CONFLICT TALK IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

A comparative study of the Something Awful and 4chan web-forums

Master's Thesis

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Tiivistelmä – Abstract

Tämän tutkielman tarkoituksena oli selvittää niitä rakenteita ja sisältöjä jotka modifoivat konflikti-käyttäytymistä Internet-yhteisöissä. Tutkimus toteutettiin vertailemalla kahta eri yhteisöä, *Something Awful* ja *4chan* keskustelufoorumeita, ja selvittämällä minkälaisia konfliktipuheen metodeja yhteisöissä käytettiin, oliko metodeissa eroja yhteisöjen välillä ja mitkä tekijät vaikuttivat kyseisten metodien valintaan.

Tutkimuksen tavoitteena oli osoittaa tarve asiantuntemukselle niin tutkijoiden kuin tavallisten käyttäjien osalta, mitä tulee kommunikaation eri verkkoympäristöissä. Tutkijoiden kohdalla korostettiin myös tarkkuutta materiaalin analysoimisessa ja keräämisessä kyseisistä ympäristöistä, koska tutkimuksen mukaan riittämätön tieto tässä suhteessa voi vaarantaa tutkimuksen luonteen. Tutkimuksessa suositellaan myös asiantuntemuksen hankkimista myös Internet-yhteisöistä yleisesti, sillä tutkijan yleisen ymmärryksen puutteen paljastumisen katsottiin voivan vaikuttaa tutkimuskohteisiin ja heiltä kerättävään aineistoon. Tiedon hankkimisen koskien eri Internet-yhteisöjä katsottiin olevan tärkeää myös tavallisile käyttäjille, sillä näin kyetään välttämään konflikteja jokapäiväisessä online kommunikaatiossa. Mikäli tälläinen tilanne kuitenkin syntyy, kokemuksen ja tiedon ei yhteisöistä katsottiin rajoittavan mahdollisia vahinkoja henkilön online-persoonalle.

Tutkimus paljasti, että vaikka analyysin kohteena olisivat verkkoyhteisöt, jotka jakavat saman yleisön ja samat edellytykset onnistuneelle kommunikaatiolle, on konfliktipuheen käyttö yhteisöissä tästä huolimatta hyvin erityyppistä. Tutkimuksen tulokset myös viittaavat siihen, että monipuolisen tietomäärän omaaminen ja se kuinka hyvä sopeutumiskyky voivat auttaa yhteisöön integroitumista, vaikka kyseisen yhteisön normit kommunikaatiolle poikkeaisivatkin valtavirrasta.

Säilytyspaikka – Depository Kielten laitos

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1. INTRODUCTION

1.1 Why study conflict talk

The purpose of this study is to compare conflict talk usage in two different online communities in order to find out how conflict talk shapes these communities and is in turn shaped by the established communication patterns and rules of those communities. The study will present examples of several features of online conflict talk as well as examine the use of these features in connection to such issues as anonymity, moderation and group immersion.

In social interactions it is inevitable that sometimes our opinions will differ from the opinions of the other people when preforming acts of communication. When this is the case, a conflict talk situation may occur. Conflict is defined by the Oxford English Dictionary (30.7.2012) as

> *Conflict,* a serious disagreement or argument, typically a protracted one

Thus conflict talk can be defined as speech action involving a disagreement. Conflict talk is a type of dialogue that happens everywhere where people interact with each other, even though we've often been conditioned to think of it simply in terms of face to face (FtF) communication. One communication environment that has increasingly gained attention in the mainstream media and news is the Internet. People are more and more prepared to take advantage of new avenues of communication, which in turn gives fuel to the debate on what exactly is the position of the Internet in modern communication. Many are willing to offer their their opinion concerning "Internet" as a brief, end-all definition, without actually attempting to understand that the Internet is, in fact, not one uniform environment, but, instead, it would be more appropriately defined as a network of different communication environments.

When speaking of the Internet, it is important to understand this multiplicity, so as to be able to take advantage of the benefits of online communication while avoiding any possible pit-traps online environments can pose for a newcomer. This is why studying conflict talk in online communities can potentially provide

important insight into not only the academical analysis of online behavior, but also help casual users of the Internet gain practical skills and knowledge essential for comfortable and safe online communication.

Concerning safety, we are not simply talking about the recent phenomenon of identity theft or of the dangers of an outsider gaining access to our private information. For example, Mäkinen (2006) argues that online environments provide opportunities for such behavior and actions that would be frowned upon in everyday social interactions. The author of the web-comic *Penny Arcade* (2004) summarizes a similar opinion rather less elegantly, but more succinctly by calling this phenomenon "John Gabriel's Greater Internet Fuckwad Theory."

Normal person + anonymity + audience = Total Fuckwad

(Penny Arcade 2004)

What both of these opinions indicate with their take on the nature of the Internet is that, for reasons currently under debate, there seems to be an aspect of online communication which appears to increase conflict seeking behavior.

This type of aggressive behavior online, while it may come as a surprise to new Internet users, is something that many people have remarked as one of the defining features that differentiates FtF communication from computer mediated communication (CMC). However, it is my hypothesis that this perceived difference is not, in fact, as simply explained as by moving the communication situation from the real world to an online environment. Therefore, there is need for information concerning conflict talk in different online environments, if we are to gain more information onto this phenomenon. This information can also help us understand the practical aspects of Internet usage, so that we are better able to conduct ourselves appropriately in different conflict situations when participating in online discussions.

In this study, I will examine conflict talk in two different online environments. By doing this I hope to provide an example of how computer mediated conflict talk is constructed differently in different online communities, even if they share the

same type of audience and discuss a similar topic. This study will be a compare and contrast type of examination of the structural and conversational properties of conflict talk as presented in the Something Awful (SA) and 4chan communities, hopefully providing an unbiased look on the features of conflict talk in each community while also comparing the results with previous studies.

1.2. Ethics in studying computer mediated communication

Studying conflict talk in online communities is a fairly new area of study, which is why there are some difficulties when trying to create appropriate standards for research. The lack of established research tools is one difficulty researchers must face, but there are also many ethical issues one must take into consideration when collecting data from online sources. The *Association of Internet Researchers* (AOIR), which consists of an active community of researchers from different disciplines of study, have collected their own take on ethical issues in a guide to for those attempting to conduct studies in CMC and online environments. This guide available for download from their site in PDF format and can be considered useful reading material for anyone attempting to do research on the topic of online communication. Advocating such things as ethical pluralism, cross-cultural awareness and flexibility, the guide aims to provide information that can be useful for various different branches of research, such as social psychology or linguistics. The basic guidelines for computer mediated communication AOIR states as follows.

- Consideration for venue/environment and informed consent of the subject of the study concerning the use of the material
- Who are the subjects posters / authors / creators of the material and/or inter/actions under study?
- What are the initial ethical expectations/assumptions of the authors/subjects being studied?
- What ethically significant risks does the research entail for the subject(s)?

The AOIR guide also emphasizes the importance of considering the benefits gained form research against compromising subjects' rights. It also states that it is

quite possible that different researchers will form differing opinions concerning what can be considered appropriate handling of the material. For the purposes of this study, I have considered these questions and can with relative confidence state that I evaluate the risks concerning the privacy of my subjects to be very low for three distinct reasons.

1) The communities that provided the data for my study are public and thus viewable to almost anyone with an Internet access. All the speakers in these communities are acting within the knowledge that everything they say may be read by a considerably large audience.

2) All the speakers are protected by the very least by a level of anonymity provided by an alias, and in the case of 4chan complete anonymity is established by the technical workings of the community.

3) My study is not focused on any single message or person, but instead my aim is to provide an overall look on the features of the conversation in each community. Thus no one poster will be singled out as the target of my study.

While I believe these measures to be enough to protect the privacy of my subjects, I have also decided not to portray the aliases of the posters as presented in the Something Awful conversation, and shall be referring to specific posts simply by the number they appear in the linear order. Should the need to demonstrated the position of an alias in a conversation rise, I will simply use the word *Nickname* to indicate the use of such alias when appropriate. Due to the time limits of my study and the fact that it would have been almost impossible to inform all the participants of the conversations of my intent, I was unfortunately unable to request informed consent in order to use the data in my study. However, as the data in question was gathered from public information made available by the subjects themselves, I see no ethical reason to refrain from using it.

All the material for this study was collected from the 4chan website in 21st of November 2011 and from the Something Awful forums on 7th of November 2011. The analysis took place in the course of Spring and Summer of 2012. Because of the rapid exchange of topics in the 4chan community the thread (for definition of *thread*, see page 17) analyzed in this study no-longer exists online, but the data

have been archived by this researcher for the purposes of this study. The SA thread is still online, but can be viewed only by those with an archive level account on the SA forums.[1] However, both threads were open and available to the general public during the time the data for this study was collected. This data is only maintained for research purposes and is not shared in any public network or service, not is it currently accessible to anyone but the author of this study. This is to provide my subjects with the maximum amount of privacy possible in the limitations of the purpose of the study.

