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Digital Bonds -- Exploring the Vital Role of Online Communities in Modern Society: A Norwegian case

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Abstract

Online interaction has become a normal aspect of our lives in the last few decades. Individuals spends more time online now than ever before. There are many studies that explore online interactions through various domains and platforms. With a domain as big as the internet, there are almost unlimited ways to research this topic. Understanding online interactions and how it impacts individuals is important for comprehending the social framework within our society. This thesis investigates why individuals take part in online communities, why they stay in the community and how they feel being a member of this community. Giving answers to these questions through in-depth interviews with five members who participate in an online community and are active members. The participants shared their experiences, feelings, and stories about their online community. By examining literature about online interactions and the findings, three main categories were created to explain why the participants are members of this community. The three categories are social support and inclusion through feeling of belonging, knowledge sharing and skill development through accomplishments, and emotional expression and self-exploration through experiences. With these three categories, this thesis shares valuable insight into online interactions and individuals well being in the digital age.

Keywords: Online communities, networked society, social support, belonging, skill development, emotional expression

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Introduction

How does social interaction differ from offline interactions to online? Why do individuals spend time and take part in online communities, forums, and other domains? Are friendships created online as strong as offline? These questions are asked by sociologists to find out how interactions and bonds are created now in a more online based society. Digital technologies have revolutionized the way individuals interact with each other. Online interactions have created new ways for individuals to stay connected, collaborate, share knowledge, and express themselves. Using myself as an example, I spend a lot of my spare time interacting with my friends and family through various online platforms and domains. Therefore, this thesis aims to explore new answers to social interactions through online communities. Looking at members who spend time online and interacting with other members of the community. Exploring the several reasons why an online community is utilized by individuals.

The focus of the thesis is online interactions through online communities with the following research question: Why do individuals take part in online communities? What benefits does an online community give to individuals? This research question gives an overall view of why members choose to participate in online communities. I also found it relevant to include a second research question. I wanted to get answers on how members utilize online communities, so my next research question is: How do online communities facilitate knowledge sharing, skill development, and collaboration among members? To get a more specific answer to how members collaborate with each other to help with tasks and objectives. I felt that these two research questions would give me a good understanding of why they choose to take part, and how they utilize the community, but I also wanted to get answers to a more personal side of online interaction through online communities. Therefore, I formulated a third research question: In what ways do online communities serve as platforms for emotional support? What makes an online community feel like a safe place for its members? If online interactions are connected to offline interactions, then emotional support should be part of the online community.

Theoretical framework

Castells (2005) defines online communities as social groups who gather online and interact through digital communication technologies. They meet with common interests and goals to engage in collaboration, and exchange within the digital space. Castells emphasizes the importance of globalization changes this has created. Online interaction is not limited by geographical boundaries, individuals with similar interests and goals can find each other regardless of physical locations. He explores the ways of collaboration that we previously could never imagine. The research's focus is how important online communities are with my research questions and viewing them in Castells theoretical frame. Building further on the concepts to figure out the interactions from online to offline through an online community. As Castells (2005) explains in his theory, collaboration and interaction has never been as it is today. Online communities are where members gather to interact with each other, and the community works in numerous ways for everyone.

Delving deeper into the subject of networked societies, Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin and Reese (2005) conducted a survey to target individuals who had consistent access to the internet, and what they used it for. It was a community-based study where members were asked several questions about their relationship to internet usage. They found that overall online interactions often occurred with individuals who share a social network through a face-to-face interaction. They belonged to the same formal and informal groups that existed offline. They found that the built-in norms and governance rules from offline transferred to their online interactions. The knowledge of meeting each other face-to-face afterwards made it harder to shirk responsibilities. The study was based on a networked society, an online community from Blacksburg Electronic Village where participants are located geographically on the same area. There will be face-to-face interactions between participants and therefore, the online interaction gets affected by this near geographic location. My research explores an online community that shares no geographical locations. The members are based across the country and online interaction can be with all members. Therefore, my literature review was based more on the topic, online and offline interactions through various sites and platforms. To get an overview of which platforms online and offline interactions might happen, and how the online interaction affects the offline interaction.

Literature review

Numerous studies have delved into the influence of online communities on contemporary societal dynamics. From gatherings offline through online corporations (McCully et al., 2011), to the exploration on social media platforms (Lampe et al., 2007; Marwick & Boyd, 2011; Ellison et al., 2014). Many theories have been proposed to explain how diverse kinds of online communities' impact how we as individuals interact with each other. Angelopoulos and Merali (2015) look at this interaction from offline to online interactions, a more “reversed” view on this topic than my research. Exploring the transition from online to offline interactions, extant literature reviews on investigating the ramifications on individuals' self-presentation, perceptions of others, and self-concept was conducted.

McCully (2011), suggests that gatherings are often conducted by companies who have a following online. These kinds of companies have in common that their members have an online platform where they can discuss interests, views and hang out online. Ruggles, Wadley, and Gibbs (2005) also explains this in their study about the importance of developers recognizing the importance of online communities. One example is online videogame creators who gather their members in a huge gathering, where you need to travel to a central location, and often pay to get access. Here the members can meet the online friends they have played with for several hours and put a face on the nickname they associate with. The goal is to further enhance creativity among members, collaboration and building friendships.

According to Lampe, Ellison and Steinfield (2007) individuals structure their online profile on Facebook to convey social signals and manage their online impressions. They analyzed key factors of online profiles and how they structure it, from profile picture, information about themselves, and network connections. Using these elements to explore how they serve as cues for social interaction and formation of relationships. This article underscores the online construct of how self-presentation online influences online behaviors and relationships through Facebook both offline and online. This article underlines the concept of getting a first impression from an online profile and how this affects offline interaction. Ellison, Vitak, Gray and Lampe (2014) created a study that followed the previous study about Facebook and profile management. This continuation created an article on the numerous ways individuals use Facebook to maintain and strengthen their social connections. They used the knowledge from online profiling and explored

how individuals use social posts, status changes and how they interact through commenting on other posts. These interactions between members also include sending private messages to interact with friends and families, but also sending private messages to new relationships. Through these ways, individuals maintain their social connections through online communities. This way of connecting with individuals makes them know what is going on in their life, through post and status changes, before meeting each other offline. Through the usage of Facebook, members often get a clear image of what is going on in others' lives and are therefore “caught up” when they meet offline.

