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Voices of an Online Generation:

Emergence of New Social Experiences in Online
Communities of Internet Content-Creators

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Abstract

As the use of internet and social media has increased, more and more people are turning to internet content-creators as sources of entertainment. Some of these internet content-creators are able to amass enough of a following that those who consume the content will participate in digital spaces devoted to these internet content-creators. This thesis performs a textual analysis of social interactions among participants of a self-described online community based around a particular group of internet content-creators. By looking at how the voices and registers in these digital spaces are understood and used by the participants, I seek to better understand how the participants in these online communities perceive and position themselves and others through interaction online. In this thesis I argue that people are engaging in a new type of social experience through participation within these online communities which distinguish themselves by centering on specific content-creators.

Keywords: Internet content-creators, enregisterment, online community, voicing, positioning, YouTube, differentiation

Introduction

Over the last two decades, human use of the internet has risen dramatically. Statistics report that from 2000 to 2016, global use of the internet went from approximately 413 million global users to more than 3.4 billion (Roser et al, “Internet”). People can now use the internet for everything from finding recipes, to organizing events, to consuming all kinds of media. The rise of social media platforms on the internet has normalized the use of such sites as a convenient way to socialize and consume preferred internet content.

One of the websites with the largest number of individual users and user engagement is the video-sharing platform YouTube, with a reported 1.9 billion users in 2018 (Roser et al, “Internet”). A consequence of the growth of YouTube is the rise of internet “content-creators”, people who will create videos in which they present themselves to any potential viewer as just a “regular” person making a video for other “regular” people. Someone who creates such videos with seemingly simple premises and unimpressive production can potentially have millions of people watching them.

Mass consumption of these kinds of YouTube videos is having a broad and profound impact, especially due to their popularity among young people. One 2015 survey of American teens reported six of the top ten favorite public personalities were such “YouTube Celebrities” (Ault, “YouTube Stars”). Of particular interest is the formation of digital sites consisting of forums for the content-consumers of these YouTube personalities, and the use of such digital spaces for socialization. These sites receive regular traffic from users who frequently perceive themselves as part of a “community,” as indicated through the utterances and text seen on the sites. A new type of social experience, which more people are taking part in every year, has emerged from the consumption of internet content and the resulting participation in the digital

social interactions based on this content on those sites. In this paper, I will analyze the text and utterances that form this social experience that develops in these online communities.

The use of the term “community” by such sites does not provide very precise insight to their nature, since use of a label does not necessarily indicate the presence of a concept. There are also many different scholarly definitions of “community”, which fall short of appropriately describing the phenomena in these new types of online communities. Benedict Anderson’s concept of an imagined community made up of individuals who perceive themselves as part of a group of “fellow readers” of specific material may parallel what occurs in these “digital spaces”, but his imagined community was applied to the rise of nationalism rather than online social experiences. He was also focused on physical printed material such as newspapers, and does not account for the interactions and perceptions possible with internet platforms (1983, 44). The interactions in these online communities indicate creation of registers for a “speech community” which exclude outsiders from fully understanding what is being communicated. In a “speech community,” to recognize and appropriately respond to specific registers is to be a part of the community. However, as illustrated by Irvine, such a “community” must be defined based on the perceptions of those who consider themselves a part of such communities, and how they distinguish themselves from others outside of their community (2006, 696). The way these online communities differentiate themselves through their social interactions may overlap with being part of a speech community, but their perception of what constitutes membership of their community extends beyond patterns of speech.

Understanding these perceptions, I will analyze of the utterances and interactions on such sites using Bakhtin’s concepts of voicing and dialogism (1981), and Wortham’s examination of self-narrative and positioning by speakers (Wortham 2001). The utterances made by those who

participate in these communities establish a perception of more than a simple audience for a media, but a group of social co-actors participating in an ongoing dialogue amongst themselves. I will also focus on enregisterment on these sites to identify the contexts necessary for recognizing the specific registers in these communities. I will use Agha's description of the social recognition of distinct forms of speech, since the recognition of specific registers and the resulting assumptions is how those who participate in these communities can identify each other on other digital sites. This can also be applied to encounters off of the internet which cement the perception of a community (2005, 38).

I will examine the "community", and the registers which differentiate it, of a particular relatively popular YouTube channel, here called JokesandGamez, as a case study. This channel consists of multiple people and has been on YouTube since 2015, with several of its members creating content on YouTube for several years before. It has a significant number of YouTube accounts subscribed to it, many of which comment and interact with the videos posted by the channel. It also has an active website for these followers to communicate with each other through posting text perceived as relevant to JokesandGamez content and then commenting on these texts. The community for this channel consists of these followers, who are individuals who consistently consume the content produced by the channel members. The content-creators are intrinsically linked with the community and may interact with these followers, and are capable of recognizing the registers used within it. However, they are distinguished as separate from the community due to their direct interactions with members of the community being more limited.

In the first section of this paper, I will review the relevant literature examining the ever-changing concept of a community and the semiotic tools for examining one. Such tools include Bakhtin's concepts of voices and dialogism and Wortham's exploration of them. As well as

Agha's approach of examining enregisterment which helps indicate a limited group of people capable of recognizing and responding to a specific register. I will then provide background for the JokesandGamez sites visited and used in my analysis as well as my methodology for gathering data. Finally, I will demonstrate the registers, perceived positions, and the use of this channel's community by those who perceive themselves to be part of it by providing examples of the content from these sites.

Literature Review

The term "community" is somewhat limited in its use as a descriptor, since there is no generally agreed upon definition among linguistic scholars. It has been used to describe groups comprised of people with more visible commonalities, such as sharing space in the "physical world" (Jones, 1998), yet it has also been used for more abstract descriptions such as "language communities". Yet the exact description of an online community continues to vary from study to study as methods of analysis and the nature of these groups change over time. These rigid definitions can also limit an analysis of a group by forcing data to align with these preconceived definitions. When "community" has been used for the more abstract constructs of groups, such as a "community of practice" or a "speech community" (Lave and Wenger 1991; Gumperz 1964), it can be used in a variety of ways to give different definitions of any interactive phenomenon.

Judith Irvine highlights this inconsistency of abstract language-related definitions, noting how the various definitions of "speech community" and "language community" have evolved in their use in a changing academic landscape (2006). She emphasizes that "any community X is only identifiable in relation to some population that is not-X" (2006, 696). She highlights how "scholarly debate" about communities has evolved over time, for example early "speech community" definitions were similar to Leonard Bloomfield's definition of a group by its

members “who use the same system of speech signals” (1933, 29). Later definitions reflected a different focus towards speech communities, such as John Gumperz’s 1968 definition of “a field of action where the distribution of linguistic variants is a reflection of social facts” (1968, 383). More recently, the term’s implication that a community consisted of a singular language system was considered a limitation if scholars wanted to broaden their conceptions of a community beyond preconceived boundaries (Irvine 2006, 690-693). Irvine makes the point that examining how differentiations and boundaries are made between the members of a community and those who are not members is crucial in understanding the interactions and relationships between those members, rather than relying on set definitions (2006, 696). By analyzing interactions and behaviors in digital spaces, I intend to identify what causes differentiation among those who perceive themselves as part of the JokesandGamez “online community”.

Analysis of text and utterances in digital spaces becomes more complicated as the term “community” comes into vernacular use by the participants of the group. What they might consider “community” shifts as the social interactions on these sites change. When trying to understand the nature of the qualities which make members of a group see themselves as a community, the apparent distinctions seem to revolve around the nature of the technology which allows for the new forms of communication among the participants. Anderson’s (1983) description of an “imagined community” emerging with new technology does more closely align with the rise of internet content production and consumption. He notes how those who consumed similar printed material became aware of one another as “fellow-readers” who were connected through this material in such a way that they could feel part of a greater “imagined community” (1983, 44). He further described how every member of such a community was aware of taking part in the “mass ceremony” of receiving and reading a newly released edition of a newspaper,

along with the countless others whom they may not know personally, but who are expected to continue in this behavior daily (1983, 35). Anderson uses his concept of an imagined community specifically as part of an explanation for the rise of movements of nationalism rather than yet-to-exist online communities. However, his focus on the perception of those who consume a certain type of media now available to them, and how they come to relate to one another provides a useful approach for understanding online communities. With technology and the internet making it easier and more common for individuals to communicate with any number of people who choose to use the same media, the often text-based forms of communication have become a central part of an increasingly common experience. This communication distinguishes online communities from Anderson's imagined communities. The members of Anderson's imagined communities did not communicate with one another or with the creators of the texts they consumed. The members of the online communities centered around content-creators are easily able to communicate with them, and frequently communicate with one another. I will analyze some of these communications which are perceived as part of participating in an online "community", specifically by looking at text-based utterances.