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1 http://forums.somethingawful.com/showthread.php?

threadid=3442982&userid=0&perpage=40&pagenumber=1

2. PREVIOUS STUDIES ON CONFLICT TALK AND COMPUTER MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

2.1 A fractured field of study

Conflict talk has been, until fairly recently, a surprisingly neglected area of discourse research (Arpo 2005). Even less work has been done in researching conflict talk in online environments such as blogs, online communities (including the subtypes know as *forums* and *boards*) or chats. This is perhaps surprising, as it is clear that online activities take over an increasing amount of people's time in many industrialized countries. In fact, computer mediated communication has become so common that the line between virtual, or online, lives and "real" lives has become increasingly more blurred. In some extreme cases, there has been talk of social isolation, where a person separates themselves as much as possible from the material world in order to focus on his/her online life.

There are many reasons why people are more and more online oriented these days, but one of the influencing factors to cause this is simply because online services have become much more affordable and accessible, while also becoming more user friendly. In order to access online content, a person no longer needs to be an expert in information technology, since the whole process of connecting to the Internet has been so far automatized as to make even computer illiterate people comfortable with simple aspects of online usage, such as the use of the World Wide Web (WWW), which many people today associate as synonymous with the Internet. This is why such a large part of casual online communication is conducted in various WWW environments. For example, blogs, discussion forums and fan-pages are just a few types of WWW environments that encourage reader participation and input.

However, this technological progress has also made people more vulnerable and unprepared for social interactions on the Internet. With the technical challenges removed, experienced users now interact with new users (also known as *noobs, newfags* or *newbies)* in many online communities, which can sometimes result in conflicts stemming from differences in experiences and expectations concerning online communication. An experienced member of an online community

(sometimes known as an *oldfag*) may be expecting that other speakers behave according to the implicit norms and customs of a community, while the newcomer may not understand why their behavior is eliciting criticism and derision. This is one situation in which conflict talk is born, and one that could be easily avoided with previous knowledge of customs of communication in specific communities.

Even if a person is an experienced user of online services they are still likely to encounter situations where conflict talk may emerge. This is simply because of the overwhelming amount of technology most people in countries, such as Finland, have to deal with every day just to be able to live their regular lives. In workplaces virtual conferences are held through computers, while instant messenger programs such as *Windows Messenger* or *Skype* make it possible for people to keep in contact with friends and relatives over long distances. These beneficial effects of technology are widely accepted as a matter of course, while the more negative aspects of continuous online presence can sometimes come as a surprise. There are several examples of socially unacceptable behavior, such as bullying or or stalking, which have also benefited from the ease of online accessibility, so much so, in fact, that online bullying has become an issue often discussed even in the mainstream media. There are also several new types of conflict seeking behavior, such as trolling or flaming which are specially build around online communication.

Considering the obvious importance of studying conflict talk in CMC situations, it is perhaps surprising to notice that as of yet this field of study remains fairly fractured and without universally accepted parameters that could form the core of the research. One of the problems is that online communication has many distinct features that do not occur in face-to-face (FtF) communication, such as the use of intertextuality in the form of *linking,* i.e. using not only pragmatic connectors to other produced texts, but also directly referring to those text by providing an access to them, usually in the form of a *hyperlink*. There are also features of FtF communication that CMC lacks, such as tone of voice and eye-contact. Another issue that makes establishing such frameworks of research difficult is the previously stated variability of online environments. Current researchers such as Leung (2002: 15) have pointed out that different types of data concerning conflict

talk will produce different results, unlike the generalizations sometimes made in popular media would have us believe.

Concerning that conducting studies in online environments is likely to produce several different types of data, it is difficult to create a framework that would provide reliable results in all situations. For example, Leung (2002: 9) proposes that earlier studies done in conflict resolution were influenced by the fact that the data used in them was collected in controlled laboratory environments, which would mean that the results of those studies would not apply to similar studies conducted in naturally occurring online environments. While conducting research in controlled environments makes it easier for the researcher to obtain the type of data they need, it can also provide a distorted or one-sided view of a typical online communication act.

The reason why artificially created CMC environments are not necessarily suited for studying naturally occurring online communication is partly because there is a sense of purpose in controlled experiments which natural online communication lacks, but also because these controlled subject groups do not provide a realistic look on the actual users of online environments. Some studies, such as Strijbos et al. (2006) and Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012), drew their subjects exclusively from students and the study of Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012) also excluded people who did not have eye-contact with the preliminary interviewer from the study. The basis on this exclusion was to eliminate participant that "might have difficulties communicating under the experimental conditions", but by doing this the researchers compromised the usefulness of their study, in that it remains questionable whether or not their results can be applied to other situations of CMC.

It is considering these issues that I decided to conduct my study on online communities. My goal is to construct an image of the workings of two different online communities, *Something Awful forums* (SA) and *4chan image-boards* (4chan), by doing a comparative analysis on the features of conflict talk as applied by members of each community. I also hope to provide potential researchers with the understanding that in order to properly study online communities with

established behavioral patterns it is necessary for them to gain in-depth knowledge of the said communities in order to properly collect and interpret their data. These communities were selected because I believe these two communities demonstrate well the need for previous knowledge on how to conduct oneself in different online environments, as in the case of both of these communities behaving in a certain way will instantly either alienate a newcomer or recommend him/her to the community.

In order to provide a proper context for my study, I have collected several earlier studies and theories on conflict talk, conversation analysis and computer mediated communication. In the following chapters I shall be providing a brief discussion concerning those studies and theories that are important for the purposes of my study. These will hopefully help to emphasize the need for my study in order to fill a gap in current research, as well as provide important background information concerning the current state of conflict talk analysis in CMC.

2.2 Content analysis and the unit of analysis

Content analysis is defined by Christopherson (2007) as having the aim of revealing information that is not immediately discernible from a transcript. At least two common types of content analysis are recognized. There are *qualitative methods*, which focus on collecting detailed information from a relatively small sample of data, and *quantitative methods* which focus on collecting large amounts of data in order to recognize general patterns and form an overall picture of a subject. In this study I applied aspects of the quantitative research model, since I will be dealing with large amounts of data which are analyzed as a collective in order to find out overall features of this data. However, when applying this approach there are few issues which must be addressed before attempting to collect data.

Since accuracy is often stated as the advantage of quantitative analysis when compared to qualitative analysis, it requires special attention concerning when it comes to the reliability of the results of such analysis. Lack of quality control concerning the methods and while analyzing the data may result in dubious

conclusions (Strijbos et al. 2006: 30). It is important that the method used in the study is clearly explained, but it is even more important for the researcher to ensure that there remains a consistency in this method. This problem can be addressed by the researcher constantly evaluating his/her method and data as s/he makes progress in the study. This type of self-editing is also known as *intra-rater reliability* (De Wever et al. 2006: 9). Other ways of ensuring that the standards of reliability are upheld are *inter-rater feedback* (feedback among two or more researchers) and *replicability* of the study. (De Wever et al. ibid). In this study I have done my best to maintain intra-rater reliability by means of continuous self-editing. However, unfortunately circumstances have limited my access to inter-rater feedback. I have also done my best to document my method so as to provide for replicability, but again due time constraints the reliability of this study is as of yet untested.

Concerning intra-rater reliability, one question that needs to be addressed when studying CMC is the definition of unit of analysis (Strijbos et al. 2006: 31, De Wever at al. 2006: 9). Rourke et al. (1999: 8-9) have suggested that there are at least five different definitions that have been used to define the concept unit of meaning. In order of size from largest to smallest the units that Rourke et al. name are: message (for example, an e-mail or a forum post), paragraph, 'unit of meaning' (aka thematic unit), sentence (aka syntactical unit), and illocution. Of these, the most frequently used are message, thematic unit and sentence (Strijbos et al 2006). In my study I decided to focus on the message (in my case, a single *forum post*) as a unit of analysis. This is because I believe this best fits my intention of comparing overall features and structures of the two communities. I also feel that to separate meanings into smaller units than the message will not allow me to draw reliable conclusions about naturally occurring online communication, as each forum post is intended to mark equal to one turn of speech in the conversation. Dividing a post into smaller units of meaning would be to strip these meanings of their proper context.

The question of context is something that I consider important for the study of conflict talk in CMC. From previous observations made concerning various online communities, I have noticed that the same person can present an entirely different

picture of themselves based on their environment. I have previously alluded to my opinion that when conducting content analysis, it is important that the researcher is able to understand subtle workings of the online environment s/he is studying. In my case I believe I am qualified to conduct research on my topic of choice, as I already posses extensive experience concerning different types of online communication, communities and subcultures. In addition, I have personal experience in observing some of the less desirable aspects of online communication, such as online bullying and *trolling* (see chapter 2.4.5). Combined with a reasonable knowledge of the mechanical workings of online technology and an active reading concerning the Internet, I believe I posses enough information to provide a reasonably educated impression on the subject of my study.