Angelopoulos and Merali (2015) explore online and offline interactions in a more reversed way than my study, they investigate how offline interactions such as face-to-face interactions influence the sociability of online communities. They examine whether offline interactions enhance the collectiveness of an online community. It is a study that investigates individuals who center around communities with specific topics or interests. The offline interactions create bonds between the individuals, and this leads to stronger feelings of belonging in the online community.

Another study that analyses how online meets offline is the paper by Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin and Reese (2005). They explore the dynamics of community networks, which are designed to facilitate collaboration, communication, and information sharing among members of the online community. The article investigates how members from diverse backgrounds with a common interest meet to engage in community-building activities that enhance knowledge, skill sharing, and foster social connections. They explore how these kinds of online networks are bridging the gap between the social spheres of online and offline interactions. It is viewed as an extension of the offline community, creating new ways to provide opportunities for members to collaborate regardless of geographical limitations. They underscore the importance of transferring social capital and resources between members and experiences in both the online and offline sphere.

Baym (2015) writes in one of her chapters about digital social media and online communities and how they have transformed the outlook of personal interactions, and interpersonal relationships. The chapter is about how individuals navigate the digital space and how they negotiate their social interactions considering factors such as self-presentation, identity

constructions and intimacy in an online environment. It is a perspective on how digital technologies can shape our views of other individuals through photos, posts, and videos. The constant chase for approval through social media is something that affects how individuals view themselves and others. This chapter also gives us an insight into how individuals maintain social relationships, personal connections, and the dynamics of an online community. This chapter highlights the imperative of incorporating a comprehensive examination of the intricate facets of social interactions within the realm of interpersonal online environments, encompassing both online and offline perspectives.

The last study explores how individuals maintain personal expression and audience expectations on twitter. Marwick and Boyd (2011), explore how twitter users manage their online persona and how they navigate the blurred boundaries on this complex social platform. The study is from before Twitter changed its name to X. This study explores similar aspects as some of the other studies. It underscores the intricate way to navigate self-personation, and social interaction dynamics. One key aspect that is different from other studies is that Twitter (now called X) focuses more on followings and audience. Therefore, this article explores more towards how self-personation through the audience affects the individual's interplay between the online and offline aspects of this online platform.

The existing research portrays that online interactions are integral part of social media platforms. These platforms give us an opportunity to collect lots of data to conduct research and to draw connections between online social interactions and profiles online. The scope of available data in this domain may potentially lead to a superficial examination of the subject matter.

Consequently, a more focused approach is necessary to ensure a thorough and rigorous investigation. Based on the existing research the goal is to find out why do individuals take part in online communities. What benefits does an online community give to individuals? Do online communities make interactions easier for the participants? How do online communities facilitate knowledge sharing, skill development, and collaboration among members, and what impact does this have on the overall feeling of belonging in these communities? In what ways do online communities serve as platforms for emotional support? What makes an online community feel like a safe place for its members? The online community that are in question in this thesis does

not follow the same social media structure, but more towards gathering online through interests and personal online interactions.

A Norwegian online community

The online community that was chosen for this thesis was an online community called Nerdlandslaget. Nerdlandslaget was founded in 2019 and has of today over 11 000 members and are still growing. It is a community that specializes in interests associated with being a nerd, they call themselves a national team with nerds across the country. As stated by the founders of this community, everyone is a nerd in one aspect. Nerds are not only associated with videogames, comic books, anime and so on, you can be a nerd when it comes to knitting, cooking food, plants outside in your garden and many other aspects. The community wants to be a safe area where everyone can join to find other members who share interests. Here you can talk to others who you can discuss your interest with, to enhance your skills or learn a new skill.

Exploring the interactions through both the online and offline, it is imperative to consider cultural differences to comprehend this understanding of online community. A Norwegian study provides a compelling case because of its renowned prominent levels of internet usage and active participation on online platforms.

<u>Share of population aged 16-79 – internet use</u>	2023
Use of Internet last 3 months	99%
Used the Internet for e-mail	96%
Used the Internet for banking	96%

This table from SSB (2023), a statistical website used for conducting surveys in Norway, gives a clear insight into individuals usage of internet and their access. It shows how high internet access is in Norway.

According to the table, 99% of people from 16-79 use the internet at least once during a 3-month period.

Kummervold, Gammon, Bergvik, Johnsen, Hasvold and Rosenvinge (2002) argues that Norwegians are among the most active internet users in the world. Their study states that about 70% of the population between 13 and 40 years old had been active during the past month. This study was conducted in 2002, and the data from SSB (2023) gives a clear overview that this number has increased.

Kummervold, Gammon, Bergvik, Johnsen, Hasvold and Rosenvinge (2002) explored the use of online mental-health services in Norway, why and how individuals take part. They conducted a web-based questionnaire and collected data from 492 individuals. One of the categories was discussing personal problems through a face-to-face interaction, where forty-six percent found it difficult. While difficulty discussing personal matters through online discussion forums were at ten percent. Collecting the data from participants who answered both categories, the data shows that seventy-five percent found it easier to discuss personal matters through an online forum. When asked about usefulness of such discussion forums participants stated that the access of knowledge was one key aspect of why participants got involved. Stating that information from others who had the same experiences gave them comfort.

Fredriksen, Harris, and Moland (2016) also found that pregnant women in Norway spent time online reading and asking about pregnancy through forums. Some even trusted the forums more than the professional doctors. Getting access to questions that many had asked before and seeing answers from previous pregnant women who had been going through the same issues or situations.

From these articles, I can draw some connections between their studies and my research. Giving me an overview of how the population in Norway accesses and utilizes the internet. From these studies, the common goal of individuals is getting access to knowledge and experiences from others. There is also the fact that interacting with individuals online creates a safer environment than a face-to-face interaction for most participants.

Method

Choice of method

Online communities are important in today's modern society. To explore this topic, I have conducted semi structured in-depth interviews with participants who take an active role in the Nerdlandslaget.

