Virtual Online Communities: A Study of Internet Based Community Interactions

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Abstract

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The aim of this research was to better understand virtual online communities (VOCs), that is, communities that are formed and maintained through the Internet. This research was guided by four research questions: What do participants in VOCs actually seek? How does a participant critically evaluate information produced in VOCs? What differences do VOC members perceive between their online community experiences compared to their experiences in real-life face-to-face communities? In what ways might a VOC shape its members’ views toward political and social change?

The methodology employed was participant observation of 20 informants within their online and offline realms plus in-depth interviews with each informant. Interviews and observations were conducted from 2005 – 2007.

This research identified two different types of VOCs: dependent and self-contained VOCs. Dependent VOCs act as extensions to already existent face-to-face communities while self-sustained VOCs are communities where relationships between members are formed, developed, and nurtured purely through virtual encounters on the Internet based on shared interests. Four functions were identified in this study: information exchange, social support exchange, friendship, recreation. Information exchange is a function where the VOC main purpose was to provide information for
members. Social support refers to the degree to which a person’s basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others. Friendship are formed within the VOC not only for social support, but also provide deeper, more meaningful relationships. Recreation within a VOC occurs when the community’s main purpose is purely entertainment.

This study also identified six motivations: accessibility/convenience, escapism, alternate identities, social recognition, voyeurism, written communication as a medium. Three issues in VOCs also emerged in this study: trust, evaluation of online material, and marginalized communities. VOCs exist in a public space and members have a certain degree of anonymity so that trust and ability to evaluate online material was found as a significant issue. Members were hesitant to reveal their true identity unless a bond had been established first. This produced problems in evaluation of content. The issue of marginalized communities was also found where gay members who were ostracized by the general public utilized the VOC as a means for communications.

Approved: ____________________________

Drew McDaniel
Professor of Telecommunications
Dedicated to Tiwi, Aditya, Amira, my partners in life;

and my parents, Arief and Leila, my source of inspiration.
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Chapter 1

Introduction

Throughout history, technological innovations have transformed society. The invention of technologies such as the telegraph, telephone, radio, television and personal computer have compressed distances between people and accelerated group thinking. These inventions set the stage for the creation of the Internet - an unprecedented integration of information sharing capabilities. The Internet today has revolutionized telecommunication through transmission of various types of traditional media such as text, audio, and video along with interactive elements. Its utilization as a mechanism for information dissemination and a medium for linking individuals through networked computers has created a fertile ground for the development of new communication applications. Manasian (2003) predicted that the Internet and new technologies, . . . will change almost every aspect of our lives—private, social, cultural, economic and political . . . because [they] deal with the very essence of human society: communication between people. Earlier technologies, from printing to the telegraph . . . have wrought big changes over time. But the social changes over the coming decades are likely to be much more extensive, and to happen much faster, than any in the past, because the technologies driving them are continuing to develop at a breakneck pace. More importantly, they look as if together they will be as pervasive and ubiquitous as electricity. (p. 4)
In other words, the Internet will play a significant role in human interaction and communication. The importance of the Internet’s role as a communication medium spurred my interest in this study.

As I looked deeper into Internet applications, I noticed that human interaction through the virtual medium is significantly different from physical interaction. For example, the virtuality of the Internet creates a simulation of human interaction where one can see constructs of people, personalities, emotion, language, and relationships. This brings up questions regarding how different these two worlds are and, more importantly, whether users will benefit from the differences. Scholars have debated whether the virtual world is a positive or negative approach to human interaction. Valentine and Holloway (2002) identified two opposing views of the “virtual” world through direct interviews with children who had been exposed to cyberspace and then formed an analysis based on theoretical studies relating to information and communication technologies. Bingham, Holloway, Valentine (1999) saw online or virtual spaces as an improvement or extension of the off-line world. Seen as a way to improve the limitations of the real world, this group was labeled “boosters” (p. 304). Another group (McLaughlin, Osbourne, Smith, 1995) saw the virtual world as an inauthentic, a poor copy of the real world. This group was called “debunkers” (p. 304). These polarized perspectives are the basis of the research seeking to establish a connection between these two worlds (Valentine and Holloway, 2002).

These two polarized views of virtuality versus reality created a fundamental problem. The debunker group would argue that a virtual environment is not meant to provide a replacement of reality, but offer an extension of self-identity. Expression of
self-identity in reality may be restricted by social norms and culture, yet a virtual environment provides a free and open platform for self-expression. In a discussion entitled “Text-Based Virtual Communities and Web Worlds,” Sandy Stone noted that virtual communities have the effect of reducing opportunities for social interaction. Stone acknowledged the fact that public space is rapidly diminishing in urban areas; therefore, the emphasis has been placed on the individual rather than the collective. The growing popularity of chat rooms and other text-based computer aided communications may be filling this gap in social consciousness. Stone posed the question: how does building graphics and individual avatars in place of textual communities affect those collective faceless environments? “Is simply bitmapping a face onto a video wall or avatar really an improvement on text-based chats?” (Brown, 2002). The use of visual aids in textual computer based communications in a virtual environment began with the use of emoticons in emails and IRC (Internet relay chat). As Internet technology offers increased multi-media support and wider bandwidth, more sophisticated methods are now available to support visualization of emotions and self-identity in computer based communications. The inclusion of sound, color, symbols and avatars adds another dimension to online communication with others.

The issues that shape how people communicate within a virtual space caught my attention when I began using the Internet in 1995. I was particularly interested in how reality is depicted online after observing individuals acting differently and communicating more freely with complete strangers than with those they knew in person. I have long supported the notion that these cyber-worlds have more beneficial than damaging attributes. Several components of virtual environments support a sense of
freedom that may not normally be available in real life. The anonymous nature of virtual communities combined with personal visual representation tools may provide a strong platform for casting oneself in a natural form rather than having to live up to the expectations of society.

Sherry Turkle (1995) argues that virtual domains become an extension of one’s self identity and even become parallel dimensions of life. When confronted with the non-physical realm of cyberspace, we can manipulate our personalities in ways that were never imagined before. This virtual community offers the possibility of changing one’s identity and escaping negative aspects of real life (RL). “When we step through the screen into virtual communities, we reconstruct our identities on the other side of the looking glass” (p. 177). The virtual community can be a channel where people express themselves more openly without the social constraints of face-to-face communication.

**Statement of Problem**

It is difficult to argue that the Internet will not have a significant impact on social life. However scholars disagree on the kind of impact the Internet will have. Some scholars contend that Internet communication is an impoverished or dry method of social exchange when compared to traditional face-to-face communication due to the limitations of human interaction. Online communities, therefore, are not real. Some even predict that communication via the Internet may produce negative effects, such as loneliness and depression along with the weakening of bonds with real-life communities (McKenna and Bargh, 2000). Media coverage of heavy Internet use has caused a small minority of mainly older adults to reject the Internet altogether because they believe it alienates an
individual from real life (Hafner, 2003). However, other scholars argue that the Internet will provide a new and different outlet for social interaction, improve the quality of relationships, and increase social connectivity through virtual online communities.

The aim of this research is to better understand virtual online communities (VOCs), that is, communities that are formed and maintained through the Internet. When people decide to join such a community, what do they seek in their membership? How do they evaluate material from their peers in an online setting when they have little or no information about the real person with whom they are communicating? One of the most important aspects in trying to gain an understanding of VOCs is to explore how they differ from communities in real life. Following a description of the VOC experience, this research aims to suggest there are positive implications for social change as a result of online community interactions.

The methodology employed was participant observation of 20 informants within their online and offline realms plus in-depth interviews with each informant. The latter method was used to gain a detailed understanding of informant motives and actions that cannot be gained through participant observation alone.

My personal experience with VOCs, beginning with their popular acceptance, also allows me to add my personal views to the data collected and to contribute to the existing literature on the subject. Since I come from a collectivist cultural background, VOCs appealed to me not simply as a tool for communication but also as a way of connecting individuals together and developing collaborative thinking. This is similar to my early experience with amateur radio where users were familiar with each other only through audio dialogs but were able to build strong communities without any face-to-face
interaction. I feel that VOCs have similar patterns of “online collectivism” and are as
complicated as the dynamics of an individual. Unfortunately, media theories that attempt
to explain VOCs in detail are still rare and range from supportive to critical without
taking a nuanced approach.

The Researcher

I have been exposed to the Internet since its introduction to the general public in
1995. I was a national marketing manager for a private firm in Indonesia. During that
time, the Internet was still in its infancy and was seen more as a novelty than a necessity.

Even in the field of marketing, the Internet was never used as a source of information or
for marketing campaigns. Only a few curious people were willing to pay for Internet
access, and content that was found online was limited to static websites displaying
limited information. I had always been fascinated by new technologies and how they
evolved into useful applications. The Internet was no different. I explored the Internet
and found it to be a never-ending source of information, with an increasing number and
variety of sites. In the early years of the Internet I found browsing was similar to reading
pamphlets, magazines or even a newspaper, depending on the type of site visited.

Communication via the Internet during the mid-1990s was in most cases uni-
directional and passive. I then discovered a service known as Usenet. Usenet is a “world-
wide distributed discussion system” (Moraes, 1999) where Internet users discuss thematic
topics organized in newsgroups. I discovered that this service was much more engaging
than simply surfing through static websites because anyone had the ability to “post”
comments, questions, or simply to reply to another post. This bi-directional
communication via the Internet increased my interest substantially because I was no longer simply a passive receiver but also a producer of information who could receive feedback on the information I posted.

In 1997, Indonesia suffered one of the worst financial crises in history as a result of the East Asian financial crisis. The Indonesian Rupiah was devaluated to 25% of its original value, and inflation skyrocketed throughout the country. Many blamed the New Order government, infamous for its cronyism and corruption. In 1998, rising poverty produced nationwide protests leading to the ousting of the government that had been in power for 32 years. During the New Order administration, the mainstream media were heavily censored. Print media that criticized the government had their operating licenses revoked and their doors forcefully closed by armed government troops. Because of this, the mainstream media were limited in what they could report. Eventually, the Indonesian people turned to the Internet for news. During the year of 1998, the Internet gained immense popularity among Indonesians as an alternate source of information, especially “subversive” information. A mailing list called “Apakabar,” or “How do you do” in the Indonesian language, was initiated by an Indonesian researcher, John McDougal. According to Tedjabayu (1999) in Cybersociology,

Apakabar offered a wide range of views, from the radical to the moderate, from pro-democracy activists to intelligence officers masquerading as Netizens. These state agents were supposed to counter any negative information about the regime, and they did their job using both polite and coarse language. But the genuine Apakabar aficionados were almost always able to spot which ones were bogus Netizens, and argued against the disinformation to such good effect that most of
the latter soon fell silent. Apparently, only a few of these pro-government militants were able to stand using such a democratic -- and at times approaching anarchic – medium (¶ 16).

Unfortunately, Internet access in Indonesia was still very expensive at that time. Only a very small fraction of the Indonesian population actually had Internet access inside their homes. Most people accessed the Internet through corporate offices and small Internet kiosks known as warung Internet or “warnet.” I witnessed hard copies of messages posted in Apakabar and other newsgroups being peddled by newspaper vendors in the street. At that time, I subscribed to several Usenet newsgroups that discussed current events in Indonesia. My office colleagues frequently turned to me for the “latest news on the Net.” When New Order regime President Soeharto was forced to step down after a massive student-led demonstration in Jakarta, an interim government was set up and led by Vice President Bacharuddin Jusuf (BJ) Habibie. Discussion among Indonesian members of Usenet groups focused on the future government and cabinet members. A list of cabinet members emerged online from an unknown source a few days before it was officially announced. The list turned out to be accurate; it was believed to be information leaked from inside the interim government. By the end of the millennium, the Internet in Indonesia had grown dramatically, although still limited to medium-to-large cities where Internet access was available. The Internet developed as a respected communication tool in Indonesia, not simply as a result of its popularity as a new communication medium.

My involvement in newsgroups and forums escalated from current news to new technology discussions. One of greatest advantages I experienced was being able to communicate over a global network. The fact that I could present my views and receive
feedback from the United Kingdom, Japan, and other countries that I would never have been able to reach through a conventional network, was remarkable. Through my involvement with Internet communications, I had the opportunity to explore the possibility of going abroad for further education. I initiated communication with professors I met through my sister, who at that time was enrolled in a graduate program at Ohio University. She introduced me to professors and administrative staff whom I contacted to learn more about the possibility of pursuing a graduate degree.

In 2000, my objective to study abroad became a reality when I travelled to Ohio University as a graduate student in International Studies. This started a new chapter in my involvement with VOCs, aided by broadband becoming the new standard for Internet access. High-speed Internet enhanced my participation in online communications because there was almost no time separation between being online and offline. The network became a natural extension to my computer and to my online identity. During the years I studied in the United States, I became aware that communities were rapidly developing online, connecting users from all across the globe. It was fascinating to see virtual identities develop. People gained reputations online depending on how they “chose” to present themselves. I also noticed that the technology that developed around the broadband revolution enabled social networking to grow in new directions, and many Internet sites had some form of community built around them. Although VOCs developed rapidly over the past few years, it’s difficult to predict where new technology will take them in the future.

In an attempt to better understand the dynamics of VOCs, I spent many hours in various forums. One of the first forums that caught my interest was an Apple discussion
group hosted by Apple Inc. Members joined these groups in search of answers to
technology related questions and to discuss new products launched by Apple. I began
noticing that not all members had similar interests. The vast majority of discussions were
created by “newbies”\(^1\) who were searching for a quick solution to a problem. They
usually registered only to post one or two questions and disappeared from the forums
once an answer was posted.

Many of the replies the newbies received were posted by a second category of
members. These were the senior members of the forum who often had over 1,000 post
counts. These members were the “regulars” and usually posted threads on a daily basis.
Although they were the minority, I saw their online presence in almost every thread. It
was rare to see a discussion thread without the presence of a senior member, who often
acted as the voice of authority and had the final word. I also noticed an even smaller
category of troublemakers, who frequented the forums to deliberately provoke conflict.
Many of these were newcomers who started discussions by posting rude comments or
who replied to threads by belittling the original poster without offering any useful
information. The online lingo for labeling these problematic members is “troll.” For
example, if a thread appeared requesting help on how to install a specific printer to a Mac
computer, a troll might add “read the manual.”

\(^1\) Newbies, also referred to as “noobs” are members who have a low post count. There is no maximum post
count to indicate whether a member is placed into this category, and it may be relative to the seniority of
other members. For example, a member with 3,000 posts may consider another member with 100 posts a
newbie. “Newbie” is often considered a derogatory term.
The final and last participant interest group was the administrative staff of the forum. These were the administrators and moderators appointed by the forum owners, usually consisting of senior members. The forum moderators and administrators are usually considered the staff. The main purpose of the staff is to ensure that the forum runs smoothly and is free from spam, trolls, and heated arguments. The staff has the ability to delete, merge and lock threads or discussion topics. As a disciplinary measure, they also have the ability to warn and ban members who violate the rules, terms and conditions of the forum.

After the September 11, 2001 tragedy and the US deployment of troops in the Middle East, many new forums emerged as an alternate media source. These forums revealed the atrocities of war and terrorist activities, many including sensitive or graphic information and images that generally did not appear on mainstream news sites. One of these forums was ogrish.com; a site dedicated for unconcerned news and media. My desire to know what was happening behind the scenes prompted me to join. People who became part of the Ogrish community ranged from curious onlookers, who simply wanted to view uncensored war footage, to members who questioned foreign policy and radical religious activism. I found the freedom of expression about sensitive topics on this site to be remarkable. For example, the concept of Islamic jihad was debated openly by members, some of whom were Muslims. Many topics that were considered taboo or socially unacceptable became popular discussion threads. Some topics inevitably became heated discussions which ended in harsh criticism and threats. I was fascinated at how openly people expressed themselves on Ogrish, and I frequently wondered why we seldom see these discussion topics emerge outside Internet communities. One question
that I pondered was the reality of the discussions and emotions that were displayed online. Seeing a significant discrepancy between the online community and communities in real life, I wondered which was the true representation of the person behind the screen name.

Through my regular visits and frequent participation in Ogrish forums, I was appointed as a moderator on April 13, 2006. This appointment has provided me with a behind the scenes view of the forums. I was able to view members’ limited personal information such as location, gender, birth date, and past history of postings. I gained an additional level of respect within the forums due to my ability to move, edit and delete postings by other members. I was also able to warn other members and temporarily freeze their accounts if they violated the terms and conditions of the forums. But this also greatly limited my online behavior. I felt that I needed to become a role model for other members and should consider how my postings would influence the community at large.

In October 2006, Ogrish.com became LiveLeak.com, a video hosting site similar to YouTube, which attempts to present uncensored media to the public. LiveLeak.com was recently in the media spotlight for hosting the anti-Islam film “Fitna” by Dutch politician Geert Wilders. Ogrish forums, where the majority of user interaction took place, transferred to a new domain: ogrishforum.com. One section in ogrishforum.com is titled “Great Debates” and includes topics such as “gay marriage”, “9/11 Do you believe the US Government did it?”, “gun control laws”, and other controversial topics (see Figure 1).
Members who frequented the above discussions had no hesitation in expressing their opinion, regardless of how socially unacceptable it was. For example, in the “Gay Marriage” thread, members critiqued the gay community without hesitation, while members of the gay community responded. There were no limits to what could be discussed. Surprisingly, many of the debates were intelligent, and seldom did we see straight “flaming” (the act of posting or sending offensive messages) or name-calling as I would expect for such a topic. The quality of the posts reflected the identity and maturity of members, and the community reacted positively to intelligent and sound arguments.

I may never meet any of these members in person and would not recognize them in a face-to-face context. Members are all disguised through an online persona and
minimum visual cues are used in the online setting. I may not be aware that the member I recently had a heated argument with is my next door neighbor. The anonymous nature of the setting provides an invisible shield that protects the member’s identity. In this study, I attempt to better understand this phenomenon by engaging various members who frequent online environments and observing how they interact with the community online and with me personally.

_A Brief History of Virtual Online Communities_

Today, the Internet has become an integral part of many people’s daily lives. People communicate through email, shop online, file taxes online, and some may even look for their future spouses online. In March 2008, there were approximately 1.4 billion people worldwide who had access to the Internet (Internet Usage Statistics, 2008). Children today grow up with the Internet and are as comfortable navigating through it as changing channels on the television set. The next generation will take the Internet for granted as the previous generation did with television and telephone (Turow and Kavanaugh, 2003). For example, in California, 13 year old children use the Internet to communicate with their school friends through instant messages (Gross, et al. 2002), and people routinely utilize the Internet to find information on health related issues, movie show times, and airline schedules. However, the Internet has not penetrated society on a global scale. Many developing nations, such as Indonesia, have limited access to the Internet. For example, in 1995, only 7.5% of the Indonesian population had access to the Internet (The World Factbook – Indonesia, 2008), while in North America and Europe 33% of the population had access. But Internet access is increasing throughout the world,
and the evolution of wireless technologies will allow nations without a hardwired infrastructure to catch up with the rest of the world (Geer, 2000, p. 11). In the 1990s, Eastern Europe, which lacked a wired communication network, was able to directly adopt cell phone technology and stay up to date with current trends (Markoff, 2002; Economist 2003).

At the turn of the century, the most popular reason why people used the Internet was to communicate with other people through email or to maintain interpersonal relationships (Hampton and Wellman 2001, Howard et al. 2001, McKenna and Bargh 2000, Stafford et al. 1999). Due to its high speed, low cost, ease of access and efficiency, email communications have become the main method of communication for many organizations, businesses, and academic institutions. Kang (2000) argued that the ‘killer application’ of the internet turns out to be other human beings” (p. 1150). In other words, human interaction is more important than the content itself.