2.3 Conflict talk research

Aside from content analysis, another area of research that is relevant to my study is the field of conflict talk research. Conflict talk analysis, in it's most basic form, concentrates on the initiation, continuation and resolution of arguments (Ikeda 2008: 289). This can mean anything from casual negotiation situation, where each party is attempting to reach an appropriate compromise, to outright threatening and aggressive verbal competition for dominance. Alternatively, Ikeda (ibid) defines conflict as "making claims, disagreeing with claims, and countering disagreements." Therefore, conflict, or an argument, is something that emerges when two or more participants in a conversation disagree with each other in at least three turns.

2.3.1 Applying pre-existing methods of conflict talk analysis to CMC

One issue is that it is difficult to apply models developed for FtF conflict talk analysis towards online arguments. Defining works in the field of conflict talk studies, such as Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), have their basis on FtF discourse with only a limited amount of participants. Compare this to online arguments which are often asynchronous and include multiple exchanges between multiple speakers, and it is clear that the methods applied to FtF conflict talk studies do not

address all the issues concerning CMC studies. This is why, in order to apply previous methods of study for the purposes of CMC, it is important that we examine the basics of what aspects of conflict talk can be said to be universal, as attributable to both CMC and FtF communication, and what attributes we must examine as a type of communication not comparable to previous frameworks concerning conflict talk in FtF situations.

Arguments, aka *disputes* or *disagreements* (Leung, 2002: 2), are often viewed as negative situations resulting from unsuccessful communication between at least two parties. While these words commonly have negative connotations, it is important to note that conflict talk as a concept is not necessarily always negative, or even undesirable in a conversation. Thus conflict talk analysis does not necessarily indicate analysis of aggressive behavior or verbal abuse. The positive or negative aspect of conflict talk depends on various outside factors, such as motivations, environments and expectations of the participants. A good example of a desirable situation for conflict talk would be a public debate, while an example of an undesirable conflict talk situation would be, for example, name calling in a children's argument. In the debate situation the goal of the whole conversation act is, in fact, to engage the participants in active conflict talk without the dialogue breaking certain expected barriers of behavior, while in the case of the name calling fight the purpose of the dialogue is simply to insult the other participant as much as possible.

When talking about possible positive and negative aspects of conflict talk, it is also important to consider the difference between a naturally occurring conflict (a row) and constructed conflict (a debate). This has also caused some trouble for researchers trying to define, what exactly makes an argument. For example, Rips (1998, as cited in Leung 2002: 3) makes the suggestion that disputes that only contain name calling and/or threats are not really arguments, as they do not include an exchange of views concerning an action. While this remains debatable, for the purposes of this study I have chosen to include all acts of verbal disagreement - including threats and insults - under the definition of conflict talk, as I feel it is vital to include all the messages as authentically as possible in my analysis. This is because in one of the communities included in my study, 4chan,

these types of verbal acts are such an integral part of the dialogue that not including them would provide a seriously warped set of data. However, I do not expect this to be an issue, as it appears from preliminary observation that there is a certain minimal amount of elaboration expected in forum posts concerning the topic of politics, which in turn makes speech acts containing nothing but verbal assaults relatively rare.

In fact, the type of conflict talk that occurs in online communities often appears to be a mixture of naturally occurring and constructed conflict talk. This is because while there is usually an initial element of deliberate instigation of debate, this initiation is not necessarily asking for a genuine exchange of opinions based on facts and accurate data. While each original post (OP) of a thread introduces a topic and invites conversation concerning that topic, there are usually no attempts made to control the direction of the conversation after that first initiation. The members of an online community taking part in a conversation are expected to know the rules and norms of the group and adhere to those when composing their contributions. When functioning inside the expected parameters, the disputes concerning the topic can be considered an example of constructed and desirable conflict talk. However, an unwanted conflict may occur when someone either deliberately or due ignorance breaks the expected behavioral patterns of the community. What happens when a person deviates from the rules and norms of the community depends on the type of participants which form it's user-base.

It has been previously proposed that discourse modes vary based on several intertwining factors depending on the types of people participating in the discourse (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012: 439). This links directly to the fact that reactions towards similar actions may differ greatly between communities. A newcomer acting according to the norms of one community may actually be breaking the unwritten rules of another without realizing it. There are also people who use the differences between communities to purposely provoke negative conflict talk. This can be a great obstacle for a researcher to overcome, as it can be very difficult to interpret when conflict talk arises from ignorance and when as a reaction to a deliberate provocation.

2.3.2 Constructing an argument

Whether natural or constructed, positive or negative, conflict talk has many properties which separates it from other types of communication, even when not examined in terms of CMC. For example, a generally accepted position is that an argument is an exchange of opinions larger than one single disagreement act (Leung: 2002, Muntilg and Turnbull: 1998). Structurally, argument can be divided into roughly three phases: initiating an argument, keeping an argument going and ceasing an argument (Ikeda: 2008). If thought of in terms of these three phases, then it follows that an argument naturally follows the pattern of three turn exchanges (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 226). This also reinforces the understanding that an argument is not something that one can have by oneself, as these three exchanges must be divided into a dialogue between at least two different speakers. The participants in argumentative dialogues engage in what Muntigl and Turnbull (1998: 226) call *arguing exchanges*, where Turn 1 (T1) initiates an argument, Turn 2 (T2) presents a reaction to this initiation and Turn 3 (T3) responds to the T2 reaction.

Perhaps the most important part of any argument is the *initiation* act. There are many types of initiations which can result in conflict talk. In the case of my study, the T1 initiation act is always in the form of an *original post* (OP), which is a message posted to and online community with the intention of presenting a new issue or a question up for discussion. The conversation that follows this original post is conducted in a dialogue appearing under a heading created by the original poster. This is what is known as a *thread*. The argument in the thread is maintained by other members of the community (*posters*) replying to this initiation act with T2 and T3 type reactions. A chain of exchanges is thus created, which can then separate into several *branches* leading the topic to different directions, as illustrated in figure 1. The structure of this type of expansion can be thought in terms of pairs of action-reaction sequences, although some researchers, such as Leung (2002: 6), question this definition, as conflict talk episodes do not necessarily follow a strict linear structure of constant disagreement.
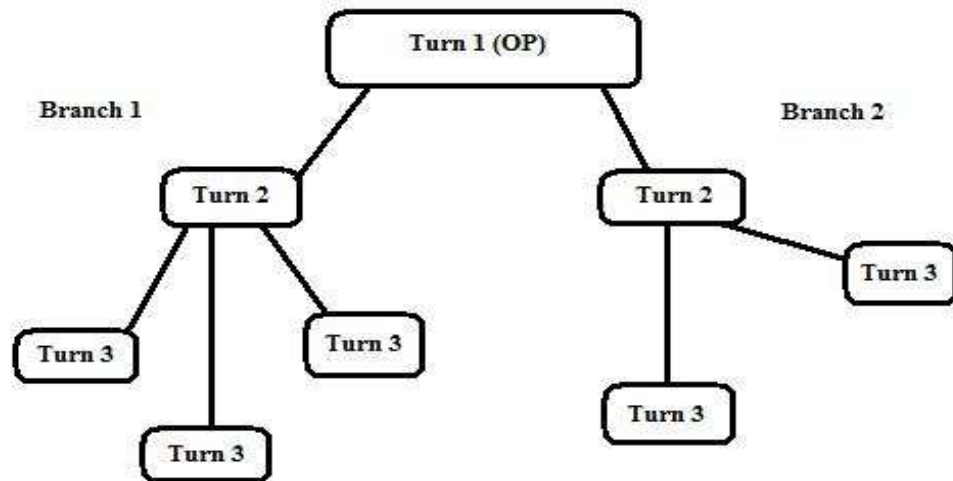
Figure 1. Branches of Conversation