Acquiring the participants

To get a hold on the participants I found that the best way for me was to create a message to post in online communities which said: "Hi! I am studying sociology at the university of Stavanger and are currently working on my bachelor's thesis. I need volunteers to participate in an interview. My research focuses on online communities and their members. The questions aim to understand why individuals participate in such communities, what it does to its members and the relationships created through these communities. Does this sound like something you would like to be part of, send me a message so that we could schedule a time for the interview. The interview will be completely anonymous, and no information about you will be disclosed. I hope to hear from some of you!" That way I would know that the participants were a part of that same community and therefore have some knowledge about online communities and their impact. I wanted participants with different knowledge and time spent in these communities. Before posting the message, my initial hope was a 50/50 split between male and females. I also had access to relevant participants through my own network, but I chose not to get them involved, I wanted my data to be non-influential.

Anonymity

As agreed with SIKT art. 32 and art. 5d) and f) participants were anonymized from the start, so that no personal information was collected. Therefore, in this thesis the participants are called by their gender and age, example: Male, 29, Female, 26.

The participants

The table below gives an overview of the participants that agreed to participate in the interviews. The table shows what they are called further in the thesis and a general explanation about who they are in the community.

Candidate 1 (F1, 34)	Age: 34	Gender: Female	She likes that members are kind to each other and that after joining this community, her view on gaming has changed. She has gotten more female friends after joining this community.
Candidate 2 (F2, 29)	Age: 29	Gender: Female	Experiences with other online communities, feels that this community is a safer place than previous ones. Does not feel any discrimination towards her in this community.
Candidate 3 (M1, 29)	Age: 29	Gender: Male	Is happy about the meetings that this online community arranges. He wants to spend more time on these meetings and is happy about members finding friends through this community.
Candidate 4 (M2, 34)	Age: 34	Gender: Male	Is part of multiple different online communities and uses them for several reasons. Have friends from across the world through these communities.
Candidate 5 (M3, 32)	Age: 32	Gender: Male	Is a teacher who experiences online communities through his students. Has a lot of knowledge about how resourceful younger students are now.

Interview guide

An interview guide is needed to structure the interviews in a way that gives answers to the research topic and questions. It is a necessary guide for first time interviewee to keep track of what data is needed and that the interview does not go off topic. A semi-structured interview makes it easier to ask new questions if there is something that comes to mind during the interview. The interview guide was constructed with four main questions with some subcategories. The subcategories were made to ensure that the participants kept on topic and to not venture out to different areas in the online sphere that is online communities. This structure creates room to follow up interesting stories and thoughts that the participants have, while maintaining the theme of the questioner.

Interview process

Five participants agreed to be part of the interviews from the post in the online community. Two female and three male participants. Each interview lasted around 15 min. The participants consented through a consent form explaining data storage and their rights. All interviews were conducted through Zoom with an audio recorder through a phone, the program on the phone encrypts the audio file making it safe for the participants. As mentioned above, the participants were completely anonymous, so the questions were constructed in a way that explored experiences, definitions, importance, collectiveness and so forth without expressing any personal data.

Ethics and reflexivity

Research on online and offline interactions through online communities might involve emotions for the participants. The topic of interaction can be a difficult subject for some, and feeling towards rejection, social anxiety might surface for the participants. Although the questions for the participants did not include anything about emotional matters, some of the participants brought up experiences related to social anxiety and depression. The most important part for the interview process was to create a safe place where no judging or disagreement were met. It was also important to give a clear understanding to the participants that their data would be safely stored through a database from SIKT. Explaining that their data would be safe and secure during the full process, and deleted when the thesis is completed.

Findings and discussion

Transcribing the raw data from the interview app, made it easier to locate the different views and thoughts from the participants. Looking through all the interviews to find similarities, and differences between the candidates. Putting each interview in categories to get a better overview to make it easier to analyze the data. Before conducting the interviews, the initial hope was to get many different stories and viewpoints with online communities. After the interviews were transcribed, many of the participants had similar experiences, but different meanings and stories from the online community. Some had a more personal meaning to the community, some spent time learning new abilities, and one had only experienced it through his students.

Since the research questions was about why members participate in online communities, and what it gives them. Transcription of the interviews gave an overview of the topics that was talked about. The research is about why individuals spend time online with other members, that they have not met in person, and how they form connections together that then lead to friendships outside of the online sphere. When transcribing, no kind of transcribing program was used, in retrospect this should have been used to save some time, but the process of transcribing without a program was an enjoyable process, compeering the interviews together and to find out similarities between them. The transcribing process led to the creation of bullet points from each of the interviews that highlighted the main topics, and then compared them to each other. Then highlighting statements from the participant to further prove the findings. Literature searches from other studies were conducted to create a theoretical image of what these statements mean. Comparing the theory to statements from the participants.

After the process was completed, the data revealed that all of them talked about the community in similar terms. The interviews were structured in a way that made it easier to get the data by starting with general thoughts about community, then social connections, knowledge transfer to other members of society, than finishing off with an overall recommendation of communities to non-active members. To get an overview of the data, three categories was formed related to my interview guide and the participants answers. These three combined create an image of why online communities are important for the participants and why individuals tend to join. It also gives knowledge to how online and offline interactions are through online communities.

Social support and inclusion:

The analysis revealed that for this community, the sense of belonging was one of the most important reasons why they joined and stayed in these online domains. There is a general feeling that the members are doing whatever they can to make new and exciting members feel included and safe. There is also an understanding from the members about topics that might not be easy for some to talk about, and that support is always given to those who need it.

Hwang and Foote (2021) argue that the sense of belonging is determined by the community's size. The smaller the community the more sense of belonging there is. Looking through my data, there is no way of determining the sense of belonging by the size of the community, rather by its members and how they perceive their peers. Though I have a small sample, my participants emphasis on belonging. This result may be affected by the fact that it is a Norwegian based community, and that the trust towards other members is higher than it would have been in a different country or region. One other reason might be that, when writing a statement to post in this community, the ones that are used to taking an active part in this community responded. The ones who are more reserved and quieter read the statement but did not act on it for different personal reasons.