The Internet as we know it is the latest in communication technologies that have changed how we interact with each other in fundamental ways. In order to better understand the impact of the Internet on community building, it is important to look at the development of on-line communication.

The Early years (1960 – 1989)

The first computer-based online community was established at approximately the same time the Internet was founded in 1960 when the United States Department of Defense, Advanced Projects Research Agency developed ARPANET. ARPANET was established to network universities and users (Cerf, 2003a). The U.S. government
modeled the Electronic Information Exchange System after an emergency communication network and used it to support computerized conferences of scientific researchers in the mid-1970s (Freeman 1986, Hiltz and Turoff, 1993).

During the mid-1980s, personal computers started gaining widespread acceptance by connecting to central communication hosts via modems and phone lines. The hosts themselves were linked to each other through the worldwide network which provided information in addition to communication services. Through these interconnected computer networks, the entire ecosystem was known as “the net,” which implied a “network of networks” (Craven and Wellman 1973) that linked host computers using a high speed communications line. Each host or server became the center of its own local network where users could connect.

![A Timeline of Internet development 1968 – 1996](image)

Figure 2. A Timeline of Internet development 1968 – 1996. (Leiner, B. et. al., 1999).
The Birth of the Internet (1990 – 1996)

In the early 1990s, commercial users were starting to tap into the Net, and the number of Internet hosts grew by 26% between October 1994 and January 1995 (Treese 1995, as cited in Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, and Haythornthwaite, 1996). While the use of computer networks grew, the cost of access decreased substantially. Usage of these computer networks ranged from tapping into non-profit community bulletin board systems (BBS) to entertainment (Marx and Virnoche, 1995) and commercial activities. America Online organized information such as book reviews, restaurant guides and recipes to support commercial gain (See Figure 2 for timeline). In late 1995, America Online had an estimated 4.5 million subscribers worldwide, CompuServe had 4 million, and Prodigy had 1.5 million (Lewis, 1996).

In 1995, Microsoft launched the new operating system Windows 95 that was designed to connect to the World Wide Web (www). Thus, low cost Internet service providers entered the scene. The new comers started displacing former information networks, and as the World Wide Web gained popularity, commercial businesses tapped into the Internet, which made the Net even more interconnected. The size of the Internet doubled annually. Its structure made determining the number of users difficult, because it was common for multiple users to share a connected computer system. Estimates of Internet users in the mid-1995 ranged from 10 million and 27 million adults (Insight New Media 1995, Lewis 1995). At the beginning of 1996, there were over 24 thousand discussion groups (Southwick, 1996). Internet users during that time included those who were constantly online and those who rarely connected. The difficulties in determining an accurate number of steady users made reports published during that time unreliable.
Virtual Online Communities (1997 – present)

Once the Internet gained mainstream acceptance in the mid-1990s, software developers started writing applications to utilize the connectivity among networks through the World Wide Web (see Figure 3 for timeline). Through interconnectivity, sites built upon the community concept by creating what is known as “social networks.” According to Boyd and Ellison (2007), the first virtual online community (VOC) created in this way was launched in 1997 and was known as SixDegrees.com. The site allowed members to create an online profile and list their friends and contacts. SixDegrees.com also allowed members to browse their friends’ profiles and create an online community through a circle of friends. Although the ability to contact other members was available prior to the launch of SixDegrees.com (through instant messaging applications), the community aspect was absent. SixDegrees.com was the first site to encourage groups to form based on interest, academic affiliation, and geography. While SixDegrees.com attracted millions of users, it didn’t have a solid business model and was forced to close down in 2000 (p. 214).

Starting from 1997, several new sites appeared that were similar to SixDegrees.com, such as AsianAvenue, BlackPlanet, and MiGente. These new sites allowed members to publish online profiles tailored to a specific purpose, such as to gain friends, for business networking, or to find dates.
Figure 3. A Timeline of Virtual Online Communities 1997 – 2007. (Boyd and Ellison, 2007)
Different from SixDegrees.com, members of these sites can add friends on their profile without first receiving approval.

In 1999, LiveJournal was launched and introduced a friends list modeled after instant messaging buddy lists. In addition to just sending messages, members could follow their friends and read their entries when a new entry was created (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 215).

In 2001, Ryze.com was introduced. The purpose of this site was to create business networks. Ryze.com was developed by the founders of several other community sites such as Tribe.net, LinkedIn, and Friendster. The founders were close friends who believed they could share resources without competing (Festa, 2003). However, Ryze.com never achieved widespread success. LinkedIn became the business networking site that founders hoped Ryze.com would become. In addition, Tribe.net grew to attract a large user base and Friendster attracted a huge global following.

Friendster was designed to compete with Match.com, which became profitable as a dating site, and was meant to be a social complement to Ryze.com (Cohen, 2003). The idea behind Friendster was to match friends with friends based on the assumption that people who know each other in real life will make better couples. This model differed from other dating sites that try to connect complete strangers with similar interests. Friendster gained huge popularity among early adopters who were mostly bloggers, computer enthusiasts and gay men (Boyd, 2004) and accumulated around 300 thousand users even before its public press coverage in May 2003 (O'Shea, 2003). Even so, Friendster faced many technical issues. Due to a rapid increase in membership, the Friendster servers were simply not ready to face such a large volume of network traffic,
and members found the site down regularly (Boyd, 2006). In addition to its technical problems, the influx of members also meant that members found acquaintances they preferred to avoid, such as their bosses and teachers, alongside their close friends. The concept behind Friendster was that members can view the profiles of friends who are four levels deep, which means that they can view the profile of a friend of a friend of a friend of a friend. This limitation resulted in members starting to create false profiles to extend their reach of contacts. Some members even started to mass-collect friends so their profile would appear in a “most popular” feature.

Some of the most popular profiles were fake, using celebrity names or photos to gain as many friends as possible. These fake members enraged the Friendster staff who took the unpopular step of deleting all the fake profiles. The fake profiles were also the most passionate users of Friendster, and other members also enjoyed reading the made-up profiles for entertainment (Boyd and Ellison, 2007, p. 216). This and the technical problems led many early adopters to leave the site (Boyd, 2006). Friendster lost popularity in the United States but found a market elsewhere. At the time of writing Friendster is still the most popular VOC in the Philippines, Singapore, Malaysia, and Indonesia (Goldberg, 2007).

In 2003, following Friendster’s success, new VOCs were introduced following the Friendster model of user profiles. Most of these VOCs targeted a specific demographic, as with LinkedIn, Visible Path and Xing that targeted the business community. Online dating sites such as Dogster followed the path of Match.com, and Care2 helped to link activists from around the world. MyChurch networked Christian churches and their members, and Couchsurfing linked travelers with people who had an interest in sharing
accommodations. This wave of VOC sites started a trend that influenced media sites to incorporate social networking. For example, Flickr grouped photographers, YouTube targeted video producers, and Last.FM brought music fans together.

Membership patterns in these VOCs were surprising. Google launched Orkut, which failed to receive a steady following in the United States, but was a tremendous success in Brazil (Fragoso, 2006). Microsoft launched MSN Spaces, which did very well everywhere except the United States. When MySpace was launched in California, few analysts paid attention to this Friendster look-alike. According to Boyd and Ellison (2007) the initial idea behind MySpace was to attract estranged Friendster users who were looking for an alternative site after a rumor that Friendster would start a fee-based system. Friendster users encouraged other members to migrate to alternate sites such as Tribe.net and MySpace through communication via the Friendster forums. This caused a huge exodus from Friendster to other sites, including MySpace (Friendster, 2003). Aspiring music groups who had been expelled by Friendster on charges that they had violated its terms and conditions, went to MySpace, which provided features allowing them to share their music online and announce tours and performances (Adegoke, 2003). This relationship between bands and fans was one reason MySpace grew in popularity. MySpace also distinguished itself from other online communities by adding many features to the profile pages based on user demand. One of the most significant features was to allow users to customize their pages using HTML code. This later evolved into the sharing of codes and started a “copy-and-paste code” culture, where users could use features they saw on other peoples pages simply by copying the code (Adegoke, 2003).
Social networking sites such as MySpace provided an even richer basis for interaction due to the incorporation of multimedia images and detailed personal user information.

In 2004, many teenagers flocked to MySpace as the new Mecca of online communities – one important factor in this development being that MySpace encouraged minors to join. These new users were not from the older Friendster generation. They had been encouraged to join by friends who were already on MySpace, and some joined to see their favorite bands online. As the membership grew on MySpace, there were two distinct groups of users that populated the site: musicians/fans/teenagers and the post urban social crowd. Interestingly, the two groups rarely interacted with one another except when browsing through music. On July 2005, The News Corporation purchased MySpace for $580 million dollars (BBC, 2005), which caught the media’s attention. This purchase highlighted a mass safety issue. The ability to browse individual profiles while remaining anonymous allowed sexual predators to frequent MySpace searching for minors. This prompted legal action (Consumer Affairs, 2006). The use of MySpace by online predators also caused a wave of panic about VOCs because anonymity is one of their inherent features (Bahney, 2006). Anyone can search profiles and find information about specific individuals while they as users remain hidden from public view.

Anonymity on the Internet is not a new concept; it emerged a decade back when the Internet was still in its infancy. According to Branscomb (1995),

Anonymity is a cherished tradition among some on-line veterans, who enjoy the fantasy aspect of these communities and argue that it enables shy or socially outcast people to finally blossom via modem. . . . It sure makes it easier to
spread wild conspiracy theories, smear people, conduct financial scams or victimize others sexually (p. 1645).

As MySpace attracted public attention in the United States, VOCs grew worldwide. Friendster became the number one virtual community in Southeast Asia, Orkut became the main online community in Brazil and later in India (Madhavan, 2007). Mixi became very popular in Japan as did LunarStorm in Sweden, Hyves in the Netherlands, Grano in Poland, and Hi5 in smaller Latin American countries. Bebo became number one for European and Australian social networkers (Boyd and Ellison, 2007).

Sites such as YouTube and Flickr also built VOCs into their range of services. Another example is the Chinese instant messaging site QQ that incorporated profiles and friends (McLeod, 2006), while the Korean forum CyWorld introduced homepages and a buddy system (Ewers, 2006). These were followed by blogging sites such as Xanga, LiveJournal, and Vox.

While VOCs grew in popularity, new sites started targeting niche communities. In 2004, a small startup called Facebook introduced a VOC exclusively for Harvard University students that became a big hit (Cassidy, 2006). Facebook then expanded to other universities. In order to join, a user had to register with a “.edu” email address and be associated with a university. This was initially intended to create a small private academic community site. But in 2005, Facebook decided to incorporate high school students and later expanded to include corporate networks and eventually became open to the general public (see Figure 4 for the current Facebook interface). Although Facebook accommodated everyone, the private network concept still applied. For example, in order
to access a specific corporate community, the user has to have permission from the organization’s administrator, likewise to join a high school network, approval from the site administrator is required.

Figure 4. A typical Facebook group on Indonesian Studies founded by John MacDougall. (MacDougall, J., 2008).

One feature that made Facebook stand out from other VOCs was the ability of third parties to develop applications. This allowed members to personalize their pages
and perform other functions not found in closed-system social networks. For example, applications allowed members to display their favorite movies and view short clips and then compare clips with other members to find compatibility in viewing preferences. Other applications allowed members to chart their travel histories.

Some organizations find that VOCs are problematic and restrict their members from accessing them. The United States military, for instance, banned soldiers from accessing MySpace (Frosch, 2007), while the Canadian Government prohibited any public employee from accessing Facebook (Benzie, 2007). The United States Congress proposed legislation to ban minors from accessing social networking sites while in school (Boyd and Ellison, 2007). While many still argue over the positive and negative aspects of VOCs, the realm of online communities continues to grow in popularity. Today their popularity has grown to the extent that businesses are starting to eye these sites as a prime venue for advertising.
Chapter 2

Literature Review

This chapter provides an overview of the scholarly literature on community and virtual online communities. The research and theories discussed here originate from scholars who work in a variety of disciplines. The chapter is divided into five sections. The first section discusses concepts related to the structure and mission of a community. The second section introduces the virtual online community (VOC). The third section discusses accountability and anonymity within the VOC. The fourth section focuses on the similarities and differences between the physical community and the virtual community. The final section explores how VOCs can support or cause social and political change, not only for the user but also for the society in general.

Virtual Communities in Perspective

Communities are the building blocks of society. But how does one define a community? One of the early scholars to study the nature of community was Ferdinand Tonnies (1855-1936). Tonnies (1955) distinguished between two different kinds of social groups, communities (gemeinschaft) and associations or societies (gesellschaft). Associations are groups in which membership is based on some instrumental goal or definite end. Relationships in associations/societies are relatively formal and structured. By contrast, communities are composed of individuals with relatively intense and intimate relationships. Community-type relationships tend to give an individual a sense of identity and emotional fulfillment. Tonnies went on to identify three kinds of community:
communities of kinship, communities of locality, and communities of the mind. The last has particular relevance to this study. Tonnies (1955) argued that a community of the mind implies cooperation and coordination towards a common goal as well as emotional involvement. A community of the mind is composed of individuals who share similar goals and interests but do not necessarily have geographical proximity (locality) or are bound by kinship.

Karp, Stone and Yoels (1991) identified three key elements that define a community: sustained social interaction, shared attributes and values, and a delineated geographical space. Lawrence (1995) revisited Karp et.al. and revised the third criteria from “a delineated geographical space” to “membership rules.” Lawrence argued that a focus on geography as a critical component no longer applies due to the advancement of new technologies.

Amitai Etzioni (1999), a founder of the communitarian movement of the early 1990s, argued that people cannot be thought of as simply rights-bearing individuals who act on self interest, but rather, people also seek pleasure and respond to moral norms that are enforced by authority and community. He called for more “responsive” rather than authoritarian models of community.

Social network theories apply to a wide range of human communities and organizations, from small groups to national ones. One of the most elementary functions of social networks is to transmit ideas and thoughts to members (Rogers and Shoemaker, 1971; Rogers and Kincaid, 1981; Rogers, 1983; Valente, 1995). The basic construct of social network theory is the idea of “social capital.” Social network theory assumes that an individual possesses a certain degree of “social capital” from the networks to which
they are connected. Wider access to other people within the social network will determine how much knowledge, influence, and power the original person will control (Ethier, 2002). One concrete example is the political application of social networks. The question of how networks influence political agency and behavior is a widely studied field. Public opinion can be formed by authoritative figures that have access to large networks, such as through popular blogs.

Benedict Anderson (1983) introduced the idea of the “imagined community” in his analysis of the rise of the nation-state. He argued that the idea of a meaningful community exists in the imagination of its constituent members.

All communities larger than primordial villages of face-to-face contact are imagined. Communities are to be distinguished, not by their falsity/genuineness, but by the style in which they are imagined. (p. 15)

Although Anderson never talked about virtual communities, in reality all communities that are “imagined” are in fact “virtual.” The determining factor that creates communities is not found in the community itself but in the way that individuals identify themselves as members of a particular community. If members’ perception is the glue that binds communities together, then community is a “virtual” entity. Building upon this idea, if the members’ “imagination” is the most important aspect of the community, then how is the image of community established in people’s minds? Anderson emphasized the role of newspapers in creating the imagined community of a nation-state, and Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) went on to argue that media and communication technologies are instrumental factors in building successful communities today.
The birth of the imagined community of the nation involved two “new media,” the novel and the newspaper that flowered in Europe in the 18th century.

Communication technologies stand at a peculiar interface between the technical culture of those who create them, the commercial interests of those who produce and market them, and the everyday lifeworld of ordinary users. (Feenberg and Bakardjieva, 2004, p. 38)

Electronic media are replacing the “old media” of the past. Among the fastest growing electronic media is what we know as the Internet. Recent studies point out that the Internet can no longer be considered as separate from the real world; it is an extension of our daily lives, a tool to achieve real life objectives. An article in the Economist “Better together; Real and virtual worlds” describes the virtual world of the Internet as an “overlay or an adjunct to the physical world, [and] not a separate space.” Although many Internet users reap the benefits of being online, the authors of this article also point out that the unpleasant aspects of real life are mirrored in online activity. “The internet has not turned out to be a thing apart. Unpleasant aspects of the real world, such as taxes, censorship, crime and fraud are now features of the virtual world” (Better Together, 2007, ¶ 5).

**The VOC: A New Kind of Virtual Community**

The emergence of computer-mediated-communication (CMC) as a networking tool among social groups has dramatically changed how social networks are established and maintained. Computer networks were initially put in place to support person-to-person exchanges of information, knowledge, ideas, opinions, insights, and advice.
Initially, computer networks only linked people within a limited geographical area (such as an office building), and they were, therefore, only a convenience supporting human networks. With the development of the Internet, the geographical limitations of computer networks became irrelevant, and computers now became a vehicle to connect to human networks virtually anywhere.

When the Internet gained mainstream acceptance in the mid-1990s, one of its most popular applications was to unite similar interest groups in online discussion forums. Enter the virtual online community (VOC). VOCs are a subset of Internet communications that originate from an “information-centered design.” VOCs are treated in both scholarly and popular publications as a cultural artifact of the Internet age. VOCs are a cultural phenomenon that is changing the way we think about our world.

Drawing on Anderson’s concept of imagined communities, Howard Rheingold (1993), a pioneer in the study of virtual communities, defined VOC as follows:

Virtual communities are social aggregations that emerge when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships (in cyberspace) (p. 5).

VOCs can be imagined communities or social aggregations that exist long enough for individuals to form personal relationships. Thus, this study defines a VOC as an information-based or thematic community that uses the Internet as its primary medium through which members have formed mutual relationships.

A multidisciplinary group of academics identified the core characteristics of VOCs as follows:
According to Palloff and Pratt (1999), VOCs are established in the following way. First, the purpose of the VOC must be defined clearly and a gathering place established for the community. Second, the VOC members need to promote leadership along with a set of rules or a code of conduct. This is necessary for the community to self-manage the VOC and resolve conflicts. Lastly, the range of roles for members must be determined along with the facilitation of sub-groups.

Palloff and Pratt (1999) also outline the following five stages with respect to the life cycle of community development, whether the community is traditional or virtual: “forming, storming, norming, performing, adjourning.” “Forming” is the establishing of the VOC where members are still testing the waters. “Storming” refers to a necessary phase where conflicts occur within the evolution of the workgroup. Once the conflicts are resolved and the community attains equilibrium, it will enter the “norming” phase where intimacy and productivity starts and leads to “performing,” one of the most productive
stages within the cycle. Eventually, the VOC will terminate and enter the “adjourning” phase. Haythornthwaite, Kazmer, and Robins (2000) identified three steps to community development: initial bonding, early membership, and late membership. These phases are based on time. Within the VOC, language, practices, customs and resources develop over time (Squire and Johnson, 2000).

Correll (1995) provided one of the first ethnographic studies of a VOC. “The Lesbian Café” was an online bulletin board system for the lesbian community. From this site a community was created online. Correll shows how “descriptions of the type of space that patrons can recognize and those they desire” (p. 295) produced “a sense of common reality” (p. 296).

Research suggests that most social networks sites, such as MySpace and Facebook, primarily support pre-existing social relationships. Lenhart and Madden (2007) found that 91 percent of teens in the United States use social networking sites to connect with existing friends. Choi (2006) reports that 85 percent of the informants in an earlier study listed one of the motivations for using the top South Korean social networking site as maintaining and reinforcing pre-existing social networks (p. 181). Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfeld (2006) found that Facebook members search for people whom they know offline more often than browsing for people based on interests alone. Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfeld (2007a) argued that Facebook was a tool to strengthen offline relationships as opposed to meeting new people (p. 435). This distinguishes social network sites from other forms of VOCs, such as newsgroups or forums, where the primary focus is themes and interests (Ellison et al., 2007). Boyd (2008) has also claimed
that youth in the United States use MySpace and Facebook to socialize with friends and
gather in unmediated situations.

Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) point out that VOCs have begun to transform
the Internet communications medium.

The Internet is now a battlefield on which similar impulses contend. [Virtual]
Online community arose from the margins of the medium, intruding on its
original information-centered design from various sources such as bulletin boards,
newsgroups and early computer conferencing systems. With the addition of this
unanticipated communication layer, the technology addresses a wider range of
human needs and potentials.

The evolution of Internet bandwidth has vastly enhanced the capacity of Internet
communication to meet the needs of users. As of June 2003, Broadband Internet had over
23.5 million users in the United States alone, a 50 percent increase from the previous
year. Emerging communication infrastructure is introducing broadband into the average
home through cable modems, DSL telephone networks and fiber to the home, such as
Verizon Fios and ATT U-verse. The broadband revolution allows VOCs to deliver
synchronous video streaming which mimics the “richness” of face-to-face
communications. Finally the use of natural language can be found in most voice capable
communication methods, usually known as “voice over IP” (VoIP) that allow voice
communication (such as telephone conversations) over the Internet protocol.

Sherry Turkle (1995) has argued that virtual communities will “re-tribalize” the
larger society by forming smaller communities of interest. This “retribalization” may
either unite or fragment society through the growing numbers of different (and often non-
interacting) communities (Fox, 2004). Scholars of Internet communication continue to
debate the impact of the Internet and VOCs.

**Anonymity and Accountability within the VOC**

One unique aspect of the VOC is the anonymous nature of its membership. Users
are rarely required to identify themselves or reveal their true identities online. There are
exceptions, for example, in a participatory classroom discussion board, where users who
participate in discussions are required by the system to login with their student account
and their names are displayed. However, in many online discussions, users are not
required to disclose personal information, and they may construct their identity in the
form of an ambiguous username or avatar.

The anonymous nature of the virtual community can be seen as problematic
because users cannot be held accountable for their actions online. Branscomb (1995)
describes the problem of online anonymity as removing “many of the layers of civilized
behavior” because users can escape responsibility for negligent or abusive online
behavior.

While the presence of anonymous users can raise ethical concerns of
identification and accountability, Singer (1996) points out that anonymity can also protect
a user from biases and stereotyping. Users are judged by what they say and not by who
they are. The power of persuasion relies only on “what is being said rather than what is
being seen” (Branscomb, 1995). Minorities and users vulnerable to stereotyping may
avoid discrimination often found in real-life communities.
Goffman’s (1959) theory of the public and private self can be applied to VOCs. In real life, people tend to adapt as a means of maintaining harmony in relationships. This adaptive behavior is presented on the “front stage” (public) while concealing a “back stage” (private). Behavior on the front stage is dictated by norms which dictate how individuals should behave in the presence of others. Branscomb (1995) reports that one of his informants explained, “I love being able to slip into another body, another persona, another world” (p. 1642). Psychologists and sociologists also point to the benefit to users in being able to construct their own personae and the ability to express opinions freely without having to think about future liabilities (Branscomb, 1995). Ben-Ze’ev (2003) argues that anonymity in cyberspace has “undergone a significant change” because “many matters that are usually kept private tend to be discussed in cyberspace” (p. 451).

In a more recent study of computer mediated communication (CMC) Boyd and Ellison (2007) point out that previous research on VOCs focused on ability to create online friendships, impression management, and social networking (p. 219). They emphasize that when people are able to construct an online representation of the self and dating profiles, impression management becomes important. Marwick (2005) explored the framing of identities through online applications and the “ways that people present their identities online” (p. 24). He found an abundance of “Fakesters” or fake profiles in the social networking site, Friendster and suggested that these fake profiles “create conflict in user self-presentation strategies” (p. 2). Boyd and Ellison (2007) argue that profiles can never be 100 percent real.

The issue of anonymity in VOCs raises questions about trust between members. Jarvenpaa and Leidner (1999) found trust to be “very fragile” and only temporal. In e-
commerce, where trust is a major factor for a successful business transaction, online exchanges that are impersonal can be supported to a large extent while anonymity is preserved through reputation systems, such as eBay’s successful feedback system (Sulin Ba, 2001). Henderson and Gilding (2004) identified four sources of online trust: (1) reputation (either grounded in a pseudonym or offline identity) (2) performance (this plays an important role in building on-line relationships) (3) pre-commitment through self-disclosure (that in-turn will encourage a reciprocal self-disclosure), and (4) situational factors that include “close-knittedness of the community” and “historical conditions” where certain members have more credibility than others (p. 494).

VOCs have been in the media spotlight for potential privacy concerns, especially concerning the safety of minors (George, 2006; Kornblum and Marklein, 2006). Gross and Acquisti (2005) analyzed 4,000 Carnegie Mellon University Facebook profiles and outlined potential threats to privacy in these profiles. The researchers were able to reconstruct user identities along with other personal information, such as hometown, date of birth and even social security numbers. Gross and Acquisti concluded that that members of VOCs often contradict their desire for privacy with their online behavior. A survey of Facebook users by Stutzman (2006) reached a similar conclusion. Barnes (2006) described this as the “privacy paradox” because users are not aware that the Internet is not fully anonymous.

Users of Facebook show a greater degree of trust and are willing to share more private information when compared to members of similar sites, such as MySpace (Dwyer, Hiltz, and Passerini, 2007). In another study, publicly available data collected from VOCs was used to construct a “phishing” scheme that appeared to come from a
network contact. “Phishing” is the practice of stealing identities by creating bogus emails which appears to originate from a trusted source. The user is led to a fake website and asked to enter personal information. Researchers found that members were willing to provide personal information to trusted contacts (Jagatic, Johnson, Jakobsson, and Menczer, 2007). However, users are becoming more adept in dealing with trust and privacy issues and the potential risks involved in revealing too much personal information. In a study of 935 teenagers (between 12 to 17 years old), Lenhart and Madden (2007) found that 65 percent of personal profiles of teens participating in social networks are not visible to the general public. Out of the remaining number, 46 percent of teens reported that they included some false information to reduce potential privacy risks.

**Comparing the VOC with Face-to-Face Communities**

One major way in which the VOCs differ from real-life face-to-face communities is the lack of visual communication cues, such as gestures, tone of voice, physical appearance and the physical environment where communication is initiated. As early as 1976, researchers found that computer networks typically do not transmit the audiovisual aspects of physical communications, therefore they rank low in social presence because communicators do not “feel” that other people are present (Short, Williams, and Christie, 1976). Such findings led to the assumption that a computer network is not a rich medium for communication that can promote consensus and build community (Thurston, 2001). If strong ties are based on multiple exchanges of social and emotional content, intimacy and self-disclosure are essential to community as hypothized by Granovetter in 1973; can VOCs provide alternative forms of trust, intimacy and self-disclosure?
In 1986 Daft and Lengel argued that new technologies emerging in online communications required that questions about media richness and reduced cues should be reevaluated. Using four criteria, they presented a media richness hierarchy, arranged from high to low degrees of richness, to illustrate the capacity of different media types to process ambiguous communication. The criteria are (a) the availability of instant feedback, (b) the capacity of the medium to transmit multiple cues such as body language, voice tone, and inflection, (c) the use of natural language and (d) the personal focus of the medium from the perspective of Daft and Lengel in 1986. Face-to-face communication is the richest communication medium in the hierarchy followed by telephone, electronic mail, letter, note, memo, special report, and finally, flier and bulletin. From a strategic management perspective, the media richness hierarchy suggests that effective managers make rational choices matching a particular communication medium to a specific task or objective and to the degree of richness required by that task.

Some VOC interfaces can be seen to possess all four criteria discussed above. The availability of instant feedback are seen in instant messaging and chat rooms, where synchronous communications transpire. The capacity of VOCs to transmit multiple cues can be seen in almost any form of VOCs. The use of paralanguage, emoticons, and Internet lingo as a means to enhance expression has been carried over from previous technologies (McLaughlin, Kerry, and Smith, 1995; Marvin, 1995). Applications of paralanguage can be seen in the myriad of chat rooms where acronyms replace whole sentences or give expression to attitudes, such as BRB (be right back), LOL (laugh out loud), or IMHO (in my humble opinion). Traditional email messages can now include multimedia attachments. Online communications have grown comparatively “richer” by
incorporating multimedia attributes, for example graphic attachments and sound and video clips, in textual messages. Enhanced expression is also seen in the utilization of emoticons to express emotions (McLaughlin, Kerry, and Smith, 1995). At the time of writing, bandwidth limitations still drive the use of paralanguage and emoticons for online applications such as through text messages in cellular telephones.

Several researchers argued that CMC had created genuine communities online. Wellman et al. found that virtual domains encouraged closeness based on shared interests rather than social characteristics such as gender or socio economic segments (Wellman, 1996). Online communities mirrored unmediated social structures where Wellman (1988) argued that ‘‘the world is composed of networks, not groups’’ (p. 37). In a computer mediated communication study, Walther (1995) concluded that VOCs achieved more positive levels of interpersonal communications over time when compared to face-to-face communication due to its “egalitarian” and “uninhibited” nature (p. 197). In her study of a VOC site for lesbians, Correll (1995) found that strong relationships were created even without the presence of physical interaction. In a more recent study of Internet-based consumer opinion sites, Hennig-Thurau, et.al. (2006) observed that users engage in “eWOM” (electronic word-of-mouth), a form of writing that is a subset of the digital genre. This new discourse may not only be seen as a replacement for the technological limitations inherent in CMC but may even strengthen the “sense of belonging” to a specific group.

The advance in CMC technology has had a powerful impact on the way that the Internet and VOCs are perceived by society. Traditional communication technologies, such as the telephone and telegraph, were perceived to be substitutes for face-to-face
communication, and not an extension of users’ lives. In these technologies, usage was determined by how “experts” (engineers) constructed the technology (Marvin, 1988). In contrast, users have had a central role in the development of Internet communication by finding ways to make it serve their own diverse interests.

**VOCs and Political and Social Change**

Studies of the effect of the Internet and VOCs on social and political change have come to different conclusions. Potentially, VOCs, ranging in size from minute interest groups to the formation of such political organizations as “Move On,” would seem to have the power to shape people’s views towards a diverse range of issues and thereby change society. The promise of the VOC is that it enables a community to surpass geographical boundaries and achieve common goals.

One of the first studies, Bailey (1995) on Usenet discussion groups in political science courses, distinguished between “active” and “passive” effects. The effect is classified as “active” when the VOC shifts a member’s political or social views and classified as “passive” when a VOC only strengthens an existing view or stance. The study reported positive results as participation in the community was both “engaging” and “life-changing” (p. 722). According to Tan, Wei, Watson, Clapper, and Mclean, (1998) participants’ views can be potentially changed due to strong majority influence from the collective voice of the VOC.

In his study of a social movement focused VOC, Diani (2000) found that the effect of the VOC was passive because members consisted of “sympathizers of movement organizations who act professionally on behalf of causes with vast resonance
among the public opinion and low radical potential.” Thus, the VOC only amplified the existing views of its members. In the realm of e-commerce, where the general assumption is that participants are only interested in business transactions, virtual online communities have been found to have an active effect. Through a study in TimeZone.com, a VOC dedicated to wristwatch hobbyists and enthusiasts, Rothaermela and Sugiyama (2001) found that “a member’s off-site communication [and] experience . . . are positively associated with a member's e-based economic transactions within this virtual community” (p.297). Rogers and Hart (2002) reported a case where a local community-based VOC encouraging interaction between residents and homeless individuals resulted in resolving an ongoing conflict between the two groups, adding another example of the “active” effects of a VOC. Matei (2004) studied 48 contiguous states in the United States for their ability to create and maintain online communities through Yahoo! Groups and found that “the Internet strengthens offline interaction, sociability online building on sociability offline.” Similarly, in a paper presented to the Kansas Rural Broadband and Telemedicine Summit on February 20, 2004, Michael Powell, Chairman of the Federal Communications Commission, argued that broadband Internet had made an important contribution to society.

Broadband deployment helps us build stronger communities. For instance, advances in health care and advantages in education, through telemedicine and distance learning applications, are possible through the deployment of broadband technologies in rural communities (Powell, 2004).

In contrast to this enthusiasm, Szmigin and Reppel (2004) reported that in a study “Internet community bonding: The case of macnews.de”, the VOC they studied had no
direct effect upon members and the site, macnews.de, were “not perceived as providing satisfaction.” Members were more interested in simply finding solutions to [technical] problems. These contradictory research reports show that more research is needed.

Hurwitz (1999) debunked the idea that the Internet was to be an electronic frontier where free thought and egalitarian associations transcended political boundaries. The problems he identified included paying for access, fragmented groups rather than consolidated public opinion, and laws that hold service providers liable for content they carry (Hurwitz 1999). However, the political scientist Dahlberg (2001) found emerging democratic practices among VOCs extended the public sphere into the online realm (Dahlberg, 2001).

In the widely popular online life simulation game “Second Life” members are able to join scenarios of real world situations to gain a deeper awareness of current events. Political activists are already exploring the possibilities of this VOC. For example, a simulation of the Guantanamo Bay detention camp encouraged Second Life visitors to consider the plight of inmates there (Ananthaswamy, 2007). Members who enter the virtual prison installation are offered orange jump suits and escorted into cells. They lose control of their avatar and can be relocated into any area on the virtual base. On some occasions when they regain control of their avatar, they will be reprimanded by having a virtual hood placed over their head, which is represented by the screen going blank momentarily. These scenarios conjure powerful messages and may keep issues alive even after they fall out of the news and the public eye.
Research Questions

Reflecting on the literature reviewed in this chapter, my research is guided by the general research question: How do members of VOCs compare their experience within the virtual environment to real life settings? I hope to be able to formulate the answer to the research question by asking and answering the following questions:

1. What do participants in VOCs actually seek?
2. How does a participant critically evaluate information produced in VOCs?
3. What differences do VOC members perceive between their online community experiences compared to their experiences in real-life face-to-face communities?
4. In what ways might a VOC shape its members’ views toward political and social change?
Chapter 3

Methodological Overview

This chapter describes the methodology used in this research. I begin by providing a rationale for using qualitative research and an interpretive approach, followed by a description of how informants were selected and chosen. I then describe how I conducted participant observation in the virtual realm and how interviews were conducted online and offline. I conclude with a brief introduction to the informants and their respective virtual online communities (VOCs).

Rationale for Qualitative Research

The qualitative research methods used in this research include three types of data collection: in-depth interviews, participant observation, and textual analysis. Conjoining these three methods provides a holistic analytical framework to better comprehend the nature of virtual environments. The primary reason to utilize qualitative research methods is the belief that an interpretive philosophical approach to research is more sensitive to the way in which individuals construct their social world. For example, Glesne (1999) argues:

Qualitative methods are generally supported by the interpretivist (also referred to as constructivist) paradigm, which portrays a world in which reality is socially constructed, complex and ever changing. The ontological belief for interpretivists, therefore, is that social realities are constructed by the informants in those social settings. To understand the nature of constructed realities, qualitative researchers
interact and talk with informants about their perceptions. The researchers seek out the variety of perspectives; they do not try to reduce the multiple interpretations to a norm (p. 5).

Dealing with online environments involves many perceived realities, and informants in this study, such as online gamers, acknowledge that they create their own reality through the characters they construct in a gaming environment.

Second, qualitative research methods produce rich data. The data I collected from informants and from observation of VOCs reveal a new phenomenon that has emerged in a non-traditional environment. For example, informants who belong to marginalized communities (such as the gay community) and informants who are physically handicapped are given a voice in VOCs. The qualitative nature of the research provided an open platform for informants to explain in detail their relationship with society at large and with the VOC. Marginal positions such as these are not easily identified in numerical data.

Third, qualitative methods allow more flexibility in pursuing new directions and issues that arise in the research as a result of information provided by informants. Patton (2002) argues that flexibility allows the researcher to be “open to whatever is salient to pursue” (p. 194). This translates into flexibility to incorporate a localized and emergent research design.

Fourth, qualitative research methods allow me to incorporate my own experience in this study. Reflexivity, according to Cheney (2000), helps researchers understand the phenomena of social life. Ever since my first experience in using a VOC as a communication platform, I have been intimately involved in its development. My
technological knowledge provides a lens for viewing computer mediated communication within VOCs. My involvement in VOCs has included various roles, ranging from participant to administrator. Throughout this research, I reflected on my own experience as I listened to informants, determined the direction of the research, and interpreted findings.

Scholars who come from more positivistic schools of thought consider researcher bias as a negative aspect of a study. However, I believe that my personal involvement in VOCs has not only enhanced the research but also allowed me to collect more informative data due to my personal access to VOCs. I embrace Cheney’s (2000) view that it is important for qualitative scholars to maintain consistent measures of reflexivity. Glesne (1999) notes that reflexivity will “increase your awareness of the ways [subjectivity] might distort, but you also increase your awareness of its virtuous capacity” (p. 109). While I have utilized my own values, attitude, beliefs and personal traits to determine the workflow and direction, I am aware that this occasionally limited my effectiveness as a researcher. I encountered a few situations where my position as a researcher or administrator prevented access to information. Close knit VOCs are often wary of “outsiders” and members tend to avoid disclosing information to others who are not part of the community. This partly determined which informants I was able to recruit for this study.

**Informant Selection**

Informants chosen for this project can best be characterized as illustrative or evocative examples who “provide a flavor” of the VOC phenomenon (Mason, 2002). I
made strategic choices about whom to study in order to generate meaningful data. The overall goal for data selection was to collect the “richest possible data” and to engage in direct interaction so as to “participate in the minds of the settings’ informants” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). As Lofland suggested, the first criteria for selection of informants (data sites) was appropriateness; informants were chosen based on how actively they were involved in VOCs. “Active” refers to being a registered member who logs on to a VOC at least once a week over a two-year period. Selection of informants involved two different recruitment methods.

**Selective Recruitment**

The first method was to observe members of VOCs and then contact them through online communication methods, such as email or private messaging. I explained the general outline and the purpose of the study and submitted a request for an interview.

**Voluntary Recruitment**

The second method was to post an announcement within a VOC requesting that interested members willing to participate in the study contact me. The announcement specified participants must be an active member of the group to qualify for the study. Interested members who contacted me were then observed to further determine whether they met this qualification. If they appeared to be an active member of a VOC, I submitted a request for an interview. In several cases, the informant met the qualifications for an active VOC member but was too similar to other informants and not expected to offer new insights.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Number</th>
<th>Informant</th>
<th>VOC Membership</th>
<th>Interview Method</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>01</td>
<td>AM</td>
<td>Flickr</td>
<td>Face-to-face</td>
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<tr>
<td>02</td>
<td>AT</td>
<td>Social Networking</td>
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<td>03</td>
<td>BC</td>
<td>Social Networking</td>
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<td>BK</td>
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<td>D17</td>
<td>Ogrish Fourms</td>
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<td>07</td>
<td>DH</td>
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<td>ED</td>
<td>Friendster</td>
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<td>10</td>
<td>JC</td>
<td>Apple Support Community</td>
<td>Online / Skype</td>
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<td>JW</td>
<td>Fansite Administrator</td>
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<td>12</td>
<td>LD</td>
<td>Social Networking</td>
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<td>13</td>
<td>LW</td>
<td>Chinese Community</td>
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<td>14</td>
<td>ND</td>
<td>Online Gaming</td>
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<td>NN</td>
<td>Social Networking</td>
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<td>RG</td>
<td>Online Gaming</td>
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<td>TL</td>
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In these cases I did not follow through with a request for an interview. In total 20 informants were recruited (see Table 1 for informant chart), based on their active participation in VOCs and suitability for the study.