This is important for the purposes of CMC analysis - especially concerning online communities - as the conversation in a thread rarely proceeds in absolutely linear manner.
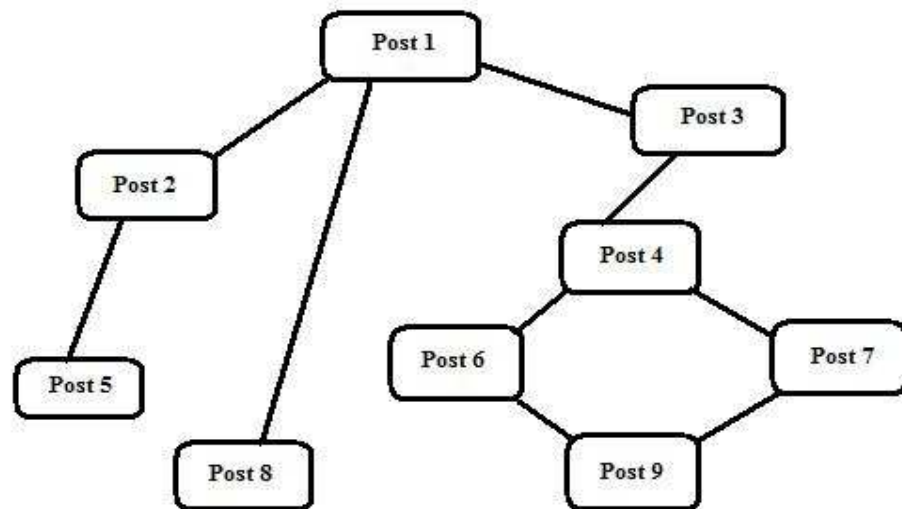
Figure 2. Alinear posting order

Since all the previous messages are constantly visible to all the speakers, it is not uncommon that action-reaction exchanges do not, in fact, follow each other, but can be separated by other messages either reacting to the same initial post, or indeed relating to different branches of conversation entirely Thus, post 1 is not necessarily followed logically by the next message in the linear posting order, as

illustrated in figure 2. From this figure it is clear to see that not all initiations are followed by an immediate reaction. Indeed, some initiative acts may receive no responses in an online conversation. This is where it becomes necessary to consider what exactly keeps an argument going.

Ikeda (2008: 293) states that there appears to be a hidden motivation on behalf of the participants in an argument is to stay in the argument. Ikeda's (ibid) describes this as "an inescapable 'trap' for the speakers", as the absence of a counterattack to a previous comment can be taken as a person's inability to support their argument further. This is also why arguments tend to branch out and why topic changes may occur without the previous topics reaching any type of conclusion, as the conversation drifts further away from the original topic while each participant refuses to appear as they have nothing more to say. For example, in both threads I examined for the purposes of this study at the end there was no consensus achieved concerning the issue raised by the OP.

This lack of resolution may be something that differentiates computer mediated conflict talk from FtF conflict talk, since in FtF communication there have been several documented studies conducted on ceasing of arguments (Ikeda 2008: 294). Perhaps one reason for this is the multiparty nature of online discussions, as the previously mentioned "trap" of Ikeda (ibid) benefits from issues such as peer pressure as well as different goals and motivations of the participants. Simply said, nobody wishes to be the first one to "give in". I have personally observed several conversations that spanning hundreds of pages without there being a cohesive understanding on the subject achieved at any point. In some cases the people enforcing the community's rules have to step in and "close" the thread (i.e. to prevent people from posting any more messages to it) as the same opinions and issues keep reappearing without any progress towards a conclusion. Another way that an online argument can end is when a thread simply "dies" when it's audience's attention is focused on something else. When this happens, a thread is sometimes saved in the forum archives, where there is a possibility of a "resurrection" if a similar topic is again brought under discussion.

Based on the previous theories on the subject, there are certain conclusion that can

be drawn when it comes to the question of why some conflict talk initiations fail while other succeed. We have already observed that some threads can go on for very large periods of time, but at the same time there are threads that never manage to initiate a proper argument and die within few posts. As a solution to this question we can examine the suggestion made by Chmiel et al. (2011: 2936) that threads are sustained by negative emotions. However, the implied suggestion that the most thriving communities are those that contain most negative discussion acts is directly contested by other researchers, such as Serfaty (2002, as cited in Chmiel et al. 2011), who questions whether a community with high levels of negative content can be classified as a community at all.

When studying conflict talk in online environments it appears that it is necessary re-evaluate some of the previous presumptions on the nature of arguments in CMC, as well as the processes that enable a successful initiation of such arguments. We may still discuss issues such as initiation, but it is also important to remember that they may not work the same way in CMC than in FtF communication. This is why in order to provide suitable background for my study, in the next chapters I have attempted to describe few of the most defining features of CMC in online communities in the hopes that examining these features more closely I will be able to provide the reader with an accurate view on how the data in my study has been affected by them.

2.3.3 Multiparty arguments in online communities

When conducting studies on online communities the concept of group is something that a researcher cannot afford not to take under consideration. One of the most obvious advantages of computer mediated conflict talk as compared to FtF communication is the ability for a conversation to hold multiple speakers without considerable loss of cohesion and ease of comprehension. The asynchronous nature of the dialogue and the fact that all the messages are usually available for all the participants to view when ever they need makes it easier for everyone to follow the conversation, even when there are multiple arguments going on simultaneously.

Concerning conflict talk in CMC in particular, Chen and Chiu (2008: 683) propose that the multiparty aspect and asynchronocity of the conversation also reduce the pressure of responding, thus also reducing the likelihood of *false agreements* (i.e. agreements that are born from group immersion and peer pressure and do not necessarily reflect the speaker's true feelings on the topic). However, this interpretation does not necessarily apply to all situations. Since their study was conducted in an environment dedicated to examining online conversations as teaching aids, the study of Chen and Chiu (2008) is not necessarily directly suitable for investigating conflict talk in naturally occurring online communities.

Depending on the amount of restrictions and rules imposed on the members of a community is something that can have a great influence on the way conflicts and controversial topics are handled in that community. It be against the goals and norms of a certain community to discuss certain topics, such as is the case with some fetish communities, which tend to be very articulate against what they define as hate speech against their lifestyle. Thus false agreements may rise when the general consensus of the group seems to be against an individual, especially if s/he is expressing a controversial opinion that might alienate his/her peers. This is one way the multiparty nature of CMC can negate the possible advantages cited by Chen and Chiu (2008).

The multiparty aspect can also affect the complexity of online conversations, as it brings in the possibility of a new actor in the form of a *collaborator*, i.e. someone who participates in an argument by supporting previous claims made by another speaker, instead of presenting their own individual argument (Ikeda 2008: 296). This addition to the two speaker template of conflict talk analysis complicates the attempts to apply some previous analytic methods, such as Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) for the purposes of analyzing online communities. The issue is further complicated by the fact that the types of collaboration can vary depending on the individual, but also by the fact that different communities have different ideas what constitutes as good collaboration.

It is perhaps surprising that some online communities can, in fact, take a fairly negative view concerning enthusiastic attempts at collaboration. There is even a

special term describing an extreme type of collaborator interfering in a heated argument. This type of person is often called a *white knight*. This term is often used derisively, as it is used to refer to collaborators who are seen as, for example, defending something that does not need to be defended, taking on a subject that does not concern them or simply being very vocal about an unpopular opinion. Thus, it is possible that a person's attempts at collaboration may be deterred by the desire not to receive negative from the other participants in a conversation, again bringing up the issue of peer pressure and group immersion in the multiparty environment.

In many of the examples provided above it has been shown that the multiparty aspect of online conversations can deter people from expressing their true opinion in CMC. It is concerning this fact that addressing the concept of *face* in conflict talk becomes relevant. Brown and Levinson (1987) introduce the concepts of *negative face*, the desire to be unhindered by others, and *positive face*, the desire to be wanted and needed by other people, which it have become key concepts in conflict studies. An argument is sometimes seen as an inherently face-threatening act, as it involves rejecting the other person's face claims (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998), even though there is some controversy over how important face actually is to conflict talk (Leung 2002: 8).

Examining face-claims can help study such issues as a person's investment in a community, motives for communication and goals for interacting with other people online. In the case of online communities, both negative and positive face-claims are relevant when trying to assess how people behave in conflict talk situations. A loss of face can mean expulsion from a community, alienation from old friends and in some extreme cases actual financial or status loss in real life. This is because in some communities the results of face loss may either invoke resentment from the other members of the community (i.e. if someone is revealed to be lying to other members of the community), or may reveal something about the individual that results in ostracization (i.e. personal values that go against common norm). While in my study I will be addressing the issue of face briefly and dealing with the multiparty aspect of communities, I have decided not to include collaboration in my research. This is partly because it did not fit within the

parameters of my study, but also because the preliminary reading of the material revealed no immediately obvious relevance of collaborative actions in the data.

2.3.4 Personality and motivations in CMC

The possibility of a loss of face in online communities seems to reinforce the idea that while many communities may revolve around people sharing the same interests and ideals, there exists great variety on behalf of the members on a personal level when it comes to motives for associating with a community. While a community may share a common purpose and generally accepted rules of behavior, this does not mean that all the members are identical in their behavior. Just like in FtF communication, people participating in CMC can have different goals and ideas on the best way to present their opinions. The personality of the speaker and his/her sense of commitment to the community are variables that a researcher should always try to remember when trying to make generalizations about a certain group.