One participant stated some of the benefits of this community. She explained how she felt being an active member in this community:

“Members of the community are open, and my experience is that people open easily to others. It’s not difficult to talk about emotional stuff, because there is always someone who have been through the same stuff before. That I really like. I do not use voice chat, but members use it too to talk about difficult subjects. I am more of a writer, I try to respond if I have something meaningful to say, if not than I just read what others write.”
(F1, 34)

She is normally active in this community, reacting to statements that other members talk about. Some examples of these kinds of reactions are from responding to birthday wishes, congratulations on achievements to more serious matters such as family illness, and issues.

While one of the participants (F2, 29) stated that they have not experienced any form of discrimination in this community she still remembers her past experiences as a woman who were discriminated:

“As a female gamer, I still have not experienced any discrimination towards my gender. I have had some previous experiences with discrimination from other communities, but here, everyone is open-minded and welcoming towards everyone, every gender.”
(F2, 29)

McLean and Griffiths (2019) argued that female individuals often experienced discrimination online. Through stereotypical views and lack of support from male members. I argue that because she knows how bad discrimination can get, in this online space she appreciated the idea of community. There is a feeling of being who she wants to be, without being afraid of narrow-minded thoughts and ideas. She states that in this community, she can be herself without being afraid of discrimination.

(F2, 29) further emphasizes the feeling of belonging and refers to this community as a hangout place. A place where you could just be together with other members, to talk about whatever comes to mind:

“My definition of this community is that it’s like a hangout place. Where you can come and “hang out” with who you share an interest with. The only thing you need to do is to reach out to find new friendships.” (F2, 29)

She states that you only need to reach out through this community to make new friendships. The feeling of belonging makes it easier for members to create new friendships.

I then asked this participant if she had experienced any negativity or wrongdoing. Her response gave a sense of structure and control. She stated that, even though this is an online community, there still are guidelines and “rules” that members need to follow. With the help of moderators who act as a type of rule enforcers:

“I have seen sometimes when members have been a little bit, what is the word, harsh? Towards other members, they did not say anything bad or hurtful, but the tone of the writing was a little bit negative. When that happens, the moderators of the community act and tell the members to relax, or to think about what it means, and stuff like that.

Everyone respects the rules, and if you type or say something that conflicts with that, you get a heads up about what is wrong and right. And that always seems to calm down the discussion or “conflict”.” (F2, 29)

I would argue that structure is needed in all types of communities. Structures help us individuals to behave and to act towards each other with respect. The participant gives a picture of moderators who do not go in with force and negativity, but rather an approach that makes the members know the difference between right and wrong. The approach is viewed more as an educational purpose rather than an enforced one.

This candidate also brings the importance of these kinds of communities with experience to the covid pandemic period. The importance of online interactions played a crucial role during the pandemic as they provided avenues for sustaining social connections. This was key for so many who could not keep their physical interactions because of lockdown. This served as a crucial lifeline for individuals who did not have access to offline physical interactions (Long et al., 2022).

“The best thing about these types of communities is that if you have a difficult day, or feeling lonely, there are always members there to help you feel better, and to make your day brighter. This has also been important throughout the time we spent isolated during covid. To just put on a headset and join individuals through voice chat, and to just sit there and talk to each other. That was important to many of the individuals here in this community.” (F2, 29)

One of the male participants (M1, 29) gives experiences of how the interaction is through voice chat. He states that he usually just joins them and listens to what is going on at that time:

“I usually use voice chat to talk to members of the community. Sometimes I see members already in the voice group and then I just join them and listen to what they are saying. It’s always a good atmosphere when I join, a lot of laughter, enthusiastic conversations and sometimes anger, not so much towards each other, but more towards the task at hand. They are playing together, of course, sometimes it gets a little heated.” (M1, 29)

He argues that these kinds of voice groups are places where a good atmosphere and laughter is commonly found. It is associated with enthusiasm towards cooperative tasks, quests, and teamwork.

Fourth participant (M2, 34) emphasizes the feeling of finding members that suddenly become friends. He argues that many individuals meet in various places and then come together to talk, play together and that this leads to friendships:

“I would define it as a good place’, to be honest. Bear in mind how many people who meet on different platforms, and suddenly you sit together with individuals who you do not know that well and play a game together. I have seen individuals who have started like that, and now are close friends.” (M2, 34)

I argue that these kinds of interactions create strong bonds between members. Working together and interacting through teamwork further strengthens the feeling of accomplishment and belonging (Wan et al., 2023).

There is one of the candidates that has more overview experience of online belonging and interactions through the online domain. The teacher (M3, 32) states that interaction through online platforms is normalized in today's youth:

“My students have more friends and interactions through online communities than outside in real life. Many of them have a huge following and are resourceful on how they use their network to enhance their knowledge. They have all gone through a difficult part of life, and that has made them more adaptable to new challenges that come both online and offline. Some of them have gone through a period of being bullied, and cast out from friends and classmates, and I think that this has made them better to understand others in the same situation.” (M3, 32)

He argues that shared knowledge of being alone in struggling times brings them closer to each other. He also argues that through these communities they have become more adaptable towards challenges they face in both the offline and online domains. Their experiences with being alone and bullied transfer to an understanding of others who might be going through the same stage.

I argue that a sense of belonging in the online community is a necessary aspect for members to be personal with each other and for it to lead to stronger bonds. A sense of belonging further enhances the sense that other members do care about you as a person. This way of interacting with each other makes the offline interaction easier for members when they arrive at gatherings created by this community. Their bonds together form a mixed-mode friendship, where friendships extend from online to offline (Antheunis et al, 2012). Their views and interactions between themselves become the same when interacting offline. Looking at answering the research question about why individuals tend to take part in online communities. I argue that this feeling of knowing someone on a personal level, and a strong feeling of belonging before meeting them offline makes it easier for several members to be themselves and feel that they do not have to put on a mask before leaving the house. They feel accepted, safe, and included.

Knowledge sharing and skill development:

One other key factor is the ability to share knowledge and to get help with skill development. There is a whole community of experienced individuals who can share their skills in various categories. It's a broad knowledge-based community that helps each other when asked.

Jenkins (2009) argues that in an online community a shared sense of belonging may be attributed by sharing experiences and knowledge with newcomers. More experienced members might feel a sense of accomplishment when aiding others who lack the skills to accomplish tasks on their own. Creating a stronger feeling of belonging in this community because there is a purpose to be fulfilled, and a feeling of being needed.