The second step in data collection identified by Lofland is evaluation of access. This includes assessing the relationship between the investigator and the setting (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Specific VOCs were not chosen prior to the start of data collection. The choice of informants determined the choice of VOCs. Since I had extensive experience with VOCs, I could generally gain access to the VOC in which an informant was engaged. Many of the informants were chosen from VOCs where I was already involved. At the time of research, I was moderating three VOCs, which provided additional flexibility in accessing information and understanding the dynamics of member interaction. However, it was more difficult for me to gain access and be accepted in VOCs that were closed social groups, such as radical, racial, religious, or sexually-affiliated groups. Because of this, most informants came from VOCs where the investigator was “accepted” as part of the community, for example, technical discussion groups, uncensored news sites, online gaming communities, and social networking sites, such as Facebook and MySpace.

**Participant Observation**

Participant observation is defined as “the process in which an investigator establishes and sustains a many-sided and relatively long term relationship with a human association in its natural setting for the purpose of developing a scientific understanding of that association” (Lofland & Lofland, 1995). Participant observation was one of the
primary data collection methods for this study. As Lofland has described, the investigator needs to sustain a many sided and relatively long term relationship with informants in their natural environment, which in this case was a VOC. Informants were observed in their online environment over a period of at least three months starting from the summer of 2005. The research involved documenting behaviors, developing trust and respect, and gaining insight into the informant’s world (Bogdan & Biklen, 1998; Lancy, 1993; Wolcott, 1995). I conducted participant observation by being part of the VOC; this included signing up as a member and interacting directly with other community members. Informant behavior was recorded in field notes that included the following information.

*Frequency of Logins*

Some VOCs display the members that are currently online (although this may not indicate that a member is actively interacting in the VOC). In several VOCs that did not provide an indicator when members were online, I determined when a specific informant was online by looking at posting time stamps, available in almost all VOCs included in the study. This method was also not perfect; members might not have been actively posting but only interacting passively by reading other posts and messages on the VOC.

*Communication with Other Members*

I identified members who were communicating with other members by reading public posts. I was also able to identify how frequently informants interacted in a posting history revealed through the search function.
Responses from Other Members

I logged responses to posts by informants in order to assess how other members perceived the information given.

Reputation

The idea that a member gains an online reputation within a VOC was evaluated by the responses of members to postings. I classified responses as positive, negative, neutral, or irrelevant.

Trust

Trust was assessed in a similar way to reputation. Responses to a post were classified as positive, negative, neutral, or irrelevant.

Emotion

The level of emotional involvement of members was assessed based on the use of emoticons and narrative. Informants were also questioned about the display of emotion in an online setting and about their own emotional involvement in the VOC.

In-Depth Interviews

To know why informants made certain decisions and to better understand the motivations, feelings, and thought processes of informants, it is necessary to conduct in-depth interviews. In the interviews, informants could bring up topics that interested them. This “fluid and flexible structure” of research (Mason, 2002) allowed me to explore questions that arose during the course of the interaction. In-depth interviews also allowed me to probe further when I was not clear on answers given. The construction of knowledge that occurred during interviewing was a co-production that involved the
interviewer and informant. This research method was used with the full realization that results may not be an objective, but rather, a subjective narrative.

Compared with other qualitative research methods, such as focus groups, interviews provided more personal and honest data due to the psychological factors that operate in group dynamics. When inquiries were made about sensitive issues, such as choice of online identity, focus groups may not have yielded honest responses.

Interviews for this study were conducted either face-to-face or through an online medium. During the recruitment stage, not all informants agreed to be interviewed. One informant said that he did not want his online activity to be disclosed. I also received a cease-and-desist letter from the administrator of Apple forums for attempting to recruit informants for this study. In general, however, most informants agreed to participate and were cooperative in providing information regarding their VOC participation. Online interviews were conducted either because of geographical distance or because the informant wished to remain anonymous. Four interviews were conducted online and 16 interviews were face-to-face.

**Face-to-face Interviews**

When a prospective informant agreed to become an informant, I explained the purpose of the study and provided an Institutional Review Board (IRB) project outline and consent form. All face-to-face interviews were recorded. They lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. I followed the interview guide outlined in Appendix A.
**Online Interviews**

Online interviews had the advantage of being similar to an online interaction in a VOC. One informant chose to use Skype, a voice-over-IP configuration for his interview. The other online interviews were conducted through instant messaging.

**Classification of Virtual Online Communities**

This study covered a broad range of VOCs in an attempt to provide a holistic view of the phenomenon. The VOCs included in this research can be classified in four categories; Usenet, Internet forums, community gaming, and social networking. VOCs such as chat rooms, MUDs (multi-user domains) and BBS (bulletin board service) were not included in this study due to the lack of informants and decline in use.

**Usenet**

According to Moraes (1999) Usenet is,

… a world-wide distributed discussion system. It consists of a set of “newsgroups” with names that are classified hierarchically by subject. “Articles” or “messages” are “posted” to these newsgroups by people on computers with the appropriate software—these articles are then broadcast to other interconnected computer systems via a wide variety of networks (¶ 1).

Today the terms Usenet and newsgroups can be used interchangeably to describe text-based thematic discussion groups. Members can access the Usenet interface through an online browser or an independent application such as Microsoft’s Outlook Express and can subscribe to various topics of interest. Discussions are usually initiated through a series of threads and replies.
**Internet Forums**

This is the most common type of VOC found on the Internet. It is an evolved type of Usenet and is usually hosted on a website. This allows for more advanced visual features, such as the use of an avatar and emoticons. ZDNet (2007) defines an Internet forum as:

> A discussion group on the Web about a particular topic. It is similar to a Usenet discussion (see newsgroup), but uses the Web browser for access. Before the Web, text-only forums were common on bulletin boards and proprietary online services (see BBS). Web-based forums can include all the extras people expect from Web pages, including images, videos and downloads (p.1).

Internet forums are usually an extension of thematic websites where visitors congregate. This allows communities to develop and increased interactivity among users. Like Usenet, Internet forums follow a format where discussion topics are categorized and topics are posted as threads. Members can create new threads, reply to an existing thread, and quote other users. One feature developed exclusively for Internet forums is the ability to contact other members through “private messages” or pm. This feature enables member-to-member communication without going through a public interface or through personal email. Forum users normally need to sign-up in order to post material in the forum, but public browsing is allowed.

**Community Gaming / MMORPG**

Cole & Griffiths (2007) define a MMORPG (Massively Multiuser Online Role Playing Game) as “fully developed multiplayer universes with an advanced and detailed visual and auditory world in which players create an individualistic character” (p. 575).
increase in broadband Internet usage combined with advanced development of the personal computer allows members in MMORPG communities to create an online self as a character in the game who can be visually seen by other players. In some cases, such as World of Warcraft, the interface allows limited audio, such as audible emotional reactions to events within the game interface. The interaction with other players in the game is enhanced because “players use [MMORPG] as traditional games as well as arenas in which to explore new relationships, new places, and themselves” (Cole & Griffiths, 2007).

MMORPGs are an advanced development of online gaming. I treat this as a VOC because MMORPGs allow relationships to develop and groups to emerge as in Internet forums and social networking sites. However, MMORPGs differ from other virtual online communities because they are intended for gaming and the game objectives define the purpose of membership. Another aspect of current MMORPGs is the ability to animate characters and realistic “worlds” which and add an extra dimension of reality.

**Social Networking Sites**

Social networking sites are a highly evolved form of the VOC. Boyd & Ellison (2007) define social networking sites as:

… web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system. The nature and nomenclature of these connections may vary from site to site (p. 211).
Social networking sites are similar to gaming communities in terms of how users can interact with each other and form groups. The objective, however, is to allow users to create a network of friends and communicate with them. ED, an informant, described the Friendster social networking site popular in Indonesia as the “perfection of other forms” of online communities.

Individuals who are interested in joining a social networking site must first create a profile that can include any information the person is comfortable disclosing, such as an image and personal details or a list of hobbies or interests. The individual profile is the center of each member’s network, which expands by adding contacts or friends. Adding a friend involves sending a request to the other party which must be approved before the interaction can take place. After the request is approved, the member can browse the friend’s profile and stay connected by monitoring other profiles.

Following participant observation and in-depth interviews, an analysis of interview transcripts, chat sessions and observation notes reporting the online activity of informants was undertaken.

**Informants**

The interview pool consisted of 20 active members who were involved in one or more VOCs at the time of this study. Out of the 20 informants, 7 were female and 13 were male. The informants ranged in age from 19 to 50 years. The amount of time they spent online varied from 5-6 hours daily to only logging in once or twice every other day. Most had been active in using the Internet for at least three years.
The majority of informants are members of social network VOCs that connect “friends”: AT, BC, DH, EF, LD, NN, SS, TG, and TL are all members of MySpace or Facebook. “Friend” in this study is loosely defined as another member who has been approved by the informant to be included in his or her contact list to allow communication to take place. Being a friend in the VOC may not necessarily mean a friend in real life. Some informants said that they were uncomfortable making a friend in a real life setting, but they do not have a problem when communicating online.

The Digital Photographer

AM is an international student from India who started his undergraduate studies at Ohio University in 2001 majoring in electrical engineering. He started using the Internet in 1999 primarily for email communication. AM is an aspiring amateur photographer, but the cost of film limited his pursuit of his hobby. In 2003, AM purchased his first digital camera, which sparked a renewed passion for photography. Not only were the costs lower, but he discovered he could use the Internet to display and share his photographs. AM used a VOC called Flickr, an online photo sharing community owned by Yahoo. In 2003, many Internet photo sharing sites had emerged, but Flickr had an advantage, “It adds a dimension. If you are already a photographer it basically gives you a connection with people that think like you,” AM explained.

Flickr (see Figure 5) is not simply an online photo album where members upload photographs and invite friends and families to view them. Flickr is a community. Photographs can be labeled using searchable keywords or tags and can be put on public display. One of the most powerful aspects of Flickr is the ability to create thematic
groups which range from very broad categories such as “black and white photography” to specific subjects, such as “50mm f1.8 lens.” Members can join these mini discussion groups and discuss specific subjects related to the main theme. AM said that Flickr allowed a “connection” with other people one may not know in real life but who share similar interests.

Figure 5. Flickr photographic community interface showing a discussion group for Photoshop support. (Flickr – Photoshop Support Group, 2008).

During face-to-face interaction, I found AM to be shy and serious in discussing his interest. However, his online personae exhibited a different dimension of his personality. He was extremely humorous, outgoing, and always willing to join different groups and
become an active member. This dual personality trait made AM a very interesting informant for this study.

**The eBay Power Seller**

BE is a 47 year old grandmother who frequents the popular online auction site, eBay. The eBay community is a dedicated space for members to interact with each other. While almost all the topics deal with the commercial and administration aspects of eBay, members utilize this space to discuss many topics outside of eBay.

![Figure 6. eBay community discussion boards showing some topics unrelated to commerce. (eBay – Community Discussion Boards, 2008).](image-url)
BE is a full time housewife who creates homemade jewelry and sells it through eBay for additional income. Her everyday life is filled with domestic routines, and she seldom has a chance to socialize with friends. Her favorite pastime is when she has the opportunity to go online and visit the eBay discussion boards. This is separate from the normal eBay interface (see Figure 6), where buying and selling is the primary goal. She uses the community board as a form of entertainment and socialization and spends between two to four hours on a daily basis and more on the weekends. “We rarely talk about auctions,” she said. What makes BE unique is that she replaces face-to-face interaction with virtual companionship.

**Online Dater**

BK is a 25 year old female undergraduate student from New York City majoring in English at Ohio University. She was introduced to the Internet in the summer of 2000 and became hooked on instant messaging when she realized it was more than a simple way to communicate with current friends. She could also use it to meet people for dating purposes. Unfortunately she found that many people she met randomly through IM or instant messaging were not serious about building real relationships and relied heavily on casual interactions.

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2 Instant messaging or abbreviated IM is a type of communications service that enables users to create a private chat room with another user in order to communicate in real time over the Internet. IM is similar to a telephone conversation that uses text-based communication. An instant messaging application alerts the user whenever somebody on the user’s private list is online and the user can then initiate a chat session with that particular individual.
on physical appearances. BK decided to try an online dating service, eHarmony. During
the seven day trial she was fascinated with the response she received from other
members. BK explained, “they did a psychological work up on you, and the people they
matched you with were really better matches than trying to go on someone’s looks.”
After her trial expired, BK continued with the paid service for $39 per month. She was
matched with seven or eight individuals whom she later met in person. Her experience
with meeting through a VOC and extending the meeting to the physical realm provided
an interesting perspective to this study.

The Deaf Artist

D17 is a single 41 year old man who is employed as a personal nurse for a disabled
client. D17, who is deaf, has been living alone in an apartment for the last 20 years.
Because of his disability, he chose to use the Internet to frequent VOCs where his
handicap is not evident to others. He is a longtime member of Ogrish, an uncensored
media forum that discusses various topics from recent news headlines to sensitive debates
on issues not normally discussed in public. This is an alternate media site that
complements mainstream media news broadcasts. D17’s involvement with Orgish is
unique. He is known by the username of “Dr. Acid Avatar” because he helps members
create avatars. His skill and creativity in animating images and video clips is known to
almost all members of the forum. New members who had questions regarding avatars are
automatically referred to the “doctor.” Compared to mundane everyday life, D17 feels
that he has reached a level of fame at Ogrish, which motivated him to return and live up
to his online reputation as the avatar creator.
The Gay Student

ED is a gay international student from Indonesia who recently graduated from Ohio University. The gay community is normally shunned by the general public in Muslim-dominated Indonesia. I first met ED at an informal Indonesian community gathering in Athens, Ohio in 2006. During the gathering, each new student was given an opportunity to introduce him or herself. When it came to ED’s turn, he surprised the group by revealing his sexual orientation. In addition, he requested that everybody be respectful of his difference. From that point, I admired his courage and honesty in talking openly, and we became friends. My friendship with ED involved discussions on how he coped with being gay in Indonesia. He later revealed that he used VOCs as a means to join a gay community. This encouraged me to probe deeper into his involvement with VOCs, and I recruited him as an informant for this study.

Volunteer Tech Support

JC is a 43 year old fireman from Greencastle, Indiana, who describes himself as a “techno-geek.” He didn’t grow up with knowledge of computers and the Internet, and his job as a firefighter didn’t require computer knowledge in the beginning. In the past five years, this changed and basic computer literacy became part of his job. When he first entered the computer world, his colleagues recommended he purchase a Mac instead of a Windows-based PC due to its user friendliness and enhanced security features. He purchased a Mac computer and started browsing the Apple forums (See Figure 7) to educate himself on using the computer. After gaining sufficient experience using a Mac, he began to answer other people’s questions online and became popular in the forums due
to his friendly and helpful demeanor when interacting with other members. JC explained that Apple forums had a feature where active members are given the title of “helper” under their user name. This title allows other members to evaluate the quality of information in a response to a question. Even though JC was not compensated for his time and effort to help others, he remained active on the forum because he saw his status as a “privilege.”

Figure 7. Apple discussion forums showing member provided support. (Apple Support Forums, 2008)

After a few years, Apple forums changed the helper title to a more hierarchical structure with levels, which were graduated from level 1 (beginner) to level 5 (expert).
Levels are determined by how helpful a member’s responses to questions posted on the forum are according to ratings provided by forum members. Apple forum members rate the replies with a plus or a minus which are then accumulated for earning points to reach higher levels. Level 4 or higher members are awarded a private forum where they can discuss more advanced topics. JC was awarded a level 4 for his proficiency in solving problems on the forum. I had interacted with JC several times through the forum and was interested in his ability to explain complicated technical concepts in an easy to understand way.

Soap Opera Site Administrator

JW was a college senior at the time of interview. Having grown up with a single parent who often left him alone at home during the work day, television became his electronic babysitter. An interest in soap operas developed, especially for a show called Port Charles on the ABC network.

He began using computers in high school. After finding a web-building site, he decided to create a simple website about his favorite television program, Port Charles, that included a discussion thread on each episode as it aired. Not long after, he began to receive fan mail from visitors to his site requesting that he upgrade it to include more interactivity so fans could meet each other. JW purchased the domain ABCPortCharles.com and set up a fan site. Because the domain name included ABC, many members thought it was an official site hosted by the ABC network. This prompted JW to change the domain name to portcharlesexplosion.com due to the “explosion of
information” contained on the site. JW added forums for discussion relating to the Port Charles program. He became the administrator for the site and appointed another moderator to keep the forums organized.

I became interested in JW because he tailored his VOC to the interest of a very specific community. Port Charles was a spin-off of a more popular soap opera called General Hospital and had only a limited following of fans. The show aired from June 1, 1997 to October 3, 2003 and included several long time General Hospital characters, such as Lucy Coe, Kevin Collins, Scott Baldwin and Karen Wexler. In addition, I was interested in understanding how JW administered the VOC and dealt with the members.

**Chinese Moderator**

LW was an international student from Beijing, China, at the time of interview. Because she lived in a large city in China, Internet access was widely available. When she was first exposed to the Internet in 1999, she used it primarily for e-mail, entertainment and occasionally reading the news. She later discovered a VOC for Chinese students who study outside of China called daigua.org (see Figure 8). This VOC mainly includes casual discussions among Chinese students who are already overseas in the United States and Europe. In 2000, LW had the opportunity to travel to the US to pursue a graduate degree, and her involvement in daigua increased. According to LW, daigua was initially littered with random discussions lacking much useful information for students who were looking for an overseas education.
She and a few other members began a new section with serious information and discussions for students applying to study abroad and Chinese students already studying overseas. She became the moderator for the new section, which became the most popular discussion area in the forum.

At the time of interview, LW explained that she logs on daily, spending more than two hours each day interacting with members and providing advice and support. I met LW through working with her on a campus project. Our similar research interests were a frequent topic of discussion. She is very active in several organizations, holding the
position of president of the International Student Union at Ohio University from 2003 to 2004 as well as being a member of the Chinese students and scholars association.

**Online Gamers**

ND and RG are online gamers. Both are male and in their mid-20s. They share a passion for one of the most popular MMORPG games known as World of Warcraft (WoW). At the time of interview, ND had been playing computer games for two years and claimed to be addicted to playing WoW. Playing on a daily basis, the game had become his main form of recreation, replacing television and reading as regular pastimes. Although ND enjoys single player games, the interactivity aspect of meeting real humans within the game setting creates a more appealing experience for him. According to ND, WoW is different from other online games because networking with other players is critical in playing the game successfully and “adds another element to the game.” ND has two major characters in the game, one is a male and the other female. He chose a female character as an experiment to see how the game changed if he assumed a radically different identity. The idea of assuming several identities within a VOC caught my attention and prompted me to explore his experience further.

RG was a veteran player of computer games since the late 1980s when his parents bought a Commodore 64. He purchased his own computer system in 1998 and began exploring the world of online gaming starting with Ultima Online, Everquest, and finally World of Warcraft. RG explained how forming alliances with other players, known as

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3 MMORPG is a massively multiplayer online role-playing game.
“guilds” was an important factor in successful play. Like ND, RG admitted to being addicted to WoW and jokingly referred to it as “World of Warcrack” due to its addictive nature.
Chapter 4
Research Findings

My research findings are presented in this chapter. An explanation of the difference between dependent and self-sustained virtual online communities will be followed by a description of the four functions of virtual online communities (VOCs) and a discussion of data from in-depth interviews on motivations for participation in VOCs. The chapter concludes by examining three issues frequently raised by informants during interviews.

A VOC is distinct from other Internet sites in that most of the content is generated by members rather than site administrators. Because the content is member-generated, the quality of content is critical to the success of the communities. In most VOCs, a process is enabled to promote “good” material and demote “bad” material. The quality of material is judged by the community of VOC members. In popular Internet lingo, several terms are used to describe members’ actions within a newsgroup or a Usenet group such as threads, bump and buried. “Threads” are a list of messages loosely related to one another under a common topic. Members who reply to a thread will “bump,” or move, the thread to the top of a list of threads giving it higher visibility. Popular topics will flourish as members continue to build on the discussion, while unpopular content will eventually be “buried,” or moved down the list of threads decreasing its visibility. The addition of popular content attracts new members to join. This natural evolution also applies at the macro level where well-maintained VOCs thrive with increased membership, while
poorly maintained VOCs are eventually abandoned. The success of a VOC depends more on member participation and contributions than on the administration of the site.