One of the most popular ways to conduct analysis on the effects of different personality types in group communication situations is Eysenck's (1947, 1997) studies on *personality dimensions*. Eysenck's system is based on archetypes of personality, which are stated as follows.

1)   *Neuroticism-Stability.* This relates to traits such as shyness, feelings of guilt, moodiness and being tense.
2)   *Introversion-Extroversion*. This is associated with personalities that enjoy human interaction, talkativeness, assertiveness and risk-taking.
3)   *Socialization-Psychoticism*. This deals with being solitary, being insensitive to others, aggressiveness and disregard for social conventions

Tosun and Lajunen (2010: 163) have used Eysenck's personality dimensions to examine how they relate to people expressing their *true self* (i.e. showing a different aspect of oneself online than what one does in FtF interactions) online. They found that of these three dimensions psychoticism was the only one which affected how people form new relationships online as well as online only

friendships, while extroversion was the only dimension related to maintaining long-distance relationships and using CMC to supplement regular FtF communication. Psychoticism and neuroticism were also found to be positively associated with expressing true self.

Amiel et al. (2004: 714-715) have also studied Eysenck's personality dimensions in CMC. They propose that those people more satisfied with their social lives seemed to use the Internet for instrumental purposes, while those who felt unfulfilled and neglected in FtF communication used CMC as a substitute for social interactions and to pass time. Amiel et al. (ibid) also argue that people who scored highly on the psychoticism scale usually cared less for the interpersonal/communicative uses of Internet. Neurotic personalities, on the other hand, expressed a desire for information and a need for belonging in their Internet usage. Based on their findings, Amiel et al. (2004: 721) suggest that people who rated as having psychotic tendencies used the Internet more for what could be viewed as "alternative" or "deviant" purposes, instead of using it for "fun". These individuals used more file-sharing sites, which Amiel et al. associated strongly with pirated content, such as copyrighted videos or images[2]. They also found that people who scored highly on the psychoticism scale visited sites with nudity and pornography more frequently.

It appears that there is evidence of personality types affecting the types of websites a person visits. Therefore, it is not far-fetched to assume that they might also affect how a person conducts themselves through CMC. Tosun and Lajunen (2010: 164) present the theory that

> People use the Internet for gratification of their needs which they have difficulty to gratify through other communication methods, including face-to-face interaction. People with different personality characteristics may differ in their needs which they attempt to gratify through the Internet.

The data in Tosun and Lajunen's study (2010) seems to indicate that, based on Eysenckian personality dimensions, we can find at least three types of different motives for Internet use and online behavior in general. Therefore, it can be

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2 Note that this does not include music-sharing sites, which Amiel et al. (2004) count as more "mainstream"

argued that different types of online communities appeal to different personality types, which could also indicate that the modes of communication in these communities would be the type to appeal to these personality types.

However, even though we know that an individual's personality can affect they way they conduct themselves in CMC situations, this does not necessarily meant that studying personality types in connection to online communities is easy. The fact that the nature of the Internet makes it extremely difficult to reliably asses the validity of claims made by individuals means that it is difficult to guess what motivates a specific person. Amiel et al. (2004: 721) have already suggested that people possessing properties belonging to the psychotic spectrum of the personality types are likely to behave differently online and offline. This could also suggest that there is nothing preventing this type of personality in creating several online "selfs" to best fit the purpose of different communities. Furthermore, the amount of participants in a conversation means that it is almost impossible to know the personality and goals of every person involved. Even if it would be possible to create a complete profile of each participant, all these profiles should also be examined in the light that these people might also be affected by the actions and personalities of other members of the community present in the same communication situation.

This complexity in using personality structures to analyze online communication is why I think the question of motives and goals behind Internet usage is difficult to answer when studying multiparty online environments. It is also why in my study, while I do speculate on some of the possible effects of personality types concerning communication in the SA and 4chan communities, I have refrained from drawing definite conclusions between personality types and communities. However, it is interesting to note that in common knowledge the 4chan community has for a long time been connected with the *psycho* and *creepy* types of Internet users. It would be interesting to see if it would be possible to apply Eysenck's personality dimensions to identify if there is truth in these types of presuppositions.

2.3.5 Internet knowledge quota as measured by iKnow

While personality is one important factor influencing the nature of a person's Internet usage, perhaps a more visible factor is their level of competence concerning the uses of modern technology and online environments. It is an unfortunate truth that there are discrepancies between people's knowledge on both the technical and social workings of the Internet. Like in any situation where people posses varying amount of information on a subject, it is not surprising that the people with less knowledge sometimes find themselves exploited, or in an unfavorable position. This is why there have been several attempts to measure a person's level of knowledge about different types on online tools in order to understand how this affects their behavior and interactions.

Concerning technical competence, Potosky (2007: 2761) defines Internet knowledge as

> a set of individual characteristics or qualities that develop over time and that generalize from one set of tasks or uses involving the Internet to another.

This Potosky calls an individual's Internet Knowledge, or *iKnow*, measure. Potosky (2007: 2762) proposes four hypotheses for measuring a person's iKnow level:

1) Frequency of internet use will be positively correlated with internet knowledge
2) The correlation between use of the internet (for e-mail and for information searching) and internet knowledge will be positive
3) Internet self-efficacy, internet use, and internet knowledge will be positively correlated with each other
4) There will be a positive correlation between computer experience and internet knowledge

With this system of classification Potosky elaborates on previous attempts of measuring iKnow, such as Eastin and LaRose (2000, in Potosky 2007: 2763) by not associating a person's iKnow level purely with the time they spend online, but also with what they know about the Internet and what they are able to do with the tools provided by it. This more complex system of understanding a person's level of iKnow was developed because, according to Potosky (2007: 2764), a simple measurement of time might be inadequate, since it might take a longer time for a

person with a low iKnow to find what they are looking for online.

While an appropriate view of analyzing the technical skills of people, what Potosky's iKnow measure fails to address is the social dimensions of iKnow. It has already been stated that personality is likely to affect the way people use online tools and conduct themselves in CMC. Therefore, it is not unreasonable to suggest that people also posses different levels of iKnow concerning the social aspects of CMC. People with a high level of social iKnow would likely be more adaptable and posses more knowledge about different Internet environments such as blogs, forums or chats, and would be able to adjust their behavior accordingly, while people with a low social iKnow level would be more likely to make themselves unwelcome in a new community or in a discussion.

It can, in fact, be said that the concept of social iKnow levels is something that is already present in the world of online communication, even though it may not referred to by that particular definition. This is due to the interesting tendency for online communities to evaluate each other, especially when it comes to conflict talk in other communities. Websites such as *FandomWank* and *Encyclopedia Dramatica* have amassed vast archives of material about various conflicts, and even individuals connected to those conflicts, that are seen as "infamous" or somehow noteworthy. These sites offer an interesting point of view on the type of meta-commentary that online communities sometimes engage in concerning each other. Naturally, they are not objective resources of empirical information, but can still be an interesting point of study for a person attempting to expand their social iKnow on different aspects of online communities, provided the reader is prepared to encounter fairly offensive content and has the ability to filter the knowledge gained from such unreliable sources.

For those not willing to browse through this questionable material, the position of research and objective studies are even more important when attempting to increase their social iKnow level. One suggestion for studying the social aspects of iKnow could to use Eysenckian personality dimensions to determine the communication methods and norms of a community might tell about it's members. While studying personality dimensions in online communication does not fit in

the parameters of my study, I will be speculating on some of the possible effects of personality types on CMC conflict talk in the two communities in my study.

2.4 Means of influencing conflict talk in online communities
2.4.1 Status and power relationships in online communities

The concept of social iKnow is important when considering the part of status in online disagreements. Since it has already been stated that face-claims, personality and experience can affect the way in which people conduct themselves in CMC situations, it is also important to note that in many online communities these features of conflict talk also contribute to the workings of the complex systems of status and hierarchy. In many arguments there is an element of dominance involved, which causes people to use all the means they posses in an attempt to gain a superior position in the dialogue. This is where people with greater social and technical levels of iKnow gain an advantage. While the face-claims of a person can be influenced by their personality, the validity of these claims can best be supported by people with experience concerning a communication situation in which they occur. Thus, it can be assumed that people with a higher lever of iKnow posses more *conversational strategies* which they can apply in order to gain support to their point of view.

Since CMC lacks some of the properties that can be used to empathize the speaker's opinions in FtF communication, such as tone of voice, gesturing or eye-contact, there are various conversational strategies that aim to replace and/or imitate these aspects of FtF. Some of these strategies may be universal to online communication, but many have developed in closed communities for the purposes of communicating inside a certain environment. While these strategies sometimes do spread outside their initial environment (i.e. the phenomenon of lolcatz[3] spreading from 4chan to the Internet at large), understanding what specific strategies are typical for certain communities is important when attempting to conduct research in online communities.