There is also the fact that sharing the same interests and discussing them with others further deepens the sense of belonging. Finding members that share the same views on topics that you as a member really care about is one of the strongest connections one can make through online communities (Mora-Cantallops et al., 2021).

One participant (F1, 34) recently experienced sharing knowledge with individuals from her experiences with gaming and her interests. They knew her experiences and went to her to get access to more information about a specific subject:

“Someone outside of our community has asked me questions about the documentary Ibelin because they knew that I am a gamer. They asked me questions about World of Warcraft to get a better understanding of the documentary. They thought, “hey, she is a gamer, let's ask her about the game, so that we can understand what the documentary is more about.” When that happens, I can use my knowledge about video games to give them an explanation.” (F1, 34)

I argue that this statement gives a clear picture of what Jenkins (2009) states in the article about how sharing experiences further increases the feeling of accomplishment. The participant could aid further with knowledge about a relevant documentary that was going viral across Norway. She aided a “newcomer” with relevant information about a topic that was both relevant and current.

While one other participants (F2, 29) stated that knowledge sharing through the online community is normalized and often used. Members who have more knowledge of a specific field tend to aid the newcomers:

“I am really interested in programming and do not share this interest with my friends. Found a group through this community who shares that interest. Here I can post questions to more experienced individuals who help me and are positive towards us beginners. I have seen some of my posts from the earlier days of programming and got to admit that I get embarrassed about some of them. But never have I experienced negativity towards my lack of knowledge.” (F2, 29)

It is a fitting example of the theory by Jenkins, (2009). The female candidate was afraid of negative feedback towards her lack of skills, but she experienced the complete opposite. The other members, who have an increased knowledge of programming welcomed her with open arms and reacted with understanding and support. Further increasing her feeling of belonging. She also states that sharing information and knowledge is not only reserved for the community members.

She talks with her mom about subjects and topics from this community. Further strengthening the feeling of accomplishment when talking to someone who is categorized as a “newcomer” to this domain:

“I talk a lot with my mom about stuff that happens in the community when it comes to female gamers, and a lot now with the new documentary Ibelin. She knows that gaming and online communities is where I spend some time, so it’s nice to see her taking an interest in my daily life.” (F2, 29)

Another way of looking at sharing knowledge is how one participant (M1, 29) explains how he found out about this community. He states that he was the receiver of the knowledge sharing, from one active member:

“I found out about this community through a work colleague of mine. He put on the podcast when we drove the car. He asked me if I had any knowledge about this podcast and its community, and that was where it really happened. So, I am not one to share my knowledge, but he was the one who showed me this community and showed me how good and funny this community could be.” (M1, 29)

I argue that this made the one active member feel accomplishment to introduce this community to his colleague. As Mora-Cantalops, Muñoz, Santamaría, and Sánchez-Alonso (2021) writes about sharing similar interests and discussing them further deepens the feeling of belonging. Here the participants felt that their common interests led to the feeling that he belonged in this community, resulting in him joining this community.

He also explains his views and feelings towards social anxiety and how the knowledge trough this podcast made him feel better about this difficult subject:

“One of the program leaders of the podcast talked a while back about his experiences with social anxiety and depression. This really hit me in many ways because I too have gone through and still am going through periods of depression and anxiety. This statement from him really helped me overcome some of the issues regarding these topics. The other program leaders are also supportive towards him, when he talks about heavy situations, and that makes me feel good about their views and knowledge.” (M1, 29)

He argues that being vulnerable is an important quality for leadership. Being vulnerable and talking about challenging times and how you overcome them gives hope, knowledge and light towards other members who are going through the same challenges.

When it comes to candidate number four (M2, 34), knowledge sharing, and skill development is one key aspect of why he takes part in communities. He has several different uses from communities. He argues that he is part of around 40 different communities, and that he uses them for diverse kinds of knowledge and skill development:

“I tried to count how many communities I am part of before this interview and got close to 40 different ones. I use the communities differently from each other, some to communicate with friends, some to learn new abilities, and some to read about innovative technologies and parts.” (M2, 34)

He argues that skill sharing through various communities helps him achieve new skills, more knowledge about innovative technologies and creating new friendships. This results in new friendships throughout the world:

“I have learned a lot about myself, because I am a shy guy, and to talk to individuals through my microphone has opened my eyes to new friendships like ever before. I now have friends from all over the world, and we are also talking about where we could travel together, to meet up with everyone in our group.” (M2, 34)

Their feelings towards each other are so strong that they talk about finding a convenient place, so that everyone can meet each other in person. They have all become friends and have created a strong bond between them. It gives a clear image of “mixed-mode friendships” (Antheunis et al, 2012), trying to arrange a way for all to meet offline to get together. He compares these friendships to how he views his own brothers:

“I have never met these people outside of these communities, but to best describe the way we talk to each other, is to look towards how I am reacting towards my brothers. We have the same conversations, the same jokes, and can also be mad at each other, without it affecting our relationship.” (M2, 34)

Antheunis, Valkenburg and Peter (2012) argue that geographical proximity may be less important for the quality of online friendships. The creation of friendships is more based on common interests and participation through joint activities. The participant argues that feelings towards each other are best described as a feeling like they can be themselves, and that nothing can change their friendships. Here he also compares their friendship to a family, a collected group of friends who can be themselves, without being judged by others.

Candidate number five (M3, 32) experiences this through the eyes of his students. He states that their ability to extract knowledge from the online domain is something that often surprises him. We are a part of a new age where knowledge is easily reachable through our phones and computers. The skills and knowledge to maintain this force is something that this candidate experiences with his students:

“One thing that really surprised me with my students is their ability to find knowledge themselves. I am used to other students who ask about everything, but here, my students, if they cannot reach me, they go online, and find out information themselves. They look at various kinds of platforms from YouTube, Discord, Reddit, and AI programs. They are resourceful, much more than I was at their age. But also, about how they look at that information with a review, they don't accept the first thing that might be the correct answer, they look around to confirm that this really is the way to program, visual, write, and so on.” (M3, 32)

I would argue that this way of gathering information is getting more normalized than ever before. Especially now with tools such as AI aided programs that can find information in seconds. Van Garrel and Mayer (2023) argue that students have changed their ways of studying. Utilizing AI tools such as ChatGPT, students can get hold of information faster and easier than before. I argue that this new way of learning and collecting information is getting normalized by students, and as the participant (M3, 32) states, the review of information is what is important for the students to keep in mind.

