricacies, references, and in-jokes prevalent among the Nerdfighters. These individuals include commenters and content creators – some of whom have amassed large followings themselves – as well as others like authors with connected fandoms who are also members of the community.

Generally, the old-timers in the Nerdfighters community were very well known across the fandom, and usually had a closer relationship with John and Hank than most. For example, missxrojas who was a content creator that established themselves in the community early on, and eventually went on to work as a PA for John Green. Or Valerie2776 who was similarly an early member of the community and went on to work for Hank Green producing content. Neither of these community members were sustained content creators – although missxrojas was a prolific content creator early on – over the decade or more that Nerdfighteria has existed. Yet both have built up and maintained a status for themselves as senior members of the community. Both were also very active across the community on a number of channels including YouTube videos and comments and on Twitter. There are dozens of other members

of the community who followed similar trajectories, as well as further numbers who are less well known widely but have a similar level of knowledge and reputation in the community.

These old timers are all very open and I was unable to find any evidence of community members (either old-timers or established members) being closed off or standoffish towards newcomers. Even in person at meetup events there is a level of comradery across all members of the community that makes it a very welcoming place to new members. With old timers and members actively engaging and showing newcomers the ropes of how the community functions and references itself. This openness is somewhat in contrast to that of Reddit, which while largely open is still somewhat guarded, and may stem from the Nerdfighter community having a user base that skews towards young adults – as that is the primary genre of John Green's fiction. Although now most of the younger old timers are now well into their late 20s and early 30s.

The old-timers in the Nerdfighter community also aptly demonstrated the mastery of their craft, although somewhat differently than those in Reddit. Although content creation is one of the core tenets of the Nerdfighter community, it was also clear that being skilled in the creation of content (primarily YouTube videos, but also much other content) was not necessarily at the core of the community. Instead, the old-timers in this community were much more defined by their individual mastery of the shared community knowledge, as this was a fan community where the core practice was relationship formation, a deep understanding of the lore behind the community was essential. Individuals like Valerie and missxrojas were deeply embedded in that lore, to the point of being a part of it themselves. Being an established member of the Nerdfighter community is knowing the lore, understanding elements, references, standards etc.,

but being an old-timer is knowing the larger context that those references sit within. That is not

to say that you have to have been around since the beginning to be an old-timer in Nerdfighteria,

although certainly most old-timers have long tenures, but that the knowledge and understanding

that makes an old-timer in the community is *expansive* and not always something you can pick

up without exposure to current old-timers to provide the content that is crucial to truly

establishing mastery. This seems like a very large bar to becoming an old-timer, but it is

extremely tempered by the vast openness of the community, and willingness to share, explain

and educate others about what it means to be a Nerdfighter, something that the old-timers

observed in this research were actively engaged in doing.

## 6.7    YouTube: Offline interactions in the Nerdfighter community

While the origins of the Nerdfighters are firmly entrenched in the ideal of asynchronous

communication, offline meetup events still form a core part of the community. From local

meetups with small scale Nerdfighter groups, to international events like Vidcon, to touring

events such as the Tour de Nerdfighting where John and Hank travel across the US and even

the world. Offline meetups are both common and encouraged in the Nerdfighter community.

In this next section I will examine these meetup events and their role in the Nerdfighters

Community of Practice.

### 6.7.1  Motivations for attending offline events

One of the core questions asked of interviewees was for them to reflect on their motivations

for attending the various meetup events they had been a part of – especially the first time they

attended. Often community members spoke of a curiosity towards offline events (and what

happens at them). While others discussed a sort of 'social obligation' towards attending, in order to more fully understand the community they are a part of.

> "I mean I think it's really important to meet people that you meet online … like it takes away that level of anonymity and it introduces you to like new views on people and I think it's really cool."
> - *"James" (Participant Y-003)*

Offline events particularly stood out as places that people who are more introverted, or isolated, in their own lives could come to "be more themselves" (Participant Y-006) and meet more likeminded individuals with whom they felt they could bond more closely. It was also often a way for people to cope with isolation or mental illness in an environment they felt more open towards. One interviewee in particular stuck out in this regard, River (Participant Y-014) attended the NerdCon: Stories convention (a Nerdfighter convention targeted towards storytelling) in 2016 and met in person many people she had first interacted with online.

> "[The group they had interacted with online] had a couple of gatherings while we were there, one of them was at the conference, and then one was … kind of like a co-op kind of thing, with a bunch of different ethnic restaurants and shops, so that was really interesting experiencing it to meet the people we had talked to online for months, and then afterward, I wrote this thing on my blog about the experience of having attended the conference"
> - *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

The blog, in this case, was an account of River's experiences coping with certain chronic illnesses and others health conditions in attending the conference – and more generally in their life. Through attending the conference, River felt more connected to the

individuals in the Nerdfighter group she was in, and in turn this helped her open up even more. Not only to that group but to the wider community.

> "So, before I shared it with the actual NerdCon: Stories conference people, because it was really personal, I'd never written about my illness publicly before, I shared it [with the group online], and I was like oh God should I shared this it's embarrassing, so they kind of gave me some confidence to share it more widely because it was way more personal than I had shared."
> - *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

More commonly, however, individuals wanted to attend meetup events to meet friends. While participants openly discussed the cathartic experiences of meeting likeminded people, or curiosity of what these events were like – and what it meant to take part – one of the most common motivations discussed was simply wanting to make an IRL connection with friends they had made online.

> "But I mean I'd say like us being here at this convention isn't necessarily because we're five hardcore Nerdfighters, like I'm here because I'm a Nerdfighter, but like also I wouldn't come if like these four weren't coming."
> - *"Ron" (Participant Y-005)*

> "I think it is pretty important … think it was that important, because I had only known people online, but now that I've started meeting people in real life it helps me feel more connected to the fandom, to the … just to people in general because I know them in real life."
> - *"Aeryn" (Participant Y-011)*

I think that's pretty common for people about my age, or of my generation. Something that our parents think is kind of weird and creepy, but for people my age it's like oh cool I know you from online … I always go through this same cycle which is like severe paranoia that I'm going to be really disappointing and awkward and they're going to think that I'm this total liar who presented herself differently from how I actually am, and then, it's like now they're going to be totally different from how they came across and then as soon as I meet them it's like nope, everything is exactly the same and they're awesome, so it's really dumb that I always experience that because, literally it's been every single time a wonderful experience where it's just like they're exactly the same as how they came across online, which is great otherwise I wouldn't have continued to interact with them online and arranged to meet with them in person.
- *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

In a similar vein to the participants from the Reddit interviews, it was clear that length of membership in the Nerdfighter community made no difference towards attitudes or motivations to attending meetups. No matter what an individual's position within the Nerdfighter Community of Practice (that being a newbie, established member or an old-timer), they all still wanted to attend meetup events to connect with online friends old and new; and to share in the collective experience that is a Nerdfighter meetup event. The only notable difference is that old-timers tended to have less 'new' connections with online friends at meetup events and spent more time connecting with those individuals whom they had already met previously. Additionally, those community members with larger followings tended to be more closed off during events as they could easily be overwhelmed by fans. At smaller gatherings, such as local events or more intimate fan meetups they tend to be more open and mix with others at the meetups openly. Some old-timers will happily risk being swamped at events like Vidcon to mingle with others in the community as well.

For the Nerdfighters, the overall motivations for attending meetup events are varied but generally fit into the following categories:

- Curiosity – a desire to see what offline events are all about

- Finding your tribe – finding individuals like themselves for support and networking

- Making connections – a desire to meet those people they've been interacting with online

These motivations were consistent across both old timers, established community members, and newbies. This was very similar to the motivations of Reddit community members, although without the desire to meet to create a local social circle that is specific to a geographic location.

Following the identification of why community members attend offline meetup events, I next investigated what significance these events hold for community members and the outcomes of their attendance.

### 6.7.2  Outcomes and Significance of Meetup events

Members of the Nerdfighters community most often spoke of meetups as being significant in further developing friendships that had first formed online, and in solidifying a sense of connectedness to the community and their membership within it. Offline meetups were clearly significant parts of their experience as community members and for many, of their lives in general.

In the Nerdfighter community, meet ups are generally not centered around YouTube, with the notable exception of VidCon. Although even at VidCon there is a Nerdfighter gathering that is not centered around specific creators or the YouTube platform. However, YouTube and

creators within the community are still often core parts of discussions and interactions at community events – as they still represent a core part of what it is to be a part of the community. In fact, community members often talked about how attending the meetups brought them closer to the community than they have previously felt – even if that wasn't the overall aim of their attendance at meetup events.

> "I had only known people online, but now that I've started meeting people in real life it helps me feel more connected to the fandom, to the … just to people in general because I know them in real life. Just to have that community and have people actually … like know each other not just through a computer screen, it's important to have people know each other for that support, for anything really."
> - *"Aeryn" (Participant Y-011)*

> "I suppose meeting in real life, now that I think about, it sort of gave me a more solid image of the person that I had been talking to and one of the problems of course is that we feel like all of our relationships have, is that we only see pieces of each other, almost all of the time we can piece those things together and as time goes on things get easier and easier, but sometimes there's just a little hole in this thing, even if it's just how their voice sounds in real life, or like how tall they really are. Those things really do change … really can change the way that you imagine someone, it doesn't really affect your relationship really, especially since it's usually something very physical and your relationship is so not physical, but it does change the way that you imagined someone, it gives you a much clearer picture. It sort of grounds your thoughts in mostly a good way, because you don't have to like … so one of the friends that I met I think very, very highly of and it sort of grounded him."
> - *"Astrid" (Participant Y-0015)*

Some participants even went further, saying that meeting offline was what made them truly feel like a full member of the community.

"Honestly, I didn't really feel like a member of the Nerdfighter community until I went to a meetup even though I had been following along with Vlogbrothers and the different aspects of it online since I picked up Paper Towns in 2010, I just felt like I was kind of out there, randomly kind of following along, I didn't really feel involved – even though I had participated in different activities online, it wasn't the same."
- *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

As well as increasing feelings of connectedness to the community as a whole, attendance at meetup events also served as a way for community members to feel more connected to other individual members of the community whom they had interacted with online previously – as they were able to 'put a name to a face'. Through their interactions at offline events, community members found themselves building a stronger sense of community and increasing their feelings of connectedness to the Nerdfighters. This was strengthened further by the outcomes of the interactions they had at offline events, and that for most community members these felt 'normal' and matched – or exceeded – their expectations. In short, interacting with people in real life felt no different to them than interacting with people online – once they had got over an initial period of adjustment (often described by participants as "awkwardness"). And the more individuals interacted with people whom they had first met online, the more normal it was to them, and so there were shorter subsequent periods of adjustment – or even none at all.

"I feel like it was it was like I was saying earlier like we were instant friends like it was almost as if we had been hanging out for years."
- *"James" (Participant Y-003)*

"I always go through this same cycle which is like severe paranoia that I'm going to be really disappointing and awkward and they're going to think that I'm this total liar who presented herself differently from how I actually am, and

> then, it's like now  they're going to be totally different from how they came across and then as soon as  I meet them it's like nope, everything is exactly the same and they're awesome, so  it's really dumb that I always experience that because, literally it's been every single time a wonderful experience where it's just like they're exactly the same as  how they came across online, which is great otherwise I wouldn't have continued  to interact with them online and arranged to meet with them in person."
> - *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

In a similar vein to comments by the Reddit participants, for members of the Nerdfighters community, the outcome of attending offline meetups and Nerdfighter gatherings are distinct feelings of normalcy, where their interactions do not feel any different from those they have experienced in an online setting. Indeed, for many members of the Nerdfighters community attending Nerdfighter gatherings is an intrinsic part of the experience of being a Nerdfighter. Participants were not emphatic about this by any means, but they often spoke passively about the impact that attending the gatherings had on their lives, and on their relationships with other community members. Take Samantha (Participant Y-012), who while discussing the general awkwardness they experienced when first meeting a friend in person, goes on to discuss how since that first IRL meeting they became much closer and now live together.

> "I think for one thing it was someone of a different gender, which usually most of my friends are the same gender. It was more or hesitant I think, we were kind of … I don't know how to … we were shyer, we're both very shy people so we we're both very introverted we're kind of dancing around each other we're both wanted to talk to each other, but we weren't quite sure how to initiate conversations. So, the early conversations were, when you look back and they're just so, so awkward but in a really sweet way. We've gotten so much closer now that we live together now, we've been living together the last three years now."
> - *"Samantha" (Participant Y-012)*

Other participants shared similar stories of how offline meetup events have enhanced their experience of being a Nerdfighter. I spoke with a small group of Nerdfighters who formed a friendship group online and then met in person, first at Nerdfighter events and then increasingly independently as and when they could (being geographically dispersed). They discussed extensively how their offline interactions enhanced their experiences as Nerdfighters, created a foundation for close friendships, and provided a support structure for them through their lives.

> "And one thing that's really interesting is that because this started in like 2010, most of us were in high school when it started and like this community has seen most of us all the way through college into like real life and that has definitely changed our friendship a lot."
> - *"Ron" (Participant Y-005)*

Although it should be noted that the *type* of event does not seem to be important. Whether individuals attended a local gathering of a dozen or less Nerdfighters or were regular VidCon attendees there was no difference in the impact attending an IRL meetup had. But for many, attending meetup events was an integral part of the community. However, participants were keen to point out that it wasn't an excusatory one. Very aware that not everyone is able to attend meetup events, many participants felt that although meeting offline was an essential part of their experience of being a Nerdfighter, others not doing so didn't make them any less of a member of the community.

> "I think it's a different part of the community, I think it isn't essential, I think you can have just a strong a relationship with someone who's on the other side of the world, geography is geography, you know, I think it's just different, I don't want to compare."
> - *"Samantha" (Participant Y-012)*

And participants were also clear that they had never encountered any negativity around people who do not attend meetups. In fact, participants were clear that such acts would be against the ethos of the community as a whole.

> "I wouldn't say that you can't be a member of the Nerdfighter community [if you don't attend meetups] … I know nobody would say, "you're not a Nerdfighter you haven't attended a meetup", I mean that would be silly because if you have those same values and you are literate about what the community is about, and you participate in things you are obviously a part of the community."
> - *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

However, while the Nerdfighters took pains to point out that offline interactions are not a "necessary" part of the community, there is certainly an implicit indication from participants that meeting IRL does change something both within them as community members, but also in their relationships with others. This is clearly seen in Samantha's comment (above), in discussing how meetups aren't an "essential" part of being a community member, she also notes that those who *do* attend meet ups are "a different part of the community". No matter what the reasoning behind attending meetup events – to put names to a face, to meet friends, or to further their experience in the community; attending an offline event changes something for those individuals who attend them and adds something to their identity as a Nerdfighter. This makes attending offline meetup events a significant part of being a Nerdfighter and an almost integral one, certainly for anyone who is a well-established community member or 'old-timer'. Although not a necessary one, as several very senior members of the community do not attend meetups at all.

It was also noted by Nerdfighter participants that interacting at offline meetup events felt easy to them because most often they were able to have had prior visual interactions with the individuals they had formed friendships with. While there are certainly large swathes of the community who interact only via comments and text-based means, YouTube is at its core a visual community and therefore community members are often aware of each other's physical attributes and body language prior to meeting. Something which participants often discussed as "taking the edge off" their first IRL interactions. As they were already familiar with many of the physical traits and habits of those they met.

"I think that was the nice thing about the fact that [we interacted visually was] we kind of already had people's base personalities and quirks down, because I mean we would go late into the night, early in the morning, so you saw all these people at every span of their being."
- *"Nyota" (Participant Y-013)*

"But the kind of people that things like that and Nerdfighteria attract are usually not usually the kind of people who for the most part would want to put up a false persona online to look a certain way that they're actually not. I think they're just more genuine people to an extent. And maybe I'm just deluding myself a little bit about that, but the fact that they've been so in line with how they presented themselves online before I met them, tends to support that theory of mine."
- *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

Finally, it is also worth mentioning that some participants found more than friendship at offline events. Participants noted both direct and in-direct experiences of forming romantic relationships through attending Nerdfighter gatherings. Bringing attendance at offline meetups events more significance to these individuals and their experiences of being a community member.

"I met my boyfriend actually of five years now through Nerdfighteria and I made a lot a lot a lot of my closest friends through this community. Most of my friendships have been through this community so. I'm kind of a shy person, I think, so reaching out to people online is a lot easier for me and forming that relationship; so, it's just something that I've made very close and very meaningful relationships through [the Internet and meetups]."
- *"Samantha" (Participant Y-012)*

From discussions with Nerdfighters across a number of years and various events – both local and international – it is clear the motivations for attending offline meetup events, and the outcomes of attendance, vary from person to person. For some, it enhances the overall experience, for others it's an opportunity to further relationships they have formed online, and for more there are no concrete reasons for attendance other than "just cause". Whatever the motivations for attendance, the outcomes remain similar – an increased sense of belonging to the community and stronger connections with individuals they have first met online. In fact, most participants had either attended multiple offline gatherings or were planning on future attendance after experiencing their first event.

While clearly some individuals who attend meetup events will have had negative experiences, for the Nerdfighters I spoke with their experiences were predominantly positive and most individuals indicated a very strong impact from attendance. In fact, in comparison to participants from the Reddit community whom I spoke with, not a single Nerdfighter shared a negative experience of meeting someone in real life at a Nerdfighter gathering. That is not to say that that could not happen of course, but across the 21 participants with experience of Nerdfighter gatherings, no one had anything bad to say about an experience at one. Although some did share negative experiences of meeting up in other communities.

"I've had some questionable experiences with people I've wanted to meet in real life, but I don't really feel comfortable with the person, but I've been very fortunate with the fact the people I meet in real life I feel like I can trust."
*- "Zoe" (Participant Y-002)*

In this section I have outlined the experiences of members of the Nerdfighter community who have attended offline 'Nerdfighter gatherings'. Their motivations for attending events are diverse, but the significance and impact of going to the events were clearly strongly positive across the participants. Attending Nerdfighter gatherings helps build a stronger sense of community and feelings of belonging in individuals as well as furthering the development of the relationships that they have built online – sometimes resulting in romantic relationships. While participants are actively keen to note that attending an event is not a necessary part of membership within the community, they are also implicitly (and sometimes explicitly) clear that doing so adds 'something' to the experience that cannot otherwise be gained by remaining a purely online community member. In the next section I will examine how these meetup events fit into the bigger picture of the Nerdfighter community.

## 6.8    YouTube: Long-term impacts of meetup events.

Previously I have discussed the significance of offline meetups to Nerdfighters, what drew them to want to attend those events, and what they got out of that attendance. This section will build on that to examine the long-term impacts that attending events has on community members and their participation, choices of communication medium, and relationships.