Communication strategies are often applied when participants in online arguments

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3   Pictures of cats with superimposed comments of vaguely humorous nature written on them, often in deliberately poor English such as the most well-known example "I can haz cheeseburger?"

vie for dominance in a conversation, i.e. engage in *power play* in order to raise their status while lowering their opponents. Regarding status in online communities, it is interesting to observe that modes of communication are affected by a perceived difference in status of the participants. Reysen et al. (2010) in their study of social presence in online fan groups found that *low status members* (LSM) and *high status members* (HSM) use different styles of communication. Reysen et al. (2010) also found that LSM used more *intimacy and social presence cues*, such as praising the group, self-disclosure and present tense verb forms. They also used less articles, shorter words and less discrepancy words. What was particularly interesting considering these results was LSM were evaluated as being more likeable by other members of a community than HSM. Reysen et al. (2010: 1316) interpret this as suggesting that LSM may use social presence cues strategically in order to ingratiate themselves to the group. They also note that previous research seems to indicate that LSM tend to conform to the groups norms (i.e. they are more susceptible to *group immersion*) when their actions are observable to other members of the community.

While the study of Reysen et al. (2010) offers some interesting insight concerning the question of status, it is my opinion that more research is needed before definitive conclusions can be drawn. This is because the Reysen et al. (ibid) study was conducted by examining the visible *post count* (i.e. a number indicating how many times a person has posted a message on this community) of the members of a certain community and assuming that the amount of posts a person makes correlates directly with their status. However, according to my personal experience, the post count is not the only indicator that should be taken into consideration when trying to determine status in online communities.

While a high post count may indeed provide a member of a community with a certain type of status, there are also indicators of status can be purchased with money or by regular contributions to the community. For example, a member of a community may be able to buy an *avatar image*[4] or *signature*[5] in some communities, while in others it may only be granted to those with a long history in

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4 A small image identifying the poster, usually appearing next to their user name
5 A short piece of text of the poster's choosing, identifying something about their character to the other members of the community. For example, a quotation or a lyric from a song.

the community. In some fan communities especially, providing content (i.e. art or music) or special inside knowledge can be the best way of gaining those types of privileges. Thus, it is possible for a person to be visually identifiable as an HSM even if they are not a prolific poster in a community.

Whatever the means of becoming a HSM, it is only natural for members of a community to aspire to reach a better position in the community hierarchy. Concerning conflict talk, being an HSM can provide some very practical advantages in an argument. For example, some HSM posses such privileges as special titles or the ability to edit, add and delete threads and posts, the later of which at least is a very real threat to their opponents in conflict talk situations. One special type of HSM that are generally acknowledged and visually present in many communities are the people who are actually responsible for the existence of the community. In the case of many online communities, the community is "owned" in a technical sense by an *administrator* (aka *admin*), who takes care of the practical and/or financial aspects of running that community. Usually this administrator then chooses a group of individuals who they deem suitable to help them with the everyday running of the community. These people are known as *moderators*, or *mods*, and they are usually the most visible part of the infrastructure behind the public access areas of an online community.

Moderators are often chosen based on the personal preferences of the administrator. This means that in different communities the amount of power a moderator holds and how s/he uses that power can vary greatly. The decisions that a moderator makes are influenced by their experience, personality, the customs of the community and actions of the other moderators. Moderators often have the right to punish those who either break the rules of the community or cause disturbance with their actions. If a community is poorly managed, or has an obvious bias concerning a certain subject (i.e. some political forums), it is possible the a moderator may use his/her authority and status to intimidate other members taking part in a conversation, or outright prevent them from expressing an opinion. While most communities have taken steps to prevent such misuses of power, it is still fairly easy to find examples of communities where moderators use intimidation tactics to influence the general opinion of the group in conflict talk

situations.

While moderators are usually a fairly visible type of HSM, it is interesting to note that a community may also have members who posses an *invisible status*. For example, in a fan forum a person might be an excellent artist who regularly uploads his/her drawings to the community. While nothing in their profile or posts necessarily indicates this person as being a HSM, other members of the group might know about this person and give them preferential treatment, such as the administration overlooking when s/he violates the rules of the community, or providing this person with direct line of communication to the moderators. They might also receive *invisible benefits*, such as other participants in an argument carefully avoiding directly insulting this person, fearing that by doing so they might experience a negative backlash from the other members of the community.

These type of benefits and their influence on the status of a person are a problem when it comes to conducting research on the effects of status in CMC, as without existing knowledge of the community they are almost impossible to notice. However, even if in-depth knowledge of a community is difficult to obtain, an observer with previous knowledge of other communities should at least posses enough information to be able to make educated assumptions about the effects of status in an online community. Even if examining status and power play is not in the scope of researcher's study, s/he can still use social iKnow to recognize possible visible and invisible levels of status.

At a first glance, it may appear that there is no way a HSM could lose in an argument against a LSM. However, it is important to remember that in many communities with the rise in status the risks associated with face-loss also increase. Previous studies have claimed that the *social costs* of face threatening acts are lower online, thus reducing the influence of status in online communities (Chen and Chiu 2008: 683). However, many of these studies have only dealt with the social costs in relation to the norms of FtF communication,while ignoring issues such as *e-fame* (i.e. fame in an online environment which may not directly translate to real-life fame) and invisible social costs of face-loss in fan communities.

In many communities, the actions of a HSM gain much more attention than those of a LSM, resulting in more visible presence and thus a certain loss of anonymity. If an LSM or an outside observer does not agree with the actions of a HSM, they may turn to other communities in order to address the issue, if they feel their opinion remains unheard in the primary community. As the Internet is constantly engaged in meta-commentary concerning itself, the status of an HSM may not only damage the HSM's own face-claims, but also lower the status of the whole community they are involved in. For example, a discussion on a gaming forum about a member of a game review site may lower the status of that whole site, resulting in less traffic and the loss of prestige and revenue.

There is another, perhaps a more dangerous, example of the social costs of face-loss in CMC; namely, the effects of an online argument affecting a person in real life. While some might instantly associate this with people realizing aggressive threats made on the Internet in real life, this is, in fact, not the real issue that warrants concern. Indeed, trying to intimidate others with the threat of actual physical violence is often seen as juvenile and the people resorting to this are sometimes derisively called *Internet Tough Guys*, with the implication that their words hold no real substance outside a limited online environment. The types of face-threatening acts are that are most effective are, in fact, much different from simple aggressive verbal abuse, and often apply more subtle ways of attempting to undermine the opposing party's face-claims in real life[6]. These types of face-threatening acts often aim not to cause physical harm to a person, but instead wish to cause embarrassment to him/her or otherwise damage his/her everyday face-claims.

A good example of this types of non-aggressive, yet effective face threatening act would be the case of Ocean Marketing and their (at the time) PR lead for the product Paul Christofoso. This company launched a product known as the Avenger Playstation3 controller, but failed when it came to keeping up their face-claims when confronted by a dissatisfied customer. A client who had placed a pre-

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6   At this point it is interesting to note that in many online communities online activities are separated from everyday activities in the physical world, which are often referred as happening IRL, aka in real life

order on the controller exchanged a series of emails with Christofoso concerning their order, during which Christofoso belittled the client and made threats about keeping their ordered items and selling them on eBay[7]. Frustrated with the uncooperative and outright rude attitude of the company representative, the client eventually added several prominent video game reviewers and bloggers to the correspondence.

While initially undaunted by this, Christofoso at the end suffered severe consequences for his ignorance of the social etiquette of the client/customer relationship, as his behavior eventually caused several popular industry people to denounce him personally, resulting in a huge publicity scandal for Ocean Marketing. In the end Christofoso even begged the people he had insulted to repair his reputation, but by that time the incident had already achieved such proportions it was impossible for anyone to contain it anymore. In this case not at any time did the customer use vocabulary indicating physical aggression towards Christofoso, but destroyed his image merely by illustrating his arrogance to other HSM of the video-gaming community.

Incidents such as this make it abundantly clear that we need to be aware of the true face-damaging potential of online face-loss. The Ocean Marketing situation as presented is also good example of how attempting to use status as a tool of dominance may turn against it's instigator. Christofoso, in this case, was clearly the more vocally aggressive party, implying that his position held more weight than that of a customer. However, as his attitude became public knowledge it was deemed as not fitting his position, and eventually his behavior caused damage to the whole company associated with him.

While the examining status is not the focal point of my study, I will be providing a brief view of visible, non-verbal indicators of status in relation to my data, so as to provide at least a cursory look on the effects of status on computer mediated conflict talk. I believe that by examining these non-verbal indicators, such as avatars or signatures, it is possible to at least make an educated guess on whether or not members of a certain community are likely to be influenced by the status of

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7   An online auction site, see www.ebay.com

the other members. Since both SA and 4chan posses a very large user-base, I estimate that the influences of invisible status in the case of these communities is negligible for the purposes of my study, which is why I have not thought is necessary to examine it in greater length. However, should any messages in my data bring forth indications of invisible status, either as an attempt to raise ones own status or lower another speakers, I will be bringing this up in my analysis.