VOCs can generate feelings of fellowship and even intimacy, leading to the development of enduring personal relationships that can be as important as face-to-face relationships for some. Time Magazine year-end edition named “you” as its person of the year in 2006, giving credence to the explosive growth and influence of user-generated Internet content such as blogs, content sharing and social networking sites. In the article, Grossman (2006) declares that the year 2006 was “a story about community and collaboration on a scale never seen before” (Grossman, 2006, ¶ 3). Google Zeitgeist is a service provided by Google to generate a snapshot in time of what people are searching for using Google. In 2006, Google Zeitgeist found that two of the ten most popular search words in the year 2006 were from VOCs: bebo and myspace. Three others were related to VOCs, including metacafe, wikipedia, and mininova. In 2007, eight out of ten of the most popular search terms used in Google related to VOCs (Year-End Zeitgeist, 2007).

According to bebo, their site is “the next generation social networking site where members can stay in touch with their college friends, connect with friends, share photos, discover new interests and just hang out” (bebo.com, 2007). MySpace allows members to “create a private community” to “share photos, journals and interests” with a “growing network of mutual friends” (myspace.com, 2007). Metacafe is a video sharing site similar to YouTube where members are instrumental in determining which content is promoted to top visibility. Members may also comment on and discuss videos posted on the site. Wikipedia is well-known as a user-developed online encyclopedia where members provide content for entries. One of the most fascinating elements of wikipedia is its “self-
correcting” nature. When entries are posted with errors, the community will spot and remedy the mistakes. Finally, mininova is a bittorent\(^4\) sharing site with interaction between users.

The community aspect of these sites is a key factor in their popularity. In this study, informants expressed excitement at their ability to communicate with other people without the risk of exposing oneself completely. Informants in this study spent hours engaging with other online members and developing relationships.

**Dependent and Self-Sustained VOCs**

**Dependent VOCs**

This study identified two different types of memberships in VOCs. The first relies on a VOC as an extension to an already existent face-to-face community. This can be described as a dependent VOC because user interaction is dependent on pre-existing member relationships. A social networking VOC such as Facebook is a good example of an extension of face-to-face communities. One informant explained that he used Facebook “because all my friends here at OU have it and it’s a good way to just to know who their friends are and things about [their] friends.” Another informant, LD, explained that “everybody uses Facebook”; without a Facebook profile, they simply lack an identity. BC did not take his involvement in Facebook seriously. It was merely another

\(^4\) Bittorent is a method of distributing large data files by sharing resources among users. Instead of having a single server as the primary distributor, all users who are retrieving (downloading) files also become providers (upload). This method is particularly effective with popular files because the more users are interested in a specific file, the more distributors there are.
method to relate with everyday friends. The real life friendship was what he treasured. When asked about the differences between his online and offline community, BC replied that the VOC was “for fun.”

It’s not really the same thing at all . . . the groups that are online are mostly just for fun, for me anyways. And then the groups I join in real life . . . that’s where you meet your friends . . . that’s where you really meet people, get to know them, because online you can’t really get to know someone that well without ever talking to them or looking them in the eye.

The fact that face-to-face friends are also members of Facebook adds an element of peer pressure and motivates people to join. In this type of VOC, the bonding between members is often dependent on the real life friendships that already exist. The VOC is simply another means of communication among real life friends.

Facebook and other social networking sites allow members to befriend each other through a process of sending and accepting a virtual request to “become a friend.” AT felt indifferent after receiving a friend request from a complete stranger.

I look at their profile and if they seemed like someone I completely would not want to be friends with, then I don’t let them be my friend. Typically, I couldn’t really care less.

Another informant pointed out that some members try to collect friends to boost self-esteem, even though a real life friendship is non-existent. BC says, “the only weird thing is when people you don’t know try to [be]friend you, there’s some people that seem to want to collect friends [for] social standing.” Another informant, a member of the OU
Democrats group on Facebook, concurred that the VOC “has no real meaning or purpose.”

There's really . . . no point to . . . [the VOC] I'm in. The college democrats or republicans are a way of communicating . . . [within a] common interest group, that’s all.

While members from dependent VOCs generally communicate with members they know personally, new members can be introduced, opening up opportunities for dependent VOCs to evolve into self-sustained ones.

**Self-Sustained VOCs**

The second kind of VOC is a community where relationships between members are formed, developed, and nurtured purely through virtual encounters based on shared interests. This can be referred to as a self-sustained VOC. In a self-sustained VOC, there is no off-line component to the relationship. Members do not know each other in real life and may not have the desire to meet each other except virtually through the VOC. Some examples of this type of VOC are online discussion groups and special interest groups. The eBay discussion community is a prime example.5

BE, a member of eBay finds this VOC more important than face-to-face relationships.

AB: How would you compare the eBay discussion group with other real life communities you're involved with?

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5 Hereafter, in the following interview quotes, I (as the interviewer) will be referred to as “AB.”
BE: I can't really compare the two. [They are] two different worlds. I don't talk about my online friends with real life friends, except in passing, or to make a specific point about something, i.e., "this girl I know on eBay said this."

AB: Do you feel closer [with online friends]?

BE: Do I feel closer to online friends? I spend more time with them because that's where I am. I don't have a huge circle of friends in RL [real life] . . . most of my friends are my kids’ parents, with the exception of two or three long time girl friends. They, like myself, are busy with their lives. Online friends are “lighter.” We don't discuss financial troubles, marital problems, work issues. We just goof off and offer each other food for thought on the more serious issues.

BE admits that in “real life” (RL) she doesn’t have as many friends as in her VOC. She is freer to establish friendships through the VOC without being inhibited by commitment. BE’s idea that a VOC is “lighter” refers to the nature of her online relationship commitments being easy to terminate. Because of the more focused nature of bonding within VOCs (bonding through similar interests) and especially because of the limited knowledge members have about their peers in the virtual realm, people may feel more comfortable than in face-to-face interactions.

Another informant, JW, explained that he felt closer and “has a tendency to share more information” with friends he meets through his VOC than with real life friends.

I honestly would spend more time talking to the people online than I would spend with people in my everyday life, so maybe I would actually feel closer to these
people because not knowing them I have a tendency to share more information, like if I had a bad day. I have one friend on AIM that I met through AOL Instant Messenger. He lives in Canada, and whenever he sees me online he instant messages me and [asks] if I had a bad day. I’ll tell him everything that happened, but I wouldn’t tell a friend because they might know other people and they might have a biased interest in it.

JW explains that although relationships are established through a shared interest, the relationship may extend to real friendships.

**AB:** Do you just talk about Port Charles?

**JW:** We did but then it went on to other stuff on TV and then if I had a bad day. Then I’d talk about the personal, like I knew when he was applying for the job at Wal-Mart, and I knew when he got the job in the electronics department.

On eBay discussion boards, conversation topics are not limited to eBay auctions. BE explained how topics evolve into other matters similar to real life friendships.

**AB:** But doesn't [being on eBay] also limit your conversation topics?

**BE:** If you've been on the boards at all, you can see we rarely talk about auctions . . . [even though] we answer questions and comment on auctions, but most of the time, in my experience, we are goofing off. We help out in our spare time. We don't get paid to be there!

Leo Laporte, a technology analyst commented that “we are living in this virtual community, where sometimes you have friends that you’ve never met. But you know more about them than you know about your neighbors” (2007).
Functions of VOCs

Ridings and Gefen (2004) identified four major functions that drive membership in VOCs; information exchange, social support exchange, friendship, and recreation. This study confirms that each of these functions are present in the use of VOCs.

Information Exchange

Information exchange refers to how knowledge and information become a valuable currency within the VOC (Binik, Cantor, Ochs, and Meana, 1997; Hiltz and Wellman, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Sproull and Faraj, 1997). Several informants identify information exchange as a function of VOCs. LW, the Chinese moderator, explained that Chinese members of Dai-Gua who are searching for education abroad opportunities frequently search for information on GRE or TOEFL testing, application procedures for admission and visas. JW, who administers the Port Charles explosion website, claimed that the site was named because of the “explosion of information” found on his site. ED, the gay student, searched several newsgroups and forums for information on homosexuality. JC, who frequents the Apple technical discussion forum claims that,

. . . anytime I get something new I don’t know a whole lot about it like setting up a wireless network [or if] I want to put my printer in another room all by itself without any computer there, . . . I went to the networking part [of the forums] and got help right away . . . it was great, they helped me instantly.
Social Support Exchange

Social support exchange is a function that relates to the members rather than the content of VOCs. Social support refers to “the degree to which a person’s basic social needs are gratified through interaction with others” (Thoits, 1982, p. 147). Some informants describe how membership in a VOC gives them a sense of belonging and identity. RT, an informant who frequents the Ogirsh forums three hours per day explains that he enjoys interacting with other members but “wouldn't call anyone [he has] talked to on Ogrish a real ‘friend.’” It was simply for social support. AM, an amateur photographer, echoes RT’s experience through Flickr. AM claimed that “if you are already a photographer it basically gives you a connection with people that think like you.” AM further explained that adding somebody as a contact doesn’t imply a true friendship. On Flickr, a mutual contact simply means they enjoy viewing each others photographs and also provided social support for one another.

A lot of them added me as contacts from looking at my pictures . . . and there is a few of them whose pictures I really like . . . anytime someone adds you, Flickr sends you an email . . . that says, “Do you want to add them as a friend?” Because of that, when someone asks you, you can just let it go if you don’t like the [other] person’s pictures. It’s just basically a lot of people whose pictures I like or who like my pictures.

Members also get emotional support and support for their opinions from VOCs. An example would be an online support group for an illness or personal disability. Research also suggests that VOCs are effective in supporting political views. Because VOCs use the Internet as a medium, it is easy to seek out specific or unique VOCs. Other
examples of support groups are minority groups, such as the gay community, or geographically distanced communities, such as a worldwide group of Elvis Presley fans. What distinguishes the VOC from a real life social group are the “weak ties,” that is, relationships with strangers whom one engages only in these online settings.

**Friendship**

Another function similar to social support exchange is friendship. The desire to seek out friendship within the VOC is not only to pursue generic support, but can also target individuals for deeper, more meaningful relationships. This can be seen in various social networking sites, described previously, where members can add other members as “friends” to their profile. Various chat programs, instant messaging services, and forums also allow interactivity and provide ways to quickly search for and contact other members. This simplifies the process of identifying individuals having similar interests. Previous studies have found that individuals who are isolated or lonely tend to participate more in VOCs (Filipczak, 1998; Lowes, 1997; Wellman, 1996). Baym (2000) found that VOC members were initially drawn into the VOC by its content but later found that friendships emerged within the community. In general, members of a VOC bond with others who share similar interests or possess similar objectives. “I seem to connect with people who appear to have the same interests and personalities as me” explained BE, a VOC member from eBay community forums.

In this study, there were informants whose interests in VOCs were limited to information seeking and lacked any desire to establish relationships or cultivate friendships. Information seeking behavior is common in the Apple support group where
members mostly post technical questions about Apple products. Utz (2000) found that in Multi-User Domains (MUDs), members who form friendships online spend more time in the VOC than those who didn’t. Although friendship seems to be a secondary benefit of participating in the VOC, studies have found that priorities differ and are highly dependent on the type of VOC.

Contacting friends is usually the main activity on social networking sites, which often include tools that automatically alert the member via email when a contact updates his or her information. AT explains,

What’s really neat about the both of them is they’ll send [a message.] I check my email everyday and they’ll send a message that says you have a new message from so-and-so on my space or someone posted a comment on your wall so you know you need to go check your Facebook or MySpace account through your email.

Recreation

The Internet is becoming a source of entertainment similar to other forms of popular media, such as television. Evans (2001) explains that society is being reshaped as a world full of simulations and different realities, and one reflection of this is the online gaming industry. Interest in online games without additional social benefits, such as friendships, is common. Before computer technology could provide photorealistic environments in games, there were the MUDs (multi-user domains). In this type of environment, users engage with other members in a text-based pseudo-world where recreation is the primary motivational factor. ND, who plays World of Warcraft for an average of three hours per
day, revealed that it was his primary form of entertainment and “replaces watching television.” RG admitted that playing World of Warcraft was his only form of entertainment and was “cheaper than going out to the movies.”

Similar to online games, the interaction between other people through the VOC can also be exclusively for entertainment purposes. For example, RT commented that he participates in the Ogrish forum for entertainment alone:

AB: What is your main motivation for spending that amount of time there?
RT: Entertainment.

AB: What about friendship? Do you have any real friends at Ogrish forums?
RT: Not really. I wouldn't call anyone I've talked to on Ogrish a friend.

RT further explains that relationships that are built within the VOC are “far more casual and not really long lasting.” When asked how he defined casual, he elaborated that “casual as in little effort to keep it going and/or putting time into building it.” AT and LD, both frequent visitors to social networking sites such as MySpace and Facebook, confirmed they use these sites because of the “entertainment factor.”

Motivations of VOC Members

Informants in this study offered different motives for joining virtual online communities, based on individual experiences in each VOC. What makes a VOC so appealing? Based on the results of this study, I learned that accessibility/convenience was a major reason people turned to VOCs on the internet. I also discovered five reoccurring motivations that consistently emerged from interviews with informants: escape, alternate identities, social recognition, voyeurism, and written communication as a medium.
Accessibility

Many VOCs are available to its members using any suitable Internet-connected device, whether it’s a personal computer, a cell phone, or a PDA. With the exception of community gaming, another means of accessibility is through spending asynchronous quality time in VOCs. This refers to the ability of members to communicate without being online at the same time. Most VOCs are available at all times, provided all technical aspects, such as Internet connection and the VOC web servers, are functioning normally. Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) have pointed out,

All other things being equal, people who have a higher amount of access, as well as modes of access that encompass more of the people in a given aggregate, are more likely to form communities than those who have a lower level of access (p. 242).

Members can visit VOCs whenever their schedules allow them. For example, AM commented that he sometimes visits “during the night when I have nothing else to do.” In AM’s case, he had the liberty login to Flickr, the photography VOC, late at night, a time when it would be unlikely for him to participate in a photography club. On a similar note, AM also mentioned he visits Flickr when he has “nothing else to do.” All VOC members interviewed for this study said that easy access prompted them to visit more frequently compared to the effort required in face-to-face communities.

Another aspect of accessibility is the ability of the Internet to transcend space. Interaction among members from across the world is as simple as chatting with neighbors across the street, provided they speak a common language. Because of this convenience, it is easier for users to identify others with common goals or interests. Members now can
communicate regularly “without significant economic or other costs and without being in close proximity, either spatially or temporally.”

These communications evolve across both geographic borders and time zones, and they encompass individuals who are home-bound because of illness, age, handicap, or lack of social skills. They provide safety for people who seek to communicate but fear leaving home, a major consideration in many cities. And they can encompass a very large number of individuals. (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999, p. 242).

It was not uncommon to find that VOC membership is comprised of multiple nationalities. BC explains that he likes to “talk to all my friends I met in Europe” through MySpace. AM, a Flickr member who is originally from India, went to the United States in 2001 for college and returned to India in 2006 upon completion of his degree. While AM attended school in the United States, he developed a passion for photography and found that this fascination connected him with other photographers around the world. After he returned to India, he maintained his membership on Flickr. A similar face-to-face community, such as a photography club, would have forced absent members to break ties with their community. The connection in virtual space allows traveling VOC members to stay involved.

LW, however, noted that there are limits on accessibility in some countries. Members of Dai-Gua, moderated by LW, are from various universities in the United States and Europe. Ironically, students in China cannot access this VOC because it has been blocked by the Chinese government.
I’d say all of the members are Chinese students, because we use Chinese and we talk in Chinese. Members are from all over. Most of the members are from the United States, and some are from Europe. And some are from China but it’s unfortunate that the website is blocked by the Chinese government.

She explained further that the restriction on accessing Dai-Gua in China may be a simple mistake. Dai-Gua only discusses social and educational issues and does not allow topics that would be considered suspicious by the Chinese government, such as politics and ideology. Of course, politically motivated manipulation of communication technology can limit VOC accessibility. Many websites that are considered subversive have been blocked by governments that have the technical facility to control access to them.

Virtual online communities can also serve as a substitute for other forms of electronic communication. Although many members find the community aspect intriguing, some members rely on virtual online communities simply as a method of communication with a group of physical contacts. Instant Messaging (IM) is a popular technology where members can “chat” with other members in real time. The IM interface allows members to see the online status of their contacts and it alerts them when their pre-selected friends are available for communication. LD is a student living in a university residence hall and is an avid IM user. She compares the use of virtual online communities as a means of communication to the telephone and explains how this technology is practical because of the resources provided by the university.

Convenience, I guess. A lot of students are at their computers anyway [so] with a quick little message [as] opposed to getting out your phone. It's cheaper anyways,
the university gives you a computer so you don't have to use the minutes on your cell phone, [and] pay the bill.

Although the technology allows LD to meet new people and establish new relationships, she prefers to keep a closed network of personal contacts. AT acknowledges that the use of social networking sites such as Facebook is much more convenient than initiating contact through other means.

. . . since we’re in college and nobody ever seems to be able to answer their phone and it seems like you’re constantly leaving messages on people’s phones and I hate checking my voicemail and it’s a lot easier when my friends leave messages on my computer screen and it’s just like post-it notes and its really convenient.

Accessibility provides a platform for VOCs to experience accelerated development. As Internet coverage and tools for accessing VOCs increase, the number and variety of VOCs also expands to reach a larger population.

**Escapism**

BE, who is 47 years old, spends approximately 2-4 hours daily on the eBay discussion boards. She spends “99.99%” of her online time in her VOC. At first, I imagined interactions on eBay discussion boards revolved around topics related to eBay auctions. However, BE pointed out that discussions are not limited to the auctions but involve many other topics, as in real life communities.

**AB:** Why do you spend so much time on the boards?

**BE:** I'd have to say, in all honesty, it's an addiction of sorts. My family is busy and crazy, husband is obsessed with work and I escape here.
AB: I'm assuming you have made some pretty good friends on the boards, people who know your ID, am I correct?

BE: Yes, many friends. I've come to know several quite well.

BE explained that VOCs provides an outlet for her to meet other people without the complexities of real life, serving as an escape from everyday reality.

I feel a common bond with more of the world [through a VOC] than I would ever feel possible in real life. I go to work. I come home. I go out with my husband from time to time. It’s a pretty simple, sheltered, closed little world when I think about it. I do the mommy thing, the wife thing, the employee thing. There’s not much room for other things.

BE’s real life fell into a monotonous routine. She saw the VOC as a separate social space for talking about interesting topics. “The online [eBay] community allows me to talk about issues that interest me,” BE explained.

BE found an accessible outlet through the eBay discussion boards. She established friendships with other members and considered them as people she knew “quite well.” In BE’s case, the virtual realm provided advantages compared to real life interactions. When asked what she gained from actively participating in the eBay discussion boards, BE explained that the VOC has provided her with a social life she lacked in her real life.

Alternate Identities

It is seldom in life that one can strip off one’s physical characteristics, one’s past history, one’s faults and defects and start anew. VOCs allow members to start fresh and construct
an entirely different identity online. Turkle (1995) argued that because of the Internet one can reevaluate one’s identity and the way one thinks about relationships and self; in doing so, one becomes multifaceted and decentered. She was concerned with the increasing popularity of substituting simulations for reality through the Internet.