The investigation on this topic further proved that sharing knowledge with others strengthens the sense of accomplishment. This creates a sense of belonging, guiding others who need help with something that is already acquired by you is one of the strongest feelings of accomplishment you can get (Jenkins, 2009). As my participants have stated that sharing interests and discussing them

further leads to accomplishments. Getting help from other experienced members supports the theory by Mora-Cantalops, Muñoz, Santamaría, and Sánchez-Alonso (2021). The members get a feeling that they belong here because they can aid others. This also blends into emotional expression and self-exploration, sharing knowledge about experiences that members have gone through before with others who are going through the same challenges now (Kummervold et al., 2002).

Emotional expression and self-exploration:

Members feel that they learn more about themselves when they talk to other members who have shared the same problems as themselves. Often of times it's easier to go through challenging times with individuals who have an experience with that issue. It is accepted in this community to share and listen to others and when that happens, safety is secured between members. There is a trust between them, and an understanding of what life's struggles can be.

Joseph Walter (1996) explored how emotional expressions in computer-mediated communication and suggested that sometimes this can facilitate even stronger emotional connections and, feeling intimacy more than face to face interactions. He produced the "Hyperpersonal Model" which states that individuals through online communication create a deeper image of the person due to the lack of nonverbal clues and physical presence. This further leads to more self-disclosure and emotional expressions because the individuals feel that the environment is less threatening (Walther, J. B. 1996, P. 3-43).

There are several studies that studies mental health and online communities. Investigating the state of mental health when it comes to playing videogames with other members to accomplish common goals and to succeed together. The feeling of being included in important tasks and having a responsibility towards this common goal can result in a feeling of belonging and creating positive relationships. Positive relationships are considered vital for the wellbeing of individuals who experience social anxiety and depression. "*The formation of friendships through online multiplayer games can sometimes be stronger than friend connections in real life*" (Yee, 2006; Jones et al. 2014).

McLean and Griffiths (2019) argues that in online communities, more specifically gaming communities, female gamers frequently face negative behaviors. Towards stereotypical views on gender and their persona. Some feel the absence of support through these communities, and this further leads to anxiety, depression, and loneliness. Additionally, female gamers often express surprise and disappointment at the lack of support from male counterparts, perpetuating entrenched stereotypes and perpetuating adverse gaming experiences.

One of the participants (F2, 29) states:

“The communities' leaders are good at sharing information towards subjects of interest. They have been good to talk about female gamers and the struggles in other countries. I remember specially when they talked about a female streamer who was killed in Brazil just because she was female. It really feels like they mention these kinds of subjects because they really care, not because it's expected of them.” (F2, 29)

Here is a good example of how the issues that McLean and Griffiths (2019) point out can be overcome with the help of leaders who take responsibility to talk about issues of the day, and care about their members. She further states that she understands that the leaders do not just talk about these kinds of issues just because it is expected from them, but more about the fact that they care about how female gamers are being mistreated by other male gamers. Their views and concerns further reflect onto the members that take part in this community. Making this community a safer place for others.

She further explains her views on why the feeling of creating an online character makes her feel safe and how this leads to her being more personal with others:

“I have experienced times with a lot of social anxiety, and to not feel comfortable with myself. For me, the best feeling was to just create an online character and to let people know me from my values and my interests without looking at me, it was a huge relief. It makes me feel like they accept me for who I am, and not for the way I look.” (F2, 29)

This statement supports the “Hyperpersonal Model” by Joseph Walter (1996) creating a character who can be an image outward to other individuals who perceive you. This effect creates a feeling of a safe atmosphere where the individual can be herself, without being judged

by her looks, distinctive traits, or other nonverbal clues. This safe atmosphere creates opportunities for emotional expressions and self-exploration.

When asking the participant (M1, 29) if he would recommend this community to others he answered:

“I would strongly recommend this community to individuals who are gamers, but also to individuals who do not play any types of games. It is not just a community for gamers, but more for people who share an interest in a field. It can be anything, and you don't have to have an interest in a field either, you could just ask members if they want to hang out, grab a beer, watch a movie or something, everyone is there to get new friends and to get to know each other.” (M1, 29)

Here he argues that it is a community suitable for gamers but also non-gamers. Antheunis, Valkenberg and Peter (2012) explore how mixed-mode friendships increased over time. Mixed-mode friendships are friendships that are both online and offline. The participant states that it is also a community designed to make members interact with each other and to create friendships. Go out and grab a beer, just belong together, and find someone to interact with. Creating lasting mixed-mode friendships.

Emotional expression is particularly important in a community to feel safe and to belong. One participant (M2, 34) explained this through his experience with communities:

“For me, one of the key aspects of an online community is the consistent focus on psychological and mental health. It is a good place for members who have lost someone and are going through a rough patch, and those members are there to help one another. Me myself lost my mother in 2020, and I know that without communities, the process would have been slower than it has been. I learned a lot from members who have been through the same terrible situation, and they told me that everything eventually would get better. Which it did! Just imagine a community with over 10.000 members, some of them will reply to those kinds of messages, it does not matter if 99.9% does not respond, because the rest 0.1% will reply, and that is enough to help.” (M2, 34)

The feeling of personal loss and/or the struggles of talking to someone about challenging subjects, is something we all have gone through. The candidate states that it does not matter if

99.9% of the members respond to your problems, if the last 0.1% reach out and helps. A community that has a powerful sense of belonging will help each other. With so many members, there will be someone who has gone through the same challenging times before who will share their experiences with others.