### 6.8.1 Changing relationships within the YouTube community

Although many community members were keen to note that meeting offline was not a necessary part of the experience of being a Nerdfighter, it was clear from our discussions that offline meetups were in fact turning points in the relationships between community members.

In the same vein as with members of the Seattle Reddit community, participants of Nerdfighter gatherings fit into two main types of relationships with other community members.

1) Online friends and acquaintances – individuals whom community members have only interacted with online and then interacted with in person at Nerdfighter gatherings online (primarily through YouTube both video interactions and comments sections – but also related Nerdfighter sites like the website).

2) Individuals met at gatherings with no prior interaction (those who community members meet for the first time at Nerdfighter gatherings and with which they have had no, or only passing, interactions with online).

For individuals who first met online, connecting at offline events often profoundly impacts their future relationships and the ways they interact with each other. The in-person events are often significant points in the relationships between community members, marking a major change in their patterns and means of interaction.

Whereas for those individuals who first meet at offline events, it is more difficult to establish the impact of offline events as there is no real 'change of relationship' unless they have happened to have some passing interactions online previously. For these types of individuals, meetups instead serve as a place for their relationships with others to begin, but they share a

similar trajectory as the relationships of participants who have previously interacted with each other online.

For individuals who first meet online a typical path for the formation of a friendship will be interaction through YouTube comments or video posting and responses. This may be recurrent passing interactions or potentially more regular exchanges. Although YouTube can be anonymous (in terms of commenting) it is more usually a place where some means of identifying oneself openly is presented (video exchanges). Even in anonymous settings community members feel that the online persona presented by others is an accurate reflection of that person in real-life, which is also reflected in the Reddit community and detailed in other research (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013; Hogan, 2010). There is established common ground, community references, social norms, and in-jokes which all exist as part of the relationship between community members. Meetups serve to validate individuals' understanding of the persona of those they meet online, as well as to underscore that the person they interact with online actually is the person they feel they are.

"Not really, everyone seems to be … has … everyone I've met has seemed to be the same in real life, online, they're the same person. I look at the same person."
- *"Aeryn" (Participant Y-011)*

"But the kind of people that things like that and Nerdfighteria attract are usually not usually the kind of people who for the most part would want to put up a false persona online to look a certain way that they're actually not. I think they're just more genuine people to an extent. And maybe I'm just deluding myself a little bit about that, but the fact that they've been so in line with how they presented themselves online before I met them, tends to support that theory of mine."
- *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

And in the same vein as was seen with a member of the Reddit community, a participant from the Nerdfighters spoke about how they felt that people online are a "more genuine" version of themselves when interacting online.

> "It depends, certainly not all the time, but in the way that I have interacted with people I think they've been very purposefully kind of more genuine."
> - *"River" (Participant Y-014)*

While no other participants spoke about their online interactions quite this strongly, there was a clear sense that individuals are true to themselves when interacting online – although in less anonymous and more visual medium like YouTube, this may be to be expected.

> "I think that was the nice thing about the fact that we [interacted visually] so we kind of already had people's base personalities and quirks down, … you saw all these people at every span of their being."
> - *"Nyota" (Participant Y-013)*

> "Everyone I've met has seemed to be the same in real life, online, they're the same person. I look at the same person."
> - *"Aeryn" (Participant Y-011)*

In the Nerdfighters community, individuals were readily open to referring to individuals with whom they only interact online as 'friends'. This is in stark contrast to the Reddit community, where individuals might feel familiarity and close ties to others in the community but would never refer to others as 'friends' without some element of offline interaction – largely due to the community's emphasis on anonymity. This closeness online seen in the Nerdfighters seems strongly related to the more open and visual aspect of the community and YouTube. The

Nerdfighters were very open with their personal identities in online interactions, and in the case of content creators were showing their physical selves, and in the opinion of other community members, their 'real' selves in terms of personality.

As a result, there wasn't as much of a change in the strength of relationships following offline interactions in the Nerdfighter community, as individuals tended to form quite strong connections online. For many, the initial offline meeting served mainly as a 'checkpoint' where they could confirm their opinions and impressions of those they had previously only interacted with online. They could then continue with developing their relationships.

Despite having strong connections online, offline interactions are still important moments of change in the relationships of community members. Most usually – as offline meetings tended to 'confirm' individual's perceptions of others – relationships were described as becoming 'stronger' and 'closer', and in some cases developed into romantic relationships. Although in other cases relationships between individuals do rapidly break apart; but this was rarely reported in the Nerdfighters community.

Most often individuals reported that meeting offline was a stepping off point, where they felt the nature of their relationships had changed – usually correlating with a change in the primary communication medium. After meeting offline, community members would often begin to communicate via other means such as text, phone, or instant messaging. Sometimes this shift to other mediums came even before meeting in person, as community members would exchange details to coordinate the logistics of their IRL meetings. This is not to say that communication via YouTube (either in video or comment form) ceased, but often it was

augmented by other communication media before (for some) eventually being supplanted altogether. In some cases, this change was rapid, for others it was a slow shift. But it was an extremely common pattern reported by individuals, especially those that developed romantic relationships.

> "Since then, we've […] now got their cell phones and emails and things like that so we were sharing cheers and stuff via text and email and all those other ways."
> - *"Kathryn" (Participant Y-004)*

> "So, until I met them, I didn't really like … I thought they were my friends, but I didn't really think they were my friends you know, and then you know I went to Europe with [friend] for two months after meeting her twice, I went to … we met at GeekCon."
> - *"Kara" (Participant Y-009)*

Individuals also discussed how this shift in communication patterns was often coupled with increased feelings of closeness and more personal interactions with others.

> "Yeah. We talked a lot more. We shared more personal stuff after we met. I guess we maybe actually started writing letters to each other, which is kind of weird."
> - *"Sarah-Jane" (Participant Y-001)*

> "Yeah, actually I would say we got a lot closer very faster [sic]."
> - *"Zoe" (Participant Y-002)*

Some participants spoke of offline interactions fueling a desire for more offline interactions, where individuals want to continue their interactions further.

"There's a lot more … once you meet in real life it's kind … of you want to keep meeting in real life and it's kind of hard to go back to 'oh we live in a different continent' in some instances. So that's kind of tricky, but not really, if anything we get closer, I think."
*- "Samantha" (Participant Y-012)*

It is clear that there is a significant, lasting impact from attending offline events that profoundly changes the relationships of individuals that have previously only interacted online. For the vast majority of those interviewed, significant changes following meetup events were reported, and nobody reported a case where meeting offline didn't result a change in their relationships – although in some cases this was because the friendships dissipated after meeting in person (usually because they didn't 'click' or, rarely, because they felt there was some misrepresentation). Overall, however, the changes in the individuals' relationships were positive and their offline interactions marked the start of stronger connections going forward.

### 6.8.2  Changing communication within the community

Interaction between members of the Nerdfighters community prior to offline interactions is a little more diverse than that seen in the Reddit community. While often large amounts of communication occur between individuals through video and comment activity on the platform initially, it is not unusual for communication to shift to another medium prior to offline interactions. This is in stark contrast to Reddit where the vast majority of interpersonal communication prior to meetups occurs on the platform. To some degree this can be explained by the key differential of the YouTube platform compared to Reddit – that of video interaction. Not all communication prior to meet ups in the Nerdfighter community is video based, but certainly for many it is. For those individuals there is somewhat of a 'step up' in their formation of interpersonal relationships as they gain that extra dimension of interaction via non-verbal

cues (or symbol-sets in the parlance of MST) which increases their levels of synchronicity and aids in building of a shared understanding.

Most usually individuals in the Nerdfighter community would – after a time – split their interactions with others between YouTube and another platform such as Facebook – where several Nerdfighter groups exist. This would sometimes, but not often, signify a change in their interaction patterns on the platform (especially among those who interact primarily in the comments) where individuals might interact less, but usually the shift to another platform prior to IRL meetups served to compliment communication on YouTube. This pre-meetup communication shift was especially prevalent among individuals who were in groups (either collab channels, or people that had formed interconnected relationships through video sharing or in the comments) where IM channels like Facebook Messenger, Skype, or Discord where the preferred method of organizing IRL meetups.

This shift in communication medium was not always associated with an upcoming IRL meetup, sometimes it was a signifier of an increase in closeness. Despite YouTube being less anonymous than Reddit, individuals were still reluctant to share credentials that could identify their real-life identities with others unless there was a sense of trust and closeness between them.

Despite there being a trend of individuals communicating off platform prior to meetup events, larger changes were subsequently triggered following attendance at meetup events. As the IRL interactions caused changes in relationships and a sense of closeness between individuals it also prompted a change in communication patterns. Individuals would still use YouTube to

interact following meetup events, but they would often increase the frequency of communication on other channels, sometimes to the detriment of their interactions on YouTube. Community members would also move to other media that they had not used before, this was most usually media that dropped any sort of anonymity and was tied to a real-life identity such as Facebook or text/cell phone communication (which was often seen as being one of the most 'personal' and closest ways of communicating).

In contrast with the Reddit community, members of the Nerdfighters were generally less cautious when it came to sharing more personal details after meeting, seemingly due to the fact that there is less anonymity in YouTube than Reddit. As a result, meetup events served generally to be confirmations that individuals are who they presented themselves to be. Once that confirmation had occurred community members were happy to share more personal details such as cell phone numbers and Facebook account details.

> "Yeah. We talked a lot more. We shared more personal stuff after we met …
> after that our interactions were more off the site, we talked more on different
> places so we could talk personally rather than on the site where everyone can see
> where you right, unless you do it in a PM of course."
> *- "Sarah-Jane" (Participant Y-001)*

> "I felt like … they were no longer just an account like they were actual person
> in my eyes at that point and so I felt like what I said mattered more."
> *- "James" (Participant Y-003)*

> "My comments [on YouTube] I would say about the same but it's the
> conversations off of YouTube, so through Twitter, through text messaging,
> seeing each other in person that have gone up a lot."
> *- "Aeryn" (Participant Y-011)*

While meeting in person was almost always a stepping off point for more in-depth and closer communication, the platform for that communication wasn't always consistent. Members of the Nerdfighters, much like those in Reddit, regularly connected with each other on Facebook, Twitter, and through text messaging/phone calls on mobile devices after meeting offline; but IM platforms such as Skype and Discord were also very popular among participants. These platforms allow for both text, voice, and video interaction and often work well for groups – especially when coordinating offline events – but individuals also use them, especially for communication where text/calls on traditional mobile phones might be expensive (such as long distance or international friendships). For many, IM seemed to hold a level of importance and closeness that was comparable to text messaging and the sharing of phone numbers. While members are more willing to share IM details than phone numbers, and where phone number sharing is an implicit signaling of closeness and trust (as observed in the Reddit community), interacting through IM is still a substantial signifier of the development of a relationship among community members. Especially on Skype as opposed to Discord. which is known as a much more public medium in general. In addition to this closeness as demonstrated in the sharing of phone numbers, community members often also shared mailing addresses to send care packages and letters with each other. Given the safety implications of such sharing this was very often only seen in those who had developed significant relationships where feelings of trust were well established.

> "After [meeting in person] our interactions were more off the site, we talked more on different places so we could talk personally rather than on the site where everyone can see what you write … we maybe actually started writing letters to each other, which is kind of weird."
> - *"Sarah-Jane" (Participant Y-001)*

> "Before I met them, I hadn't been messaging them through Twitter. Because I felt like the YouTube comment section was enough. And then meeting them I was like oh, so these guys really do care about my opinions and who I am."
> - *"Kathryn" (Participant Y-004)*

Although occasionally this was for pragmatic reasons, as well as wanting to be closer.

> "Primarily it's actually WhatsApp group chat, because they live in Canada and it's easier for us to communicate on a free platform."
> - *"Ellen" (Participant Y-010)*

### 6.8.2.1 Other spaces within communities

The somewhat amorphous nature of the Nerdfighter community means that although YouTube sits at its core, there are many other spaces that exist where Nerdfighters congregate. There are Facebook groups, (such as 'Adult Nerdfighters', Nerdfighter Gaming' and 'Nerdfighters'), there was once a forum known as 'My Pants', or the former website 'The Ning'. There are Minecraft worlds and Discord groups, even a subreddit. Many little slices of the community sit across many sites. These often carve out smaller niches in the community, the Minecraft server for example serving Nerdfighters who also play Minecraft, or allowing for real-time community chat (i.e., the Discord) which is not facilitated by YouTube.

Most of the 'other' spaces are both integral to the Nerdfighter experience and also superfluous. They provide spaces for discussion and community awareness, but they are often mirrors of the kind of conversation and discussions you can see in YouTube comment sections or between content creators in the community. This is not to say they are not important – especially for individuals in those specific niches – they add something to the community and are an important part of it, but they are also unnecessary for membership in the community.

Some spaces, however, do hold more significance in the community. In the early days of the Nerdfighters the Ning was an especially central place, its forums were fairly popular, and it also had a chat room feature that was utilized by community members. But the Ning, at its core, was a place to centralize much of the content being produced by John and Hank and other Nerdfighter content creators. It showed their other social media streams such as Twitter as well. Awareness of the existence of the Ning was, at the time, an important part of being a Nerdfighter – but utilizing the platform for interacting with other Nerdfighters was not. Today, there are no longer forums as the Ning no longer exists and Nerdfighteria.com serves only as a reference point for those other spaces and posting local gatherings. While some Nerdfighter Facebook groups are large enough to be fairly prominent, interaction on them and with other members through them is not a prerequisite for membership at all, although many old-timers in the community can be found on them, many more are not active in these spaces.

Most strikingly, none of the participants I interviewed explicitly mentioned these other spaces – or their activity on them – other than Facebook. And for most of those participants the mentions of Facebook were to do with closed groups or group messenger chats that were related to their friends/friend groups and organizing meetups. It can therefore be implied what while many of these spaces do exist across the community, and many are quite active, membership of them does not hold a significance in what it means to be a Nerdfighter.

### 6.8.3 Changing interactions with the community

In addition to offline meet up events impacting the individual relationships between community members – and the ways in which they interact subsequently to meetup events – offline

meetups can also have a considerable follow-on impact on the communities (and platforms) upon which they are based.

Similarly, to members of the Reddit community, members of the Nerdfighter community indicate that they do not believe meeting in person substantially impacts their interaction with the community, or their use of YouTube. However, they also clearly discuss how their interactions and communication with other community members begins to shift away from YouTube over time once they have met in real life.

For some community members there is a clear conflict between their feeling of connectedness to the community and the platform, and their actions in interacting with friends via different communication media. And while some members do clearly demonstrate that their interactions with others via YouTube is merely augmented with interactions on other media – a net increase in communication – for most, their interactions across YouTube decrease over time as they shift to text, IM. social media and other communication media.

> "But we just talked … we talked more off the site, so that might have actually made us be less active in a way … in the beginning it was definitely centered around that [YouTube], but it's no longer … some of the friends that I have from there are no longer on the [YouTube], so it's just we are friends that like Harry Potter … and it started out as in all of us on [YouTube] and then we just became friends like normal people, not just massive nerds!"
> - *"Sarah-Jane" (Participant Y-001)*

> "[We moved away from YouTube] there was … Facebook … you know when possible smaller Skype chats … we use to talk about really specific things, the main Skype chat we do a lot of video calls and we've been playing a lot of board games…"
> - *"Kara" (Participant Y-009)*

"I think [my YouTube activity] is around the same, because I still watch all the
same videos and the comments on the videos are more like for the creators, but
then I created a community because we're talking with the creators and we all
have the same views so my comments I would say about the same but it's the
conversations off of YouTube, so through Twitter, through text messaging,
seeing each other in person  that have gone up a lot."
- *"Aeryn" (Participant Y-011)*

Members of the Nerdfighters community were therefore clearly demonstrating a shift in
communication away from YouTube. However, this does not seem to be something community
members are actively trying to achieve – in fact in some cases community members are actively
attempting to maintain their activity levels on the platform. Instead, there is evidence of an
incidental transfer of communication frequency away from YouTube to other communication
media. In some cases, this does eventually lead to a relative abandonment of the platform.
Where community members are still interacting with content creators, but the level of
interaction with other community members can rapidly and significantly decrease following
offline meetup events. While this decrease in activity on the platform might occasionally
indicate a lack of interaction with the community – this is usually not the case. Community
members are often still attending community-based offline meetup events while curating these
friendships off the platform, as well as consuming community-based content on YouTube and
other platforms. But their interaction with the wider community may often be reduced over
time.

While extensive interviews of members of the Nerdfighter community cover this behavior and
shift in communication away from the platform, it is still useful to triangulate these accounts
with other available data. However, unlike in the Reddit community, activity across the

Nerdfighter community is much more difficult to track as YouTube does not provide a centralized way to monitor user's activity across the site. As a result, I have chosen instead to utilize a case study to triangulate the accounts of participants in this study, where one particular community group could be monitored closely to understand how an offline meetup event impacted their methods and frequency of interaction.

## 6.9 Case Study: Forgetting to be awesome - the impact of offline meeting on participation in a YouTube collaboration

In this case study, I have chosen to examine one particular YouTube collab channel within the Nerdfighter community. The collab discussed here will be referred to as NFT and its members identified only the initials of the US state in which they were based at the start of the project, for reasons of anonymity.

### 6.9.1 The formation of the collab channel

The seven original members were: IN, MI, TX, WA, CO, IL & AZ. They ranged in age from 17 – 24 and none of them had previously met before they began engaging with each other online as members of the Nerdfighter community. The collab members initially started to engage with each other through the activity that surrounded a nationwide tour by Hank and John. These tours happen irregularly and typically involve evening events at bookstores or others small venues across the US, as well as livestreaming and other video content being produced by the Green brothers. There is always a lot of activity around these events, both in the YouTube comments, other Nerdfighteria platforms, and among other content creators on YouTube. During this time many members of the community are interacting with each other as well as with Nerdfighter content creators – and this is when the collab first formed.

Originally it was IL that had the idea to start a collab channel with other members of the community. They initially reached out to TX with the idea and then they both contacted the other members to form the collab. They had both had some interaction with the other members during the tour and had started to form online friendships. Like many YouTube collab channels, the idea was for the members to produce content on the one channel, in the case of NFT each member of the collab was assigned a day of the week to post a video and were subject to a 'punishment' (to be performed on camera in their next video) should they fail to post. Although members were allowed to swap days should they need to.

In a later reflection on their time as a member of the collab, IL stated that their original purpose for starting the channel was to get to know the other members better following the winding down of activity in the community at the end of the tour.