Central Concepts Used

In this paper, I will primarily use concepts established by Mikhail Bakhtin, Stanton Wortham, and Asif Agha when analyzing the text from my data. Each of these authors provides a useful tool for the analysis of the utterances made by the social actors on websites.

In his essays, Bakhtin argues for a dialogic approach to discourse analysis. He maintains that when a speaker makes an utterance, it is almost always in response to the utterances of others (1981, 92). Therefore, it is necessary for social actors to understand the context in which an utterance is made in order for there to be any kind of meaningful communication. One of

Bakhtin's central concepts is his concept of "voicing", which looks at how the utterance of an individual and language are linked to the extent that an utterance that is an example of a particular voice indexes a certain identifiable persona (1981, 262-263). Online text often relies upon the uptake of a reader to be able to identify the voice in order to understand the intention behind the text, especially when the digital spaces frequently use references to media believed to be mutually consumed by the writer and those whom they anticipate will consume the text. Online communities often have specific dialogic discourses in which participants are expected to understand the context.

In his work, Wortham expands on Bakhtin's concept of dialogism by looking at how social actors position themselves through their own narratives when interacting with one another (2001). Wortham adapts Bakhtin's "voicing" concept into terms for analysis of these narratives, particularly at how narrators "voice" other social actors in their narratives and how their own "voice" may change throughout the narrative (2001, 62). For Wortham, how an individual narrated the events of their life was important for understanding their experience. He presents tools for identifying voicing in the autobiographical narrative of a speaker including: reference and predication, metapragmatic descriptors, quotation, evaluative indexicals, and epistemic modalization (70-75). Although these tools were intended for analysis of a self-narrative speaking event, they can also be used to identify how a social actor positions themselves and the intended recipients of their utterances from any text. When examining interactions in online communities, cues of references, evaluative indexicals, and even epistemic modalization are useful for dissecting the content of utterances and understanding how the social actors in a community position themselves. Identifying references can help identify what greater context is necessary to be part of a dialogic discourse, and notes how the way a speaker characterizes a

reference can be a strong indicator of the speaker's position towards the reference (2001,71).

Wortham characterizes evaluative indexicals as expressions marking the speaker as associated with a specific voice, which a speaker can use not only to index this voice, but also to position themselves in relation to it (2001, 74).

Wortham's technique of identifying positioning of social actors and "evaluative indexicals" in speech relates to Agha's work on registers and voicing. Agha expands on Bakhtin's concepts by partitioning different applications of voicing into specific types of voices. While Agha notes that there is an "overlap" of voice and register, he specifically defines "registers" as being "models of language use" which subject an individual detecting it to establish some form of alignment with the voices indexed by the register (2005, 38). For Agha, a voice is not necessarily associated with an individual person, but is instead a representation of a personhood with specific ascribed characteristics to be recognized by other social actors (2005, 43). His concept of "enregistered voices", a class of voices connected to registers, helps reveal what characterizations are associated with speakers of a specific voice that can be recognized by others, which then indexes the existence of a group which uses the voice (2005, 39). Similar to Wortham's evaluative indexicals, identifying enregistered voices and the processes which enable them to be recognized by a group can provide insight into the assumptions and expectations of social actors within a community. They can also help identify when a specific register is being used, either to intentionally invoke a certain persona or to unintentionally partake in the persona.

Other Research of Online Communities

There is a history of research into online communities, as well as linguistic analysis of discourse over the internet (Rheingold 1993; Herring 2004; Angouri and Sanderson, 2015). Any research about the YouTube website and its participants are often examined with a holistic

approach focusing on the greater “YouTube community” (Burgess and Green, 2009). Elise Kramer did, however, use internet forums on websites in her semiotic analysis of online discussions about the humor of rape jokes (Kramer, 2011)¹.

It could be argued that online communities of YouTube content-creators are simply a new form of people coming together online over mutual interest in certain media. Nancy Baym’s research into “fandom” and online community would seem to find similar elements in how the community in her study formed based on enthusiasm for the same media (Baym, 2000)². However, Baym’s online communities formed around traditional scripted media such as television or film. Communities for YouTube content-creators form based on expectations that these content-creators are “regular” people, simply presenting self-recorded videos of themselves spontaneously behaving how they would ordinarily behave in various situations. Additionally, there is the expectation among the participants of YouTube content-creator communities for the potential of some form of interaction with the content-creators due to the ease of interaction in digital platforms. This ease and frequency of interaction among participants has enabled a new type of social positioning and experience among the social actors involved in these communities.

Data and Methodology

This paper is based on data gathered from observing the texts and interactions made on a variety of websites and social media platforms. I chose a particular YouTube channel, which in this paper will be referred to as JokesandGamez, that had the qualities of typical content-creators. The key factor making this typical is that the members of this channel have made a career out of posting videos online of themselves doing things, to the point where an apparent community

¹ Kramer’s methodology and presentation of research were consulted for research and organization of this paper.

² For further reading about “fandom culture”, see Jenkins, H. (2013). *Textual poachers: television fans and participatory culture*. Routledge.

centered around them exists online³. I looked at the sites where their videos were posted, which included their own websites in addition to YouTube. I also looked at their accounts on various social media platforms. I viewed these sites in order to observe any comments or interactions that took place either among content-consumers or between content-consumers and content-creators. This observation took place over the course of fourteen weeks, from February 24, 2019 until June 6, 2019. This included looking at the comments on their various videos, monitoring the channel's frequently used forum-based website, and observing posts made by and about this channel on social media sites such as Twitter and Instagram. I particularly observed texts from their forum-based website, since it had an especially high frequency of utterances and interactions in addition to explicitly referring to itself as a community. I noted the frequency of posts, the accounts which made them, the content of posts, the number of interactions/written responses with the posts, and the content of the responses.

By analyzing these texts, I sought to identify the voices and indexical markers which indicated when an individual was participating in a specific register. I also intended to examine how an individual may position themselves within these texts as a way of participating in what they distinguished as a community. The texts could also reveal what interactions an individual may have anticipated when making their utterance.

Analysis of these texts would also enable me to see and experience what a standard user would experience; I could see the context that was available for users of these sites to help them process the interactions and activity of the content-creators and other content-consumers. The nature of internet communication allows for anonymity among the participants. This makes it difficult to identify characteristics of a social actor such as gender or age. Yet this potential

³For the sake of anonymity, the names of the content-creators, the internet-handles of the content-consumers, titles of specific videos and forum threads have been changed.

anonymity becomes part of the experience of participating in this online discourse. The unknown aspects of an individual making a comment become part of the voice identified with the comment. Alternatively, the choice to reveal personal characteristics can also be part of the experience in participating in online communities. How people choose to identify themselves on these sites and the voices they use become a reflection of the overall experience in participating in these communities.

My initial goal in observing these online interactions was to identify the register associated with this specific online community, and how individuals differentiated themselves as part of a community through their utterances and voices. Due to my interest in the direct interactions seen on these sites, I focused on any post or comment on any platform that had more interactions than normal from different users. I also took note of utterances and interactions which seemed to reveal what might usually be considered personal or sensitive information about a participant. Such texts often seemed to express how an individual perceived the community that they believed themselves to be participating in.

Ethnographic Background

In this section, I will give a brief history of YouTube and its content-creators, before giving a description of the website as it can be used today. I want to provide an image of the site so that someone who may be unfamiliar with how its features work would have a better understanding of the context in which the interactions take place and the framework for the sites which participants must navigate. I also seek to provide context for the YouTube channel I have chosen to analyze and why it fits the category of a YouTube “content-creator” with an online community.