This last statement from one of the participants (M3, 32) explains how many members of community's experience the collaborative sense of belonging, emotional expression and sharing of knowledge:

“Think my students feel more about the motivation that comes with these online communities. They feel that everyone is there to make each other better..... All my students prefer to open more through these online communities, rather than to talk about them with me or other people offline in their life. It is not so scary, talking to someone through a microphone rather than looking them in the eye, in fear of being judged. It all comes down to how they view themselves. All my students have not gotten a lot of confirmation throughout their youth. Sharing accomplishments with others online through a screen makes them feel a lot safer, and not easily judged by others. The ones they share accomplishments with online do not look them in the eye, and therefore do not judge the book by its cover, if that makes sense?” (M3, 32)

Data from the Norwegian Institute of Public Health states that psychological issues are common in today's youth in Norway. There was a significant increase after the pandemic. Psychological issues are more common now than before (Bang et al. 2024). I argue that some feel safer interacting with each other through their microphone in a more relaxed space. It makes it easier for individuals to talk about their issues without looking them in the eye, afraid of being judged by their statements and issues. Experiences of not being heard and getting the confirmation they deserve further increase this feeling of being alone. As this candidate (M3, 32) states that his students feel safer in these places, and not getting judged by their “cover”. Creating a safe environment through online communities makes it easier for students who have psychological issues to talk about their problems, and with help from others, cope with them. Pine, Fleming, McCallum, and Sutcliffe (2020) also underline the importance of casual videogames and their affect on mental health, giving a reported improvement with anxiety and depression.

The outcome from this research have provided an insight into why participants participate in online communities. There are clear links when comparing the findings to Castells (2005) networked society and his definition on online communities. Where members come together online through interests and goals. But the results of this study indicate that members experience a greater sense of belonging and acceptance within the community. The common interests and goals might be the reason for why members initially join these kinds of communities, but the sense of belonging, being themselves, and acceptance is why they chooses to stay. The findings also answer how Castells (2005) views collaboration and interactions, and that it has never been as it is today. The several ways of online interaction through this online community creates numerous ways for members to acquire knowledge, skill sharing and emotional growth.

As stated by the participants, Nerdlandslaget creates a safe environment where members share their experiences with each other, through knowledge sharing and emotional expression. Comparing this online community to Kavanaugh, Carroll, Rosson, Zin and Reese (2005) study about an online community in a networked society. Nerdlandslaget might be the result of an online community with members who does not get affected by geographical boundaries. As stated by participants, its easier to talk about emotional matters, without being judged by their looks and physical presence. The fact that members can interact with each other without the risk of meeting offline through a face-to-face interaction makes it easier for members to express their emotions, and to further help other members who are going through the same difficult times.

Conclusion

To conclude, this research was an attempt to discover why individuals take part in online communities. For this, five semi structured in-depth interviews were conducted. As outlined in the findings section of the thesis the analysis revealed three important categories for the participants. These three categories combined create an overall feeling of why the participants joined and still are members. The participants underline the feeling of belonging in a safe environment where they can be themselves. A feeling of no judgment, acceptance, and support. Furthermore, they emphasized the collaborative part of the community, explaining that members share their skills amongst the members. Creating an environment where skill improvement is welcomed, and collaboration with each other is common. Lastly the feeling of emotional support amongst the members. Knowing that members will interact with members when they are feeling sad, lost, and when they are going through challenging times. That they can reach out and get support from other members who have experiences with the same struggles and challenges. These three foundational categories combined create a way of understanding why individuals take part in an online community. The interweaving ways for members to interact with each other creates a safe environment where members feel like they belong. They can be themselves; they do not have to hide their intentions and feelings, and they are welcomed into the community where everyone is included.

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Appendix

Appendix 1: information letter Norwegian

Vil du delta i forskningsprosjektet:

Digital Bonds: Exploring the Vital Role of Online Communities in Modern Society

Dette er et spørsmål til deg om å delta i et forskningsprosjekt hvor formålet er en bacheloroppgave i sosiologi ved Universitetet i Stavanger. I dette skrivet gir vi deg informasjon om målene for prosjektet og hva deltakelse vil innebære for deg.

Formål

Prosjektet er en bacheloroppgave som skal undersøke viktigheten med nettbaserte samfunn som Nerdelandslaget, Level UP, og lignende. Oppgaven tar for seg viktige temaer som inkludering, felleskap og positivisme. Den kommer også til å se på sosiale utfordringer og hvordan et nettbasert samfunn som nerdelandslaget hjelper med de utfordringene som følger.

Hvem er ansvarlig for forskningsprosjektet?

Universitetet i Stavanger, Det samfunnsvitenskapelige fakultet, Institutt for medie- og samfunnsfag er ansvarlig for prosjektet.

Hvorfor får du spørsmål om å delta?

Du får spørsmål om å delta på grunn av at du ga interesse via Nerdelandslaget og/eller Level UP om at dette var noe du ville være en del av. Utvalget til denne oppgaven er valgt ved hjelp av discord samfunnet som tilhører.

Hva innebærer det for deg å delta?

Vi kommer til å ha et intervju sammen der vi tar for oss ulike deler av Nerdelandslaget/Level UP og deres medlemmer. Her kommer jeg til å spørre om ulike spørsmål som du kan svare på. Du som deltaker kommer til å bli behandlet helt anonymt, og kan trekke deg til enhver tid.

Intervjuet vil bli lagret på nett via Sikt og blir slettet når prosjektet er ferdig.

Det er frivillig å delta

Det er frivillig å delta i prosjektet. Hvis du velger å delta, kan du når som helst trekke samtykket tilbake uten å oppgi noen grunn. Alle dine personopplysninger vil da bli slettet. Det vil ikke ha noen negative konsekvenser for deg hvis du ikke vil delta eller senere velger å trekke deg.

Ditt personvern – hvordan vi oppbevarer og bruker dine opplysninger

Vi vil bare bruke opplysningene om deg til formålene vi har fortalt om i dette skrevet. Vi behandler opplysningene konfidensielt og i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

- Ved Universitetet i Stavanger er det kun meg og min veileder og eventuelt prosjektansvarlig ved instituttet som vil ha tilgang til informasjonen.
- Ingen uvedkommende får tilgang til personopplysningene dine. Navnet og kontaktopplysningene dine vil jeg erstatte med en kode som lagres på egen navneliste adskilt fra øvrige data. Alle data blir lagret innelåst eller kryptert.