> "It started as a way for us to get to know each other better when the tour ended.
> Like these people seem cool, let's keep this going."
> - *"IL"*

The collab officially began right after the end of the tour and ran for a little under 3 years. Four months into the collab one member, MI, left the collab and cut off all communication with members, they were then quickly replaced by PA – a regular viewer, commenter, and active participant in the community during the previous tour. Additionally, TX departed the project after 2 years, and was replaced by AZb, the partner of AZ, who was known to the other members through AZ's videos and social interactions through other media. However, unlike MI, TX still interacted with other members of the collab after their departure from the collab.

## 6.9.2  Nerdfighter gathering

The Green brothers' tour that was previously mentioned is one example of a 'Nerdfighter Gathering' where members of The Nerdfighters community come together to meet in real life, sometimes with John and Hank in attendance, sometimes without.

In this case study I will be looking at one specific gathering that occurred 2.5 years into the collab, when the members of NFT met in person during a trip to Orlando, FL. The idea for the collab to meet in person originated when several members planned to attend a Harry Potter convention that was taking place at Universal Studios Florida, this quickly snowballed into an idea for all collab members to attend and meet in person as a group for the first time. Eventually the idea of attending the convention was abandoned altogether and the members of NFT decided to instead just meet up and visit Universal Studios and Disney World together as a group.

It was intended that all members of the collab would be in attendance, however due to work commitments CO was unable to attend. Several others were also present at the gathering, including future member AZb, making the group size for the gathering ~10. Members of the collab and their associates spent a little under 1 week in Orlando travelling to Disney and Universal Studios together. The group split two hotel rooms between them and spent most of their time together in that period.

## *6.9.3  Data Collection*

Data in this case study was gathered from multiple different sources after the conclusion of the collab channel. Discussions with members of NFT occurred several years following the end of the channel.

Other than the collab channel videos themselves, the primary interaction medium for community members was Twitter and a single Skype IM chat that existed for the extent of the collab channel, and for some time afterwards. Tweets from all members of the collab were also collected for the duration the collab was active (note: as this was done after the collab ended, some tweets may have been deleted, but the record of tweets is believed to be mostly intact). Finally, data was also collected on the YouTube videos posted on the NFT channel. A series of semi-structured interviews were also held with some members of the channel. Data was gathered for the entire life of the channel, however for the purposes of the case study data will primarily be presented for a 12-month period beginning 6 months before the Orlando gathering occurred.

### 6.9.3.1 Skype

In the main Skype IM members of the collab channel would discuss anything and everything. Their topics of discussion varied but the core of their communication concerned personal issues or community related matters. They also discussed logistics for video creation, posting, and participation in the collab, as was the organization of the Disney trip. No Skype calls are analyzed in this case study as their use was very infrequent and during the study period was used only for the purposes of trip organization (booking flights, hotels etc.).

### 6.9.3.2 Twitter

A complete archive for all but one member of the collab was gathered; this contained a record of all their public tweets made since the creation of their account. No data was collected on direct messages sent or received by members of the collab as they were deemed to be private correspondence and were unavailable for analysis.

### 6.9.3.3 Interviews

Every member of the collab (except MI, who was untraceable) was contacted for an interview. Five members responded (WA, TX, AZ, PA, and IL) and semi-structured interviews were conducted with them, which were then transcribed, coded, and analyzed. Interviews lasted approximately 60 minutes.

### 6.9.3.4 YouTube

YouTube provides analytic data on all videos uploaded to the service, a feature they call 'insight'. I was able to gain access to the closed insight data of the NFT channel that is generally only available to channel owners, via a participant. From here I took information on the posting date, length, views, and uploader for each video uploaded to the channel in the time period being studied. Additional data was also collected from members' personal channels.

## *6.9.4 Results*

6.9.4.1 Skype

As previously mentioned, Skype was the primary method of communication between group members, other than YouTube. Over the 12-month period of the study a total of 37,167 messages were exchanged between group members in the Skype chat. 24,185 messages were exchanged in the 6 months prior to the gathering, and 12,982 messages exchanged in the 6 months after. This represents a 46% decrease in messages sent in the months following the Orlando meetup. Figure 18 shows the total number of messages sent by each channel member before and after the gathering. Note here that TX departed the collab approximately 3 months after the gathering and was replaced by AZb. AZb was added to the Skype chat following the departure of TX from the collab, but TX was never removed from the chat – although they ceased to communicate using it following their departure. Figure 19 shows the message exchange rate per month for all members of the Skype chat.
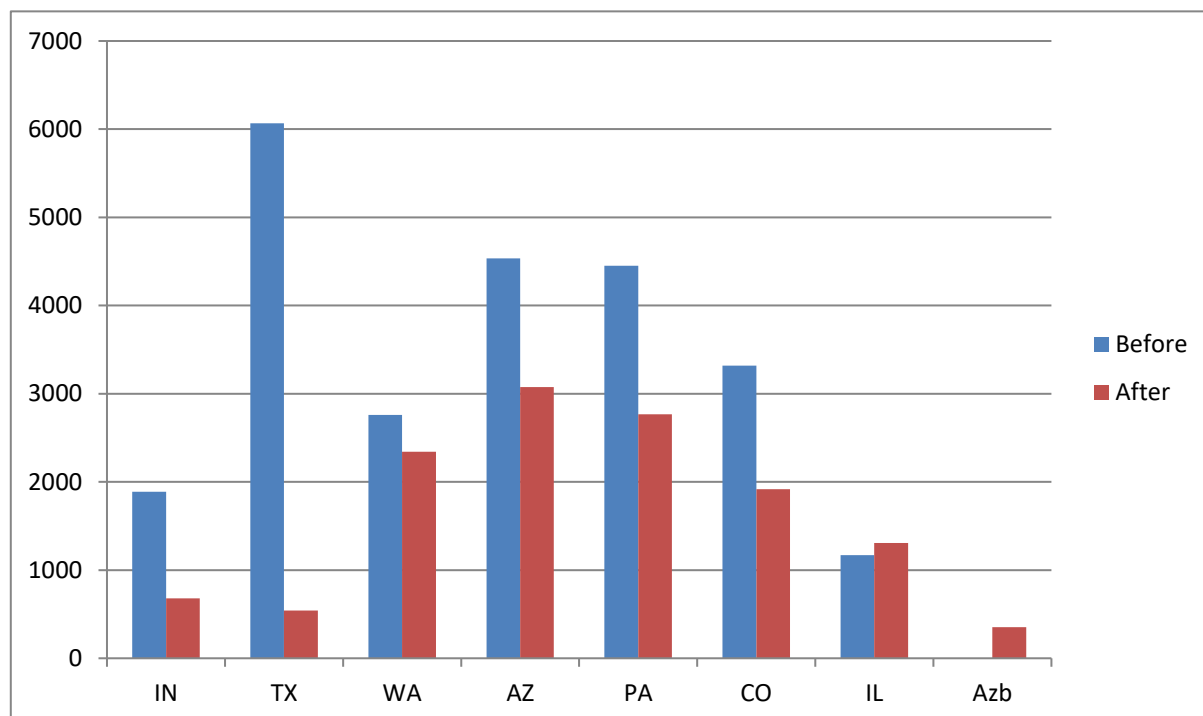


*Figure 18: Message totals per member, before and after Orlando*

6.9.4.2 Twitter

All group members were active Twitter users, in most cases users had a Twitter account that pre-existed their participation in the collab. Tweets were gathered from archives downloaded and submitted by collab members in all except two cases. For CO, tweets were gathered using the Twitter API, due to issues getting access to their personal archive. For IN, no tweets were gathered as they were unable to access their personal archive and Twitter API restrictions prohibited collection due to their large historic activity levels on the platform. Additionally, AZb did not have a Twitter account.

Of the 6 members for which data was gathered, a total of 9729 tweets were collected. Of these 1263 were directed to one or more members of the collab. Table 7. shows the number of tweets posted by collab members for which data is available. Overall, the number of tweets posted by members of the collab drops after the Orlando gathering by 14%, but the number of Tweets made to other members of the collab actually increases by 21%. As a result, the average number
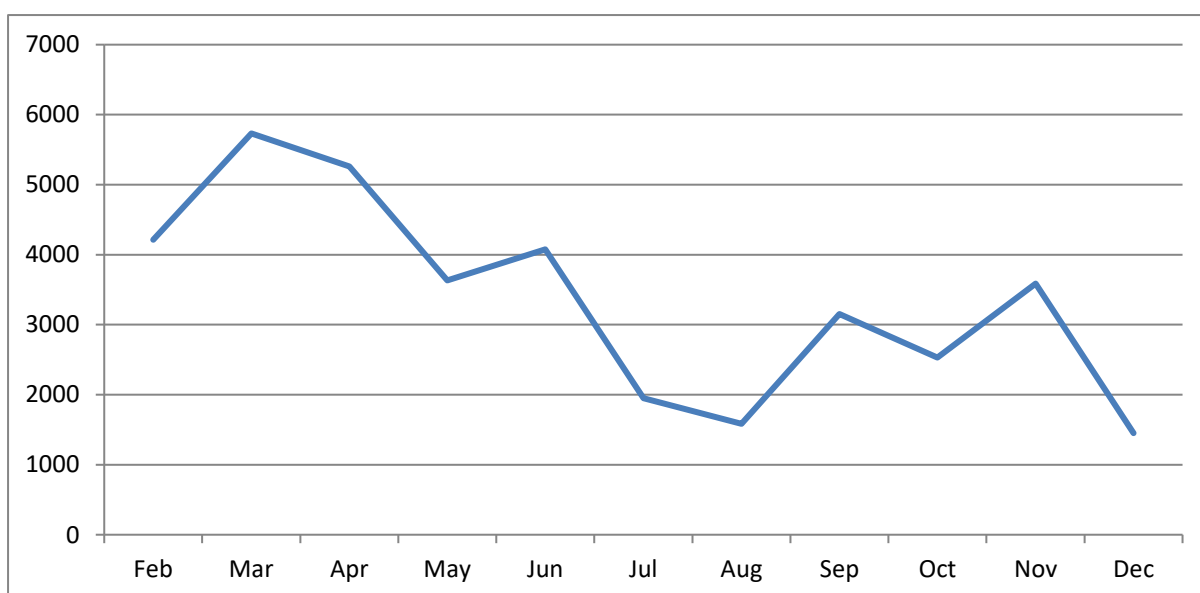


*Figure 19: Message rates per month for all members*

of tweets made to other collab members jumps from 11% of total tweets to 16% of total tweets, a 48% increase. Figure 20 shows the network diagram between members of the collab. Tweet exchange is more or less reciprocal, with the strongest interactions being between WA, TX and PA. IN makes up the smallest node in the bottom right corner, as outgoing tweet data for this member is incomplete.

### 6.9.4.3 YouTube

Data on a total of 246 YouTube videos produced during the study period was collected. On average videos were 4.2 minutes in length, this runtime remains constant both before and after the gathering.

Before the Orlando trip the channel had a 74% upload rate, meaning that 74% of the time a video was uploaded on an assigned day, either by the correct person or by someone they designated to replace them temporarily. After the meet-up this dropped to a rate of 68%.

*Table 7: Tweets before and after Orlando gathering*

| Group Member | Before | After | Before | After |
|---|---|---|---|---|
| AZ | 330 | 287 | 34 | 36 |
| WA | 1487 | 1127 | 147 | 196 |
| TX | 1344 | 708 | 192 | 203 |
| PA | 1141 | 1454 | 146 | 178 |
| CO | 387 | 278 | 32 | 29 |
| IL | 591 | 595 | 54 | 91 |

Additionally, channel views dropped dramatically following the Disney trip, by an average of 53%. Figure 21 shows the upload rates per month for each collab member's personal YouTube channel and the NFT channel. This shows that members had, on average, more activity on their
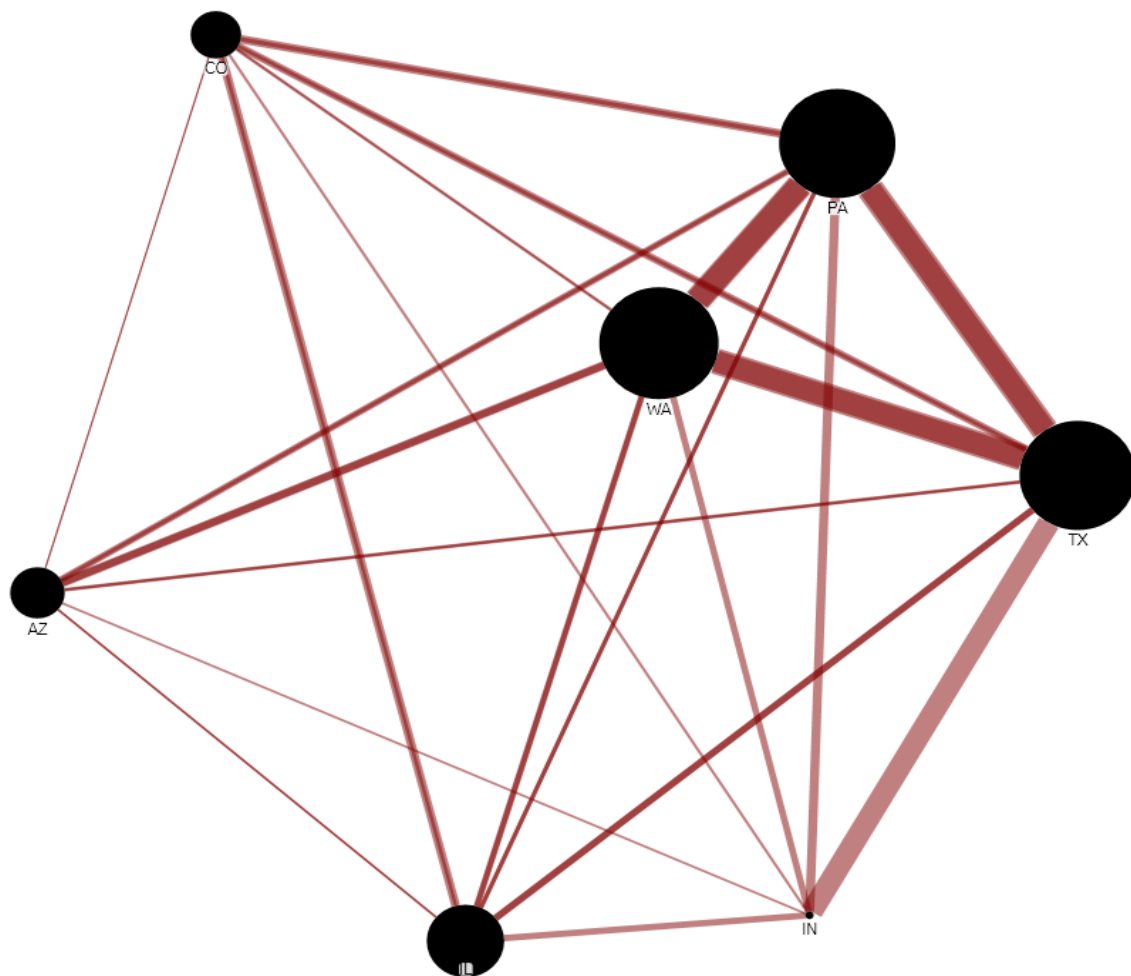


*Figure 20: Network diagram of Tweets among NFT members*
*Line weight represents number of messages sent (i.e., @ tagged) between each member.*
*Node size represents total number of tweets made during time period (i.e., how active they are)*
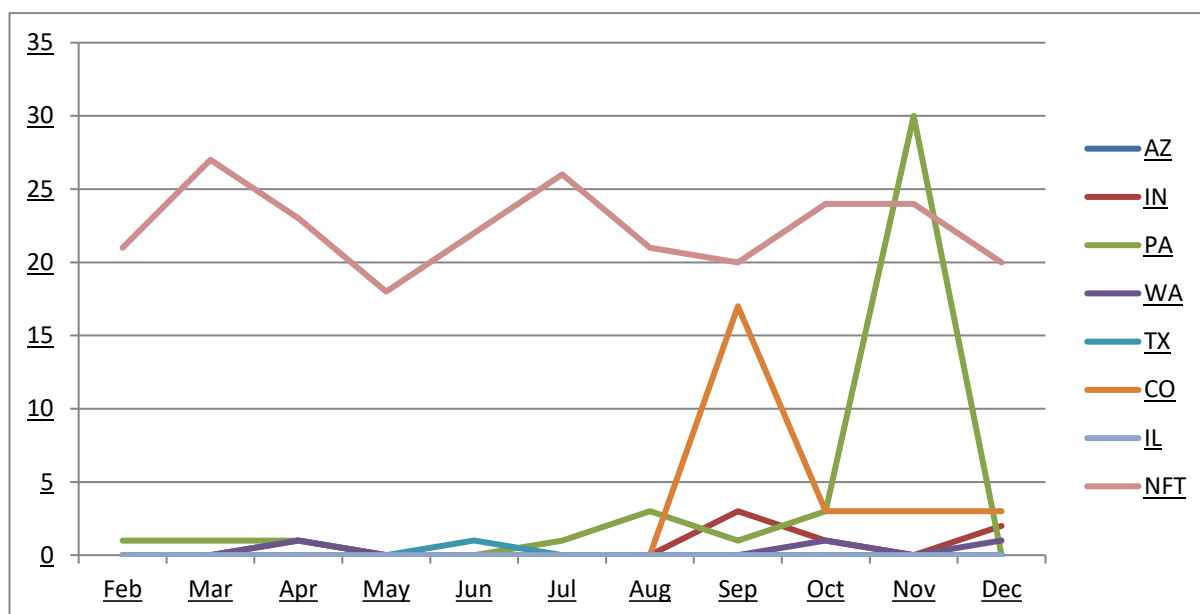
*Figure 21: YouTube upload rates for all users and NFT*

personal channels following the gathering than they had before it. With several members having considerably more activity.

6.9.4.4 Interviews

Interviews were conducted using a semi-structured protocol, all group members were contacted to participate in the study and five agreed to be interviewed. These interviews took place via Skype voice chat and lasted approximately 45 minutes. Interviewees were asked a variety of questions about the collab, the other members, and their experience of meeting in Orlando. The results can be categorized in the following areas:

*Communication*

All interviewees indicated that their primary methods of communication with others in the group didn't change following the meetup. Members interacted via YouTube, the Skype chat, and also text messaging for most 1-to-1 communication. Members also indicated that group Skype calls were very infrequent, occurring only once in the period studied, to finalize the

logistics of the Disney Trip. They also indicated that, other than a few emails, Skype was the primary method used to organize the gathering.

All members indicated a perceived increase in text message interaction with other members following the gathering. Several members were mentioned specifically as increasing their interactions with others in the group following the event, this was most often mentioned to be IL. One member described the change in text messaging frequency between the group as a "dramatic increase".