2.4.2 Conversational dominance

When examining the influencing structures behind conflict talk, the concept of *conversational dominance* is closely linked with the question of status. While status deals with pre-existing structures of hierarchy in a community, the term conversational dominance is understood to refer to those properties of speech which are employed by an individual in order to control the direction of the dialogue (Itakura 2001: 1862). According to Itakura (ibid), conversational dominance can be divided into three specific types, based on what means the speakers employ in order to control the dialogue. These types are as follows:

1) *Participatory*, meaning restriction of speaking rights, such as interruption and overlap.
2) *Quantitative*, meaning the amount of words one person contributes to the conversation
3) *Sequential*, meaning the tendency of one speaker to control the flow and direction of a conversation through means such as initiation

(Itakura 2001)

When examining these three types, it is clear that in CMC conversational dominance cannot work exactly the same way as in Itakura's model, which was based on FtF communication. In written CMC there can be little or no participatory dominance, as interruptions and overlap such as they are in FtF communication are virtually impossible. While an online chat might possibly contain elements of overlap, in the case of forum discussions this is simply impossible due to the working mechanics of the communication environment.

Therefore, if a researcher wishes to examine restrictions in speaking rights, they cannot use established examples of participatory conversational dominance.

Quantitative dominance is also something that is not necessarily as simple as conceding victory to the person who expresses his/herself most eloquently. Different online environments have different standards for whether long or short messages are preferred. While a high amount of knowledge content is usually appreciated in debates, in some Internet communities there is a certain desire for brevity and verbosity can, in fact, be viewed as a negative feature of a message. Messages that are viewed as overly elaborate are often followed by comments containing the abbreviation *TL; DR*, which stand for "Too long, didn't read." Speaking in great detail about a subject of little or not interest for the rest of the group is sometimes also known as *sperging*, a term which is coined from the name of the condition known as *Asperger's syndrome*, and the tendency of people who suffer from Asperger's to sometimes focus obsessively on details.

Despite there being clear differences in features of conversational dominance between FtF and CMC communication, it is still possible to find similarities when comparing the two. Sequential dominance seems to be very important in CMC, with *pragmatic linking* being an important aspect in online communication. In many communication situations the participants prefer to connect their messages with previous ones in order to provide context to their opinions. This is done typically by either quoting a part of an earlier message, or by providing a direct hyperlink to the message which is commented on. This type of linking helps to avoid confusion in a conversation which may have a large number of participants who are engaged in several branches of dialogue simultaneously (see chapter 2.3.2 p. 17 for definition of branches).

Initiation, another type of sequential dominance, is also something that happens in both FtF and CMC, and initiative actions are often used as means of influencing the flow of conversation in a thread. In the most simple terms, initiation in online communities means that a participant in a conversation forgoes commenting on previous messages in favor of attempting to initiate a new branch of conversation. One forum thread can contain several initiation acts, which are also used as tools

when attempting to control the flow of the conversation. This is why by examining initiation posts in relation to the responses they elicited can be an excellent source of data when examining conversational dominance in CMC. By combining the study of initiation with examining pragmatic linking it is also possible to determine if participants prefer to communicate by responding to previous posts, or by contributing initiations of their own. We can also identify which types of initiations are successful and if these initiations employ similar strategies.

2.4.3 The effects of anonymity in computer mediated conflict talk

In this study, I will be discussing the elements of initiation and pragmatical linking in SA and 4chan. This is because I believe that these features of sequential dominance are important when attempting to identify the structures of conflict talk in online communities. While I believe studying initiation is valuable when examining group immersion and status in online communities, there is perhaps one other influencing factor involved in CMC that benefits from research concerning sequential dominance. This factor is *anonymity*, or *namelessness*, and the effects of anonymity on established communication norms in conflict talk situations. When discussing the different aspects of conflict talk in online environments, anonymity is something which researchers needs to take note of, as it is one of the most defining differences between FtF communication and CMC.

The question of anonymity is something that has polarized Internet users and researchers alike. While it has been argued that anonymity increases the possibility of loss of inhibition - which is turn manifests in aggressive verbal behavior - there are also studies that have found no connection between anonymity and aggressive behavior (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012). Moore et al. (2012: 2) claim that it is more common for an attacking party in a verbal conflict to present themselves as anonymous, while defenders preferred to label themselves with social indicators. Moore et al. (ibid) also observe that the Internet is seen as an environment where it is safer to hurt other person's feelings, since it offers the cover of anonymity and lacks immediate retributions for our actions.

However, the influences of anonymity are not easily defined as purely negative. Christopherson (2007: 3041) proposes that anonymity can provide a cathartic experience since:

> One can be completely anonymous within the Internet, but still express thoughts and emotions without fear of being identified and socially evaluated and examples can be found on individual blogs throughout the Internet.

Anonymity is also more complex as a concept than mere lack of name. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012: 435) have identified several levels of anonymity and they propose that the most common level of anonymity associated with online communication can be understood better as *unidentifiablity*. By this they mean that online anonymity is not as necessarily synonymous with namelessness, but refers more to a lack of identifiable details such as gender, occupation or race. A conceding interpretation of anonymity is offered by Christopherson (2007: 3040), who defines anonymity as

> perception of others and/or one's self as unidentifiable because of a lack of cues to use to attribute an identity to that individual

and suggests that anonymity in the verbal sense does not necessarily mean anonymity in the social sense. By this Christopherson (ibid) means that while a person may not be identifiable as themselves through a name, they may still posses an identity which other people can associate with them.

It is perhaps difficult to try and understand anonymity as consisting of several levels possessing different features. If namelessness cannot by trusted as a defining influence behind anonymity's effects on behavior, then it is necessary to try to find other ways of explaining why anonymity is so often associated with antisocial behavior. Lapidot-Lefler and Barak (2012: 436) suggest that the most important contributing factor on our feeling of anonymity is not, in fact, the lack of name, but the lack or eye-contact. This would indicate that anonymity is not something that in itself creates aggressive behavior, as is the lack of visually identifiable person behind the message.

There have been several attempts to filter the perceived negative effects of anonymity out of CMC. It has been suggested that there could be an automated

tool created in order to filter out posts that include disruptive behavior such as trolling or bullying (Chmiel et al. 2011: 2937). However, creating such a tool is not as easy as some would assume. Chmiel et al. (2011) have suggested that one way to limit the disinhibiting effects of anonymity would be to make the community members aware of their traceability, even though they may appear anonymous to each other.

While the idea of such a tool may seem like a sound concept in theory, it poses a problem for many communities, as experienced Internet users often feel uncomfortable in providing personal details to parties who are not 100% clear on what they are going to use the information for. If a user is likely to post controversial content it is even more futile to ask them to provide this type of information. Indeed, many users who posses a high level of technical iKnow are already doing their best to erase their steps by using proxies[8] and other similar software, meaning that any tool created to trace users would have to by-pass multiple levels of protection, which in turn would mean increase in expenses to the forum upkeep. It is also likely that such tool would not be able to differentiate between attacks against ideas and attacks against people, thus limiting the freedom of speech of the participants in a conversation.

Another suggested way (Chmiel et al: 2011) of controlling online conversations way would is to find a way to focus people's attention to the topic instead of comments made by other users, for example by modifying the interface of the community for this purpose. However, this suggestion does not take into consideration that in many communities the exchange of opinions and even disagreement are, in fact, desired outcomes in a conversation. Christopherson (2007: 3049) presents that "even anti-social behaviors can be encouraged in anonymous CMC, as long as these anti-social behaviors are the group norm.". Consequently, Postmes, Spears and Lea (1998: 690) also suggest that different groups developed different communication norms over time. It is possible that to an outsider these communities appear to allow methods of communication that can be classified as offensive, when these methods are, in fact, just typical for that particular community.

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8   IP altering software intended to make physical location of the user more difficult

Concerning my study, 4chan is a textbook example of a community where anti-social behavior is not only tolerated, but also expected and in some cases encouraged. This has become so obvious to Internet users who are familiar with the community that it is rarely even questioned in conversations. Just recently I myself was involved in a conversation online where, when discussing group normative behavior and peer pressure, one of the other participants in summarized his experiences with 4chan thusly:

> I've tried posting on other chan boards before, and in my experience, if you haven't let go of your original personality and blended with the group mind, they pretty much GTFO *(get the fuck out)* NEWFAG you out.

To which another poster replied:

> Yeah, kind of. I wouldn't exactly call it a group mind, but the elitism of these people is fucking unfathomable.