Ingen av dine opplysninger vil bli offentliggjort og ingen utenfor prosjektet får vite at du er med i denne undersøkelsen.

Hva skjer med personopplysningene dine når forskningsprosjektet avsluttes?

Prosjektet vil etter planen avsluttes 31.07.24. Etter prosjektslutt vil dine personopplysninger, inkludert lydopptak, bli slettet.

Hva gir oss rett til å behandle personopplysninger om deg?

Vi behandler opplysninger om deg basert på ditt samtykke.

På oppdrag fra Universitetet i Stavanger har Sikt – Kunnskapssektorens tjenesteleverandør vurdert at behandlingen av personopplysninger i dette prosjektet er i samsvar med personvernregelverket.

Dine rettigheter

Så lenge du kan identifiseres i datamaterialet, har du rett til:

- innsyn i hvilke opplysninger vi behandler om deg, og å få utlevert en kopi av opplysningene
- å få rettet opplysninger om deg som er feil eller misvisende
- å få slettet personopplysninger om deg
- å sende klage til Datatilsynet om behandlingen av dine personopplysninger

Hvis du har spørsmål til studien, eller ønsker å vite mer om eller benytte deg av dine rettigheter, ta kontakt med:

Universitetet i Stavanger, ved

- *Sondre Fossan Dahle*, sf.dahle@stud.uis.no tlf: 47894390
- *Prof. Hande Eslen Ziya* hande.eslen-ziya@uis.no tlf: 51 83 28 92
- Prosjektansvarlig ved instituttet: Ragnhild Sjurseike, ragnhild.sjurseike@uis.no, tlf: 51831680
- Vårt personvernombud ved: Rolf Jegervatn, rolf.jegervatn@uis.no, tlf: 5183308

Hvis du har spørsmål knyttet til vurderingen som er gjort av personverntjenestene fra Sikt, kan du ta kontakt via:

Epost: personverntjenester@sikt.no eller telefon: 73 98 40 40.

Samtykkeerklæring

Jeg har mottatt og forstått informasjon om prosjektet “Digital Bonds: Exploring the Vital Role of Online Communities in Modern Society”, og har fått anledning til å stille spørsmål. Jeg samtykker til:

- å delta i et intervju

Jeg samtykker til at mine opplysninger behandles frem til prosjektet er avsluttet, ca. 31.07.24

(Signert av prosjektdeltaker, dato)

Appendix 2: Interview guide Norwegian

Spørsmål til deltakere:

Hei, og takk for at du har takket ja til å bli med i min forskning på nettbaserte samfunn og dens innflytelse på medlemmer i samfunnet. Dette er et intervju som er 100% anonymt og du kan til enhver tid trekke deg fra intervjuet og angre på svar du har kommet med. Angrer du, så tar du bare kontakt med meg så skal jeg slette dine kommentarer og svar fra forskningen. Det viktigste er at du skal føle deg godt behandlet og ikke urettferdig behandlet.

Hvis du ikke har noe mer spørsmål å komme med, så vil jeg gjerne starte intervjuet. Husk på å ikke komme med noe personlige detaljer, men svar ærlig på spørsmålene jeg kommer med, uten å dra inn person detaljer og lignende.

Jeg trykker START nå på diktafonen.

I.Hvordan vil du definere Nerdelandslaget som en plattform?

- a. Hvor mye bruker du Nerdelandslaget sitt “community” i hverdagen?
- b. Er du innpå hver dag? Par ganger i uken?

II.Hvordan føler du deg som et medlem av dette nettsamfunnet?

- a. Føler du at medlemmene er positive, hyggelige og imøtekommende?
- b. Føler du det lettere å diskutere dagsaktuelle hendelser som er temaer i nyheter og på sosiale medier via Nerdelandslaget, mer enn dine andre sirkler.

III.Overføring av kunnskap fra podkast, til samfunnet, andre medlemmer, familie og venner? Føler du, etter din erfaring at medlemmer er engasjerte i mange ulike saker som omhandler spillere på nett og deres sosiale tilværelse?

- a. Tar du med deg dagsaktuelle saker fra Nerdelandslaget videre ut til familie, venner og bekjente?
- b. Det er mye snakk for tiden om spillere på nett, mye går innpå temaer som kvinner som spiller og deres opplevelser, Ibelin saken, osv. Er

Nerdlandslaget medlemmer engasjerte i temaer som er i fokus i media og nyheter.

c. Et annet tema er det med den sosiale tilhørigheten, tror du mange ser på nettbaserte samfunn som dere omgangskrets?

IV. Ville du anbefalt Nerdlandslaget til andre?

- a. Hvorfor?
- b. Hvorfor ikke?

Appendix 3: Interview guide English

Questions for participants:

Hello, and thank you for agreeing to participate in my research on online communities and their impact on members. This interview is 100% anonymous, and you can withdraw from the interview at any time and retract any answers you have provided. If you wish to retract your answers, simply contact me, and I will delete your comments and responses from the research. The most important thing is that you feel well-treated and not unfairly treated.

If you have no further questions, I would like to begin the interview. Remember not to provide any personal details, but answer honestly to the questions I will ask, without divulging personal details or similar.

I am pressing START on the recorder now.

- I. How would you define Nerdlandslaget as a platform?
 - a. How much do you use Nerdlandslaget "community" in your daily life? Are you on it every day? A few times a week?
- II. How do you feel as a member of this online community?
 - a. Do you feel that the members are positive, pleasant, and welcoming?
 - b. Do you find it easier to discuss current events that are themes in the news and on social media via Nerdlandslaget, more than in your other circles?
- III. Transfer of knowledge from podcasts to the community, other members, family, and friends? Based on your experience, do you feel that members are engaged in various issues concerning online gamers and their social lives?
 - a. Do you share current issues from Nerdlandslaget with family, friends, and acquaintances?
 - b. There is much talk these days about online gamers, much of it revolves around topics like women who game and their experiences. Are Nerdlandslaget members engaged in topics that are in focus in the media and news?
 - c. Another topic is social belongingness; do you think many see online communities like yours as their social circle? (Ref, Ibeling documentary)
- IV. Would you recommend Nerdlandslaget to others?
 - a. Why?
 - b. Why not?