> "There was a lot more texting after Orlando, like a dramatic increase I would say. I was definitely texting loads more, especially with like IL and IN, but really with everyone. And sometimes calling too."
> - *"AZ"*

In addition to text messages, occasional phone calls between individuals 1-on-1 also occurred. Again, group members felt there was an increase with this following the Orlando meetup. TX noted that by the time of the Orlando meetup they had formed a close bond with IL and after Orlando phone conversations with IL were an almost everyday occurrence, which they welcomed. Members also indicated that they occasionally sent and received packages from one another, although this was infrequent and generally part of wider YouTube challenges within the community (and other collab channels).

*Video Production*

A common theme among interviewees was the perception of a self-imposed pressure to create and upload videos on their assigned days. Members felt, however, that following Disney there

was a lessening of this pressure. They became more at ease with missing upload days on occasion, understanding that they still had the Skype chat or text messaging to communicate with each other and to keep each other updated on their lives if they missed an upload.

> "I always tried to do something for my day, I felt bad if I missed it, and then I'd have to do a challenge too. But after Disney I kind of didn't feel so bad anymore, like we're all friends and we know stuff happens. I mean not that we weren't friends before Disney or anything, just that it was maybe more real after. I don't know, but I definitely missed days afterwards where everyone else just kind of let it go."
> - *"IL"*

> "Sometimes, especially in the early days, the first-time big stuff happened in people's lives it would be like the first time I'd hear about it was from their video – which was kind of the point you know. But as time went on, and definitely after the Disney trip, we'd be sharing these things in the Skype chat or texting."
> - *"WA"*

Most interviewees indicated they felt a sort of 'high' following the gathering, in relation to video production. One member spoke about how they thought the quality of the videos they produced as a collab were much higher immediately following the gathering. They perceived there to be much more interaction between group members following Orlando and specifically mentioned that they felt there was an increase in Skype chat activity and YouTube upload rates.

> "We made some great videos in Orlando, maybe some of the best we'd done. And afterwards it kind of felt like everyone stepped their game up a lot. I think our videos were riding a wave from Disney for weeks afterwards, everyone was uploading on their days, and we were all talking on Skype and coordinating out videos and stuff. And even CO, he was so funny because he wasn't there, so he was making these fake sulky videos and it was pretty funny."
> - *"PA"*

Despite much positive talk about their interactions with other members of the collab and their

frequency and quality of content uploads, members also indicated that they felt the Orlando

trip to be the beginning of the end of the collab. One member specifically pointed to the Orlando

meetup as the tipping point that led to the end of the collab, another bought up the subsequent

departure of TX as the point where the collab started to die.

> "Looking back on it, even though we like were super active with our videos and
> Skype and stuff after the trip. That was when it all started to unravel a bit, you
> know. Like we'd been making videos for 2 years to get to know some other nerds
> like us, to make friends and stuff, and now we've all met … well mostly … like
> we're friends now – do we need to be doing videos when we have school and
> stuff and like CO has a super tough job and making videos is a lot for him.
> - "*WA*"

> "When TX left, that was kind of it. Like we tried, I got AZb involved and we
> went on for a bit, but like most of us were still talking with TX a lot on text …
> and I guess IL and her speak a lot too … and so it seemed like we all kind of
> figured out the video thing was a lot of work when we are all doing other stuff
> and talking in other ways.
> - "*AZ*"

All interviewees agreed, either through direct interviews or statements via YouTube videos /

Twitter that they joined the collab as a way of forming friendships with the other members. For

most they felt that the gathering finally solidified these friendships, they even indicated they

felt closer to the one member who was absent from the gathering. One member also responded

that they felt that after Orlando the whole motivation behind making the videos – to form a

friendship – had been completed and they indicated this as the collabs overall death knell.

> "Like now it seems super obvious, the whole reason we started NFT was to get to know each other. And like after the trip it was like 'mission accomplished' we know each other now, we're friends. And we're still friends. The whole point of this thing was to make friendships and we did that, so it kind of ran its course, I guess. It sucks that we stopped, but it was going to happen eventually."
> - "IL"

> "And yeah, CO wasn't there, but we called him, and we chatted a bunch afterwards. Like we all wanted him there and it sucked he couldn't go, but I definitely felt as close to him as I did the others. I mean we actually ended up going to Comic-Con together a few years later, along with PA. Didn't feel weird we'd never met at all, just friends hanging out doing nerdy things, you know?"
> - "WA"

Overall, in the 6 months after the Orlando meetup, activity on the NFT collab channel was generally the same, but within a year of the meetup the channel actually stopped entirely. Members instead chose to continue their friendships via other communication media.

*Relationships*

A common theme in the interviews with group members was the discussion of the notion that their relationships with other group members felt more "real" after the meetup. Members also discuss the feeling that the substance of their relationships moved away from YouTube and their videos and to other communication media like text, calls, and Skype. Overall members indicated that they had an extremely positive experience at the Orlando meetup event. They felt their relationships with other members were stronger – even their feelings towards the member who was absent – and they took the experience to be the capping off point for solidifying their friendships with other members.

## 6.9.5  Discussion

Members of the NFT collab channel spent 2.5 years actively cultivating friendships through their YouTube collaboration. This included regular video production and communication via Skype chat, Twitter, and text messaging. In the early days of their collaboration, discussion away from their YouTube videos was mostly centered around the creation of content and associated logistics. As time went on, conversations in Skype became more personal, as did interactions on Twitter and, eventually, via text messaging. In the 6 months prior to their meetup event, members of the collab were actively using multiple channels to communicate with each other, both privately 1-to-1 and as a group – but their activity was still centered around the creation of YouTube content and their interactions via that medium. In addition to the logistics of organizing a meetup event.

However, once the collab members met in person, this changed. YouTube insight data and Skype chat logs indicate a decrease in productivity (i.e., video creation) and group interaction via Skype. The data clearly shows that Skype messages between the group decreased by almost half in the months following the Orlando meetup, and that only one member – IL – showed any increased message activity at all.

A detailed look at Figure 19 will note a downward trend in Skype messaging across the entire 12-month period being studied. However, as the bulk of the organization for the trip occurred in March and April, these months are artificially bolstered and a steady message rate of around 4,000 messages per month can be seen for February, May, and June, before a significant drop-off in July – the month the meetup event occurred in. Following the July/August slump in Skype messaging (which interviewees attributed to attendance at the meetup event and lots of

communication among the group spreading to more active text messaging) the Skype chat recovered somewhat to around 3,000 messages a month – a 25% decrease in overall activity. There is then a significant drop in activity in December as the collab begins to fall apart and video production starts to cease.

YouTube insight data shows similar results, although overall upload rates drop 8% after the gathering, the graph shows that the upload rate for NFT after is more or less in-line with that of before the gathering and is, in fact, considerably more stable than before. However, there is a notable increase in activity on personal channels following the gathering, which may well backup what some members mentioned in their interviews about a feeling of completion of the task of NFT – forming friendships – and a move back to creating videos on their personal channels. In the case of two members their video production is rather prolific after the meeting, if only for a short period. Additionally, data shows a drastic decrease in views for NFT videos towards the end of the 6-month period following the meetup. This could well be indicative of a decrease in the quality of those videos, which would in turn indicate a decrease in productivity. It was also suggested this could be because the videos were becoming increasingly based on things that had occurred during the Orlando meetup, and less about content that could be appreciated by all.

"I don't feel like we made less videos after Disney. I mean we made a bunch during it so maybe we did, but I don't think so. Less people were watching after that through, I don't remember the numbers, but I know PA mentioned it in the chat maybe a couple of months after. Basically, saying it feels like no one is watching us anymore. I think maybe it was because the videos started to become very cryptic if you weren't one of us, like talking about things that happened at Disney that you wouldn't know about if you weren't one of us. Like TX liked to joke about when I fell over a lot, but like no one else even knows what happened. It all started to just be stuff about Disney or little inside jokes we'd developed. Which is very entertaining for us, and CO too 'cause he knows from Skype, but to anyone outside it must have been really boring!"
- "WA"

The increase seen in Twitter interaction and the discussion from the interviews that there was an increase in text messaging following the gathering may well indicate that overall interaction moved mediums following the gathering. The Twitter app is well suited to mobile interaction, whereas Skype is considerably less so – even for its instant messaging features.

This increase in Twitter communication is also backed up by the interviewees' view of an increase in connectedness among members of the collab. Although some members felt this connectedness was through the YouTube videos and the Skype chat, evidence suggests a great deal of this was in fact facilitated by Twitter and text message interactions – as well as by phone calls in the case of some members.

Another important aspect to mention is the departure of TX. The reasons behind the individual leaving the collab were due to their taking part in a high intensity professional training program, where they felt they would have a reduced time to make videos. This individual attended college during most of the time the collab was running and had consistently uploaded videos. Their decision to depart is indicative of the general feeling among collab members that priorities had changed following the gathering. The collab was no longer about making

friendships, as those friendships had already been made, and solidified by meeting in person. As a result, TX felt less responsibility to continue making videos and chose to concentrate on their career instead.

The data collected from the interviews shows an interesting contrast to the quantitative data that was collected. The interviewees all felt they had developed stronger connections with the other members of the collab than they had before the gathering. Curiously this extended to CO, who was mentioned by more than one participant when discussing their feelings of connectedness to others in the group – even though CO was unable to be present. These stronger connections can be demonstrated through the previously mentioned perception of an increase in offline communication technologies. But other than the increase in Twitter posts there is little qualitative evidence for this from the dataset.

### 6.9.6  Conclusion

The case study presented here provides evidence that meeting in person has a significant impact on members of a collab group. While the relationships between the collab members clearly formed and developed over the time they were interaction online, the impact of their offline meeting had both a dramatic and long-lasting effect on all members of the collab.

Collab members stated clearly that they felt their relationships were "stronger" and "more real" following the Orlando meetup, they even felt a strength of connection with the one member of the group who didn't attend the meetup event. The activity of group members off the platform also increased following the meetup. Although levels of text communication and calling could not be independently measured in the study, self-reported communication levels from

interviewees point to a marked increase in activity on these more 'personal' channels. This is coupled with a significant decrease in activity on the group Skype IM channel, although a large part of the stark before/after levels in messaging are due to the logistical effort involved in organizing the meetup. It is clear that message activity levels never recover after Orlando and are around one-quarter of that from before.

The overall YouTube activity levels and Twitter interactions between members do not show as stark of an effect on interaction between collab members, although there does seem to be an increase in both in-group twitter activity and personal YouTube account activity following the meetup. The level of content production on the NFT channel remained largely the same before and after the meetup, seemingly due to the social obligation of producing content. But there is a hint of a quality drop in content and overall views do drop in the period following the meetup. It was also suggested that this might be due to an increase in videos being referential to the meetup and the eccentricities of the collab members' relationships – rather than content that could also be appreciated by those outside the group.

Although this case study only concentrated on a 12-month period centered around the meetup event, it is important to note that within 6 months following the end of the data reported here the NFT channel ended – with only occasional content being produced by group members before all activity ceased within 24 months.

The Orlando meetup was an important event for members of the NFT collab. As they state themselves, it was almost a turning point in their relationships where they became more real, and a key milestone in the aim of the NFT collab – to get to know each other. Once they felt

they had fully achieved this the collab began to fall apart, but the relationships between the collab members did not. This is perhaps best exemplified by TX who chose to leave the collab only a few months following the meetup to concentrate on their career. But who still maintained communication and friendships with the other collab members outside of the NFT YouTube and Skype channels.

This case study provides an interesting snapshot of one group of online friends and the impact of their real-life interaction. The evidence presented here suggests that while a great deal of friendship formation can and does happen online, it takes an in-person interaction to take that to the next level. And that often means a shift in the means and method of communication. In this case, away from the platform which facilitated the formation of those relationships in the first place.

## 6.10   YouTube: A Summary of Observed Impacts

Throughout this chapter and in the related case-study, I have outlined the discussions and observations I have had with members of the Nerdfighters community on YouTube. These results show a demonstrable impact from offline meetup events in relation to community members' future interactions with the community; and with friends they have made within it. This includes impacts on frequency of communication, interpersonal and romantic relationships, and participation with the YouTube platform.

Members of the Nerdfighter community are extremely open to forming online relationships of all manners and through all types of site interaction patterns. From creating content, to

commenting on videos, to being members of collab channels, Nerdfighters are prolific in their multitude of ways of communicating.

But while members of the Nerdfighter community were capable and willing to foster relationships online - and these online relationships are often strong - in-person interactions have a considerable impact on community members and the strength of their relationships. Following in-person interactions, community members discuss feelings of relationships as being "more real" and there is an increase in the strength of those relationships. From the case study it can also be seen that offline interactions can have significant effects, impacting communication patterns and mediums. As seen with members of the Reddit community, Nerdfighters will often shift to text and phone conversations more readily, and with an increased frequency following in-person interactions. With this group, as with Reddit, interactions via text/phone are often seen as the closest and most trusted form of communication. Community members usually do not pass on details of their phone number until they have met in person or are organizing an in-person meeting. But following in-person interactions a great deal of communication often shifts to this more 'personal' medium, indicating stronger ties and connections between those individuals as a consequence of in-person interaction.

It is clear from the results seen in this chapter that individuals in the Nerdfighter community feel an impact from in-person events, and even those not present can be impacted by the ripple effects of these meetings. What exactly this means in the wider context of this research will be discussed in the following chapter.

# Chapter 7: Discussion

Following the presentation of my findings in the previous chapter, I will now discuss these findings within the larger context of the research questions and the theoretical frameworks as previously laid out. Finally, I will consider the practical and theoretical implications of these findings, as well as the limitations of this research.

## 7.1    Summary of Research Questions

As previously discussed at the start of this dissertation, I laid out the following research questions which this study set out to answer:

RQ 1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

RQ 2: What impact does community members meeting offline have on the platform on which they originally interacted?

Through answering these questions, the goal of the research is to build an understanding of the driving forces behind the value that individuals place on offline interactions – as a part of membership within an online community – and understand the impacts of those interactions on the wider community and the original platform of interaction.

Through finding answers to these questions, this research has aimed to establish a fuller understanding of what individuals take away from their offline interactions. This insight can

then be used to inform the construction of future online platforms which may more easily meet the expectations and desires of a userbase which values interactions away from the platform itself.

## 7.2    Reviewing the Theoretical Frameworks

At the start of this dissertation, I discussed the theoretical approach to this work, namely that the findings would be viewed through a lens of informed grounded theory. Through this approach the findings would be considered with an open mind to new theoretical frameworks or patterns of behavior, consistent with a traditional grounded theory approach. While at the same time remaining aware of existing theories which are likely to be applicable to this work. The two theories that I have outlined in this work as being potentially relevant are:

*Media Synchronicity Theory*

Media Synchronicity Theory (MST) is a theoretical framework concerned with understanding how individuals pick the best communication media for their specific needs in a certain situation. It posits different communication media can be used in different phases of understanding, from communicating messaging to coming to a shared understanding (Conveyance and Convergence in MST). MST also describes in detail different communication processes that relate to the capabilities of the communication media that make it particularly well suited for this research. Utilizing MST as a lens through which to investigate this research will allow me to more readily identify how interactions between individuals change over time and across different communication media.

*Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) is a theory concerning how individuals become members of Communities of Practice over time. In LPP individuals progress from newcomers, to experienced members and eventually become a community's 'old timers'. As Communities of Practice do not have unrestricted access, individuals must legitimately participate in the community to break through the boundary to become novice members. In these cases, newcomers to a community are guided by the old-timers and experienced members and learn from them about the ins-and-outs of the community. Through these activities, newcomers become familiar with the eccentricities of the community. They gain access to – and become part of – the community's shared understanding, identity, and repertoire. Through these actions individuals move from peripheral activity to full participation in the community as novices, before eventually engaging more to become full members and eventually old-timers themselves. By applying LPP to the context of offline interactions it is possible to learn more about the specific processes of transitioning through the boundaries of a CoP and becoming an old-timer in such hybrid communities. This allows for the investigation of how these processes may be different from those observed in more traditionally studied Communities of Practice which exist purely in one space.

## 7.3    A Summary of Findings

Having revisited both the research questions and the theoretical frameworks discussed earlier in this dissertation, I will now begin to review how the findings of this work address the research questions. I will also look to understand how these findings might suggest patterns of behavior and novel theoretical lenses – while maintaining an awareness of the frameworks already outlined as being relevant.

## *7.3.1  Reddit*

Members of the Seattle Reddit community who first interact with others on Reddit and then subsequently meet in person, change the way in which they communicate with others after those in-person interactions. This is due to changes in relationships and methods of communication which lead, in turn, to changes to the way individuals interact with the wider community. The findings of this research can be broadly classed under three overarching themes in relation to offline meetup events: motivations, outcomes, and impacts.

### 7.3.1.1 Reddit: Motivations

For members of the Seattle Reddit community there are a variety of driving forces behind the desires for meeting in person. Largely these motivations are seated in a curiosity towards what offline events are like, and towards the real-life personas of other community members. Additionally, there is a very strong desire among newer members of the community to expand their social circle, especially those who are also new to the city. Community members also felt that attending meetups was a good way to find other people with similar interests and motivations, described by one community member as a way to "find your tribe". Often meetup events became ways for community members to discover other local communities and sub-communities of the wider Seattle Reddit community – such as those based on specific interests, sub-cultures, or other factors. These motivations did not change over time, with newcomers and old-timers alike mixing freely and attending events for the same motivations.

### 7.3.1.2 Reddit: Outcomes

For individuals who attended offline meetup events, the outcome of attending was the formation of friendships, relationships (including occasionally romantic relationships), and the building of strong social ties with other members of the Seattle Reddit community. That is not

to say that every individual who attended an offline event encountered this outcome. For some their curiosity would be sated at just attending a single event and moving on. But generally, participants noted positive attitudes towards offline meetup events, and for many attending these events reinforced to themselves that this was a community they were part of and of which they wanted to be a member.

Participants also indicated that meeting offline is something that intrinsically enhances and changes the experience of being a community member. That it adds 'something' that you can't always get by only interacting online. Making offline events not just a significant part of the community but an integral one that adds to the experience of being a community member. However, community members were strongly opposed to the perception that those who attended IRL events were any different to those who did not. It seems that they are unaware that their actions and the accounts of their changing relationships and interactions with the platform suggest the opposite is true. And that while they did not believe that individuals who don't attend offline events are 'less' or 'different' than those that do, the results of this research indicate that offline events do in fact have stark impacts on individuals' participation on the platform, separating them in a way from other members that do not attend these events. However, for the Seattle subreddit being an 'old timer' is not contingent on attending offline meetup events. Many old timers do not, but in some ways it's a fast-track to becoming a more established community member when you're new to Reddit and Seattle.