Background of YouTube

The website YouTube launched as a platform for sharing videos in 2005. It began as a website where anyone who had an email address could create an account and post videos for anyone else to view. Some users of the site eventually found that by consistently posting certain kinds of videos, they could accumulate a steady audience of people who would regularly view these videos. These videos were usually the type that were simple for anyone with a camera and a computer to make, such as video blogs or short skits. Initially this practice was generally considered more of a hobby rather than a profitable profession. This is because a video that gained a lot of views did not directly have a way to make money for the person who posted it.

Early ways of making money as a popular YouTube content-creator generally consisted of selling merchandise branded with references to their content, such as clothing apparel or posters. Eventually, it became more common for videos to be monetized by using advertisements, which the YouTube website will independently run before, during, or after a video. The more views gained by a video with advertisements, the more money that is received by the channel which posted the video. If a content-creator is able to get sponsors for videos, they will personally read an advertisement for the sponsor's product at some point during a video. Such systems of earning money allowed for what might have once simply been a hobby to become a viable way of earning a living.

The YouTube website of today has a similar general format to when it began. Unlike many social media sites such as Facebook or Twitter, a visitor to the YouTube homepage will not be greeted with just messages or images recently posted by followed accounts. Instead, the visitor will find a display of links to various videos. These links will display the title of the video, the name of the YouTube channel that posted it, and the thumbnail, which is an image taken

from or created for the video by the channel. YouTube differentiates itself from text-based social media platforms which might encourage “scrolling” through content, the site instead encourages more active exploration of videos. Any video that is clicked on to be viewed will have a small portion of its webpage consist of thumbnails linking to similar videos or more videos posted by the channel. A user can also scroll down from a video to read comments written by other viewers. When a regular user of the site opens YouTube’s homepage, they will either see links for videos from channels which they have recently viewed or videos about subjects they have recently searched the site for. A new visitor to the site who opens YouTube’s homepage will be presented with “Recommended” and “Trending” videos. These will be videos that either have a high number of views or have been posted recently and rapidly acquired a large number of views. Although there are also now many accounts for more traditional media companies using YouTube as a place to promote their products, YouTube channels consisting of one person or a small team of people creating content of themselves still retain large audiences and remain an essential part of the YouTube “landscape.”

The YouTube website has always had features for “user engagement”, which content-creators must navigate in order to retain viewers and be able to support themselves. Every YouTube channel now has a “studio” section which only the user of the account can access, presenting a view of YouTube from what it calls the “creator” perspective. It includes features such as “channel analytics” and recent announcements made for the “creator community”. These terms position the user of a channel as a content-creator who should be concerned about such elements of activity on YouTube. This “studio” section allows the user of a YouTube channel to examine and evaluate the views and interactions accumulated by their various videos. This “studio” feature also allows the user to set certain regulations for how other accounts can interact

with their channel. For example, a channel can turn off commenting for a video so that no comments by other accounts can be made on the video's webpage. They can also choose to set filters that can prevent certain words from being posted in comments, or will hold comments containing these words so that they can be reviewed by the channel user before they are posted. These settings allow content-creators to use tools native to YouTube to prune language they deem undesirable from the comments section of their channel.

On pages of regular uploaded videos, other viewers are able to "like", "dislike", or reply to a comment. These features can act as a system for social regulation of which comments are initially seen by anyone who watches a video uploaded to YouTube. Comments on YouTube videos are sorted by either "Top" or "Newest". Sorting by "Top" means that comments with a high number of likes will appear before other comments. YouTube sorts comments by "Top" by default, until a user changes their preferred settings. Content-creators are able to directly interact with comments on their videos by replying to them, by "liking" them, which is indicated by an icon next to the comment, or by "pinning" them, which permanently places the comment at the top of the comment section to be the first seen by other viewers.

Chosen Channel Background

My chosen YouTube channel, here called JokesandGamez, is similar to many internet content-creators in the kinds of videos it posts and how the members of the channel interact with those who consume their content. They post videos on YouTube of themselves, often playing some sort of video game or even just talking. Users can then comment on the videos, "like" or "dislike" them, or subscribe to the channel if they have not already. Content-creators will usually have a social media presence through the use of websites such as Twitter or Instagram where content-consumers can follow them. Many content-creators will also have links on their videos

to websites which allow content-consumers to financially show support of the content-creators through donations or by purchasing merchandise.

JokesandGamez is an American comedic YouTube channel which is part of a larger company consisting of channels creating videos for YouTube. The JokesandGamez channel at time of research consists of a central group of several people, with frequent appearances by other employees. Their videos will often be of them playing video games while talking with one another about the game or various other topics. These types of video-game-play videos are commonly called “Let’s Play” videos. The intent of the videos made by JokesandGamez is usually to make them entertaining and humorous by making jokes about the games, each other, or any other topic. Dark or crude humor is often used, such as joking about menstruation when encountering a bloody corpse in a video game. JokesandGamez will also release slightly more serious content, such as podcasts in which they discuss recent events or popular culture. The channel currently has over 1.5 million YouTube accounts/digital profiles subscribed to them, with videos typically getting views numbering in the hundreds of thousands. It also has a social media presence with official accounts for the channel across platforms including Facebook, Instagram, and Twitter. All of the members of the channel also have their own personal social media presence. In their videos and through their social media, the channel members present themselves as ordinary people who are trying to make a career out of appearing entertaining to viewers.

The channel also makes use of a Reddit.com webpage. Reddit is a type of forum website where users can devote entire sub-sites to content and interactions related to specific topics. Such sub-sites are called subreddits. This website allows for users to post pictures, videos, questions, or comments in order to interact with one another over a shared interest. If someone is

particularly interested in a subreddit, they can create a reddit account, using a made-up name for their account, and subscribe to it. The JokesandGamez subreddit, which identifies itself on the website as a community, has over 150,000 accounts subscribed to it, all of which are able to make original posts or comments. Although this may seem to be a high number, not all of these accounts will necessarily participate in interacting with others on the site. The frequency of posts on the site did not reflect regular activity from such a high number of users. During the weeks of my analysis an average of approximately 211 original posts were made every week, with an average of 30 posts made per day. The JokesandGamez YouTube channel often uses their subreddit as their unofficial site of interaction with those who consume their content. Members of the channel may even occasionally comment on posts or draw on the users to suggest content for the channel. Due to the clear visual and metapragmatic commitment of this subreddit to being a “community”, much of my community-centered analysis was done with content from this site. The existence of subreddits for popular YouTube content-creator is very common, but activity on them may vary depending on how they are utilized by the content-creator or the content-consumers.

The use of forum-type websites as spaces where digital communities are constructed does have a history of research by scholars. The subjects studied in these online forums range from health-related issues (Rodriquez, 2013; Angouri & Sanderson 2015) to deliberation while socializing online (Loveland & Popescu, 2011). However, despite the abundance of research into digital media, there is limited anthropological analysis for the communities participating in online forums centered on YouTube content-creators. Kramer, however, used internet forums in her analysis of online discussions about the humor of rape jokes (Kramer, 2011). Although I focus on a different subject of analysis, Kramer effectively demonstrates how analyzing

interactions in digital spaces can help identify how participants perform and perceive their experiences in online discourse. These kinds of debates are easier to hold on forum-based websites like Reddit, but they can still occur in the comments section of a YouTube video. Such forms of social interaction in the JokesandGamez community will be further explored below.

Differentiation and Identification through Speech in Online Communities

In this section, I will explain and provide examples of how content-consumers can use social media in ways that encourage the perception of direct interaction among themselves as well as between them and content-creators. I will then provide background on how the websites, particularly YouTube and Reddit, encourage the perception of a “community” on their sites by users and how those users are able to utilize site mechanics for interaction. I then analyze various texts made by content-consumers providing their own perspective of the “community” which has formed around JokesandGamez. Finally, I will analyze the voices and positioning found in these text-based social interactions in order to identify the emerging register and how it is used to differentiate participants from non-participants.