Baumeister and Tice (1986) proposed four types of identities; the public self, the self-concept, the actual self and the ideal self. The public self is the “totality of how one is known to others.” This is generally the identity seen by others. The three other selves are all components of the private self, a more personal identity that is often masked to the general public or what Goffman (1959) refers to as “back stage.” The self-concept is how one generally sees one’s self. This differs from the public self in that it includes elements of secrecy, masking aspects of ourselves that we choose not to disclose to others. Therefore, others may see us differently from the way we view ourselves. The actual self is the true behavioral self which is “the reality of the person in the use of sense, behaviors, traits, and individual differences or characteristics” (Baumeister and Tice, 1986, p. 66). The final form of identity is the ideal self, which is the person that one wants to be. The ideal self is the ultimate goal a person wishes to achieve.

There are several ways to accomplish bringing the actual self closer to the ideal self. One method is through continuous self-improvement by altering behavior and observing that one has gained a more satisfactory result. This phenomenon can be seen among members of VOCs in identity creation. VOC members may experiment with various types of “selves” and eventually might keep an identity that is thought to be closest to the ideal. Identities in VOCs can be discarded if they fail to represent the member’s ideal persona.
In the eBay discussion board, members use their eBay identity (used for eBay auctions) to interact with other members in the community. Some personal information is revealed when the membership ID is posted on the discussion board. For example, there are feedback ratings, items bought and sold, feedback about others, and perhaps some limited personal information if an optional “About Me” page has been created. Consequently some members may chose to create a posting ID used for interacting with other members. This allows members to post messages without having to disclose their personal details. I asked BE about the practice of creating posting IDs to conceal an authentic eBay identity.

AB: Why do you think people “hide” behind posting IDs?

BE: Many because they have been harassed. I also think the “meanies” with posting ID's have them to be mean without having to worry about their real eBay account being suspended. [They are] throw away ID's.

If a member receives a negative reputation (not through feedback ratings but through online misdemeanors), their identity can be discarded and a new identity created simply by applying for a new account. The use of constructed identities to hide deceptive practices can become annoying and even destructive. Some invented identities can be quite harmful to individuals or to the community; others are innocuous, benefiting the members without injuring the group. Some alternate identities are clearly deceptions, meant to provide a false impression; others are more subtle manipulations of identity, similar to the adjustments in self-presentation one makes in real world situations (Donath, 1998).
In another example, LW noticed that some members in her Chinese VOC hold several accounts, each reflecting a unique identity. “I know some people might have different accounts and use different identities to talk with people” she explained. LW also pointed out that an alternative identity can play a positive role. The VOC she moderates constructs a virtual authority under the title of “general moderator,” which can be accessed by chosen members, including herself:

Instead of saying “I am the owner of this community or this forum,” we decided to create a figure. We call it the “senior of Dai-Gua”, and we use this figure to post some regulations. So that’s just some kind of an ID or identification of the collective management. So the five of us, the initiators, know the password and ID of this figure and we use it to control and manage this forum. And we divide among ourselves the job and responsibilities. And I am the one to manage the daily activities of this forum. One person will take care of the technology issues. Another will take care of the relationships among members and maybe another member will take care of how to develop this forum. So we divide our responsibilities.

The Dai-Gua moderation team devised this identity (senior of Dai-Gua) as a symbol of authority.

VOCs do not have the capacity to transmit all information comparable to face-to-face communication. In some cases, members register with very little information, the most common being the username. A username is simply a user-defined name that distinguishes one member from another. Members have the freedom to create any usernames they desire, and these do not have to be related in any way to a member’s true
identity. Some are vague while others disclose some element of character, such as gender (masculine vs. feminine images), views or beliefs (religious symbols), or how a member wants to be perceived (favorite public figures). JW who owns and manages a VOC for a daytime television soap opera, uses his real name in the discussion group: “They would have no way of knowing if it is my real name or not” he explained. Since he manages the community, he feels a personal responsibility to be “truthful” in the forums. When asked whether the use of real names generates more trust in the community he indicated that there really is no way of knowing. More often than not, VOC members do not use their real name as their username.

In a VOC, members can use a variety of other visual elements to create an online identity. The most common visual element is the avatar. The avatar is a term taken from Hindu philosophy which refers to the manifestation of a higher being in physical form. In forum-based VOCs, the avatar is a graphical representation (manifestation) of the user (higher being) commonly represented as a small icon next to the username. In gaming VOCs the avatar serves as the visual character that members use to interact with other characters within the game environment. Being an administrator, JW used an avatar that was the official logo of his soap opera site. He explains, “When people see [my avatar], they know this is an official posting cause it’s the official logo [of the site].” Like LW, JW uses a graphical identity that represents his authoritative role in the VOC. JW points out that an avatar can shape member’s reaction to a posting:

I’ve seen . . . Tinkerbell there and . . . you start reading it . . . the avatar kind of taints your mind towards the type of person writing it because you see the
Tinkerbell there so . . . this is probably like a teenage girl writing this post so you .
. . . read it differently.

The construction of identity through an avatar can also be used for identity experimentation. ND, a male involved with online gaming, initially started with a male character, but later created a female character to see if it made a difference in playing the game, “I made my second character female intentionally to see how the game is different.” H found that the game was much more enjoyable with the female character, since other players seemed to be more generous and open when dealing with female characters. Subtle improvements in the game prompted ND to finally use a female character as his primary identity. “You know . . . your main character [is] the one you spend most of your time with” he explained.

The limited cues available in VOCs offer members plenty of room to construct identities with which they are comfortable. Members tend to experiment with various identities when beginning their involvement in a VOC and these eliminate ones that fail to represent the “ideal self” they seek. Because tools are available for the member to construct an alternate identity in a VOC (username, avatar, personal information, etc.), the VOC offers an outlet for members to present their private self online.

People in real life may feel inhibited to display fear, insecurity or anger in public. Displaying such emotions may damage their public image or be understood as a sign of weakness. VOCs provide an environment in which it may be easier to express opinions and thoughts.
Social Recognition

The reasons why members participate in virtual online communities are varied, yet acknowledgment of accomplishment has proven to be a powerful enticement for VOC involvement. Real life communities often organize special events, such as award ceremonies, to recognize achievements of members. Likewise, informants acknowledge that recognition was a strong motivational factor in explaining why they spent many hours of service working for the community. For example, D17, an Ogrish member, started a thread offering help modifying or creating avatars. Ogrish has strict guidelines on customizing avatars to meet specific requirements. Members frequently have images which they would like to use that do not comply with the guidelines. D17 offered to use his technical skills to assist other members in the creation of their avatars. At the time of writing that thread, titled “Mindtrippin' Avatars,” he had received over 1,600 replies and over 69,000 views. During an interview, I asked why D17 volunteered his time to assist others in this labor intensive task. D17 replied that social recognition was the main factor.

I do it because I've seen others post their drawings and avatars so I felt that I wanted to share my talent to Ogrish. Just for fun. I get kicks from members who say “WOW” when the “av” [avatar] I made was so simple! . . . Really, I was kind of showing my skills off.

He was rewarded by having the moderation team “sticky” his thread. To “sticky” a thread means that the thread is always visible at the top of thread list. Normally, threads move down the list when new threads are created. D17 eventually changed his user name to “Dr. Acid Avatar” to further advertise his talent within the forum.
In another example, JW is the administrator of a VOC aimed at fans of a daytime television show. He receives no revenue from hosting this site, yet he continues to maintain it. During the interview JW said that many fans mistakenly assumed his site was an official site provided by the television network, which he found quite satisfying. Seeing my work online and knowing people are seeing it. And whenever I get an email, like you did a great job! . . .I know earlier I said that people used to mistake me for the official site. Sometimes I still [get questions, such as] why did you cancel the show? (laughs) Annoying as that is to have to answer, it really does make me feel good that I’m doing a good of enough job that people mistake it for the official site.

**Voyeurism**

Internet technology allows new and accessible methods of searching for content that may be difficult to access in real life. This includes virtual voyeurism, which is the practice of observing people unnoticed while online. It is this voyeur aspect that motivates some members to join the social networking sites such as Myspace and Facebook that have flourished over the past decade. One informant explained that the voyeur aspect is “part of the fun.”

AB: Have you ever had that urge to just look up other people?

BC: Oh yeah, that’s part of the fun. I think just finding new people, looking at new faces, seeing if you recognize people in classes.

This informant felt that she was empowered by the practice because she can observe other members prior to initiating a contact that might lead to friendship. Online dating
has recently gained mainstream acceptance also. Such sites encourage an “acceptable”
form of voyeurism. An informant who has been involved in online dating commented on
the opportunity to look up personal details of other members in her search for potential
mates in a VOC. BK said:

There are ways that you can look through all the men in Ohio who have their
profile on there. It’s just a quick little blurb of “I’m into this,” and you just list
your interests and you can see if that person has interests that you do.
The voyeuristic nature of online dating services and the opportunity to match interests
with potential mates is a feature that draws some to virtual online communities.

**Written Communication as a Medium**

VOCs use text as the primary medium of communication. Written communication has
advantages over verbal communication for users who have shortcomings in their spoken
language. For example, use of written communications was a positive factor for
informants who do not use English as their primary language. AM, a foreign student from
India, found that in speaking face-to-face with others he was inhibited in his ability to be
expressive because of cultural and language barriers. He found that it was much easier to
express ideas in VOCs than in face-to-face interactions. AM especially found it
uncomfortable to express humor in spoken English, but he could be witty in his writing.

AM: A lot of times . . . it is a little harder to convey sort of sarcastic humor
through speech . . . A lot of people, they don’t get it.

AB: They don’t get it? What do you mean by that?
AM: You make a joke and they are like, “Yeah, yeah, that’s right.” No, that was a joke; you aren’t supposed to agree with me. (Laughing)

AB: The language when you’re online is a little bit different?

AM: Yes, definitely. … I never found it that hard in writing. . . . talking to people, sometimes my points don’t get across . . . Whenever I say something in writing to them in email or even like write a note to them and give it to them, it gets across a lot better than speaking to them. I’m really at a loss to explain why that is.

On his profile page, AM includes a number of humorous quips and amusing statements that paint a picture of the writer as an outgoing, almost extroverted, personality. Yet, during our interview, AM showed a different personality altogether. He seemed quiet, shy and very serious.

Similarly, AT describes agreeing to meet another VOC member, but when they actually met in real life, she was disappointed. She explained that this was partly due to the different types of communications.

. . . probably the way he talked, because when you’re typing it sounds like you have perfect grammar and everything’s perfect and then when you talk to them in real life they have an accent or just something different about their voice.

She recalled misjudging another member based on the photograph and visual images he had placed in his profile:

He had sent me a request before but I declined it because in his pictures he looked really creepy, but when I met him in real life he wasn’t like his pictures and I had the wrong impression.
**Summary**

Members are attracted to VOCs for different reasons. The community aspect or sense of belonging and sharing a common objective is the underlying factor that bonds members together. Many members initially join for the communication convenience factor, yet maintain membership as they come to feel they are part of a larger community. Others find that they can escape to a VOC or develop an alternative identity there. Most importantly, identities can be masked or discarded if negative consequences arise. The ability to cloak one’s identity is another motivational factor for members to join.

Social recognition is also a prime motivational factor. In online forums, persona and reputation are defined by one’s actions in that community. Whether a member has another identity elsewhere, real or not, is irrelevant. The informant who presented himself as the avatar doctor explained during the interview that he has a dull occupation and receives little recognition of his skills. Yet, in Ogrish, he is admired as a highly competent member who is a master of his craft.

Voyeurism also attracts VOC members. This is particularly interesting because face-to-face communities discourage voyeurism since it violates a sense of privacy. The VOC in some ways encourage voyeurism because members are only known to others through what they choose to reveal.

Online interaction is much different than face-to-face verbal communication. Gestures are replaced with emoticons and paralanguage/abbreviations. Some members find written communication more satisfying than verbal communication, either because of language problems or insecurity about their appearance or other attributes.
**Issues in Virtual Online Communities**

In this study, three key issues were identified by informants in their discussion of VOCs. They were trust, the evaluation of online material, and marginalized communities.

**Trust**

Because VOCs exist in public space, trust is a significant issue. Members are hesitant to reveal their true identity unless a bond has been established. Informants such as AT and BC decided against publishing personal information, such as their telephone numbers and their postal and email address.

Sometimes trust in VOCs originates from real life relationships. AT explained that among all her contacts, there was only one friend whom she really trusted. “He grew up in Athens so I trusted the fact that I knew who his family was.” The trust arose not through the individual’s attributes but because of a long-term “real” relationship. When asked how many times he initiated contact with perfect strangers, BC replied that he normally doesn’t do that. Trust is a rare commodity in virtual online communities that members value and seek out carefully. When I questioned BE about the biggest limitations in her online relationships, she replied that not knowing the truth was her biggest concern in dealing with other people through a VOC.

In one interview, AT explained that information she finds in MySpace is more often gathered simply to satisfy curiosity, so she doesn’t worry about whether it is reliable.

**AB:** Do you trust information provided by (unknown) members?
AT: No, because when you look at people’s pictures you wonder if that’s what they really look like or who they really are, but it’s the kind of questions that are on there. It doesn’t really matter. The descriptions that they ask for on MySpace is more like your age, where you are from, how tall you are. Yeah it’s really nothing that would matter if somebody lied.

When asked if she herself provided credible information, she explained that the information she reveals is accurate because she feels comfortable in disclosing certain kinds of personal information. She didn’t feel the need to mask her identity since the amount of information she offers is within her comfort level.

AB: Would you say [your profile is] all accurate?

AT: Yes, everything I put is true because it asks what kind of movies do you watch, what kind of books do you read, and I really don’t care if people know that about me so I go ahead and put what I want.

Another informant explained that she trusted information provided by other members by default. She didn’t feel other members needed to be dishonest because the information they provide is not important. She later explained that the unimportant information referred to favored music and hobbies.

Most of the people I know, and I trust them enough. It’s kind of neat to have friends but you don’t know all of the stuff about them. You don’t know . . . a lot of stuff about them, all of their favorite bands. You might know a couple, so that’s always neat, I guess it’s not too big of an issue with me, I just assume they’re telling the truth. And it’s nothing important . . .
Evaluation of Online Material

The security of identity in face-to-face communities reduces the opportunity for deception. Members of a parish, for instance, seldom question the intentions of their minister. Students generally trust professors and lecturers as experts in their field. Neighbors may trust each other based on past experiences. A host of other factors determine the level of trust that accompanies information provided within physical communities. The most common indicator is past history with other members. People may attune their level of trust toward other people based on past experience. LD stated that she trusted her real friends because she had “known them for years.” Another respondent, DH also claimed that he “remembers” which friends are more honest than others based on past experiences. In relationships where past experience is not available, people learn to rely on physical and visual clues, such as a physical location (church, classroom, or office), dress (police officer uniform, doctor’s coat, business suit) or even how an individual speaks (with authority or not). Children in the U.S. are taught to trust a person in uniform. People in the U.S. are culturally inclined to trust an individual in professional attire over a person in a t-shirt and blue jeans. DH explained a situation where his family was seeking advice for finding a restaurant in an unfamiliar town.

AB: . . . do you have any other experience where trust has become an issue?

DH: There’s was one time when I was with my parents and we wanted to find a good place to eat . . . we chose to ask a gentleman who dressed well . . . if we [had] asked another student, they [would] probably lead us to pizza joints.
When none of these visual indicators are available, one relies on other indicators, possibly credentials or personal recommendations from acquaintances.

To illustrate this point, consider a job interview. Interviewees tend to dress similarly yet their credentials may be quite different. The inability to discriminate based on visual indicators prompts the interviewer to rely on the resume and its cover letter. More information is revealed through the job interview. The first few minutes of the interview tend to be the most critical because interviewers will subconsciously evaluate the interviewee based on oral and visual cues. Indicators such as speech, articulation, poise, and personality all become observable traits that can be evaluated. NN recalls the process she experienced in evaluating her roommate for the first time.

At first I thought she looked strange. She wore outdated clothing and had several tattoos . . . the way Amy talked sounded like she knew her stuff. I was impressed when she spoke about all the classes she was taking . . . she’s a person I can trust.

A default characteristic of a VOC is partial anonymity. Although in most cases a real person sits behind the online persona, those individuals may choose not to reveal certain aspects of identity that would be evident in a face-to-face setting. Information passed among members of the VOCs requires that they use different attributes to evaluate the credibility of information presented online. Identifiers vary from one VOC to another. For example in the eBay community forum, a colored star rating method is employed to

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There are instances of automated personas being present in presentation of self in a VOC known as bots (short for robots). These are automated programs designed to interact with humans using artificial intelligence (AI). Some are easily identified yet others are sophisticated enough to be indistinguishable to most users from their human counterparts.
provide some information about a member’s experience on the site. The Apple technical discussion forum uses a five tier system to identify the experience level of participants.

There are parallels in evaluation between online and offline communities. Virtual online communities that are based on physical communities tend to rely on their offline identifiers to determine trust. For example, on social networking sites like MySpace and Facebook, there may be small circles of friends who wish to congregate online. Yet, the nature of social networking online ensures that members’ profiles are revealed to the entire online community. When members who are not a “friend” attempt to initiate communication, it will be difficult for a user to evaluate that “friend’s” trustworthiness.

This study has identified four evaluation methods for online material; quality of information, technical indicators, visual indicators, and reputation.

**Quality of Information.** The most fundamental indicator for evaluation is the quality of the information presented. Different virtual online communities have different ways to evaluate the quality of information. In Apple Technical Support Forums, information consists of replies to members who have technical issues with Apple products. The forums are heavily moderated in order to simplify topics and to classify issues. Members are assigned a level from one to five to indicate their seniority on the Apple technical forums. When new members sign up, they are automatically assigned level one status. At this level, the number of posts permitted and the number of threads that can be created on a daily basis are limited. When the member replies to topics posted, other members rate the post as positive or negative based on the helpfulness of the information provided. As members receive more points by posting helpful replies,
they will be promoted up the ranks to higher levels. Higher levels are rewarded with more liberal posting limits and other rewards, such as the ability to use a custom avatar.

JC was a level four (out of five) informant from the Apple technical forums. A level four indicates that he has between 8,000 - 49,999 posts in the discussion boards. JC says that the rank system is secondary to the value of the information presented in establishing trust. He says that the level system can easily be fabricated by posting a large number of replies, yet it doesn’t establish credibility.

AB: I am sure there are some members you trust more than others. What are the characteristics of members you trust, for example, do you trust them more if they are a higher level or for another reason?

JC: You know, I guess . . . I would probably trust somebody that’s a higher level, but I know there’s a lot of people that post a lot of responses that don’t really do anything, they just got the post numbers that show they are higher up . . . I would go on the basis of their response . . . I’m a Midwest guy, down-home, just tell me what you need to tell me and leave out the blah.

**Technical Indicators.** Although a VOC member is partially anonymous, each computer connected to the Internet does leave a digital signature which points to the originating network: the IP address. A digital signature is hardly comparable to unique personal identifiers, but it provides an evaluation tool for judgment of the information provided.

JW, the website administrator of the soap opera fan forum, uses technical indicators to investigate information provided in the forum. He explained that members
sometimes create alternate identities to strengthen an argument made in the forum. The website administrator has the resources to look up members’ IP addresses to determine if an alternate identity has been created by the same user.

JW:  There’s a member, not a long time member, someone that’s been around maybe for a few months, and they’re making an argument and someone disagrees with it. There was someone that registered that day and their first post is “I agree with such and such.” I always check that, because that to me is just a sign this could be an alternate identity just created to back up their case.

AB:  Would there be any other way to check the information?

JW:  Aside from that, I always check IP’s but you know there could be someone with two computers. There’s never really any way. The IP is basically my only tool. As the creator I have the access.