<u>7.3.1.3 Reddit: Impacts</u>

For members of the Seattle Reddit community attending offline meetup events was often a focal point for changing relationships between community members. Community members have an established common ground with social norms, community references and in-jokes which all exist as part of that relationship. The offline meetup serves mainly to underscore that the people they interact with online are actually the people they feel they are. Which they generally were – as established by  Bullingham & Vasconcelos, (2013) and Hogan, (2010) this is usually the case in online communities. Therefore, upon meeting in real life, community members essentially confirm their understanding of what another individual is like from their online persona. Relationships become stronger (or in some cases rapidly break apart), most often this meant interactions with each other shift to no longer being based solely around Reddit community activities, and Reddit is no longer the core communication media for their interactions.

Attendance at meetup events changed individual's patterns of interaction with those they had previously interacted with online. Community members would still interact with each other on Reddit as they had previously, but they would also add additional communication media as their relationships grew into stronger friendships (or romantic relationships). The decision to move to Facebook and other media (away from Reddit) was often described as being a more "personal" way to communicate – especially considering Reddit's emphasis on anonymity. Overall, attending offline events often fundamentally changed the relationships of people who had previously interacted only online, for the majority of the 21 participants I spoke with who shared Reddit meetup experiences attending the offline event became the jumping off point for closer relationships and friendships.

7.3.1.4 Reddit: Changing interactions with the community

As well as substantially impacting interpersonal relationships between community members, participating in offline meetup events also influenced individuals' subsequent interactions on the Reddit platform itself.

In the same way as members feel that you do not have to attend an offline event to be a full member of the community, there is also a perception that meeting offline doesn't impact their activity on Reddit or with other Redditors. However, at the same time individuals also outline the ways in which their communication with community members they've met in real life moves to other mediums over time. So, while community members felt that the way they interacted with people they first meet online did not change after meeting them in person, there is a measure of incompatibility between that understanding and the subsequent shifting nature of their relationships and communication.

It is clear from the results of this work that while the manner of interaction on the platform does not substantially change, the frequency of interaction does. In around half of the participants in this study there was a demonstrated decrease in activity over time following the attendance of offline meetup events. With some drastically decreasing their activity over time.

## 7.3.2 YouTube

The Nerdfighter community is much more amorphous than the Reddit community. Although both contain elements outside their core platform, Reddit is much more centralized than YouTube. Everything on Reddit is contained within a number of distinct subreddit's whereas on YouTube, YouTubers do not sit within a designated 'Nerdfighter' space. However, the

openness of YouTubers to cross collaborate and cross reference each other, as well as members of the community to actually engage with each other in the comments does work to create a defined and active community.

As with the findings from the Reddit community, the findings of this research can be broadly classed under three overarching themes in relation to offline meetup events: motivations, outcomes, and impacts.

7.3.2.1 YouTube: Motivations

Like Reddit, curiosity is a strong driver towards participants' attendance at offline meetup events. However, unlike Reddit some participants spoke about how there is sometimes a perceived 'social obligation' towards attending Nerdfighter gatherings – as these are often seen to be a large part of being a member of the community. Offline meetup events were also viewed as opportunities for community members who were introverted, or isolated, in their own lives to "be more themselves" and meet more likeminded individuals with whom they felt they could bond more closely – to also "Find their tribe". More commonly, however, individuals wanted to attend meetup events to make an IRL connection with friends they had made online. Position in the community of practice (newbie, established or old-timer) did not alter this desire to connect and to share in the collective experience that is a Nerdfighter meetup event. Overall, the main impetuses for members of the Nerdfighter community to meet offline were: curiosity, finding their tribe (finding individuals like themselves for support and networking) and making connections (a desire to meet those people they've been interacting with online).

7.3.2.2 YouTube: Outcomes

Members of the Nerdfighters community most often spoke of meetups as being significant in further developing friendships that had first formed online, and in solidifying a sense of connectedness to the community and their membership within it. In fact, community members often talked about how attending the meetups bought them closer to the community than they have previously felt and more connected to other individual members of the community – even if that wasn't the overall aim of their attendance at meetup events.

Through their interactions at offline events, community members found themselves building a stronger sense of community and increasing their feelings of connectedness to the Nerdfighters. This was strengthened further by the outcomes of the interactions they had at offline events, and that for most community members these felt 'normal' and matched – or exceeded – their expectations. For members of the Nerdfighters community, one of the main outcomes of attending offline meetups and Nerdfighter gatherings were distinct feelings of normalcy.

However, participants were keen to point out that attending meet-up events was not an exclusive activity. Participants were very aware that not everyone is able to attend meet-up events. Although they felt that meeting offline was an essential part of their experience of being a Nerdfighter, they also stated (somewhat in contradiction) that not doing so didn't make other members any less a part of the community. But for them, there is certainly an implicit indication that meeting IRL does change something both within them as community members and also in their relationships with others.

Ultimately, whatever the motivations for attendance, the outcomes remain similar – an increased sense of belonging to the community and stronger connections with individuals they have first met online. In fact, most participants had either attended multiple offline gatherings or were planning on future attendance after experiencing their first event.

7.3.2.3 YouTube: Impacts

For individuals who first met online, connecting at offline events often profoundly impacted their future relationships and the ways they interact with each other. In-person events are often key points in the relationships between community members, marking a significant change in their patterns and means of interaction. In the Nerdfighters community, individuals were readily open to referring to individuals with whom they only interact online as 'friends'. This is in stark contrast to the Reddit community, where individuals might feel familiarity and close ties to others in the community but would rarely refer to others as 'friends' without some element of offline interaction – largely due to the community's emphasis on anonymity.

This closeness online seen in the Nerdfighters seems strongly related to the more open and visual aspect of the community and YouTube. As a result, there wasn't as much of a change in the strength of relationships following offline interactions in the Nerdfighter community, as individuals tended to form quite strong connections online. For many, the initial offline meeting served mainly as a 'checkpoint' where they could confirm their opinions and impressions of those they had previously only interacted with online and continue with developing their relationships. Most usually – as offline meetings tended to 'confirm' individual's perceptions of others – relationships were described as becoming 'stronger' and 'closer', and once that

confirmation had occurred community members were happy to share more personal details such as cell phone numbers and Facebook account details.

One of the more significant impacts from meeting in real life among members of the Nerdfighter community was that of shifting patterns and mediums of communication. As the Nerdfighter community is somewhat decentralized compared to Reddit, community members would tend to complement their interactions with others in the community on YouTube with another platform, such as Facebook – where several Nerdfighter groups exist. Additionally, pre-meetup communication on other platforms was especially prevalent among individuals who were in groups (either collab channels, or people that had formed interconnected relationships through video sharing or in the comments) where IM channels like Facebook Messenger, Skype, or Discord where the preferred method of organizing IRL meetups.

While some community members shifted to complementary communication on other platforms prior to meetups, for most it was after meeting offline that community members would begin to communicate via other means such as text, phone, or instant messaging. This is not to say that communication via YouTube (either in video or comment form) ceased immediately, but often it was augmented more and more by other communication methods before eventually being supplanted altogether. For many, instant messaging seemed to hold a level of importance and closeness that was comparable to text messaging and the sharing of phone numbers. While members are more willing to share IM details than phone numbers, and where phone number sharing is an implicit signaling of closeness and trust (as observed in the Reddit community), interacting through IM is still a significant signifier of the development of a relationship among community members. Especially on Skype as opposed to Discord – which is known as a much

more public medium in general. In addition to this closeness as demonstrated in the sharing of phone numbers, community members often also shared mailing addresses to send care packages and letters with each other.

7.3.2.4 YouTube: Changing interactions with the community

In a similar fashion to the Reddit community, members of the Nerdfighter community indicated that they did not believe meeting in person substantially impacts their interaction with the community, or their use of YouTube. However, they also clearly discuss how their interactions and communication with other community members begins to shift away from YouTube over time once they have met in real life. And while some members do clearly demonstrate that their interactions with others via YouTube is merely augmented with interactions on other media – a net increase in communication – for most, their interactions across YouTube decrease over time as they shift to text, IM, social media, and other communication media. In some cases, this does eventually lead to a relative abandonment of the platform.

In the case study of a YouTube collab channel, once the collab members met in person, there was a stark change in interactions through the platform. YouTube insight data and Skype chat logs indicate a decrease in productivity (i.e., video creation) and even group interaction via IM. Skype messages between the group decreased by almost half in the months following their meetup, and only one member showed any increased message activity at all. Collab members stated clearly that they felt their relationships were "stronger" and "more real" following their meetup, they even felt a strength of connection with the one member of the group who didn't attend the meetup event. The activity of group members off the platform also increased following the meetup, level of text communication and calling could not be independently

measured in the study but self-reported communications from interviewees point to a marked increase in activity on these more 'personal' channels.

In the Nerdfighter community it is clear that while other communication mediums can and do augment activity on the YouTube platform, the real impact of meeting offline among members is a shift away from YouTube as a means of interaction. This is not to say that community members abandon YouTube entirely, nor do they abandon the Nerdfighter community either. But for the relationships they have fostered through the platform (and community), YouTube does not meet their needs as a way to nurture and grow their relationships as they become stronger following in-person interaction.

## 7.4    Addressing the Research Questions

Having re-visited the research questions and re-capped the results of this study, I will now lay out how these results help to provide answers to the research questions.

### 7.4.1 Research Question 1: How do members of different online communities change the ways they participate in those communities, after engaging in different kinds of offline experiences?

As re-capped at the start of this chapter, the purpose of the first research question was to uncover the outcomes of attending offline meetup events and future impact of those meetups on the way individuals interact and participate in an online community. This question provides a focus on subsequent communication with other individuals, as well as subsequent participation on the platform. However, uncovering initial motivations was also a key focus for this question; in order to provide a better overall context and understanding. The aim being to

build an insight into the driving forces behind the value that individuals place on offline interactions.

7.4.1.1 Motivations

For members of both the Seattle Reddit and Nerdfighters communities, the key motivations behind attending offline meetup events were three-fold.

First, community members were curious about these events. In many communities – including those studied here – offline meetup events are usually well established and much discussed events. This is especially true of new members of the community who are often keen to understand what offline events are about, and this often drives them to attend. That is not to say established members are also not curious, just that curiosity about the events themselves tends to be a stronger driver of attendance in newer members. Other facets of curiosity tend to drive members of all tenures however, mainly a curiosity about an individual or set of individuals. This was strongest in the Reddit community where anonymity is much more prevalent but was seen in both communities. In these cases, there was a curiosity to see if other individuals that community members had been interacting with online were as they present themselves, and if they were 'worth' further interacting with – potentially in new settings (offline or online). While curiosity is not a tenet of LPP in itself, it does add an interesting dimension in understanding the drivers behind progression through the Communities of Practice being studied here. Particularly in how the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation manifest themselves in these hybrid communities.

The second common motivation for attending offline meetup events was perhaps the strongest – the desire to "find your tribe" as described by a member of the Seattle Reddit community. In these cases, community members were driven by a desire to meet others like themselves, including some they had already interacted with online. This was seen in both the Nerdfighter and Reddit communities as a shared phenomenon, despite the fact that each community has a very different established base (geographical vs fan community). This is likely to be because although one community is much more general than the other, there is still a great deal of variety among members. In Reddit someone might 'find their tribe' in finding others with a shared desire to climb Mount Rainier[9], whereas in the Nerdfighter community it might be a group of Nerdfighters who also are really into Dungeons and Dragons. In each case the individual has found a subculture within the community which fits them best – and this is often a key driver for individuals in attending meetup events. Not necessarily to find others with such a specific interest to begin with, but merely to attend knowing there is a high likelihood they will meet other people who are like them, and who they might get on with. This is true for newcomers to both communities, but especially in the Seattle Reddit community and individuals who were new to the city itself. This behavior links closely to both the mentorship elements of Legitimate Peripheral Participation and utilization of high synchronicity interaction to build shared understanding, as described by Media Synchronicity Theory. Through meeting others like themselves who are already members of the community, individuals establish relationships and build a shared understanding (in the parlance of MST)

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[9] Mount Rainier, also known as Tahoma, Tacoma, Tacobet, or təqʷubəʔ, is a large active stratovolcano in the Cascade Range of the Pacific Northwest, located in Mount Rainier National Park about 59 miles (95 km) south-southeast of Seattle. (Source: Wikipedia)

of the community which enables them to further move through the community towards becoming an established member / old-timer.

The final common motivation among community members (specifically exemplified here in the Nerdfighter community, but equally plausible within a Reddit setting) was to make direct connections to specific individuals with whom they have previously been communicating online. This is distinct from common curiosity, where members might have a passive desire to see what certain individuals are like in real life, as it is rather a direct active goal of attending the meetup event. This type of motivation was seen in both communities but was a more common motivation in the YouTube community where there was often a lot of active 1-to-1 interaction online both on and off the platform prior to meetup events. Whereas on Reddit 1-to-1 interaction tended to be predominantly on the platform through comments.

<u>7.4.1.2 Outcomes</u>

Once individuals have been motivated to attend offline meetup events, there are then obvious outcomes which follow. For a few, these outcomes are clear and short-lived – in that they attend the events and either fail to "find their tribe" or fail to authenticate other individuals as who they perceived them to be. In which case they move on and return to the community – generally as they were before. But this is the minority of cases, most often individuals had very positive outcomes from attending IRL events and found those they interacted with to be accurate representations of their online selves. They felt a great sense of 'normalcy' in attending meetup events, like these interactions were not just a normal part of community life, but almost something they do every day – hang out with people like them.

Therefore, the core outcomes of attending offline meetup events for members of both communities studied was the formation of friendships, relationships, and the building of strong social ties. This demonstrates the processes of LPP as individuals move through their respective Communities of Practice as they continue to build a shared understanding and become established members of their community. After attending events, individuals felt stronger connections to both the individuals they met at the events, but also the community as well. Solidifying a sense of connectedness and closeness to the community and other community members – even those they had not interacted with offline. Again, demonstrating their movement through the Community of Practice in line with the processes of LPP. Individuals often spoke of offline meetup events as intrinsically enhancing the experience of being a member of the community – given them 'something' they can't get from online interactions alone. Curiously however, in both communities' individuals quickly and actively downplayed the importance of attending offline meetup events. While passively discussing these events it was clear there were strong, positive, and definitive outcomes to attending, as discussed above. But when actively discussing events, individuals tended to pull back. The reason for this is that individuals in both communities did not want to minimize the membership or contributions of those that do not, or cannot, attend offline events.

As such Nerdfighters and Seattle Redditors alike were very strongly opposed to the perception that individuals who attend offline events were better, or even just different, from those that do. Despite the fact the evidence from this research does point to a marked impact, and by association difference, to those that attend offline events. Certainly, in the Reddit community attending offline events was often a way to get a crash course in the community and accelerate an awareness of the standards and norms, enabling newcomers to transition to established

community members faster (Lave & Wenger, 1991). In YouTube, community members had similar experiences, as well as these events serving as key points in the relationships between community members – discussed below.

### 7.4.1.3 Impacts

As I have just discussed, the outcomes of meeting offline are changes to the relationships and interactions of members of the communities studied in this dissertation. Over time, those outcomes begin to have significant, wide-ranging impacts on the lives of community members. While the outcomes of attending offline meetings are a more general strengthening of a sense of community and social ties, the impacts are much more focused. For many, this took the form of significant changes to their relationships with others which they had first interacted with online. This includes changes to both their patterns and means of interaction. Offline events tended to function as 'checkpoints' for individuals to confirm others online personas, and once that check was complete relationships often changed rapidly, becoming 'stronger' and 'closer'. What is perhaps stranger is that there is evidence within the Nerdfighter community that this strengthening of relationships does not limit itself just to those who meet offline. In the case of a collab channel made up of several individuals, there were increases in the strength of relationships and feelings of closeness even with the individual in the group who did not actually attend the offline meetup event. This may well be due to the unique nature of collab channels as a singular entity made up of numerous individuals – as this was not evidenced elsewhere in either community. But there is clear evidence that the groups generally increase closeness with each other following their offline interactions, including the member who was not present.

This also tended to coincide with individuals moving their communications to new mediums. Most usually this took the form of moving communication to text messaging, instant messaging, voice calls, and other forms of social media (sharing phone numbers, adding each other on Facebook, Snapchat, Instagram etc.), and away from the platform they had originally met on. They would still interact with each other on the original platform, but this was increasingly augmented with interactions through other mediums. Most often mediums which were seen by participants as being more "personal" (particularly text and IM), as they had strong links with an individual's real-life identity. These more 'personal' mediums also tended to be of much higher synchronicity than those individuals had previously used when interacting, this shows a desire to build a stronger shared understanding following attending meetup events as individuals continue to build stronger interpersonal relationships. Eventually this movement to other platforms could move from augmenting the experience of interaction on the original platform, to supplanting it entirely. Additionally, for some individuals the most significant impact of attending offline meetup events was the formation of romantic relationships – this was seen in both communities, and in some cases IRL meetings led individuals into long term relationships and even marriage.

## 7.4.2 Research Question 2: What impact does community members meeting offline have on the platform on which they originally interacted?

The first research question focused on the impact that meeting offline has on individuals and their interpersonal relationships with other members of online communities. But offline interactions also have significant impacts on the platforms which host those online communities.

In both communities studied in this dissertation there were clear changes to the way individuals interacted on the platforms following their attendance at offline meetup events. This was primarily seen in a shift in communication to those channels deemed more 'personal' by individuals. Primarily text messaging and phone calls – but also instant messaging conversations. These channels facilitate communication of a higher synchronicity, thus allowing individuals to build a stronger shared understanding and further develop their relationships through the processes of Media Synchronicity Theory.

Almost exclusively across both platforms the increase in communication that followed offline interaction was not facilitated by the platform itself. In fact, it could be argued that neither platform even hosted the capability to enable this kind of communication. YouTube has no private message facility at all, and Reddit's is designed more around facilitating one-off private discussions about specific content, rather than long term ad hoc interactions. Although it now does host a private live chat feature it did not at the time of this research, and that feature is not widely utilized in the community.

In the Reddit community over half of the individuals interviewed showed a decrease in their interactions with the platform following meetups, with several experiencing a significant decline in interaction on the platform. For those that did not show a decrease, interaction with the community remained more or less static. At the same time community members were clear that they felt that meeting offline did not have an impact on the ways in which they interact with Reddit or the members of the community they have met in person. This clearly shows a separation between the perceptions of community members and the reality of their subsequent interactions. For some, the creation of these offline interactions would seem to have very

definite impacts on their subsequent use of Reddit, for others there is no impact on their Reddit usage overall but the increased interactions they report with other individuals they have met at offline events do not take place on the platform itself.