Community Online

One of the complications of analyzing online communities is that the term “community” frequently becomes used as a label by the websites. Unlike the printed media that Anderson felt created imagined communities (1983, 44), websites allow for users to more directly interact with each other. If a user went to the home page of any particular YouTube channel, they would find a tab labelled “Community.” In this section of the channel, the content-creator(s) can make posts in a similar manner to a social media platform. Such posts usually contain updates or information from the content-creator about new videos coming out. Other users can then leave comments on

these posts or “like/dislike” them. A content-creator looking at this section on their channel will see a prompt near the top of the section reading “Add a public comment”, which once posted would then be seen by other users. They can also choose whether to allow other accounts to be able to make “public comments”, or whether other accounts can only comment on the posts made by the channel. This label may reflect emerging attitudes among content-consumers of YouTube who perceive themselves as part of an online community. The change also seems to suggest that the YouTube website considers a “community” to consist of a sufficiently high number of individuals who expect or desire another avenue of potential interaction with the content-creator. Yet the JokesandGamez YouTube “Community” section has not been utilized to any great extent.

On the Reddit website, the term “community” is frequently used by the various subreddits to reference themselves. The home page of a subreddit always has a description at the top of the page entitled “About Community”, while the description itself is usually a brief summary of the central topic for the subreddit. The button that a user can click on to subscribe to these subreddits reads “Join Community”, while another link reads “View this community’s rules”. The labels used by the Reddit websites categorize any subreddit as a community which has rules and that a user can subscribe to in order to “join”.

The YouTube website’s use of the term “community” compared to the various uses by Reddit sites seems to differ by how the content-consumers are able to interact. YouTube’s “Community” tab is for the content-creators to leave messages for their content-consumers to see and respond to. In comparison, the Reddit site’s version of “community” seems to be digital spaces for individuals who desire a place to express interest in or discuss a specific topic. The design of Reddit websites also encourages discourse and more extended communication between

the commenters. YouTube's comment system allows for a user to make a comment on a video, which other users can then reply to. If a user wanted to reply to another reply on a comment, that user would reply to the original comment then specify that they are replying to the account which wrote a reply by using @. For example:

User1: Original Comment
User2: Reply to comment
User3: @User2 Reply to reply.

On Reddit sites, the format allows for more coherent and in-depth discussion. A post on a subreddit does not have to be a video, it can also be an image or up to several paragraphs of text. Comments on YouTube videos with more than four lines will have a prompt reading "Read more" which a user must click to view the rest of the comment. Reddit comments only have a "Read more" prompt for a comment if there more than twenty lines and a user is viewing a page with mobile device. Yet similarly to YouTube, other accounts can express whether they "like" or "dislike" certain comments or posts. The Reddit version is to "upvote" or "downvote" using arrow icons next to the posts. Reddit comments can even display when users give each other different amounts of the website's currency, which can be purchased directly from the site. Reddit also allows a user of the site to sort comments according to how many "upvotes" they may have or how recently they were made.

When a Reddit account leaves a comment on a post, other accounts can reply to the comment. Unlike YouTube, these replies can then be visibly replied to by other accounts, which can be further replied to by other accounts to create long chains of comments. These chains of comments and replies to posts are called "threads". Reddit comment sections can also be sorted in a wider variety of ways than YouTube such as by "Old," "Controversial" which allows a user to view comments by order of which received the most "downvotes" first, or "Rising," which

shows posts which have rapidly acquired any number of upvotes. These differences allow for more varied and sustained conversations which can carry on at various levels. For example:

User1: Original comment on a post
User2: Reply to original comment
User3: Reply to User2
User4: Different Reply to User2
User5: Reply to User4
User6: Reply to original comment

All users of Reddit websites need to understand this format in order to participate in discourse. Participation in a less popular Reddit “community” is further hampered if the subreddit does not have enough active members for posts to be receive enough upvotes to “trend” on the Reddit homepage. In contrast to YouTube which considers views to be part of “trending”, Reddit requires more active participation from users for a post to gain prominence. Even if a post made on a subreddit for a YouTube channel receives a large number of upvotes from other subscribers to the subreddit, the post may require specific knowledge of the channel in order to understand why the post is worth upvoting. A post on the JokesandGamez subreddit about a channel member getting into a minor car accident received over three thousand upvotes, but a Reddit user who does not know who the person is would not be likely to upvote the post even if it is seen “trending”. Additionally, unlike YouTube, a subreddit will only show links to other posts made on that subreddit. If a user is viewing a post on the JokesandGamez subreddit, the page will not show links to posts from other subreddits for the user to potentially explore.

These features of Reddit sites give a user more of a sense of exclusivity, despite the fact that these sites are accessible to anyone. A subreddit for a YouTube channel may not necessarily be “stumbled upon” in the manner that the videos might be on YouTube. This focus on one subreddit helps the users of these sites perceive differentiation between the various Reddit “communities”. The mechanics and language used by these websites will undeniably affect the

experiences of the users. The perception of what constitutes these “communities” and how they relate to YouTube content-creators may initially seem tied to the use of the term “community” by the websites themselves. However, the discourse and practices of the participants of these groups plays a much larger role in the perception of these online communities than the websites’ terminology. I will explore the perceptions of this community below.

The features and language use of sites such as YouTube, Reddit, and other platforms reflect Anderson’s concept of a community that exists due to individuals being aware that other people consume the same content using the same technology and mechanisms (1983, 35). However, these websites also allow for interactions among the participants that help differentiate their “sense” of the community. JokesandGamez content-consumers who use these sites will often refer to “the community” in posts when regarding others who interact with each other based on JokesandGamez content. These posts may directly address the perceived community, such as when one user created a post entitled “Because JokesandGamez has been endorsing the use of TikTok recently, how does the community view this new finding?”. The perceived JokesandGamez “community” is not limited just to their subreddit, but the channel’s frequent use of the site to communicate with content-consumers cements it as a central space for discourse. The discourse on the subreddit also has “community”-established constraints.

Every subreddit will have its own rules for the participants to follow. These rules are enforced by moderators, who are users with approved accounts that monitor posts on the site. JokesandGamez had fourteen moderators for a site of over 150,000 subscribers. Over half of those moderators were members or former members of the channel. The rest of the moderators were members of the “community”. A moderator can help manage the subreddit by removing undesirable posts, “locking” posts so that they cannot be commented on, and placing restrictions

on accounts that perform undesirable behavior. The rules themselves overall anticipate that anyone visiting the site will already have sufficient knowledge about JokesandGamez and general use of the Reddit website. A visitor to the JokesandGamez subreddit would see the rules to the side of the posts after slightly scrolling down the page. The rules state:

1. Do not make Q&A posts
2. No shit posts!
3. Tag your posts
4. Respect each other
5. Let the video bot do his job
6. Don't monetize your fan content
7. Only post JokesandGamez relevant videos.

A regular user of Reddit would easily understand the intention behind these rules, but an individual who is unfamiliar with the site would need to expand on each rule in order understand their meaning. A “Q&A post”, for example, is a reference to a type of post that is made every week as part of an ongoing “Question and Answer” video series released by JokesandGamez. Every week a certain moderator makes a post for the content-consumers to ask various questions. From these questions the channel will choose about six to answer during a video. The restriction on the creation of these posts enforces an order for the site, that certain “official” types of posts are limited to only the content-creators and select individuals approved by them.

The rules regarding “tagging” posts and “shit posts” also require knowledge of behavior and systems commonly found on Reddit. To “tag” a post is to categorize it according to one of the “flairs” designated by the subreddit such as a “Discussion” flair for a post entitled “Just discovered JokesandGamez, any recommendations?”. A “shit post” is described by the rule as “low effort posts, such as memes, lookalikes, adverts, reposts and buffering screenshots”. “Shit posting” is a practice that can be seen on other subreddits and even other forum-based websites; it is generally considered to be making posts that are not considered to be contributing to the desired types of discussions on the site. Even the JokesandGamez subreddit qualifies what it

considers to be “shit posts” based on previous experiences across media platforms. These rules also index a desire by the site’s moderators for users to follow certain behaviors on the site. These include that users must “respect each other” as well as put sufficient effort into a JokesandGamez relevant post which will contribute to a perceived ongoing “discussion”.