Regular members do not have access to administrator tools in virtual online communities, but other technical indicators may be available such as numbers of total postings and posting timestamps. As stated by JT, new members are often targets of suspicion and distrust. This relates to the lack of personal history within the VOC itself. The derogatory term of newbie (sometimes referred to as newb or noob) is often used to classify new members within a VOC. The status of members generally rises as the length of their participation grows.

Visual Indicators. The avatar, as discussed earlier, is a graphical representation of the member and is widely used in virtual online communities. Avatars chosen by members tend to be related to the type of VOC. For example, in a fan forum for a
television series, members might choose photographs of characters in the show as avatars. An avatar can influence the way that member’s persona is perceived by others. JW explained that he would evaluate a member’s post based partly on the personality projected by the avatar.

EBay is another VOC where visual indicators play a major role in determining the credibility of information presented. As stated earlier, eBay ratings are based on successful transactions. Each successful transaction equals one point. Members start only with a username but are awarded colored stars as they successfully complete transactions. As feedback scores accumulate, a colored star icon is added next to the number to visually signal the number of points a member has (see Table 2). A yellow star signifies between 10 to 49 successful transactions, dark blue indicates 50 – 99, light blue means 100 – 499, etc. (eBay help pages, 2004).

Previous studies have revealed that buyers are willing to pay 8.1% more to sellers with better feedback ratings or with more stars (Resnick, Zeckhauser, Swanson, and Lockwood, 2002). This leads to a rank system that places the new user with a zero feedback rating in a disadvantaged position. In the eBay community discussion boards, messages are posted using the same eBay identity as in auctions. Members with higher feedback ratings are generally more respected and trusted than new users.

AB: Do you feel reputation (feedback rating) has anything to do with status on the boards?
**Table 2. eBay Rating System**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Star Rating</th>
<th>Point Value</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>No star</td>
<td>0 to 9 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow star (⭐️)</td>
<td>10 to 49 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Blue star (⭐️)</td>
<td>50 to 99 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise star (⭐️)</td>
<td>100 to 499 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple star (⭐️)</td>
<td>500 to 999 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red star (⭐️)</td>
<td>1,000 to 4,999 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Green star (⭐️)</td>
<td>5,000 to 9,999 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yellow shooting star (⭐️)</td>
<td>10,000 to 24,999 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Turquoise shooting star (⭐️)</td>
<td>25,000 to 49,999 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Purple shooting star (⭐️)</td>
<td>50,000 to 99,999 points</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Red shooting star (⭐️)</td>
<td>100,000 points or more</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

**BE:** Most people on the board have very good feedback ratings. There's a post at least once a week from one regular poster or another who's been slapped with a negative. I personally don't look at that to make any kind of judgement [sic]. Those who have higher feedback ratings, for the most part, are more highly respected. Then there's many with 0 because they
use posting ID's. Many who use posting ID's can be harsher, hiding behind the ID.

Resnick points out that “the net feedback scores that eBay displays encourages ‘Pollyanna’ assessments of reputations, and is far from the best predictor available” (Resnick and Zeckhauser, 2002, p. 127). On eBay, plenty of personal information can be obtained from the auction ID. For example, feedback ratings, items bought and sold, feedback about others, and even specific personal information on an optional “About Me” page is created. Each feedback rating also provides detailed comments from other members based on the success of each transaction.

**Reputation.** As in offline relationships, an online identity can gain trust based on positive past experiences. LW, the administrator of a Chinese discussion board, explained that community presence is crucial in determining how other members view information presented.

**AB:** When somebody posts something how do you determine its truth?

**LW:** That’s a good question. I think it’s based on the person’s presence in this community. If this person is well recognized among members, people will take their word more seriously.

When asked to explain how she deals with misleading information, LW explained that virtual online communities tend to be self-governing. Information presented online can be evaluated by the entire community. Misleading postings will often be immediately questioned and corrected by the community and by its administrators.

**AB:** Have you ever run into a situation where you know the information was wrong or you simply didn’t trust that information?
LW: There are situations like that. I would just say, ‘no that’s wrong, my understanding was this.’ We have some arguments . . . When the person posted, we don’t have the privilege . . . Well, actually I have the right to block someone, but regular members don’t have the right to stop someone from talking. So people can post their own opinions. So there are various opinions and ways of dealing with situations . . . There might be situations where somebody asks for help, and another person will offer a different approach or even contradicting approach, but the information is all there for the person who posted to decide.

A key factor in the evaluation of information is the reputation of the information provider. There are inevitably instances where members with malicious intentions create temporary identities that can be discarded once the damage is done. For example, LW has banned many “members” who created accounts simply to enable them to post advertisements or spam.

**Marginalized Communities**

ED is a 23 year old international graduate student. Virtual online communities assisted him with exploration into his sexuality, leading him to the realization that he is gay. When ED was first exposed to the Internet in 1997, he discounted it as a serious medium. He established several email addresses but mostly used email to send short informal messages to friends and colleagues. In 2003, he realized that the Internet could also be used for serious tasks, such as filing scholarship applications. That is when his interest in the Internet matured. He began exploring his sexuality via the Internet by
browsing through sites that explained homosexuality. Struggling to decide whether to deal with his feelings or ignore them altogether, he chose to address his feelings by joining a VOC for the gay community. At this time, ED admitted that he still chose to only talk face-to-face with friends about his sexuality, but he seldom found them available for discussion. In real life, he was faced with increased hostility as a result of his sexual orientation. ED used the Internet to seek out answers about his sexuality from scientific and psychological websites. While searching for answers, he became more exposed to gay-themed social networking sites.

In 2004, ED discovered Friendster. “Friendster is the ultimate way to look for gay friends”, he explained. I asked ED whether he made similar attempts to meet others in a face-to-face community. ED explained that the interaction of the gay community is limited due to the cultural and religious norms of Indonesian society. This has pushed the community underground. Through the anonymous nature of virtual online communities, the gay community could openly express themselves without directly facing criticism from the wider society. Friendster is the VOC of choice for ED. He describes it as “a virtual form of you in cyberspace.” In a way ED felt that the VOC was an improvement over networking in real life. This is because members don’t just see the physical attributes of others, but focus on traits such as personality and interests. According to ED, Friendster is superior to other forms of social networking. He said,

Friendster is the perfection of other forms of virtual online communities, such as Internet forums, mailing lists and chat rooms. Chat rooms were widely popular in the past but it’s just text. It lacks the visual elements of Friendster. On other forms
of online communities, it takes time to get to know other members, while with social networking sites such as Friendster, it’s instantaneous.

ED explained that Friendster provides an “amazing, amazing, amazing environment” for the gay community in self-expression. Members’ motives may vary, but ED feels that Friendster can accommodate them all, starting from browsing out of curiosity to searching for dates. He said that through a range of clues, gay members can easily perceive other members’ sexual orientation. The clues include pictures, interests, tastes, etc. ED explains that in the gay community, there is believed to be a special sensitivity that is referred to as “gaydar”, short for “gay radar.”

Just looking at his profile, his pictures, his interests, his taste in music and books, I can easily determine if a member is gay or not. Even without any written reference of being gay in his profile . . . It’s a kind of symbolic communication among gays . . . In Friendster, we can easily use our gaydar to find other gay members, because members need to symbolize ourselves into a webpage.

ED also demonstrated this by viewing several Friendster profiles and pointing out a few symbols that signify a gay profile. These symbols include the use of feminine attributes such as earrings, flowers, or hearts on their profile picture. I questioned ED why gay members’ simply don’t declare their sexual orientation as opposed to using symbolism, ED said that being gay in Indonesia is still not culturally acceptable, and very few gay people have the courage to openly express their sexual orientation, for fear of being ostracized.

I asked ED how he determines whether a member is representing him or herself truthfully. He explained that truth is irrelevant in the beginning stages. “What’s more
important in the beginning is what the true motives of the member are. This is the starting point.” One can have an elaborate profile and “self-images” that rival professional models, but they may only wish to “show-off” instead of forming bonds with other members. If the motives are to establish relationships or dating, and there is mutual interest, then the truth becomes much more important.

ED explained that in 2003, Friendster was his main link to establishing relationships within the gay community. Three of ED’s close friends are people he met and developed relationships with through Friendster. What initially started as virtual friendships blossomed into real-life friendships with people whom ED eventually met in person. One of his close friends is W. W initially published a profile in Friendster, which consisted of a fake name and profile photo but all other details (such as interests, personality, hobbies) were truthful. ED contacted him and established an online friendship. After a few emails, W admitted that his profile image was not his real picture, and he was actually slightly overweight. ED didn’t mind and continued his friendship with W. ED didn’t feel that he was deceived by W and expressed an understanding of why he had done it. Because W felt that he was not physically attractive, he chose to hide behind a fake profile picture. In this case, W had two separate profiles on Friendster. One was the “public” profile where he posted an alternate identity, and the other was a “private” profile, where he displayed his true identity and sexual orientation. In this private profile, he was extremely selective in approving friends who could view it.

In 2005, when ED started to realize the effectiveness of Friendster in facilitating access into the gay community; he also created an alternate profile. The new profile was
similar to his original profile, with the exception that his new profile openly expressed his sexual orientation.

How does the VOC differ from real life in establishing relationships within the gay community? The first and most important difference according to ED, is security. Within a VOC, ED claimed that he was protected by multiple layers of anonymity “like an onion.” From initial contact, other people were only exposed to limited information about ED, just the information that ED wanted others to see. Once trustworthiness grew among other members, the layers “peeled away” and a deeper relationship developed. This type of layered protection is not unlike real life, with the exception of real life lacking the anonymity a VOC offers.

The second advantage of VOCs for ED is its equitable use of “public space.” In real life, public space for the gay community is limited, perhaps only within the confines of a gay bars. The mainstream community may judge the gay community within this limited physical space. The space within Friendster is much more heterogenic and open for ED than the gay bar. Online, gay members and straight members interact on an equal basis in shared space.

The last advantage for ED is networking. It is much more difficult for him in real life to openly express his gay identity. Through Friendster, ED makes use of visual icons on his profile that will be understood by the gay community. ED can also interact with other members of the widely dispersed gay community without a need to meet face-to-face.
Chapter 5

Discussion and Conclusions

This chapter presents a discussion of the findings and conclusions of this research project. The implications of this study and a discussion of its strengths and limitations given the qualitative data collection methods will begin the chapter. Also included are my reflections on this research and the impact of technology on the development of virtual online communities (VOCs) followed by a look into “Second Life”, an interactive online world created by members. Finally, given the limitations of this study, I provide directions for future research in order to enrich the understanding of virtual online communities in light of anticipated technological change.

Contributions of this Research

This study represents a systematic effort to understand how the virtual community has evolved from its inception at the beginning of the Internet age in the early 1990s. This study also portrays the experience of VOC members in interacting with other users. The first important finding confirms that informants follow practices commonly associated with VOCs as laid out by Whittaker, Issacs, and O'Day (1997): sharing goals with other users in their VOCs, engaging in repeated active participation, having access to shared resources, exchanging information, and understanding the contexts of their interaction.

One prominent force behind the informants’ interaction in a VOC is a lack of physical contact. The research informants, as with other VOC members, start interacting
with others in VOCs with a clean slate. Communications through VOCs has a restricted interface compared to direct face-to-face interaction. Virtual online communities such as forums or discussion boards often require only that the user choose a username. Everything else may be optional. This means the only indicator that separates one member from the next is their username. Since very little information can be extracted from a self-constructed username, it lacks the rich cues which are normally present in direct face-to-face communication.

Several tools have emerged for self-expression within VOCs. One example is the use of emoticons to portray emotional states. In one study, the use of emoticons had a direct relationship to one’s inability to express emotions in real life as online (Levenson, 2004). This may be an advantage for members who experience problems in direct face-to-face communications, since the limited information available through the VOC may also mask handicaps that might hinder real life communication. For example, D17 who is clinically deaf had no difficulty in communicating with other members; his handicap was invisible online. AM, an international student who spoke English with an accent, also felt uncomfortable communicating face-to-face. He was extremely shy in real life, but his online personality was outgoing and gregarious. In regular face-to-face meetings, there are many visual and audible cues that might prompt judgmental perceptions. Visible attributes such as age, social status, gender, rank, race, language, handicaps and other factors are elements used to evaluate others, and they undoubtedly influence communication between people. With few or no visual cues, the VOC provides users the opportunity to conceal their communicative shortcomings.
Another finding in this study confirms previous research by Ben-Ze’ev (2003), who found that the direct correlation that exists between privacy and an individuals’ inhibition is reversed when online using an alternate identity. In face-to-face settings, one tends to control the extent of personal exposure because of the awareness of others’ perceptions and feelings of inhibition. This is what Goffman (1959) described as a “front stage” public identity. According to him, a “back stage” identity is reserved for private settings. Typically, in an online environment, users tend to feel more protected because they do not fully disclose their true identity. For this reason their behavior can be less restrained. The increased level of privacy may also cause users to become more open when online. Ben-Ze’ev (2003) further claims that

the relative anonymity of cyberspace and the ability to control which matters we wish to reveal allow us to safeguard our privacy while increasing emotional closeness and openness. In fact, the nature of privacy itself has undergone a significant change in cyberspace since many matters that are usually kept private tend to be discussed in cyberspace (p. 451).

Informants in this study have suggested that the limited exposure of true identities is actually desirable since such identities may not always be the ideal through which members wish to be perceived. Shortcomings in individual characteristics—such as personal appearance, or distinctive/undesirable accents—are seen as a less than ideal reflection of the individual. Burgoon et.al. (2002) argued that “visual cues are not only unnecessary but a possible hindrance” in effective communication.

For example, some informants were concerned that physical shortcomings might arouse prejudice. BK, an informant involved in online dating, noted how difficult it was
to find a profile photograph that would hide that she is over-weight and make her appear more attractive. Inside the walled confines of the VOC, where not all information about a member is disclosed, such imperfections may not be visible. This rings true with D17, an informant who is clinically deaf and may be unable to interact as easily with other individuals in a physical setting. Inside the VOC, his handicap is not evident, and he shared the same level of acceptance as any other member. A VOC can enable members to appear as entirely different individuals, or enable them to construct an alternate identity in their effort to interact with others virtually. This further confirms findings in a study by Amaral and Monteiro (2002) that concluded a “technological identity” is mostly appreciated by the users themselves and their peers, but is separate from a non-virtual human identity. In other words, Amaral and Montiero claim that the technological identity is “a singular, separated social identity dimension” (p. 587).

This study also highlights a number of issues of anonymity and accountability within a VOC as experienced by the research informants. The ability to invent an identity is one of the factors that motivated some informants to maintain their presence in virtual online communities. In this realm they could experiment and play with different identities. One male informant involved in the game “World of Warcraft” chose a female character instead of his actual gender. He might have felt that other members treated him differently as a female. Members tend to be more generous toward females and this can translate into an advantage in playing online games. However, the experimentation phase in identity creation can also produce undesirable results. This is often seen in discussion forums when new members may try to project a strong personality as a ploy to gain respect. Such tactics are usually not well received. When members are faced with a
negative reaction like this, it is easy to abandon a failed identity and simply construct a new one. The steps in creating one’s identity in the VOC are simple and this may encourage experimentation with interaction styles.

Admittedly, the simplicity of identity creation has also affected how members of VOCs perceive a new member. There are derogatory terms used for branding new VOC members such as newbie, newb or simply noob. Correll (1995) has determined that members of a virtual café can be classified under four categories: lurkers, regulars, bashers, and newbies. The latter literally means that the member is still new and inexperienced within the specific VOC and may make mistakes because he or she is still unfamiliar with the group culture. On a deeper level, it also indicates that the new member is still unknown to the community because of his/her lack of online history. In order to overcome this situation, the new user needs to be actively involved in order to establish their own “track record” so as to gain recognition by senior members. Many virtual online communities, such as forums and discussion groups, will rank members based on the number of posts they have created. The reason members are ranked higher based on their activity is for the simple fact that they have a traceable history in the specific VOC. Whether their activity is positive or negative is irrelevant. New members, on the other hand, lack history and so they are likely to arouse suspicion. Having a “reputation” gained through online participation, is one of the four factors in determining online trust (Henderson and Gilding, 2004). Nevertheless, trust earned within the VOC may be fragile and temporal (Jarvenpaa and Leidner, 1999).

An interesting aspect of identity experimentation is the roles that members can define for themselves within a VOC. For example, a member can enact the role of a
villain, contributor, consultant, or friend, or can alternate between multiple identities. Visual identifying characteristics related to the member, such as the username, avatar, and signature, can be customized to further enhance the member’s pseudo-personality.

Another example in the use of VOCs is to mask traits that members do not want to reveal and to highlight positive characteristics. This study found several cases in which this is practiced. BK, who used an online dating service, deliberately selected profile pictures that are attractive for others. In another example, D17, the deaf VOC member had no trouble in portraying himself as a proficient designer by providing other members with custom-designed avatars. Because of the limitations of the VOC interface, which in this case is the absence of audible media, D17 had no trouble in blending together with other members. In addition, D17 had earned the status of a highly valued contributor within the community. He spent a great many hours helping other members, without any monetary compensation. He explained later that receiving social recognition motivated him sufficiently to encourage him to maintain his online identity.

AM is another example of a successful online identity. Through his role in Flickr, the photographic sharing VOC, he had managed to portray himself as witty and engaging. English is not his native language and he speaks with an accent, but his written English is flawless. I was surprised when I first met with him face-to-face because his online persona was very different than his real self. During the interview, he admitted that he felt more comfortable when expressing himself online because members only judge him based on his writing, not by his actions, physical appearance, or verbal communication skills.
The ability to invent identities within a VOC may not always result in positive outcomes. In a recent case, Megan Meier, a 13 year old girl committed suicide after having her online relationship severed with supposedly a 16 year old boy, “Josh Evans.” The boy turned out to be a 49 year old woman, Lori Drew, who deliberately constructed a fake online account on MySpace and initiated a relationship with Megan. “Josh” ended the relationship by sending cruel messages ending with “the world would be a better place” without her. Megan hanged herself in her bedroom later that day after receiving the final message (Cathcart, 2008).

Another interesting phenomenon arose during the interviews: the nature of the VOC interface may actually foster a sense of false reality. In virtual online communities, members interact with other members through an Internet connected device and, although the member is fully aware that he or she is interacting with real people, it may not feel as though the other people are real. Additionally, the intimidation of communicating face-to-face with strangers can be minimized in a virtual environment. Communicating through text and visual icons will not convey the same impression as in a physical environment and may even convey the sense of communicating with a machine rather than a human.

This study has also shown how a member’s online persona can be continuously “improved” through the creation and deletion of identities and online histories. Members can revise and improve their virtual reputation through trial and error. Throughout their membership, informants may follow a steady course of change, enhancing their reputation as they evolve their personality. Failures can be “edited” by either deletion of their actions through the VOC interface or users may simply start fresh with the creation
of a new and improved identity, learning from past mistakes. In some cases, I have noted that some VOC members create postings but delete them if they attract negative feedback.