In YouTube see similar behavior is observed. Following offline meetup events, interactions with others that individuals meet at offline events moves off the platform. This behavior is generally rapid although it does not always have an immediate impact on their overall interactions with the platform. In the case of the YouTube collab channel studied in this work however, it was clear that meeting offline was a nexus point that led to an overall decrease in video production, and even in content generation through other shared platforms, such as the group IM chat, which were based around the creation of that content. Instead, interactions moved to other mediums which better facilitated the stronger relationships that formed following offline interactions.

In neither community did all members completely abandon the platform immediately following offline meetup events. However, both communities saw cases of significantly reduced interaction on the main platform (i.e., YouTube and Reddit) following meetup events, and in some cases there were users who did completely abandon the platforms over time – although this was not common. There is clear evidence therefore that platforms need to be concerned about the impacts that offline interactions have on the participation level of their userbase – especially as these platforms often actively encourage such meetups.

Given that community members do not actively see offline meetups as having a detrimental impact on their interactions with the hosting platforms, it is clear that the decreased activity

levels which follow offline meetups (and which users do not perceive) are not purposeful. But rather side effects of the fact that the hosting platforms cannot or do not facilitate the kind of interactions which community members wish to have following offline meetups. Therefore, if these platforms wish to abate these impacts on interactions, they may wish to look further into how they can facilitate closer relationships between their users – Reddit has attempted this in the recent past with the introduction of the Chat function, but seemingly this has not been received well by its userbase.

It, of course, may not be possible for these platforms to fully meet the needs of users when mobile phone-based communication seems to be the core medium of these more personal interactions – something that seems to be rooted in the possession of an individual's phone number as a significant demonstration of trust and closeness. But there may well be opportunities for these platforms to serve their users in similar ways.

## 7.5    Addressing the Theoretical Frameworks

This research utilized an informed grounded theory approach, staying open to the uncovering of new theoretical frameworks whilst maintaining an awareness of existing theory. The frameworks of Legitimate Peripheral Participation and Media Synchronicity Theory were chosen as lenses for this research and were outlined in Chapter 4. In this section I will discuss how the findings of this work can be understood through those lenses, before moving on to discuss the wider theoretical implications of this work.

## 7.5.1 *Legitimate Peripheral Participation*

Throughout this research, the members of both communities being studied demonstrated the expected actions of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) throughout their interactions and membership with their respective communities. r/Seattle's old-timers were users like u/AmericanDerp, who was also a mod but considerably more popular than Careless, or 'Barbie' a user whose first account 'u/Barbiedreamherse' was eventually banned site-wide but ran through a considerable number of alts (usually named after some derivation of her original account) to continue contributing. Meanwhile in the Nerdfighters community the oldest old-timers were clearly John and Hank – who created the community – but there were several well established 'senior' community members who had been around for many years; some of whom then ended up working for John and Hank in producing content.

Both communities feature a steady influx of new members and continue to grow over time. In-between these newcomers and old-timers, there are regular community members of varying experience, who also hold knowledge about the wider community but may not have the full exposure to all the nuances of the community that an old-timer might have. For example, in the Nerdfighters community there are many established members who have joined the community since the influx of new members that coincided with the release of The Fault In Our Stars movie (based on one of John's books). These members are now well established but are several years removed from the original Brotherhood 2.0 content and much of the community culture that comes with that. So, while they have much knowledge and are well established, they are often still learning about many of the events surrounding the start of the community in 2007.

In both communities, the predicated activities of Legitimate Peripheral Participation in action can also be seen, whereby newcomers will learn community norms, trends and history and then move through to become an old-timer. This is usually best seen directly when significant events happen in a community, such as the above-mentioned release of a movie based on one of John Green's books, or in the Seattle Reddit community it's usually a big local event such as the Seahawks making it to the Super Bowl or extreme weather events such as the 2021 heat wave. In each of these instances' newcomers come to a community and interact on the periphery, before learning more about the community and moving to become novice members via continued interaction on the respective platform. Although in the Seattle Reddit community some newcomers encountered barriers to LPP in that more established community members were often hostile towards questions and learning actions which are a normal part of LPP. This is particularly prevalent when newcomers might ask basic (in the opinions of established members), and common questions, which results in their posts being deleted or them being met with ridicule. The reasons for this, however, are not complex as the information generally sought this way is widely available through the subreddit's wiki pages that contain links to prior posts with common questions (such as about housing, social activities, the subreddit split etc.). So, while some individuals might find this immediate hostility to be off-putting the barrier to entry is still low as the information newbies often seek is available.

As community members became more exposed to each of the communities, they learned community norms and references in a manner commensurate with the expectations of LPP. For example, a newcomer to the Nerdfighter community might not initially understand the acronym 'FTL' which is used often by members (including John and Hank) but continued exposure to the community (including just asking in the comments) will soon reveal both its usage (to

express surprise) and that it stands for 'French the Llama'. Over time, as the individual interacts more with the community and becomes a more established member, they would then be more likely to become exposed to the origin of the term and the cultural significance to the community - in this the term FTL originates from a prank that was played on John.

In some cases, the learning of cultural norms and references was quite rapid as both communities are quite self-referential and have a lot of in-jokes. Old-timers and established community members are open and welcoming when referring to the origin of these jokes and/or norms, often posting links back to the original content that sparked the reference (as in the FTL example, above). Eventually members become old-timers, who sit at the core of the community, who collectively hold the institutional knowledge of the community either through having been around for long enough to have experienced the events or having learned that knowledge through the actions of LPP.

It also is clear from this research that the Community of Practice (CoP) that is the Seattle Reddit community is not limited to a single subreddit. This is clearly shown during the subreddit split when the community migrated to r/SeattleWA but often members still interacted on r/Seattle as well. Over time other subs and groups have also become parts of the CoP such as the Ladies of Seattle group or the Seattle Reddit Facebook group. But the core of the Seattle Reddit community remains the two subreddits r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA where a majority of the interaction between community members occurs, and importantly where most meetup events are organized and advertised. The Nerdfighter CoP is similarly decentralized. While the core of the community is very much based on and around the YouTube platform, there are significant parts of the community that do, and have previously, existed on other platforms

such as the Facebook groups or The Ning website. In both communities this decentralized aspect to the respective Communities of Practice does not significantly impact the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation on members of those communities. As these alternate locations are all encompassed within the wider CoP of that community, individuals still progress through to becoming an established member and beyond while interacting across the various parts of the wider CoP (e.g., posting on both r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA).

Finally, in both communities studied here, members were clear that attendance at offline meetup events was not a barrier to becoming established members of the community (and therefore also not barriers to eventually becoming old-timers). However, members of both communities still spoke of offline events feeling like "normal" parts of being a member of the community, and of attendance as an action that enhances participation within the community through creating new connections, building on existing ones, and sharing in a collective experience. This suggests that attendance at offline meetup events does have some impact upon individual's connectedness to the community and by extension on the kind of old-timer they are, even though community members themselves deny this. This in turn suggests there are behaviors within the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation occurring in these communities that have not been observed previously in LPP. Specifically, that some significant elements of what it is to be a community member, can either be skipped or have a transitive property wherein that experience can be relayed to other members without direct involvement.

### 7.5.2 Media Synchronicity Theory

As discussed in Chapter 5, unlike LPP which has a large corpus of work based in both offline and online environments (although little in hybrid settings), Media Synchronicity Theory MST

has been primarily seated in purely online contexts, but some prior work has (Zhang et al. (2008) and Randall (2011)) established that it is still applicable in hybrid environments.

In both communities being studied, individuals began their experiences utilizing asynchronous communication media. In Reddit, this is the forum-style post and reply system that is the core of the platform. It offers a single type of asynchronous dialogue that can sometimes be a rapid, almost synchronous, back a forth but is generally a slower interaction style – one that offers both the elements of rehearseability and reprocessability. Meanwhile in the YouTube community interactions are either via video posts or comments, both of which are also asynchronous, although videos may offer less opportunity for rehearseability and reprocessability (although certainly both are possible). The visual aspect of YouTube makes it a medium with a higher level of synchronicity due to the added symbol sets provided through non-verbal cues that would be otherwise invisible in text-based communication.

In MST lower synchronicity media are better suited for the Conveyance processes of the transmission of raw information and the individual retrospective analysis of that information. In Reddit, this would be represented through the reading of posts and replies, and in YouTube the watching of videos. Whereas higher synchronicity media (including face-to-face interactions) are better suited for the Convergence processes of building a shared understanding through the mapping of individual analysis to existing mental models (A. Dennis et al., 2008). Which in both communities studied here is best represented by face-to-face interactions but is also facilitated through simple text-based interactions as well. This is because Convergence processes can equally be supported by lower synchronicity media, it is just that such media is less well suited to support those processes. In fact, in both communities, individuals build a

shared understanding over time through utilizing the lower synchronicity media within their respective communities.

In both Reddit and YouTube, individuals engage in the Conveyance practices of gathering raw information about the community through asynchronous posting and commenting activities. This might be through re-watching old John and Hank videos in the Brotherhood 2.0 era when much of the community norms and core Nerdfighter culture was established. Or in Reddit this could be represented through the reading of the summary post on r/subredditdrama about the background and fallout of the split between r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA. Through actions like these, over time community members build up an understanding of their respective community and engage in Convergence processes of forming a shared understanding – particularly of community norms, in-jokes, and preferences. All without engaging in synchronous activities such as interacting offline. For some community members, this will be their entire experience on the platform, even for some old timers like Alan Lastufka in the Nerdfighter community. Alan is an author and co-founder of DFTBA records, a record label that produced music within (and tangential to) the Nerdfighter community (although today it is largely a merchandising company). He has been a Nerdfighter since the beginning of the Brotherhood 2.0 project and a key member of the community, certainly meeting the definition of an 'old timer'. However, he never attends meetup events such as VidCon, yet is still clearly a core member of the community.

While most community members will engage with the community using asynchronous communication prior to attending meetup events, there are some exceptions. This is mostly around the logistics of attending meetup events, where individuals may utilize communication

via more synchronous media for the organization of meetup events. Occasionally in the Reddit community, and more often in YouTube, individuals will share IM details or phone numbers (to allow text communication) in order to work out the logistics of meeting up, especially at larger events. In these cases, there is a specific need for the Convergence processes of MST to come to a shared understanding about when, where, and how they will meet in person. This behavior is also observed within the YouTube case study, where collab members have a Skype channel to enable synchronous communication to organize the running of their channel as well as the logistics of attending their own in-person meetup.

Once community members are attending offline events, they are clearly interacting in the most synchronous way possible – face to face. This enables them to build a shared understanding more rapidly through engaging in the Convergence practices of MST. In most cases of MST, the shared understanding users come to is centered around the completion of a task, in the social communities studied the overarching tasks are content creation, relationship development and growing interpersonal relationships. In Reddit this might take the form of simple conversations at the Global Reddit Meetup Day or side conversations in the Capitol Hill Boardgame Nights where individuals would learn more about the intricacies of the community and their fellow users. Similarly, at Vidcon there are dedicated Nerdfighter events where individuals get together and connect with each other, sharing stories and conversations. The shared understanding in these cases is about being a member of their respective communities and learning more about the intricacies of that community.

Following offline meetup events community members often return to interacting in the same asynchronous ways they had previously. Although many individuals (if they had not done so

already) will share the phone numbers, IM details, and other more synchronous channels with each other, which they see as a more 'personal' way to interact. This allows their asynchronous communication to be augmented with more synchronous text and phone-based interactions as they further develop their interpersonal relationships with each other. In the future they will often continue to meet face-to-face, again engaging in the Convergence processes of MST.

## 7.6    Theoretical Contributions

Having laid out how the results of this work can be viewed through the theoretical lenses of Legitimate Peripheral Participation (LPP) and Media Synchronicity Theory (MST), I will review how this work has provided contributions to both of these theories, and beyond into the wider corpus of computer mediated communication.

### 7.6.1  Contributions to LPP

Much prior work has investigated the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation and provided robust evidence to support it. This work builds on those prior studies, through a clear demonstration of the predicted processes of LPP occurring within both communities studied.

In both communities, individuals were observed to engage on the periphery of their respective communities before becoming newcomers and then, over time, developing into established community members before finally finding themselves as 'old-timers'. As community members move through their respective communities, they engage in situated learning, picking up the established norms, in jokes, and becoming part of the culture of those communities. As predicted by LPP.

This work therefore establishes LPP as a suitable lens through which to observe and understand these communities, it also provides additional support for the established theory of Legitimate Peripheral Participation. Beyond this, this research has also uncovered some unique factors which present themselves when applying LPP to these types of online communities that have not been previously observed.

In discussion of old-timers throughout this research, I have outlined the importance of mastery within a respective community in order to transition to become an old-timer in a Community of Practice (through the processes of LPP). In a Community of Practice there is most usually a skill, task or purpose that encompasses the shared practice. In the Reddit community this task is primarily based on the skill of information sharing but also general community building too. But in the Nerdfighters there is no overarching skill, the core practice is around relationship formation and community building. Both valid practices under Wenger's (2015) definitions of practice, but ones that demonstrate an interesting inversion of mastery from what is observed in a typical Community of Practice. In the Nerdfighters community true mastery comes not from demonstrating skill in content creation (be that prose, art, videography etc.) but in a deep understanding of the community lore. To be a Nerdfighter old-timer the ability to demonstrate skill is secondary, rather knowledge and understanding of the lore is primary. This is in contrast to the more traditionally situated Seattle Reddit Community where demonstrating skill in the understanding and navigating of the community norms in information sharing and knowledge generation are a primary skill, and knowledge of the lore is secondary – which is what is to be expected in a typical Community of Practice. Although even within the Seattle Reddit Community, the skill/lore dichotomy is much more balanced than would be typical, where knowledge of the community lore is still a critical part of being an old-timer. In viewing these

communities through the lens of LPP and Communities of Practice, we can observe that these communities offer a further atypical make-up than what might be usually expected in a traditional CoP, this presents an opportunity for further investigation.

Additionally, this also suggests that in situated learning environments which undergo the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation, there are cases where the transit from the periphery to the core is not always a predictably linear path. In both the Reddit and YouTube communities, members interact online, meet in person, and return to interacting in mediated settings (which may or may not be augmented by continued offline interactions in the future). The results of this research clearly demonstrate that meeting offline changes the ways in which individuals subsequently interact, both with other members of the community and with the community itself (in terms of participation). Individuals are clear that meeting offline "adds something" to the experience of being a member of their community and often the events at these meetups are referenced within the online community in the future (e.g., Careless' undesirable behavior towards certain community members in person, or the events of the case study groups meetup at Disneyworld). At the same time however, members of both communities were also clear that you do not 'have' to attend meetup events to be a full member of the community, or indeed an old-timer.  And there is clear evidence for this as some very senior 'old-timers' in both communities have never attended offline events.

From this research, it is not immediately clear what processes are actually at play, but it can be shown that members of both of the communities studied in this research experienced different paths to becoming old-timers depending on if they interacted online or not. It can also be shown – particularly from the case study of the YouTube collab channel – that the experience and

impacts of meeting offline can be transferred to members who did not actually participate in the offline meetup itself. This suggests that potentially these lived experiences can be transferred through a first-hand account to other members of the community – allowing those members to transit along the same linear path of LPP as t hose who attend meetup events, without actually having to have had those experience themselves. Alternatively, there is the potential that certain parts of the experience of being a community member are diversions off the linear path to becoming an old-timer and are, as such, not necessary for progression to the core. In the parlance of the traditional LPP example of Naval Quartermasters, learning how to bring a ship alongside a wharf and knowing traditional Navy drinking songs are both important skill-based cultural elements of the situated learning experience of becoming an experience Naval Quartermaster. But only the ability to actually navigate and dock the ship is truly necessary to become an old-timer.

There are several potential alternative LPP processes at play in these communities and as such there is great potential for future research to consider this further.

### 7.6.2  Contributions to MST

This research has continued to add to the relatively small corpus of research that utilizes Media Synchronicity Theory. In this work, I have demonstrated the validity of this theory and how it continues to work as an excellent lens through which to understand individual's choice of communication media for different purposes. This work has also continued to raise questions about some elements of Media Synchronicity Theory that were first noted by Randall (2011). Namely that the media capabilities introduced into MST by Dennis et al. (2008) do not always have the predicted impacts on synchronicity. Randall (2011) showed that the elements of

Reprocessability and Rehearseability did not lower synchronicity in a case study that examined a very rapidly changing environment that included many non-native English speakers. In this research similar impacts have been shown when applying MST to different spaces – in that the Reprocessability and Rehearseability offered by Reddit commenting and IM conversations did not provide for lower levels of synchronicity. The mediums utilized in the communities studied still enabled individuals to come to shared understandings even when they did not utilize media which enabled higher levels of synchronicity.

Beyond providing further evidence for the validity of Media Synchronicity Theory, and questioning some of its later elements, this research also builds on the theory to demonstrate the applicability of Media Synchronicity Theory in hybrid social environments. MST has not previously been applied to a hybrid environment such as those studied in this work before, and this research shows that it is valid and applicable to these communities.

This work also suggests that the processes behind MST may be better understood if the goal of a task was taken into account. It is clear from both communities studied in this work that media of high synchronicity is not necessary to form shared understanding, something Media Synchronicity Theory does allude to. But MST suggests that past familiarity is the key factor for lowering the need for high synchronicity media. This research posits that is not necessarily the case and that experience required to lower the need for synchronous media can be built up over time. In other words, the more individuals interact with each other using lower synchronicity media, the more they build a familiarity (with each other and the media) and an understanding of social norms. This in turn reduces the need for more synchronous media to facilitate the forming of a shared understanding.

More curiously, while this research shows that asynchronous media can still facilitate the formation of a shared understanding, it also shows that this is only the case for community building and not for the development of interpersonal relationships. While individuals can, and do, interact only online the development of close personal relationships requires the use of synchronous communication media – although this does not have to be predominately face-to-face interaction. In both communities this research demonstrates after attending offline meetup events and interacting in a synchronous face-to-face manner subsequent communication between individuals was always facilitated by more synchronous media (often in addition to asynchronous interactions as well), as their relationships grew. In some cases, more synchronous media was utilized prior to a face-to-face meeting, but most usually for organization and logistics concerned with meeting face-to-face. Only in cases where individuals did not get along (usually due to misrepresentation) was there a default fallback to only the original asynchronous media. In the words of the participants in this research, the utilization of more 'personal' (i.e., also more synchronous) communication media such as text messaging, IM and phone calls was called for as relationships advanced. In the cases of senior community members and old-timers who did not ever attend offline events, the utilization of that media was not necessary (although sometimes used) for them to gather a full understanding of the community and form a shared understanding.