The participants of JokesandGamez subreddit and other social media do not just identify as a community simply because the term is used by the websites they frequent. Participants occasionally express through posts or comments of how they differentiate the JokesandGamez community from other online communities, even other Reddit “communities”. These utterances often refer to perceived qualities of the community and the content-creators that initially appealed to the content-consumer. In this example, I examine a series of comments made by content-consumers in the subreddit comments section of a post made for a JokesandGamez video. The video was an episode of the JokesandGamez podcast posted to YouTube in 2015. At around an hour long, these podcasts consist of informal, unscripted conversation between typically four channel members. They usually discuss recent developments in video game or internet culture, often making jokes and keeping the conversation relatively light. In this particular podcast one of the members, Brian, briefly told a story describing his poor relationship with a parent throughout his childhood. The story described a final physical confrontation with the parent before they became permanently estranged. The story was told in a very calm and apathetic tone, while the other podcast participants quietly acknowledged the seriousness of the story before making a humorous transition to a video-game related topic.

Although this story was told in about two minutes, the majority of the comments that received the most “likes/upvotes” on both the YouTube and the Reddit pages were comments that mentioned Brian’s story. Below is one of the comment chains from the Reddit post.

Thread 1:

level 1

A: Honestly, the fact that Brian is comfortable enough to be able to speak about his past on a livestream to his fans is really humbling. You guys keep being awesome.

level 2

B: It really was moving, and for me help to not feel so embarrassed about my childhood.

level 3

A: Absolutely. I'm sure a lot of us have had an embarrassing childhood or really shitty moments. I'm no exception.

In the end, this channel is more than somewhere people can go for laughs, I see posts where people say they're dealing with depression/chemo and the community is really damn supportive. I think we are one of the best fan subreddits out there and I'm proud to be a part of it.

level 4

B: Absolutely, I can't say I feel as close to any other community in my subs. It's not like I ever have a heart to heart with someone from [/r/blackpeopletwitter](#).

level 5

D: Ya, but in [/r/dota2](#) we have heart to hearts by shitposting. It's how we say we love each other

level 3

C: This may sound like a cliché and I dont know what happened, but it's not your fault, dude. You dont have to feel embarassed about anything. A lot of people feel uncomfortable when talking about the shittier parts of their childhood (me included) but if you dig a little bit deeper you'll see that you're not as alone with this as you might feel.

level 4

B: Yeah that's true, I know its not a unique situation, though I wish it was. It's atleast nice to know there's people to talk too.

This thread of comments demonstrates several of the content-consumers having a conversation expressing their appreciation of Brian and support of each other. The first comment from A initially seems to address other content-consumers, expressing the emotional reaction of being “humbled” by Brian’s willingness to speak candidly about an unhappy aspect of his childhood knowing that content-consumers would hear it. The comment then switches to apparently address Brian by saying “...keep being awesome”. The reply to this comment from B agrees with A, describing Brian’s action as “moving” and making commenter B feel better about their own childhood. Commenter A replies to this comment by relating to B’s experience, and by extension Brian’s experience, of an “embarrassing childhood”. Commenter A further proclaims the JokesandGamez channel as “more than somewhere people can go for laughs ...”, and

describes a community that is supportive of its members and “one of the best fan subreddits out there”. B agrees with this feeling by differentiating the site community as conveying more feelings of closeness than another subreddit such as “blackpeopletwitter”. D replies to this comment by protesting that the members of the “dota2” subreddit do express support for one another, they just do so through “shitposting”. C also makes a reply to B’s first comment about having an embarrassing childhood. C performs a supportive role for B, relating to the potential uncomfortableness of talking about the unhappy parts of their childhood, telling them that whatever happened was not their fault, and that they were not alone in having an unhappy childhood. B acknowledges the truth in C’s statement, and expresses feeling comforted that there are others to speak with about such a situation.

Such expressions of receiving support and good feelings from the JokesandGamez channel and even from the community often show up in posts across platforms. Individuals will use social media as a way of expressing appreciation for JokesandGamez content. My second example comes from a comment on a YouTube page of a Q&A video from March 2019. A user on YouTube expresses gratitude that JokesandGamez has helped them through a tough time:

Thread 2:

Original Comment: I don't know what the odds are that anyone from JokesandGamez will see this comment, but I'm not on Twitter or any social media so the comment section is probably my best shot at getting this message to them.

I just wanted to say how grateful I am. I had to drop out of school a few years ago after I fell down a mine shaft (I shit you not) and have been having a series of back and hip surgeries. I don't get to leave the house very often and am dealing with some pretty nasty pain on a daily basis. Getting to laugh along with this group has been some of the very best therapy for me. Some days I feel like I'm losing my mind, but JokesandGamez always helps get my spirits up again. I'm sure I'm not the only one, either. So from all of us going through it right now, THANK YOU, thank you, thank you. It means a whole lot.

Reply1: Tim reads the comments here I think. Leah almost always replies on their subreddit. Anyway, I second this.

Reply2: Yeah post on the subreddit dude, they often reply. Hope you are doing well now, glad to have u here

Reply3: I hope they see this man, I think they've helped us all through something or another, whether it be small like mine or big like yours. I wish you all the best with your recovery and any future surgeries and procedures you might have

Reply4: LIAR!!!

Reply5: So in a way you literally dropped out of school. Sorry. I've been going through chemotherapy and I can say that JokesandGamez videos in combination with a little THC have been such good therapy for me as well. I don't know how they manage to pull off these genius comedy routines so consistently but thank God for JokesandGamez.

Reply6: I agree, they're a big reason that I got through college with my sanity intact. Keep fighting man, I hope you heal fully and quickly.

Reply 7: Get well bud. (watch your step in the future. Geezuz!) The channel is fantastic! There is nothing like the healing power of laughter, and the guys are constantly bringing "Tha Goods."

Reply8: Stay positive, brother! Feel better

Reply9: Which mineshaft?

The original comment received 241 upvotes and nine replies from various other users. Seven of the replies were encouraging to the commenter and wished them well. Four of those replies further related to the feeling that JokesandGamez content has “helped” them in some way. Those seven replies had all been upvoted a number of times, but the two replies that were not supportive, Reply4 and Reply9, received no upvotes. This type of “Thank You” post is seen on YouTube, Twitter the subreddit, where they received similar replies from other users. Thread 2’s original comment and the resulting replies illustrate that the content-consumers do not feel they have to restrict these types of interactions to one website. The reactions to this comment, the high number of “likes” and generally supportive replies, index the approval by other content-consumers of this type of utterance expressing personal feelings of appreciation and gratitude for the content-creators. The comments in Thread 1 indicate similarly, that expressing such personal utterances is recognized as an accepted and even encouraged form of voicing that can be part of participating in this community. The replies in Thread 2 also note the possibility of one of the channel members seeing the comment, and encourage the author of the original comment to post to the subreddit to increase the likelihood of that happening. Their encouragement indicates an implicit understanding that a channel member seeing the comment would be even more

meaningful to the author, which further indexes a perception of shared mindset in how content-consumers regard the content-creators.

Voices and Positioning in the Discourse

I have already demonstrated how the perception of a community is encouraged and reinforced through the use of the term by certain websites and the users. I will now analyze the very language used by participants, using Bakhtin's concept of voicing (1981) and Wortham's concepts of positioning (2001). Across all of the social media platforms, any text posted by a user is made with the intention of the post being seen by other users, either known or unknown to the original poster. Through the mechanic of tagging JokesandGamez social media, even by posting on JokesandGamez related sites, an individual uses an evaluative indexical that signifies participation in a certain community and their position in it as a content-consumer. It also increases the possibility that the post will be seen by other social actors who are aware of JokesandGamez, which raises the probability of further social exchanges with other members of the community.