Some VOC management systems in this study allow the use of rewards and reprimands to direct members’ actions. Members are also judged by others according to the accumulated positive and negative ratings within a VOC. For example, eBay is well known for its commercial interface and rating system. The rating system is carried over into the community boards where users can see the colored star of each member, which determine how seasoned the member is. Members within the community boards will inevitably rate a member’s responses and standing within the community based on this indicator. The eBay community boards (http://pages.ebay.com/community/boards/index.html) are separate from the main eBay commerce section (http://www.ebay.com/). The main eBay section focuses primarily on buying and selling merchandise with little member-to-member interaction. The primary function of the eBay community boards is to encourage member-to-member interaction for information exchange and classified as a forum. In Apple discussion boards, a member’s level is a reward for being a good member and providing helpful advice to the community. A member who consistently offers useful feedback will be awarded points that will eventually enable him or her to advance to a higher level in the VOC. Levels are normally displayed below the user name and are highly visible indicators for all users. Post counts and join dates are other common types of experience indicators. High post counts combined with an early join date will usually translate into prominence in a VOC.
On the other side of the coin, infraction systems are also exercised by VOC administrators to enforce codes of conduct. Punishments can range from a reminder sent from a staff member to outright banning from the VOC, with many gradations in between. One of the most successful infraction systems I have seen is within Ogrish forums. Ogrish provides provocative news and discussions such as debates on the ethics of war, gay marriage, ethnicity and religion. This sparks many heated arguments and comments. Thus, an effective infraction system is required to keep discussions from getting out of control. Ogrish forums use a three tier warning system for violation of its rules which is logged in each member’s profile. However, a special section called “Flame Lame Hate” (FLH) is provided specifically for that purpose. FLH is an unmoderated area where anything is fair game. Discussion threads that violate the rules are normally moved to FLH and a caution is sent to the member. Repeat offenses will result in a warning and a temporary ban from the forum. Continued violation of the rules after three warnings will result in a permanent IP ban, and the member will not be able to login to the forums or create a new account.

Finally, virtual online communities also contribute to political and social change. One informant (ED), for example, reported that he utilizes the VOC not to reshape his identity, but to become his “true” self. A VOC provides a safe haven where the gay community in Indonesia can interact and congregate. ED uses Friendster as a limited extension of his physical self to reach out to the gay community. This is primarily done by publishing two separate profiles, a public one and a private one that is exclusively accessible to other members who are in the gay community.
ED’s experience within VOCs is remarkable since it suggests that his virtual identity is in fact his real identity. This inevitably brings up the question of whether his physical identity is his masked self. Like AM, who used the VOC to enhance his true self, ED also uses the VOC interface to create an idealized persona to gain acceptance within his online community. Despite its limited scope, online interaction through virtual online communities allows an extended dimension of the self, especially for members who live outside of mainstream society.

**Limitations of this Research**

Despite its contributions and strengths, this study acknowledges several limitations. Because virtual online communities provide a sanctuary for members who do not wish to disclose their true identity, many were reluctant to participate in this project. Apart from the willingness to cooperate, some virtual online communities were very protective of the privacy of their members. In one case, I was given a cease and desist order when trying to recruit informants through the forum. These factors undoubtedly limited my ability to communicate with informants who had an acute sense of privacy.

In regards to textual analysis, I found each VOC has its own unique environment, with its own set of rules and terms of service. This limited my ability to group themes and concepts across different platforms. For example, the concept of recreation is more important within a gaming platform than in a technical support forum; therefore a direct comparison between the two would be meaningless. Comparing motivations and issues in VOCs across different genres complicates my ability to analyze similar patterns and themes.
This research focused on VOCs with positive intentions. However, there are a variety of VOCs which includes harmful material, promotes hate and illicit activities. One example is the “Libertarian National Socialist Green Party” (LNSG) whose mission is to “to make healthy changes to a sick system” (About the LNSG, 2008, ¶3). The community forums are littered with hate discussions against the Jewish, Islam, homosexuals, and democracy in general. VOCs with negative objectives such as the LNSG were not covered in this study but need to be acknowledged as being in existence. I have tried to recruit an informant from a radical VOC; however the informant refused to be interviewed and have his or her identity disclosed.

_The Technology Angle_

Recent technological developments within the past decade play a significant role in the development of VOCs (see Figure 9). The discussion of the evolution of the VOC in Chapter Two shows how online communities emerged from simple text-based exchanges to elaborate visual profiles with multimedia components. It is very difficult to determine which direction VOCs are heading in the future, almost as difficult as predicting which Internet startups will be in high demand in the future. When YouTube was founded by three former PayPal employees, they never intended it to be one of the major players in the online video sharing community. According to Yadav (2006), “Ever since it began, the company has had a stronger goal to build a community than to make a lot of money.” This strong community aspect was what motivated Google to purchase YouTube for $1.65 billion (Yadav, 2006). At the time of writing, VOCs such as Twitter and Jaiku have become the most recent trend in social networking. Twitter allows
members to receive updates from other members through the Twitter web interface, instant messenger updates, or by way of mobile phone text messaging on a subscription basis. This practice is referred to as “following.”

![Comical map of the online community landscape. (Xkcd - Online Communities, 2008).](image)

Figure 9. Comical map of the online community landscape. (Xkcd - Online Communities, 2008).

Message updates that Twitter members receive from people they follow are limited to a maximum of 180 characters per message posted. This limitation was designed to fit into
the limitation of text characters on cell phones, which brings up an interesting point regarding mobility. Cell phone technology has enjoyed rapid growth with the introduction of smart phones and more recently Internet capable mobile devices such as the Apple iPhone. VOCs have moved onto the mobile platform where they flourish without the need for their users to be tied to a computer. Mobility has brought dramatic changes to the way users interact with online communities because the technology now permits members to be connected constantly regardless of location. This new development further enhances the ease of access which was found to be an important aspect of VOC popularity.

The development of the Internet was initially thought to be an extension of traditional media. At first, newspapers and magazines on the Internet were considered merely as an alternate means of displaying articles and images. Radio and television used the Internet to funnel out audio and video programs as a mere extension of their over-the-air broadcasts. However, the interactivity that distinguished the Internet eventually came to be recognized as a completely new and different capability, one that separated VOCs from traditional media systems. Today one can visit personal blogs as easily as visiting large news sites. One can see the emergence of podcasts, YouTube and live streaming of audio and video feeds employing consumer grade webcams. And, most importantly, another distinct feature of the Internet is the ability of users to network with others through VOCs. This has dramatically changed the media landscape and enabled each Internet user to become a content provider.
A Look into Second Life

Along with the technological advancements in computer processing power and increase in Internet bandwidth, recent developments in VOCs have taken a step in a new direction: the simulation of life. Second Life is a 3D computer simulated world created by Linden Labs that opened to the public in 2003 (What is Second Life? 2008). People can join by downloading and installing free software from the Second Life website (http://secondlife.com/) and connect to the Second Life virtual world via the Internet.

Castronova (2005) classifies Second Life under a new genre known as “massively multiplayer online reality games” or “MMPORGs” (Castronova, 2005, as cited in Lin, 2008, p. 49). Second Life has many similarities with MMORPGs (massively multiplayer online role-playing games) but is technically not considered a “role playing game”, where players take turns in play action. At the time of writing, the Second Life world has a population of approximately 14 million residents, a real economy with an exchange rate against the U.S. Dollar and land that can be bought and sold (Economic Statistics, 2008). According to Lin (2008) Second life residents “adopt a persona and enter an electronic world where they can interact with thousands of other participants and carry out an existence that mirrors the real world in striking ways” (p. 49). The persona is represented by a user-created anthropomorphic avatar that interacts with the environment in a fashion similar to the real world. Avatars can mimic human gestures such as walk, run, laugh, and so on, and they are controlled though keyboard and mouse actions.

The environment itself is a simulated 3D environment that includes islands, mountains, trees and buildings. and is completely designed and created by residents (see Figure 10). Members have started successful virtual businesses in Second Life that
produce real money by buying and selling land, creating virtual items (art, crafts, tools) and accessories (clothing, avatars) using Second Life currency Linden dollars (L$) and later exchanging it with real currency. Although membership is free, the Linden dollar is not. At the time of writing, US$ 1 is equivalent to L$ 264 (Economic Statistics, 2008).

Some residents have earned comfortable annual incomes of over US$ 150,000 by selling virtual real estate, clothing, cars, hairdos, and “other representations of consumer society” (Risen, 2006, as cited in Berger, 2008, p. 431).
I registered for an account in Second Life in the early 2006 and found a high degree of flexibility in many aspects from avatar customization to the ability to venture into virtually anywhere within the Second Life world. I opted for a free account hoping to experience Second Life similar to how the other residents would experience without paying for access. I soon discovered that non-paying residents were soon faced with limitations such as the inability to own land or earn a monthly stipend. I became a homeless resident in a virtual world.

Similarities of real life reflected through the virtual world of Second Life may also create potential problems. Residents may feel uninhibited in their actions in a virtual world due to some degree of anonymity. In addition, the consequences residents face when conducting illicit activities are not as severe compared to real life consequences. Lin (2008) states that,

. . . in virtual worlds, one can take actions and risks without fear of adverse physical consequences. This disinhibiting feature of virtual worlds frees individuals to participate in activities considered taboo in the real world, such as crimes or affairs. Alternatively, participants may embark on dangerous adventures or new pursuits, achieving excitement, psychic satisfaction, and a sense of progress not readily available in ordinary everyday life (p. 100).

In 2007, virtual bombs were detonated outside Reebok and American Apparel storefronts in Second Life (Takahashi, 2008). In February 26, 2007, the John Edwards campaign headquarters in Second Life was attacked by vandals that

. . . plastered the area with Marxist/Lenninist posters and slogans, a feces spewing obscenity (sic.), and a photoshopped picture of John in blackface, all the while
harrassing (sic.) visitors with right-wing nonsense and obscenity-laden (sic.) abuse of Democrats in general and John in particular (John Edwards . . . 2007, ¶ 2).

Also similar to real life is the significant volume of crime, gangs, and dark corners of the virtual world that litter the Second Life landscape. Neil (2007) claimed that Second Life was “overrun with sex clubs, discos, casinos, yard sales, tragic architecture, and more shopping malls than the San Fernando Valley” (Neil, 2007, as cited in Lin, 2008, p. 107).

I also explored these dark corners of Second Life and found scantily-clad female avatars and street peddlers offering their goods and services in exchange for a handful of Linden dollars. Although I was aware that everything was occurring in a virtual world, I couldn’t help but feel uncomfortable as other avatars watched my avatar’s movements.

If the virtual world known as Second Life is so grim then why do residents continue to populate its world? Like real life, the virtual world of Second Life also has its attractions. First and foremost, the Second Life environment has a large captive audience of the emerging digital generation. Universities including Ohio University (which I attend) have set-up virtual campuses in Second Life that are used to promote education by offering virtual classrooms and access to academic material through virtual libraries. The introduction of Second Life in higher education also has an advantage to unite distance-learners which may not be in the same geographical location or have the ability to meet together due to different time schedules. Berger (2008) notes that,

Distance-learning instructors report that the graphical virtual classroom can create a community for learners, bridging the gap between asynchronous online-course participation and the experience of a real-life classroom (p. 431).
Through a study of libraries found in Second Life, Kari (2007) concluded that people wanted and needed libraries to exist in Second Life and residents asked for books through virtual libraries found in Second Life. Books that are available currently through Second Life are mostly from free public domain sources; however Penguin Books announced in 2007 that it will be establishing a virtual presence in Second Life (p. 15). The Ohio University Second Life campus attracted 16,000 visitors between May 2007 to January 2008 and provided student orientation and the option of online classes in the future (Naab-Levy, 2008). When I first discovered Ohio University Second Life campus back in 2006, I was mesmerized by how identical it was to the layout and setting of Ohio University campus in real life. I walked down college green and immediately recognized the university gateway. The red-brick university buildings all exhibited the distinct dark green name plates. One building had an art exhibition which displayed paintings from real Ohio University art students. I found the attention to detail in building the Ohio University Second Life campus remarkable. Lecture halls had waiting areas, classrooms, faculty offices and even vending machines in the hallways. According to Muriel Ballou, director of Ohio University without Boundaries (OUWB) who led the Second Life project development at Ohio University, the Second Life campus was designed to be a branch of Ohio University in the virtual world of Second Life.

**Navigating the VOC Landscape: A Personal Quest**

Reflecting on my experience with virtual online communities and my deeper investigations into how communities form virtually, I have realized that experience with virtual online communities has changed my perceptions of the media landscape. Back in
the late 1990s when Indonesia was in political turmoil, I periodically monitored relevant newsgroups and experienced a form of freedom of expression I had never previously known. During that critical time when riots were rampant, I relied heavily on online information for my personal safety. I regularly tuned in to activists’ newsgroups for the latest news. News spread so fast through the virtual online communities that I felt other mainstream news sources, such as newspaper and television, were delivering old news. Apart from the immediacy of reports on the Internet, I was able to communicate with the authors of content on the Indonesian newsgroups directly by posting questions or emailing them and receiving direct responses through the interactive nature of the Internet.

Since 2001, I have had a chance to explore virtual online communities at a much more leisurely pace and have had the liberty to become involved in a greater variety of these sites. I joined dozens of virtual online communities and assumed many roles, from being a lurker, a newbie, a passive member, a contributor, a senior member, a moderator, and even an administrator. I also experimented with different identities; some match closely with my true self while others were my chosen alternate personalities.

As my online quest progressed, like some of the informants in this study, I began to notice a common thread. I feel much more uninhibited when expressing my ideas online. My ethnicity, gender, economic status, political affiliation, religion, or physical appearance at times felt little relationship to my online self. I was free to be who I wanted to be at the moment. I joined Flickr because I enjoyed photography and soon started sharing thoughts and pictures with other photographers. I met many of my Flickr friends online and not in real life, yet we can talk, joke, and vent our frustration on problems as if
we were close friends. I also had Flickr friends who were real life friends and family members who I added to my contact list because I share my pictures with them. Ironically, I communicate more with my virtual friends and spend more time in discussions with them. For my “real” friends, Flickr is simply a tool to share my photographs but not to communicate. I normally meet them in person and talk to them directly or through personal emails. Yet, I generally have weak ties with the members whom I don’t know in person but who have been added to my friends or contact lists. I would equate this experience with being introduced to another person at a party. We have a connection based on a shared experience, but nothing beyond that.

Ogrish forums differ substantially from other virtual online communities. I joined Ogrish on October 18, 2004, after I discovered it following a Google search of an unrelated subject. After browsing the forum and finding many discussion topics which caught my interest, I decided to sign-up to be a member so I could interact directly with the members of the online community. I found that Ogrish forums are special because they have over a quarter million members and responses are fast, providing instant gratification on discussion topics. I participated in many discussion topics and met many members. Due to the frequency of my visits, I reached a point where I became familiar with the online personality of many active members, although they were known to me by their username and avatar alone. This dictated how I communicated with them and was strikingly similar to the way I communicated with my physical acquaintances. I learned how to identify members based on my past experience by interacting with them. For example, when I see SE10 and his avatar, I remembered from past posting history that
this member is an anti-war libertarian and very sensitive about the war in Iraq. This affects how I communicate with him through the forums.

My experience in Ogrish landed me a staff position as a moderator on April 13, 2006. This gave me an almost Orwellian look into an active VOC. In this role, I could view members’ activity history, warnings and IP addresses and I had the ability to reprimand members and ultimately ban them if necessary. Unfortunately, this “power” also had its drawbacks. Because I was in an authoritative position, I was also under the VOC’s community spotlight and no longer able to freely discuss topics and to respond to members based on my forthright opinions. On April 16, 2006, the site administrator posted the following message to the moderator section:

You are mods now. We like to see posting behaviors change just a bit as we are here to set examples as well as keep the peace. You cannot use your moderator status to put you on a pedestal and make others feel bad/flame them. (Littleone, 2006, April 16)

The change from being a regular member to a moderator is similar to holding an authoritative position in real life. The idea that I could easily discard a damaged reputation through invention of a new identity no longer applied. My username was now published as a representation of the VOC, and I had to greatly restrict my actions in order to “set an example” and to avoid receiving complaints from other members. However, one major difference separated my presence as a moderator within this VOC from physical communities; nobody within Ogrish forums knows my true identity. Although they are aware that I am a staff member of Ogrish forum, they are unaware of my location, ethnicity, gender, and so on. I may have gained a much higher level of trust
compared to regular members through this position, but that is only through my position and past experience, and not through my physical qualifications. Information that I produce within the forums is simply a representation of the forum’s administration.

Throughout my experience in navigating through the current VOC landscape, the majority of my visits were merely as a passive observer. Frequently, search engines will lead me directly into the heart of a discussion thread within a VOC. I would simply leave once I found information that was sought, and I never felt the need to join that community. This is somewhat like the experience of listening in on an organization’s meeting without any intention to join. Today, many large websites embed a forum or discussion group in order to add a community element, primarily for member retention. This trend is based on the idea that interactivity encourages visitors to return for feedback on their submissions. In forums and discussion groups, I tend to find a pool of regular visitors who usually have high post counts and joined before the majority of members. LW, the moderator of the Chinese VOC, shares similar experiences to my membership in Ogrish forums. She has earned a reputation through the site and was appointed as moderator due to her seniority.

**Future Research**

The definition of the VOC itself is very broad and ranges from interactive thematic discussion sites to social networking platforms. This opens many gaps for researchers because it is very difficult to chart all of the aspects of Internet VOCs. At the time of writing, the mainstream Internet is still less than 20 years old, yet major developments in Internet technology have branched Internet services into many different
specialties. Each one may determine the way that virtual online communities will develop in the future.

It is difficult to predict the development path of virtual online communities and their various branches because of their broad reach. Studies so far have attempted to focus on specific VOCs. This study attempted to understand VOCs by looking at a general view of the VOC landscape. Due to the ongoing development of the Internet, it is difficult to assess to what extent VOCs will empower individuals in the future. In addition, data is mostly collected where Internet access is widely available. In developing countries, such as Indonesia, personal Internet access is out of reach for the general public, and most users rely on Internet cafes to access VOCs. This makes it difficult to estimate Internet access because one computer can be shared by many. This alone requires further qualitative and quantitative research in order to understand VOCs in areas outside the United States.

Through this research, I have provided answers to questions surrounding VOC usage. Yet, it is still far from complete. I will continue to navigate the VOC landscape in search of better explanations for the research questions presented in this study. I look forward to monitoring the development of communication technologies in my attempt to build a more accurate picture of the VOC.
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Appendix A

Interview Guide

General Information

A. Brief Introduction (occupation, interests, age, marital status)
B. Internet proficiency
C. Length of Internet Use
D. Types of offline communities involvement

RQ1. What do informants in virtual online communities seek?

A. Type of VOC (online community) participation
   a. Main topic discussed
   b. Length of membership
   c. Interest in joining
   d. Monetary exchange for membership
   e. Frequency of participation
   f. Topics of interest
   g. Online friends
   h. Online enemies

B. Motivation for returning to virtual online communities
   a. Similar offline communities
   b. Unique material only found in virtual online communities.
   c. Cases where VOC membership yielded fruitful results
   d. Satisfaction for engaging with virtual online communities
   e. Likes of VOC participation
   f. Dislikes of VOC participation

RQ2. How do informants of virtual online communities critically evaluate material produced in a virtual online community?

A. Establish trust in the VOC environment
   a. Indicators to classify members
b. Type of membership  
c. Names of trusted members and reasons for trusting them.  
d. Names of distrusted members and reasons for trusting them.  

B. Evaluation of truthful information  
a. Examples where of acceptance the validity of information without cross checking other sources  
b. Cross check the validity of information against other sources  
c. Sources for cross checking  
d. Main factors sought after for information evaluation  

RQ3. What differences do VOC members perceive between their online community experiences compared to their experiences in physical communities?  

A. Involvement with similar offline communities  
B. Advantages of using virtual online communities  
C. Importance for using virtual online communities  
D. Comparisons between relationships within virtual online communities and physical relationships  
E. Pseudonym use in VOC membership  
F. Reasons for using the username  
G. Physical meetings with VOC contacts  

RQ4. In what ways might a VOC shape its members’ views toward political and social change?  

A. Influence of relationships and information  
a. Information that prompts additional action and examples  
b. Information given by physical contacts and its impact compared to VOCs  
c. Emotional involvement in VOC relationships  
d. Examples of information that altered action  

B. VOC contribution toward views  
a. Type of information that changes views toward a specific topic and examples  
b. Discussion topics that are more significant in changing views