### 7.6.3  MST & LPP

Finally, this research is the first to use both the lenses of Media Synchronicity Theory and Legitimate Peripheral Participation together in understanding the actions of membership in an online community.

While this research clearly shows that each theory can separately explain the actions of members of these communities, together they can help us form a more structured understanding of the communication processes of individuals as they progress through a community of practice. And being to generate an insight into individual's media choice in different points throughout their membership of an online community.

In LPP, individuals begin their life as community members by engaging on the periphery of the community. In MST terms, the task they are undertaking at this stage is one of Conveyance – they are taking in large amounts of information and processing it as part of forming an isolated understanding of the community.

As individuals move into the community and establish themselves as novice members, they begin to engage in both the Conveyance *and* Convergence practices of MST. They are still primarily engaging in the Conveyance processes (consuming and processing information about the community in isolation) but as they begin to become more active in the community, they naturally start to being to utilize the Convergence processes of MST to further develop their understanding of the community by taking in information from more senior members which is more distilled. At this phase, they actively engage with other community members and work towards building understanding of social norms and group culture.

*Table 8: The side-by-side process of MST and LPP*

| Media Synchronicity Theory | Legitimate Peripheral Participation |
|---|---|
| *Conveyance practices*<br><br>Taking in large amounts of raw information and processing it retrospectively | *Engagement on the periphery*<br><br>Gathering an understanding of the community, establishing if it is for them |
| *Conveyance practices (Primary)*<br><br>Continuing to take in raw information and processing it on their own terms.<br><br>*Convergence practices (Secondary)*<br><br>Further developing their understanding of the community by taking in information that is more familiar and distilled. | *Becoming a member of the community*<br><br>Establishing themselves as novice members of the community<br><br>Actively engaging with other community members to build understanding of social norms and group culture. |
| *Convergence practices (Primary)*<br><br>Refining the shared understanding of the community through part-ownership of its institutional memory<br><br>*Conveyance practices (Secondary)*<br><br>Distribution of information throughout the community, particularly to more junior members. | *Existing as established member / old-timer*<br><br>As established members / old-timers individuals actively engage with the community, transmitting knowledge to more novice members |

Finally, individuals become established members/old-timers in the community. They have formed a shared understanding and an awareness of community norms, parlance, and custom. At this stage community members are primarily utilizing the Convergence processes of MST as they further refine the shared understanding of the community through part-ownership of its institutional memory. They also continue to utilize Conveyance processes at this stage, but to a lesser degree, as they pass on this shared understanding throughout community – particularly to more novice members.

Therefore, MST provides a picture into the communication processes occurring at the different stages of LPP as individuals move through the Community of Practice of an online community. This is particularly useful as it enables us to gather a better understanding of the media capabilities individuals need at different stages of their engagement with a community. For example, online platforms may not wish make a hard push for introducing synchronous IM channels when members first join a platform and instead allow for members to naturally transition to engagement on those channels once they reach the point on their journey of community membership where they would benefit the most from it. This research has shown that in naturalistic settings this is what happens, as individuals engage on the periphery happily utilizing asynchronous media and then progress to more synchronous (including face-to-face) media as they move towards becoming more established members of the community (i.e., joining community Discord channels, IRC chat etc.).

## 7.7    Implications

This research suggests some interesting implications for the design of platforms which host online communities, based on the observed impacts of community members meeting in real life. Currently, most of these platforms work to actively encourage offline meetup events between users, even hosting huge annual conferences for that sole purpose. However, it is also clear that the platforms may not be fully aware of the impact these offline meetups are having on their userbase, and potentially on their user attrition levels.

This research shows that meeting offline has a direct impact on members of online communities. It leads to increased closeness and interaction between those that meet offline, but often these increases are coupled with a shift away from the platform that hosts the online community. Evidence from this research suggests the reason why individuals shift away from the platforms which host the communities is not because they lose a desire to be a member of that community, but because the platform cannot facilitate the communication processes needed by these individuals to further develop their relationships. In fact, most individuals do not stop interacting with the community after attending offline meetup events, for many it has no impact in this respect at all, they are actually increasing their interactions but moving them away from the original platform to a place that better meets their needs. Participants often spoke of shifting to more 'personal' methods of communication such as sharing phone numbers to facilitate texting or sharing IM usernames. It is not coincidence that these 'personal' methods of interaction are also more synchronous and enable individuals to better form a shared understanding with each other and build close relationships. Most often individuals still retain membership of the communities in which they attend offline meetups, even if they do shift some of their interactions to other platforms. Meeting offline does not suddenly make people

want to abandon online communities; it merely opens up other avenues for interaction that the hosting platforms may not facilitate.

Therefore, platforms which host online communities are risking increased levels of user attrition through not designing for the consequences of offline meetup events. Importantly, however, this research also shows that in offering more features with increased synchronicity, in the support of these users, platforms also need to be careful in how they offer these features. Individuals engaging in communities on the periphery only have a limited need for high synchronicity media as they are primarily taking information in and processing it themselves. Platforms may therefore need to consider how and when they offer high synchronicity features (such as chat features) as users will generally need lower synchronicity media at the start of their interactions with a community in the early processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation. In delaying offering such features to users until they are more established in a community, users may be more comfortable interacting with others using them.

This has actually already been observed to some extent on the platforms in this research. At the time the fieldwork for this study took place, neither platform offered a synchronous communication feature. However, since then both have tried to roll out features that would potentially have positive impacts on individuals that meet offline, and on the platforms themselves. Reddit rolled out a live chat feature but pushed it very hard and it has largely been a failure. This could well be because it is not an appropriate medium for many users and therefore was not targeted correctly. Similarly, YouTube has tried several different features aimed at providing a more one-to-one experience between content creators and community members – which also allow crosstalk between individuals in the chat. This has been more

successful but does not adequately support 1-2-1 discussion between two individuals in the manner needed to support the development of interpersonal relationships.

Further to the implications of this research on the design of platforms, there are also implications from this work around the broader academic practice of Computer Mediated Communication. Firstly, it should be noted that there is a rather large elephant in the room that has not yet been noted in this work: COVID-19. The fieldwork presented in this research was conducted prior to the worldwide coronavirus pandemic that began in early 2020. Covid has had a demonstrable impact on the ability of members of online communities to meet in real life in recent years. VidCon 2020 and 2021 were cancelled and Reddit has not sponsored a Global Reddit Meetup Day since 2019 due to the continued fallout of the pandemic. In terms of the Nerdfighters community more meetup events have started to emerge more recently, with VidCon 2022 taking place – although at much reduced attendance compared to 2019 – and John doing some tour events to promote one of his books. Things are much more reserved in the Seattle Reddit community however, with less meetup events being advertised across both r/Seattle and r/SeattleWA. Therefore, it is clear that Covid has had significant implications for the outcomes of this research as the communities have demonstrably changed as people are still reticent to meetup for casual interactions with strangers when there is a risk of Covid infection still lingering. Meanwhile online interaction patterns have also changed as more synchronous online media choices have ramped up between community members – particularly instant messaging, where both the Nerdfighters and Seattle Reddit community have active Discord servers which facilitate a lot of interaction between members. This is a direct result of the pandemic as Discord use had exploded since early 2020 in both communities. There are

therefore also opportunities here for future work to investigate in more detail the impacts of the pandemic on these communities – which I will address later.

Covid is not the only significant change that will have implications for this work, and the outcomes presented in this study. When this research was being planned out in the pilot phase the larger corpus of research on Computer Mediated Communication (CMC) was still significantly platform centric. That is to say that large amounts of academic research were focusing on communities contained to single platforms, where membership and activity on that platform was a large part of the personal identify of community members. Researchers were focusing on "Wikipedians", "Facebookers", and "YouTubers". However, even as this research began to ramp up, CMC research had begun to move on to a non-platform centric approach – as indeed had many of the members of those respective platforms (McGrath, 2015). Therefore, while this research and the results presented here are still valid, there are still implications that the approach may be somewhat dated. However, at the same time this research presents an interesting bridge between the platform-centric approach of the past and the current community-based approach seen in a lot of the CMC research today.

On one hand the Nerdfighters community presents a clear case of a cross-platform community that spans numerous touchpoints both offline and online. While the community was targeted on a platform centric basis, the findings of this study point to a great deal of activity beyond just YouTube, Minecraft, Discord, Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, TikTok and numerous other platforms all serve to augment the experience of being a Nerdfighters in numerous ways. And while YouTube still forms the core of the community, and there are many YouTube content creators heavily involved in the community at its core, it is clear that approaching the

Nerdfighters as a 'YouTube Community' is increasingly less valid – even more so post-pandemic. In fact, most Nerdfighters would likely not self-identify as 'YouTubers' today. This provides implications that this research is more in line with the current trends in CMC research, however the Reddit community presents a different case. The research showed that the members of the Seattle Reddit community largely interacted through Reddit for their online interactions, and that the 'other' spaces outside of Reddit were very minimal and did truly serve to augment the Reddit experience in minor ways – according to the accounts of participants. These community members are still thinking of themselves as 'Redditors', and it is still valid to describe them as such.

The overarching implication here is that non-platform centric communities and platform-centric communities aren't all that different. Given the similarities in the findings across both communities it is clear the results of this work are both valid and offer interesting insight for the wider academic CMC research community into how both these types of communities are comparable.

## 7.8    Opportunities for Future Research

The findings of this work suggest several avenues for future research, across multiple aspects of the results.

From the outset, this research chose a targeted approach of informed grounded theory in order to be able to uncover new theoretical approaches while maintaining an awareness of existing theoretical lenses. Through the findings of this work, it became apparent that much of what was being seen could be adequately understood using the theories of LPP and MST and the

novel way this research has combined the two. The clear exception to this, however, was the way in which individuals actively chose to deny the impacts of offline meetup events. This 'meetup denial' was clearly observed in both communities and took exactly the same form: participants would attend offline meetup events that would have significant and demonstrable impacts upon their lives and their future interactions with the community but claim that attending such meetups was not necessary or significant part of being a member of the community.

These observations do not have enough evidence available in this study to offer a well-rounded novel theory, but this research certainly presents an opportunity to explore these processes and observations further. It is suggested the future research should be undertaken to focus heavily on this pattern of 'meetup denial'. Researchers should use this work as a basis for understanding individuals' motives and impacts from meeting offline and then go further to focus on why individuals insist that these offline meetings have no impact on them. It is suggested the researchers pick similar communities (i.e., those that are community based, rather than task based) on alternative platforms where levels of interaction with the platform can be easily tracked, in order to get the most thorough understanding of the actual impacts of meeting offline on individuals' 'productivity' on the platform. It is suggested that future investigations observe individuals on parallel tracks through a similar Community of Practice, where one member does not attend meetup events, and another does. This may offer critical additional insights into the claims of 'meetup denial' by members. Similarly, it is suggested that future research delve deeper into forming an understanding of exactly what aspects of community membership individuals feel are not impacted by attending offline meetup events. It is also suggested that individuals who make similar claims of 'meetup denial' be presented

with evidence of demonstrable impacts to their own patterns of interaction and future communication / interpersonal relationships with other members, to see if a retrospective understanding of the impacts by these members can further elucidate the origin of their claims.

In addition to further work in developing novel theory from the results of this research, there are also presented here additional opportunities to provide more context to existing theory. More specifically, in this research there are presented several different potential processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation that could be occurring in the communities studied. This presents a significant area of potential future research. From this work, it can be seen that individuals in the communities being studied are going through LPP process that are not necessarily following the linear path as predicted by the theory. However, this research does not have enough evidence to conclusively identify the processes going on here, although 3 alternative approaches have been suggested:

1. Offline experiences are transferable to the first degree. Somewhat like hearing the first-hand account of a historical event.

2. There are parallel streams moving through Communities of Practice where members engage on the periphery and move into the CoP on a common stream and then those that attend meetup events (the assumption is awareness of and attendance at meetup events requires novice membership) split into a different path towards becoming an old-timer. Anyone can move from an online only path to the offline path at any point in their journey through the CoP (up to and including becoming an old-timer) but can never move back.

3. The linear path towards the center of a CoP includes primary and secondary experiences. Where primary experiences must occur for progression through the CoP (e.g., Naval Quartermasters learning to navigate through fog), secondary experiences can be skipped over on the journey to being an old-timer (e.g., Naval Quartermasters learning traditional navy drinking songs).

Future research should look to further investigate these potential explanations for LPP processes in hybrid communities and understand if one, or more, of these alternative processes is occurring – and what the potential impacts could be on Situated Learning practices as a result.

There are also other opportunities presented here as a result of this work, being the first to pair Media Synchronicity Theory with Legitimate Peripheral Participation. As previously discussed, in applying the two theories together researchers can utilize MST to provide a deeper understanding into the communication processes occurring at the different stages of LPP. Future research can use these findings to set up dedicated studies which target the understanding of media choice as a part of membership in an online community; specifically in how different stages of membership in communities (and associated Communities of Practice) impacts media choice. This will allow a more detailed understanding of what media capabilities individuals need at different stages of their engagement with a community. There are particular opportunities here to investigate this from a platform perspective and understand if targeting specific tools at specific times in an individual's interaction with a community might impact their continued use of the platforms. For example, future researchers might investigate the impacts of targeting integrated instant messaging functions to members with

longevity on a platform (and therefore by associating within some/many communities), compared with those who have just joined. This could help platforms understand if they need to be very selective in how they offer capabilities to their members and uncover any unintended consequences from potentially mistargeting capabilities towards users.

The unique application of these two theories together offers opportunities to further understand the processes of Legitimate Peripheral Participation in a new light. As laid out in this research the different stages of LPP which individuals go through as they move towards the center of a Community of Practice can be understood through the Conveyance and Convergence practices of MST. In utilizing this approach, future research can provide an opportunity to delve deeper into this combination of the theories to understand how media choice might impact the speed at which an individual moves from the periphery of a community to the core. This study alludes to the fact that individuals rapidly gain access to a community's shared understanding when they attend offline meetup events. As one of the core requirements for becoming an old-timer in a Community of Practice is an understanding, and eventually shared ownership, of a community's shared understanding and repertoire, it can therefore be hypothesized that engagement in the Convergence processes of MST can speed up the ability of an individual to transition towards the center of a Community of Practice. Future research should take the lead from this work and explore further this hypothesis to gather a deeper and more nuanced understanding in how these two theories complement each other and can further our understanding of the workings of online communities.

In addition to providing opportunities for platform operators, and deeper insights into progression through a CoP, further research into the combination of MST and LPP could also

provide robust basis for a combined theoretical framework that can aid in Situated Learning and guiding individuals through a Community of Practice in the most effective and efficient way possible.

Finally, this research also presents an interesting "before" window into online communities immediately prior to the worldwide COVID-19 pandemic. As laid out in the implications section, while this research provides valuable and novel insight into these communities, a great deal has changed in the world since the data collection phase of this study. Therefore, it is recommended that future researchers take this unique opportunity to utilize the results of this work for comparative studies into online communities to better understand how they have changed following the pandemic. Particularly focusing on how individuals desire to attend offline events has changed over time, and if shifting communication patterns during the peak of the pandemic (i.e., increased Discord usage) has altered individuals outlook towards interacting with others at offline events.

## 7.9    Limitations

Finally, I wish to acknowledge some of the limitations of this research. Foremost in the choice of communities chosen for this study. Although both online communities and platforms are valid ones, they are inherently a very, very small drop of a very, very big ocean. Online communities of all types exist across many different platforms and while interesting, diverse, and novel findings have come from this research, it does stand that these findings might not be transferrable to communities that exist on very different platforms – for example IM platforms such as Discord or IRC. There are, of course, opportunities to extend this research out into

those spaces, but this research in itself limits its validity to these spaces in which initial communication and information transfer is inherently asynchronous.

Additionally, the means by which recruitment was conducted for this research may also provide a limitation to these results. Participants were recruited at, or around, offline meetup events. Whereby adverts for participation in the study were placed in groups and threads concerning the specific meetup events (i.e., VidCon or NerdCon) or general calls for participation online for those who had, had experiences meeting others from the community in real life. This may open the results of this research to influence from participation bias, as those who have had positive and influential experiences through attendance at offline meetup events are more likely to have responded to the call for participation. And while participants did certainly share some negative experiences of real-life interactions, it is likely those individuals who had a much more tapered response to interacting with other offline (i.e. interacted cordially, found it wasn't special or wasn't for them, and returned to online only interactions at the same level) would have been less inclined to respond to the call for participation, and thus may be a missing population segment from this research.

There are also obvious limitations in this work presented by the COVID-19 pandemic. As the entirety of the fieldwork in this research was conducted prior to the pandemic there is the potential for the outlook of community members towards offline meetups to have changed in some way. This clearly presents opportunities for future research, as outlined above, but is also a potential limitation of the outcomes of this research.

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# Appendix A: Terminology

| Term | Description |
|------|-------------|
| *Alt* | Alternative Reddit user account |
| *Circle jerk* | Term used on Reddit to describe a sub-group of people with similar beliefs that self-validate one another. Often dedicated satire subreddits appear to poke fun at these individuals |
| *Collab* | A YouTube channel which has multiple people posting videos |
| *Collab Channel* | See: Collab |
| *Comments Section* | Place on YouTube videos where other YouTubers can make comments. Often derided as a place for 'trolls' |
| *Creator* | Term YouTube used to describe its users who post videos |
| *Cross post* | Taking content posted on one subreddit and posting it to another subreddit |
| *DFTBA* | 'Don't Forget to be Awesome' phrase often used in the Nerdfighter community. Either as a sign-off or exclamation |
| *Karma* | The point system Reddit users to upvote and downvote posts and comments |
| *Mod* | Administrator of a subreddit. In charge of blocking / banning individuals and curating content on the sub |
| *Redditor* | User on the Reddit site |
| *Shadow Ban* | Reddit reference to the act of being banned from commenting and posting but the user is unaware of the act |

| | |
|---|---|
| *Sub (or Subreddit)* | Subs are the individual subreddits which are related to specific topics such as r/Seattle. All subs start with 'r/' as an indication of the full URL 'www.reddit.com/r/[SUBREDDIT]' |
| *TL;DR* | Too long; Didn't Read |
| *Vlog* | A video blog. A popular format for YouTube videos, especially for early adopters to the platform |
| *YouTube Channel* | This is a YouTube account, where members can post videos online |
| *YouTuber* | User on the YouTube site |

# Appendix B: IRB Materials

## B-1: Human Subject Approval

The following are materials related to the approval of this study by the University of Washington Human Subject Division. This includes the initial study and a modification to include additional funding information.