In almost all interactions on these sites, the content-consumers perceive that they are part of a group who not only share an interest in JokesandGamez, but who are capable of citation of JokesandGamez content during these interactions. Anderson's imagined community is one where the participants perceive themselves as unified through consumption of the same media (1983, 35). Although the use of "community" as a label on various websites might encourage this perception, but it is not enough to truly facilitate it. Although JokesandGamez content-consumers do acknowledge the existence of a group that has formed based on consumption of the same content, technology and social media allows them to directly interact with each other in a way that shapes their image of the JokesandGamez online community. This is a significant difference

between Anderson's concept of a community unified by their perceived relation to each other over an object, and a situation where the object can interact with the individual members of the community. Wortham's concept of positioning is useful here. The content-consumers leaving the comments in Thread 1 and Thread 2 all perceive themselves as holding similar positions in the community centered around JokesandGamez. In Thread 2, several of the replies to the original comment use voices of someone already friendly to the commenter through the use of informal terms of familiar address such as "man", "bud", and "brother". These terms index a sense of closeness and positioning of equality among the social actors. The comments in Thread 1 demonstrate a more open acknowledgement of the positioning of the content-consumers as members of a group that encourages supportive interactions. For example, commenter A's comment that "the community is really damn supportive". The commenter goes on to position themselves as "part of" the "fan subreddit" for JokesandGamez, using "we" to position other users who might read the comment as fellow participants within in the community. Although such language indicates positioning of relative equality between the commenters, these interactions also position the speakers as "fans" who elevate the social position of the JokesandGamez content-creators. The recognition of the "fan subreddit" by members of the JokesandGamez channel as a community for individuals to participate in also implies participation in that community by the channel members.

YouTube is used as a central site for consumption of content, but other social media platforms make participation in social interactions easier. Content-creators and content-consumers are both able to use social media to more directly interact amongst themselves and with each other. The social media platform Twitter often becomes an official source of communication from a content-creator, as is the case for the JokesandGamez channel, but other

popular platforms such as Reddit, Instagram, and Facebook are also used. The platforms Twitter and Instagram allow users to implement mechanics that increase interaction, such as the ability to directly reply to another user's post, or "tagging", a particular username so that the user will be alerted to the post. Here are three examples of tagging in Twitter posts:

- (1) a.) @JokesandGamez Woohoo! Got 2 of my new JokesandGamez shirts today!! Cannot wait to wear them out and represent you all!!.
- b.) Shoutout to @JokesandGamez for providing disgusting and wholesome content for those of us who have been treading water. Every once in a while it's nice to detach while appreciating some truly talented content creators produce some quality shit. Thanks guys.
- c.) @JokesandGamez any reason why podcast time on my app says the podcast is only 23 minutes and the YouTube video is over an hour longer? I use cast box.

These examples provide instances of utterances commonly seen when the channel is tagged on social media: 1a is an announcement of having received and the intention to wear JokesandGamez themed merchandise the user had purchased. 1b is an "appreciation post" in which the user expresses gratitude and appreciation to the JokesandGamez channel for creating entertaining content. 1c is a user with a technical problem hoping to get a solution by tagging the channel's twitter account. Each utterance positions the respective user as someone who "receives" from JokesandGamez. 1a received anticipated merchandise, 1b receives ongoing "quality" content, and 1c wishes to receive technical advice so that they can then receive more content. Although other social media platforms will have posts that are similar in content to the above examples, Twitter allows users more visibility to each other. Many of the Twitter posts which "tagged" the JokesandGamez Twitter account were simply posts of various accounts replying to an original post by the JokesandGamez account with a reaction.

In the utterances of the content-consumers on JokesandGamez sites, the term "fan" is frequently used to describe themselves and each other. User A from Thread 1 refers to the "fan subreddit" This indicates the perception that a core shared commonality among the community is their position as "fans" of the content-consumers. The perception of a "community" made up of

“fans” does extend offline into the physical world. Some online utterances will discuss the experiences of the users encountering other members of the JokesandGamez fandom “offline”.

One post entitled “Anti-Social Fanbase” on the JokesandGamez subreddit had an image of a YouTube comment which read:

(2.) a.) “So I saw a guy with a jokesandgamez t-shirt at college today walking towards my direction in the hall and pointed to him and said nice shirt. He completely ignored[sic] me and walked past me. Thanks”.

The image showed that the comment received 127 upvotes. The user who made the post added to the image of the YouTube comment with their own experience:

b.) This exact same thing happened to me at a movie theatre. Complimented a guys hat and he just stared me down. We just got out of the same movie too, so there was no excuse. Has anyone run into someone wearing merch in public? Did they completely ice you?

The Reddit post was commented on six times by other users. The comments generally respond to the original post, one of the comments directly address the original poster using “you”. Three of the comments also tell their own personal experiences of encountering other “fans” of JokesandGamez “offline.” They mention being able to identify other fans when they wear JokesandGamez apparel but recognized that while some might be friendly, not every person will be willing to speak to a stranger in at any given moment. There was a sentiment that recognition of another JokesandGamez fan led some of the users to expect positive interaction from one another, with unfriendly interactions causing confusion and disappointment. The YouTube comment which this Reddit post quoted had five replies on YouTube, but only the first one was addressed to the original commenter. The first reply used a negative voice, calling the commenter a “weirdo” and saying “I would have ignored you too”. The other four generally addressed the first reply expressing disapproval that the reply was so negative to the original commenter. The other replies expressing disapproval received many more upvotes than the

negative comment, demonstrating an apparent preference by other users for social interactions that discourage negative voices.

An example of a more positive interaction can be seen in a post by one Instagram user who tagged JokesandGamez to their picture of a note with a colorful metal pin which they captioned:

(3.) Found this outside of my car today after work! What an awesome gem, great pick me up that I needed after a long weekend. Loving the @JokesandGamez fandom. :
‘One fan to another! I love your JokesandGamez decal! Please take one of my pins –[Illegible]’”

This content-consumer’s decoration on their car displaying their interest in JokesandGamez had allowed another content-consumer to identify them as a fellow participant in this “fandom” and left them a pin referencing a show made by a channel connected to JokesandGamez. This potential for recognition and expectation for a positive interaction is identified as an extension of the content-consumers’ experiences and expectations with this online community. The post also indexes a continuation of a dialogue between content-consumers. Through consuming interactions about JokesandGamez in a digital space, the gift-giver was able to identify someone in public who could participate in similar interactions and communicates this identification by leaving a gift and note. This author’s post then allows for this communication to potentially be seen by JokesandGamez content-creators and content-consumers, or “fans”, on social media.

The term “fan” generally indicates that someone admires a particular person or group for works or performances, such as a physical performance in a sport or a dramatic performance in a television show. Baym’s 2000 analysis of online soap opera fan groups show that fans forming online communities based on their object of interest is not a new phenomenon. Yet unlike with internet content-creation, the existence and interactions of the fans in these groups were usually expected to not be seen by the performers or producers of a show. The profession of an internet content-creator by nature requires proficiency in the navigation of websites and the various

social media platforms. The fans of content-creators are consuming the content on the internet, where they are encouraged by the structure of websites to at least superficially interact with the content such as by “Liking/Disliking.” They can also generally expect the content-creators to use a social media platform where messages to their fans will likely be seen. This perception of the content-creator interacting with their fans is encouraged by the way that many content-creators will address their fans during a video. In the JokesandGamez Q&A video on which the posts from Thread 2 were made, the question reading was begun with the channel member Brian looking directly at the camera and saying “Oh, hey. Your first question this week comes from ...” before he named the user and read the question aloud. This particular video had three of the channel members and one guest who all took turns discussing answers for several questions posted on a subreddit thread by users of the subreddit. Before the question reading began, the video shows the four briefly discussing the guest’s career, which gave the viewer a sense of exclusion from participation in a conversation. This changes when Brian begins with “Oh, hey” near the beginning of the video, which positions himself and the viewer of the video as having a direct interaction. The phrase suggests that he has just noticed the viewer and is greeting them with a casual “hey.” Using “your” in “Your first question this week comes from ...” indicates Brian’s perception that the questions that will be read belong to the viewer. This could refer to how the questions came from a thread of fan-submitted questions, which position them as belonging to the viewer since they would be placed in the same position as a fan of the people in the video.

This positioning is repeated every week as the phrase is used in every Q&A video. In many of the videos posted by JokesandGamez, the channel members will directly address the perceived viewers watching the video, such as by saying “Hey guys” when beginning a video.

This collective, informal greeting is typically considered to indicate a voice used for casually greeting people known to the speaker. Saying “Hey guys” in a video indexes a feeling of ease and familiarity between the channel members and the content-consumers. The constant positioning of content-consumers being an addressed group by content-creators reinforces the perception that to consume this channel’s content is to be a part of a group with an ongoing dialogue between the content-consumers and the content-creators. The perception of participating in this dialogue aligns with Bakhtin’s emphasis that dialogism is necessary for assigning meaning to utterances, (1981, 277).