{Starts on Following Page}

**David Randall <dpr47@uw.edu>**

## Approval of Human Subjects Application #49991-EJ, "Determining the Impact of Offline Meetings on Individuals & Groups Who First Meet Online"

**R Brzustowicz** <brz@uw.edu>                                                      Thu, Aug 6, 2015 at 11:34 AM
To: "David P. Randall" <dpr47@uw.edu>
Cc: Cortney Leach <cjohnso@uw.edu>

Dear Mr. Randall:

Thank you for your responses, and for forwarding the revised and additional materials. Human Subjects application #49991-EJ, "Determining the Impact of Offline Meetings on Individuals & Groups Who First Meet Online, has been approved by Subcommittee EJ. The dates of the approval period are from August 6, 2015 to August 5, 2018. I will forward your copy of your approval via campus mail.

For your convenience, attached please find a PDF file of scans of the approved approach and consent materials. The stamped originals will be included in the paper approval packet.

<u>Informational points</u>

- Please note that, although there is no limit on the number of subjects approved for involvement in the study, with each Status Report the number of subjects involved up to that time should be reported.

- Whether recordings can be deleted prior to the limits set in University of Washington record retention policy depends on whether it is the recordings, or only the transcripts of the recordings, that constitute the data-stream. If the object of analysis is the transcripts, it is the transcripts that must be retained. If the recordings themselves are the objects of analysis, the recordings must be retained as well. (Although this distinction may be clearer in theory than in practice, it does represent our current best understanding of the requirements of the data retention policy.) In this study, it would seem that the transcripts rather than the recordings are the focus of analysis, and thus the recordings may be deleted prior to the end of the record retention period.

<u>Regulatory considerations</u>

The three-year approval period is possible because the study covered by the application satisfies the following criteria (as set out in the Flexibility Policy guidance at http://www.washington.edu/research/hsd/docs/1809?dl=true):

·    **There is no current federal support for the study (as defined in Section 3.2.1)**

·    **The study poses no greater than minimal risk, as defined in 45 CFR 46.102, taking into account the approved procedures and protections.**

·    **FDA regulations do not apply to the study.**

·    **There are no applicable restrictions imposed by the UW IRB on the researcher.**

Should any of these features change, please notify the IRB immediately.

Certain standard points relevant to the approval of this application are listed below the signature block.

If you have further questions, feel free to contact me.

Best wishes for your research.

Regards,

**David Randall <dpr47@uw.edu>**

## APPROVED--modificaiton # 1 to Randall, HSD # 49991

**Deborah A. Dickstein** <dickstei@uw.edu>                                    Thu, Jun 16, 2016 at 4:07 PM
To: "David P. Randall" <dpr47@uw.edu>

I have reviewed and approved your modification on behalf of IRB Subcommittee EJ, and am sending you the approved mod via campus mail.

Your revised recruitment and consent materials do not specify the value of subject payment—there is a variable field for dollar amount, and the mod itself says that this could be either $10 or $20. Normally we do not approve materials with variable fields. However, in this case I approved them for the following reasons:

1) Even the higher payment is not large enough to create undue influence, and although the larger payment is twice the smaller ($20 vs. $10), in absolute terms the difference is not great.

2) Because these materials will be used online, you do not need to use them with the HSD approval stamp showing. Thus I can approval-stamp a document that includes a variable field.

Let me know if you have any questions.

Deborah Dickstein, MSPH    Administrator, Committee G

Human Subjects Division, Box 359470

University of Washington    Seattle, WA 98195-9470

206 543-5971    dickstei@uw.edu

http://www.washington.edu/research/hsd

***Ask early and often; there are no stupid questions; the answer depends…….D.D.***

## B-2: Information Sheet

The following are the information sheets given out to participants either in person or online

{Starts on Following Page}

# UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON

## INFORMATION SHEET
**Determining the impact of offline meetings on individuals & groups who first meet offline.**

Researcher:  David Randall, PhD Candidate, University of Washington Information School, (206) 397-6055, dpr47@uw.edu

**Researchers' statement**
We are asking you to be in a research study.  The purpose of this information sheet is to give you the information you will need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not.  Please read this sheet carefully.  You may ask questions about the purpose of the research, what we would ask you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research or this form that is not clear.  When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not.  This process is called "informed consent."  We will give you a copy of this sheet for your records.

## PURPOSE OF THE STUDY
The purpose of this study is to investigate the impact of meeting people offline whom you have only previously interacted with online, and what impact these in-person meetings have once you return to interacting with them online. Through this research we hope to discover ways in which online services can better facilitate user needs by allowing users to more readily manage their relationships and friendships with other users.

## STUDY PROCEDURES
This study will consist of an interview that will last around 1 hour or less. You will be asked about your experiences meeting individuals online and then interacting with them in person. Questions will center around your opinions, feelings, and the impacts of these meetings on future online interactions. You may refuse to answer any question at any time, and are under no penalty if you decide to do so. The interview will be audio recorded and transcribed. Records regarding this study will be retained after the conclusion of the study, however audio recordings will be destroyed once data analysis is complete, and contact information will be discarded immediately after the data collection is complete. You are free not to answer any questions you do not wish to answer, and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time or for any reason. Should you request to withdraw from the study, all information regarding your interview will be immediately destroyed and your contact information discarded.

## RISKS, STRESS, OR DISCOMFORT
The risks associated with this study are a potential breach of confidentiality and invasion of privacy.

## BENEFITS OF THE STUDY
We do not anticipate that you will benefit personally from participating in this study. The outcomes of this study will enable us to better understand the effects of offline interactions on online participation. It will help to fill a gap in the research around these impacts, as well as provide new insights into the effects on interpersonal relationships among individuals who interact online.

## CONFIDENTIALITY OF RESEARCH INFORMATION

All data gathered in this study will be anonymous, and no identifiable information about you will be recorded or published. Contact information will be immediately discarded once data collection is complete and there will be no direct link between you and this research. Audio recordings of your interview will be transcribed by the research staff and no one outside the research staff will have access to these recordings, they will also be kept on a secure computer. Once transcription is complete and the information has been analyzed, at the end of the data analysis phase of the study, the recordings will be destroyed.

## OTHER INFORMATION

You may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled.

As a thank you for participating in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card at the conclusion of the interview. This will be sent to you via email to whichever address you prefer, unless you previously indicated a preference for a physical gift card. If you choose to withdraw from this interview at any point you will still eligible to receive this gift card.

This study is funded through a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation

## RESEARCH-RELATED INJURY

If you think you have a medical problem or illness related to this research, contact insert names and contact information right away. He/She/They will treat you or refer you for treatment.

## PARTICIPATION

If, as this study has been explained to you, you volunteer to take part in this research, please indicate to the interviewer now. You will be asked to re-affirm you agreement to participate again once the audio recording as begun.  If you have questions later about the research, or if you have been harmed by participating in this study, you can contact one of the researchers listed on the first page of this information sheet.  If you have questions about your rights as a research subject, you can call the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098. You will receive a copy of this information sheet.

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**

**RESEARCH STUDY INFORMATION SHEET FOR PARTICIPANTS AGE 13-17**

**Determining the impact of offline meetings on individuals & groups who first meet offline**

Researcher: David Randall, PhD Candidate, University of Washington Information School
(206) 397-6055, dpr47@uw.edu

My name is David Randall, and I'm a researcher at the University of Washington.

We are asking you to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how meeting people in person that you have first met online effects the way you behave and interact with those people, after you've met in person.

If you agree to be in this study, I'm going to ask you some questions about your experiences meeting people in person that you've only talked before online, and how you feel about meeting them in person. I will be recording this sessions on audio tape and will later transcribe these into a written transcript. No one other than me and the other researchers will have access to these recordings and they will be kept on a secure computer. Once I have analyzed these transcripts to learn everything I can about them I will destroy the audio recordings.

I'm not going to be asking you anything about you personally, or your family, like what your names are or where you live, and we can stop at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore. We are not going to be gathering any information about who you are. You are also free not to answer any questions you do not wish to answer.

By asking you these questions I hope to better understand what people like about meeting people offline, to make how you talk to people online a better experience.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to do this. If you parent is around we will also ask them if it's okay for you to be in this study. But even if your parent(s) say "yes" you can still decide not to do this.

If you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.

You can ask any questions about the study. If you have a question later you can call me (206) 397-6055 or email me dpr47@uw.edu. If you have any questions about your rights as a research subject, you can contact the University of Washington Human Subjects Division at (206) 543-0098.

I will read out to you everything in this form and ask for you to verbally agree to be in this study. If at any time you wish to withdraw you may verbally indicate that to me, and the interview will stop and all information gathered will be destroyed.

You should take a copy of this form for your records, so you can contact me in the future if you wish. You can stop being in the study at even after this interview is over if you want. You should also show it to your parents.

## B-3: Oral Consent Statement

The following is the oral consent script read to participants that took part in this study.

Also included is the assent form, this was read and handed out to participants who were between 13-17 years of age in advance of being interviewed.

{Starts on Following Page}

**Oral Consent Script**

[This script will be read to participants before audio recordings take place. Once they have consented to take part they will be asked to confirm their consent at the start of the audio recording]

Before we start the research study I am going to provide you with a written information statement about what the study will entail and then give you the opportunity to ask any questions you may have before we start. This information will provide you with everything you need to help you decide whether to be in the study or not. Please read the information sheet carefully.

[Subjects will be given several minutes to read the information sheet]

So, to reiterate, in this study we will be asking you about your experiences meeting individuals online and then interacting with them in person. Questions will center around your opinions, feelings, and the impacts of these meetings on future online interactions. Your responses will be recorded on an audio recorder, the responses transcribed and then the audio recordings will destroyed after the completion of the data analysis phase of the study. We won't be taking down any identifying information about you. Participation in this study is voluntary, you may refuse to participate and you are free to withdraw from this study at any time without penalty or loss of benefits to which you are otherwise entitled. Additionally, this study is funded through a grant from the Andrew W. Mellon Foundation.

As a thank you for participating in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card for [location], at the conclusion of the interview. If you choose to withdraw from this interview at any point you will still eligible to receive this gift card.

You may now ask any questions you like about the purpose of the research, what we are asking you to do, the possible risks and benefits, your rights as a volunteer, and anything else about the research that is not clear. When we have answered all your questions, you can decide if you want to be in the study or not.

[Questions and answers]

Ok, so have we answered all of your questions and do you agree to participate in this research study and have your responses recorded on tape?

[Subjects will answer yes or no. If no, subjects will be dismissed and no further communication will be made unless instigated by the subject. If yes, audio recording will commence and eligibility criteria will be checked]

OK, I'm going to begin recording now. Can you confirm again for the tape that you have agreed to participate in the study?

[Subject answers, if answer has changed to a no, same procedure as above]


[End of script]

**UNIVERSITY OF WASHINGTON**

**ASSENT TO RESEARCH**

STUDY OF How meeting offline effects productivity in online virtual teams
Researchers: David Randall, PhD Candidate, University of Washington Information School
(206) 397-6055, dpr47@uw.edu

Researcher's statement:

My name is David Randall
We are asking you to be in a research study because we are trying to learn more about how meeting people in person that you have first met online effects the way you behave and interact with those people, after you've met in person.

If you agree to be in this study, I'm going to ask you some questions about your experiences meeting people in person that you've only talked before online, and how you feel about meeting them in person.

I'm not going to be asking you anything about you personally, or your family, like what your names are or where you live, and we can stop at any time if you don't want to talk to me anymore. We are not going to be gathering any information about who you are.
By asking you these questions I hope to better understand what people like about meeting people offline, to make how you talk to people online a better experience.

Please talk this over with your parents before you decide whether or not to do this. If you parent is around we will also ask them if its okay for you to be in this study. But even if your parents say "yes" you can still decide not to do this.

If you don't want to be in the study, you don't have to participate. Remember, being in this study is up to you and no one will be upset if you don't want to participate or even if you change your mind later and want to stop.

You can ask any questions about the study. If you have a question later you can call me (206) 397-6055 or email me dpr47@uw.edu.

I will read out to you everything in this form and ask for you to verbally agree to be in this study. If at any time you wish to withdraw you may verbally indicate that to me, and the interview will stop and all information gathered will be destroyed.

If you choose to take part in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card at the conclusion of the interview as a thank you for your time. If you choose to withdraw from the interview at any point once we have started, you will still be eligible to receive this.

You should take a copy of this form for your records, so you can contact me in the future if you wish. You can stop being in the study at even after this interview is over if you want. You should also show it to your parents.

## B-4: Contact Scripts

The following are the scripts for contacting individuals via email and social media to participate

in the study.

{Starts on Following Page}

# Email Script

Version 1: Subject will be attending in-person meetup events

Hi,

Thanks for getting in touch with me. I'm excited to be attending [event] and having the opportunity of learning more about your experiences of meeting people in person that you've first met online.

If you wish to be interviewed the interview should last no more than 1 hour, it will be audio record and transcribed, but no identifying information will be gathered about you. Records regarding this study will be retained after the conclusion of the study, however audio recordings will be destroyed once data analysis is complete, and contact information will be discarded immediately after the data collection is complete. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, at which point all records regarding your interview will be destroyed.

As a thank you for participating in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card for [location], at the conclusion of the interview. This will be sent to you via email to whichever address you prefer. If you would like a physical gift card please indicate this in your reply and that can be arranged.

I'll be attending [the event] on [day(s)] and I'm available [available time(s)]. If you wish to take part in this study please let me know which times work best for you. I've attached an information statement about the study, which I will also read to you before the interview, you will be given a copy for your records as well.

If you're under the age of 18, please let me know in your reply. Please also discuss this with your parents and show them the information sheet before agreeing to take part.

Thanks

Regards,

David Randall

<u>Version 2: Subject will be not be attending in-person meetup events</u>

Hi,

Thanks for getting in touch with me. I'm excited to have the opportunity of learning more about your experiences of meeting people in person that you've first met online.

If you wish to be interviewed the interview should last no more than 1 hour, it will be audio record and transcribed, but no identifying information will be gathered about you. All records, including contact information, audio files and transcripts will be destroyed at the conclusion of the study. You are also free to withdraw from the study at any time, at which point all records regarding your interview will be destroyed.

As a thank you for participating in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card for [location], at the conclusion of the interview. This will be sent to you via email to whichever address you prefer.

I'm available [available time(s)/date(s)] for an interview. If you wish to take part in this study please let me know which times work best for you. I've attached an information statement about the study, which you should keep for your records.

If you're under the age of 18, please let me know in your reply. Please also discuss this with your parents and show them the information sheet before agreeing to take part.

Thanks

Regards,

David Randall

# Social Media Script

Version 1: Posted in advance of research attendance at meetup event


Hi!

My name is David Randall, I'm a researcher at the University of Washington and I'm going to be attending [event] this [date of event]. I'm currently doing research that looks at the effects of meeting people in person who you've first met online and I'm really interested in talking to people who have experience of interacting with people they've met online in person, at events like [event] or any other type of meetup event. If you're going to [event] and are interested in talking to me there as a part of this research please send me an email at dpr47@uw.edu and I can send you more information. If you want to take part and you're not going to [event] you can still do that too, just send me an email and we can set up an interview online! If you choose to take part in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card at the conclusion of the interview as a thank you for your time.


Version 2: Posted when researcher is not anticipated to attend any meetup events


Hi!

My name is David Randall and I'm a researcher at the University of Washington, I'm currently doing research that looks at the effects of meeting people in person who you've first met online.  I'm really interested in talking to people who have experience of interacting with people they've met online at offline meetup. If you're interested in talking to me as a part of this research please send me an email at dpr47@uw.edu and I can send you more information. If you choose to take part in this research you will receive a [$ amount] gift card at the conclusion of the interview as a thank you for your time.

# Appendix C: Interview Materials

## C-1: Interview Protocol - Reddit

The following is the sample interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews conducted

with users of Reddit.

{Starts on Following Page}

## **Reddit Interview Question Protocol – Online/Offline**

In this protocol "[x]" refers to the online community platform (i.e. YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr) most closely tied to the offline meetup event the subject is being interviewed at, or most closely tied to the social media group / forum they were recruited through.

**Questions**

Q0: Can you talk to me a little about the meetup experience that you first thought of when you saw my post/email about experiences attending meetup events?

Q1: How often do you use Reddit?

Q2: What Subreddit's are you most active on?
        Q2 a): Have you attended any meetup events for those subs, can you tell me about them?

Q3: Have you made friends exclusively through Reddit?

Q4: Can you tell me more about how those friendships developed?

Q5: Would you characterize those friendships differently to ones where you first met the friend offline, if so why?

Q6: How often do you interact with these friends?

Q7: Have you met any of these friends in person, if so how many?

Q8: What was the experience like of meeting these online friends for the first time?

Q9: Did your friendships change when you went back to interacting online?

        Q9 a): if so how?

Q10: Do you communicate with friends you've made on Reddit on any other platforms or using other communication tools?

        Q10 a): Did meeting these friends in person change the way you communicated with them?

Q11: Has meeting someone in person whom you met online changed your opinion of them?

        Q11 a): Was this positive or negative?

Q12: What social media platforms similar to Reddit to you use, and how active are you on them?

Q12 a): Would you classify Reddit as a social media platform?

Q13: Are you active in the community on any other platforms?

Q14: Any additional comments, particularly related to meetup events?

## C-2: Interview Protocol - YouTube

The following is the sample interview protocol for the semi-structured interviews conducted

with users of YouTube.

{Starts on Following Page}

## YouTube Interview Question Protocol –Online/Offline

In this protocol "[x]" refers to the online community platform (i.e. YouTube, Reddit, Tumblr) most closely tied to the offline meetup event the subject is being interviewed at, or most closely tied to the social media group / forum they were recruited through.

**Questions**
Q0: Can you talk to me a little about the meetup experience that you first thought of when you saw my post/email about experiences attending meetup events?

Q1: How often do you use [x]?

Q2: What other social media platforms similar to [x] to you use, and how active are you on them?

Q3: Have you made friends exclusively through any of those platforms?

Q4: Can you tell me more about how those friendships developed?

Q5: Would you characterize those friendships differently to ones where you first met the friend offline, if so why?

Q6: How often do you interact with these friends?

Q7: Have you met any of these friends in person, if so how many?

Q8: What was the experience like of meeting these online friends for the first time?

Q9: Did your friendships change when you went back to interacting online?

      Q9 a): if so how?

Q10: Do you communicate with friends you've made on [x] using platforms other than the one you met on, or some other communication tool?

      Q10 a): Did meeting these friends in person change the way you communicated with them?

Q11: Has meeting someone in person whom you met online changed your opinion of them?

      Q11 a): Was this positive or negative?

Q12: Are you a member of any sub-groups in the [x] community (like collab channels)?

Q13: Are you active in the community on any other platforms?

Q14: Any additional comments, particularly related to meetup events?