The social media posts made by content-consumers also reflect the perception that they are taking part in an ongoing dialogue, with various voices being used by the participants. The Twitter posts from 1a, 1b, and 1c were each made by individuals who had the intention of the posts being seen by others. The ability for other content-consumers or even for content-creators to comment on or interact with these posts in some way perpetuates the sense of dialogism. The content of the posts may be different, but the existence of each indexes the desire for recognition. Each post also demonstrates the “voices” of fans. The voice in (1c.) was simply reaching out with logistical questions about accessing content. (1a.) was voicing intention to perform support for the channel by showing their use of channel merchandise they purchased. The voice in (1b.) expressed how the user feels appreciation for the content made by the content-creators, positioning themselves as part of a group of people who identify as “those of us who have been treading water.” (1b.) then positions themselves as a grateful recipient of JokesandGamez content, which they describe as “disgusting”, “wholesome”, and “quality”. The voice in example (3.) expressed how being a fan of JokesandGamez led to a positive if indirect interaction with another fan who physically demonstrated participation in the JokesandGamez community. The

seemingly conflicting description of JokesandGamez content as simultaneously “disgusting” and “wholesome” indicates how the individual recognizes the crudeness of the content, but perceives it as a positive aspect of the channel.

“Appreciation” posts similar to (1b.) index certain positions and perspectives of JokesandGamez content, which other consumers of this content can recognize as applicable to themselves and other potential participants of this particular online community. Other content-consumers will be able to recognize what the use of these voices index about the participant’s positioning around JokesandGamez. The phrase “treading water” indicates that the person feels that they are experiencing some difficulty in their life, but the “quality” content produced by JokesandGamez helps them to occasionally “detach” from experiencing this difficulty. The posts “tag” the JokesandGamez name and also make use of the evaluative indexicals of using the voice of a fan through appreciation posts, displays of having purchased channel merchandise, or even simply asking questions about mechanics that index the desire to consume content. The shared knowledge that anyone, but most likely other consumers of JokesandGamez content, would see their posts suggests that the language used in the posts were specifically to be understood by these other content-consumers. The use of “wholesome” and “disgusting” together in example (1c.) when describing JokesandGamez is an additional evaluative indexical in this utterance. Through these evaluative indexicals, the author of the post positions themselves as part of a group that will understand and approve of the reasoning behind their description.

The social interactions over social media connected to JokesandGamez content relate to Agha’s concept of the use of registers in speech. Agha builds on Bakhtin’s concept of voicing to argue that a register is a model of language use which social actors use to identify certain social attributes of participants (2005, 39). Agha also refers to a register’s “social domain” consisting of

a group of people who are able to recognize these persona/attributes which would include participants in the JokesandGamez community (2005, 40). Through various forms of online communication, individuals who identify themselves as part of the JokesandGamez community can perceive of such a model and utilize it when interacting with each other. Agha argues that a register has social indexicals which index certain recognized personae, and social formations that require a social domain, “a group of persons capable of recognizing figures performable through use” (2005, 39-40). Content-consumers can recognize one another through social interaction in digital “community” spaces for specific content-creators, and do so by recognizing indexicals markers related to consumption of and certain positioning towards these content-creators.

Differentiation of an Emerging Register

Above I mentioned that there is an apparent preference for certain types of voices among social interactions between content-consumers. The examples in Thread 1 and 2, as well as in comments (2a), (2b), and (3.) suggest that positive, more friendly voices are expected for social interactions between participants. When Commenter A from Thread 1 refers to how “the community is really damn supportive” among the “supportive” utterances of other commenters, it indicates anticipated characteristics of the speech used in this online community. Agha’s definition of registers as “models of language” for individuals to recognize (2005, 38), can be applied to how the commenters ascribe such characteristics to all social actors participating in this particular online community. The very rules of the subreddit identify a register that is not allowed on the site, what they call “shitposting.” The recognition of such a specific “model of language” across social platforms identified with the JokesandGamez community aligns with Agha’s definition of enregisterment as the recognition of distinct forms of speech (2005, 38).

The participants of the various JokesandGamez related sites often exchange humorous social interactions, reflecting a belief in shared knowledge and shared perception of the channel. Someone who is unfamiliar with the JokesandGamez channel will not be able to understand the references made in comments on videos or social media posts. Posts on the JokesandGamez subreddit will frequently reference JokesandGamez content, while the comments will continue this referencing, often by quoting lines from JokesandGamez videos that the content-consumer perceives as relating to the post in some way. “Appreciation posts” are not uncommon throughout the JokesandGamez subreddit, which communicate sentiments similar to those expressed by the original post in Thread 2 and the post in 1b. For example, a post entitled “Yet another post about JokesandGamez helping someone” by one user described JokesandGamez content as helpful to them during a stressful time of unemployment:

(4.) “You folks at JokesandGamez were my go to for getting a laugh and staying calm during this time. You really helped me stay sane. I can’t express how thankful I am”

This post had three comments on it, two of which were users who described similar feelings and experiences. Other posts on the subreddit directly addressed other content-consumers. In another post entitled “Just discovered JokesandGamez, any recommendations?”, the user described having recently “discovered” JokesandGamez which has become one of their favorite YouTube channels. This post was commented on 67 times. One of the comments was from the account of one of the channel members, which led to the small chain of replies in Thread 4.

(5.) “BUT, there are sooo many videos to catch up on (which is amazing), so I wondered if y'all got any recommendations or personal favourites?”

Thread 4:

Level 1

Channel Member: Welcome

Level 2

Original Poster: :O Thanks!

Level 3

A: Oh you poor soul. All it took was a welcome from her. Now you're stuck here forever like the rest of us

The rest of the comments all post titles of JokesandGamez videos the users consider especially good to watch. This post demonstrates how content-creators can and will directly interact with content-consumers by replying to posts or comments. The author of the post then replied by expressing surprise through the use of an emoji before thanking the channel member. The Level 3 reply indicates how this interaction has permanently “stuck” the “poor” original poster with the “rest of us”. This commenter again demonstrates a self-positioning by content-consumers who perceive themselves as a somewhat hapless group who are devoted to receiving content. The response to the channel member’s comment indicates an eagerness to receive a direct social interaction from the content-creators. This exchange among the participants also further perpetuates the perception of an ongoing dialogue both among the content-consumers themselves and between the content-creators and the content-consumers.

Other posts on the subreddit included images of “fan art,” brief clips of JokesandGamez content with the user’s opinion attached, “appreciation posts,” meme/fanart post referencing a specific joke, and posts speaking more directly to “community” that might either ask questions or make comments. These posts and the responses become part of the register recognized by participants. Part of the register is to comment using quotes from JokesandGamez content, which act as indexical markers of their position as content-consumers and fans of JokesandGamez. The quotes use the voices of the content-creators as a way for content-consumers to have positive interactions with each other within this particular online community through reference, indexing recognition of a register associated with it. Some posts on the subreddit may also make references which originate from the content-consumers themselves.

Fan art often references things that channel members have said or games they have played in their content. Alternatively, the fan art will reference a shared belief or agreed upon sentiment of the content-consumers. One piece of fan art posted on the subreddit mimicked the style of posters advertising the then upcoming movie “Avengers: Endgame”. The original posters showed dramatic close-up shots of characters from the film franchise, some of whom died in the previous film, with the phrase “Avenge the Fallen” displayed across the top of the image. The fan art used the same format but replaced a film character with a close-up of a photoshopped image of one of the content-creators from a video. The post entitled “Did it his way” received over 3,800 upvotes and 37 comments. Many of the comments are simply quotes referencing the video that the photoshopped image is from, others express opinions on the piece or participate in perpetuating the perspectives of this particular character. Participation in this digital interaction requires specific knowledge both of the specific film franchise, and of JokesandGamez content. The photoshopped image and the title both refer to a specific JokesandGamez video in which one channel member, while playing a video game, made jokes about his character’s experiences in the game. Understanding the meanings and references made both in the original post and in the comments requires the participant to have seen the specific video. For example, one brief thread reads:

Thread 5:

level 1

A: I really hope his family gets all those royalties

level 2

B: Man... I have some bad news for you.

Commenter A in this thread anticipates that anyone who reads their comment will have seen the video and will understand that their comment as a reference to how the character in the video supposedly realized that he was not going to receive royalties from singing covers of songs and left his family in debt. Commenter B’s reply not only understands the reference, but builds on

Commenter A's facetious comment by claiming to have "bad news" regarding Commenter A's "assumption". The two commenters perform roles that express enthusiasm for the character, not just the channel member. Commenter A seemingly expresses concern about the character's "family" receiving "royalties," while Commenter B responds using the familiar term of address, "man," before claiming to have bad news regarding Commenter A's concern. This interaction demonstrates a social exchange that can only be understood by participants of this "community." Even the title of the post, "Did it his way", is a reference to how the character sang the phrase "I did it my way" in the original video. The user who originally posted the image expected it to be seen and understood only by other participants in their "community" who would have seen the video and would understand all of the references. The references, quotes, and playful use of certain voices and roles are typical on such posts. Participation requires understanding what is being communicated. Being able to playfully interact becomes another standard part of social interaction within this particular community. The frequency of such posts and their high rate of interaction indicate high regard for them among the community participants. The posts become a space where enregisterment occurs as participants can playfully use voice types and roles they anticipate will be part of a humorous dialogue among each other (Agha, 39).

Those who participate in this community will often go further with expressing how they perceive themselves as differentiated from others. Another piece of "fan art" entitled "He returns in our hour of need" equated an image of Jesus Christ to a specific video series from JokesandGamez. A different character in the same image was labelled "normal people judging me". The comments on this piece of fan art are mostly praise directed towards the video series the piece references. When the comments do refer to the piece, they usually build on the identification of various people and groups of people who receive the referenced video series as

something which they need or regard as a savior like Jesus Christ. The distinction of “normal people” who “judge” the creator of this piece illustrates the perception of differentiation between people who consume JokesandGamez content, and “normal people” who do not. It also reflects a perception that it is not “normal” to consume JokesandGamez content. When participants in the JokesandGamez community distinguish themselves from others, it helps to consider Irvine’s 2006 view that what a community considers to be its boundaries help better identify how they differentiate their community from other groups (696). How JokesandGamez participants distinguish their community demonstrates how they perceive themselves as a group.

There is further differentiation not only from “normal” people or followers of other content-creators, but even within the JokesandGamez online spaces. Posts on the JokesandGamez subreddit will make references to “JGLIVE”, a site related to the channel which constantly plays, or “streams”, a catalog of JokesandGamez videos. The posts made by users of the subreddit express the perception of differentiation between content-consumers who frequent the subreddit, and the content-consumers who communicate over the JGLIVE chat. For example, one member made a subreddit post entitled “JGLIVE chat is a poor reflection on the JG fanbase”. The post described the participants in the “chat” function of JG LIVE as “full of transphobia and homophobia”, which was very upsetting to author. The author went on to write that they “love the stream, it was an amazing idea, but the chat has ruined it for me lately”. It had over 149 upvotes and had been commented on 78 times. One of the JokesandGamez channel members commented on the post stating:

(6.) This is unacceptable and I will pass word on to the mods that this and any discriminatory behavior should be enforced against. I do know that what mods we have can't be available for the 24 hours a day, 7 days a week of JGLIVE, so I would encourage others to always be the positivity you want to see in this community.

The comments from other users positioned themselves as aligned with the author of the original post against the discriminatory commenters in the JGLIVE chat, with some comments expressing concern over the content of the JGLIVE chat and the need for more moderators. The comment by the JokesandGamez channel member received a lot of interaction, gaining 436 upvotes and a reply from the original poster thanking the channel member. This comment was taken as having a more important position over other comments, since was made by one of the content-creators.

Another post entitled “I feel like this is a more accurate representation of the JGLIVE vs. subreddit ‘conflict’” depicted an image of two men having a brief exchange, one was labelled “JGLIVE Chat” while the other was labelled “Subreddit”.

- (7.) JGLIVE Chat: I feel bad for you.
Subreddit: I don’t think about you at all.

This post had been upvoted over three thousand times with 151 comments. The most upvoted comment on the post received a reply from the author of the original post.

Thread 6

Level 1

A: I had no idea there was any sort of conflict. What's it about?

Level 2

B: Not really a conflict. There are dicks in the JGLIVE chat and it's kinda clique-y, I think they also hate us apparently. IDK

This interaction illustrates how the author of the post differentiates between the rude participants of the JGLIVE chat and the participants of the subreddit who would presumably not participate in such undesirable social interactions. The author’s description of JGLIVE chat participants as “clique-y” indicates the perception that those participants will be deliberately unwelcoming to any new chat participants. The author’s statement “they also hate us” further positions JGLIVE chat participants as “they” while including Commenter A as part of an “us.” This aligns with their portrayal of the JGLIVE participants and the subreddit participants as separate entities with

JGLIVE participants expressing pity for the subreddit participants who do not even spend time thinking about “them”. The large number of upvotes the original post received indicate a large number of individuals were able to recognize and appreciate what was being communicated by this particular text.

Another post titled “Decided to check out the JGLIVE chat...” was simply an image of a screenshot of the JGLIVE chat. The post was tagged as “Not Safe for Work”.

Thread 7

X: is it possible to fuck a snake?

Y: not really

...

X: what about a hamster?

Y: I don't recommend that

X: im a hardcore furry

X: i like vore

Y: Why are you considering bestiality?

MOD: Okay time to tone it down.

In this post's example of the JGLIVE chat, commenter X continued to make escalating graphic comments about sexual contact with animals until a moderator commented to stop this topic from being further discussed. The comments on the subreddit post of this image again generally position themselves as separate from the participants of the JGLIVE chat and disapprove of commenter X's comments. Some called it “Weird shit,” while others expressed distaste for how such graphic comments appear in the JGLIVE chat so frequently.

These subreddit posts demonstrate the perception of differentiation between JokesandGamez content-consumers who communicate using the subreddit and the content-consumers who interact with each other over the JGLIVE chat. They also demonstrate how participants identify indexical markers perceived to indicate undesirable enregistered voices. Participants of the subreddit perceived participants of the JGLIVE chat as “clique-y” and poorly moderated, which allowed for the voicing of intolerant, discriminatory, and overly graphic

speech forms to occur. Such voices are perceived by other content-consumers and the JokesandGamez content-creators as part of undesirable registers outside of the JokesandGamez community. Content-creators even appear to personally address concerns about such unwelcome language use, their voices are perceived as having more authority in the situation. They instead encourage a register consisting of “positivity”, friendliness, and appropriately humorous speech forms.

Conclusion

In some ways the rise of popular Internet content-creators can be seen merely as a new form of consuming entertainment. However, the use of social media by both content-creators and content-consumers has resulted in new forms of social experiences.

Anderson’s (1983) version of an imagined community forms a basis for how individuals who participate in the consumption of the same media may perceive themselves and each other. Internet websites then often encourage the perception of site users as participating in a “community” through the frequent use of the word with some sites even using established guidelines. Using linguistic analysis of the social interactions and discourse among the participants of one such “community” revealed the enregistered voices and indexical markers used to position the participants. It also displayed how the content-consumers require a certain amount of knowledge about the content-creators to participate in these digital spaces. Within these spaces, they perceive themselves as a potential part of an ongoing dialogue that exists both among the content-consumers, and between the content-creators and content-consumers.

Content-creators are not static, and content-creators will always have different ways of interacting with and cultivating content-consumers . The members of the JokesandGamez channel, the content they create, and those who identify themselves as part of the community

will change over time for various reasons. The registers that are associated with them will also change, but during this analysis it appeared to be one that contained friendly, often humorous voices that wanted to have positive interactions with each other and participate in the ongoing dialogue across various websites and social media platforms. There is a consciously distinguished sense of being part of a group that requires a certain amount of knowledge about the content-creators, as well as the utterances and social performances that the members of the group consider desirable interactions.

This is a new type of social experience but it is one that can have a significant effect on participants who perceive themselves as part of a community. As digital spaces and communication become more engrained in our culture and everyday practices, it is important to be able to understand and respect the experiences that come with them. The potential for in-person interaction and deliberate group socializing can easily grow from such groups. The results of which could be further studied. It is clear, however, that online communities and their content-creators will continue to be a part of the online experience in this digital age.

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