While this may only be a single exchange of opinions concerning the issue, one does not need to look hard in order to find corresponding opinions online. Thus it falls to reason that trying to moderate discussion by limiting the access to other comments would not only be useless, but also counterproductive for the purposes of some online communities.

All in all, it is very difficult to determine how anonymity and it's effects on CMC should be handled. Considering that the ramifications of anonymity for CMC cannot be easily interpreted as purely negative or positive, and that there are problems with suggested methods of limiting negative effects of anonymity, it is very difficult to say what type of conflict talk should or should not be allowed. There is also the question, do we really want to limit anonymity at all in online communication? Christopherson (2007: 3052) points out that technology applied for anonymity for the sake of personal safety can be used strategically for negative actions, but there is also no reason why anonymity in online communities cannot also work for positive purposes such as a protective layer between a bully and a victim. Anonymity is also something that can provide people possessing a shy or introverted disposition an opportunity to enjoy social interactions without the social pressures present in FtF communication (Suler 2004).

There are many sides to the issue, which is why it is disappointing to notice that in popular media anonymity tends to be understood quite one-sidedly as the all-encompassing force behind the evils of the Internet. Indeed, one of the most prolific "gangs" often seen in the headlines is the mysterious *Anonymous*, which, depending on the source, seems to refer to everything from a global terrorist organization to a collection of intellectual freedom-fighters. The actions of this group - consisting in reality of a constantly shifting collection of loosely connected individuals with different motivations and goals for their actions - are sometimes viewed as definite proof of the dangers of online anonymity. While connections between anonymity and conflict seeking behavior cannot be completely denied, it would do well to remember that it is only one aspect of the online communication act. Indeed, many types of conflict seeking behavior, such as trolling (see chapter 2.4.5), can exist completely separate from anonymity, although in perhaps different forms.

2.4.4 Threats and threatening behavior

Concerning conflict seeking behavior, it is necessary to address the issue of verbal aggression in the form of *threats*. Limberg (2009: 1378) defines threats as "linguistic strategy that is used to manipulate or even coerce the addressee into (not) doing something which has an undesirable outcome for him/her. As suggested in the previous chapter, there appears to be a link between anonymity and the degree of severity which participants are willing to employ when engaging in online communication acts. However, as it is clear that there are differences in what people perceive as acceptable behavior in CMC, it must be that definition of threat too is subjective when it comes to conflict talk. Here is where it becomes important to consider the difference between *threats* and *perceived threats*. It has been reported in earlier studies that people judge other peoples' behavior based on their view of appropriate social behavior for a certain situation (Limberg: 2009). This would seem to imply that what a person considers as definite threat against them may only be a perceived thread, as interpreted through their own subjective experiences.

Aside from the problem of the subjective nature of interpreting threat speech,

there are also other issues concerning analyzing threats in conflict talk. Limberg (2009: 1379) proposes that there is a difference between *conditional threats* and *non-conditional threats*. While conditional threats directly state the consequences of ignoring the said threat, non-conditional threats merely imply these consequences (Limberg, ibid), thus appearing, at least initially, as less confrontational. Non-conditional threats are, in fact, a subtle way of asserting social dominance, as there is an implication of possible face-loss without the risk of appearing overly aggressive.

Using threat speech effectively is an excellent way of asserting social dominance, but not one without it's problems. The more aggressive the threat, the more likely it is to damage the face-claims of the speaker rather than those of the addressee. For example, if actual threats are defined as threats conditional (direct) and always directed at a specific target (as clearly targeting an individual reduces the possibility of incorrectly interpreting a threat), then we can easily see that these type of threats include topics such as hate-speech or racism, which are harder to gain support for in an environment which embraces modern values on tolerance. Consequently, the less aggressive, non-conditional threats or threats without a direct target are more likely to be accepted as simply a part of a communication strategy in an argument.

It makes also practical sense that non-conditional threats would be more acceptable in conflict talk situations online. This is because in many communities direct threats and personal insults are something that have to be addressed carefully by the administrators and moderators, as there is a chance of one individual's actions reflecting on the whole community and it's reputation. An administrator can be held accountable if his/her forum is subject to potentially harmful content, such as hate-speech or copy-protected material, especially if the administration is seen as supporting this type of action in the community by ignoring said undesirable behavior Service providers have also been known to shut down online communities in order to protect themselves, even though the community has not actually violated any laws.

While it is relatively rare for the government of service providers to interfere with

online communities outside the ones containing truly controversial material (i.e. child pornography), most administrators have a definite view on what type of content they will allow in their community. Depending on the nature of the community, the personality of the administrator and the reputation of the service provider, many online communities have developed an intricate balance between threats, face-damaging acts and face-claims. Furthermore, the administrator also usually faces pressure from inside the community, since the individual members of the community also have their own view on the limits of threat speech (Limberg 2009: 1381).This adds a new dimension of challenges when it comes to analyzing conflict talk in CMC, as two communities that appear similar at a first glance may have completely different standards for punishable levels of threat speech. .

All in all, threat actions in online communication are very closely linked with other methods of power play in conflict talk situations. Non-conditional threats especially relate closely with status (using one's position to intimidate) and face-claims, while anonymity can be associated with conditional threats. However, the definition of threats and the amount of threat speech allowed in a community are highly subjective, resulting in complications and possible misunderstandings in interpretation. Furthermore, it is still unclear what motivates a person to resort to threats speech in CMC.

2.4.5 Trolling

In the previous chapters I have discussed several aspects of conflict talk, usually taking the stance that it is something that is born from disagreement or misunderstanding. However, when examine online communication it is important to address the type of conflict talk which is not born naturally in dispute situations, but which is the result of a deliberate, conflict seeking behavior. In online communication, there is a certain type of communicator who chooses to act provocatively, not because s/he wishes to express of defend an opinion, but because s/he finds amusement in stirring up arguments. This type of behavior is known as *trolling*.

Trolling is a concept that sometimes seems to baffle and/or divide observers of online communication. A troll is usually a person who may not have any other reasons for his/her behavior than to cause commotion and amuse him/herself by provoking other people. This type of behavior is also known as "Doing it for the lulz *(laughs)*". Suler (2004) uses the term *toxic disinhibition* to refer to the negative effects of online communication on human behavior, as opposed to *benign disinhibition* which categorizes the positive effects. Suler (2004) describes toxic disinhibition (TD) through six different ways of thinking. These Suler lists as:

1)   "You don't know me" aka *dissociative anonymity.* By this Suler refers to the fact that in acts of communication what people see is actually an image that a speakers projects of his/herself in a particular situation. This image is not necessarily the same as a person's "true self"

2)   "You can't see me" aka *invisibility.* This Suler uses to address both the fact that in online communication it is possible to take the position of an *invisible observer* (aka non-commentator) and the fact that the users for the most part are physically invisible to other users

3)   "See you later" aka asynchronocity. Because many online communication are by nature asynchronous, Suler proposes that there is a possibility of posters delaying feedback or even resulting to "hit and run" posting tactics when delivering personal, emotional or hostile feedback.

4)   "It's all in my head" aka *solipsistic introjection.* This is an interesting psychological concept that Suler uses to refer to the tendency of some people to create an image of the other person they are talking to in their minds. This image can eventually even become such an integral part of the psyche of the individual that it is essence becomes the "real" person behind the text, gaining their own voice and personality as imagined by the other party. Thus a person who is in a long time contact with another person via CMC may have created an image in their head of that other person which to them is completely real, but which, in fact, does not correspond to the other person's perception of themselves at all.

5)   "It's just a game" aka *dissociative imagination*. Related to solipsistic introjection, this refers to the tendency of some people to think of the online environment as a completely different space, a dream world of sorts, which they in

their minds disassociate completely from real life. Suler proposes that to these people this online world acts as a type of game that they can just switch off when they wish.

6) "We're equals" aka *minimizing authority*. This Suler describes as dissociation from one's status in the outside world, and not necessarily the lack of status structures in online communities. In these communities a person's status and the amount of influence they have on others is determined based on issues such as communication skills, technical skills, persistence and quality of ideas instead of outside status indicators such as wealth, occupation etc.

(Suler 2004)

When observing Suler's (2004) definition of TD, it is easy to notice that trolling appears to posses many of the behavioral patterns associated with TD, such as invisibility and dissociative imagination. Indeed, trolling is commonly seen as a typical example of negative effects of online anonymity, fitting perfectly within the parameters of TD. However, this is actually a quite one-sided view of trolling. In reality, there are multiple variations of trolling that an active member of an online community may encounter in daily communication situations. Just like anonymity, trolling is not a concept that is easily explained in the terms of purely positive or negative associations.

Christopherson (2007: 3041) argues that one feature often associated with anonymity is autonomy. This involves the chance of experimenting with new models of behavior without fear of social reprisal or face-damage. In some cases, this experimental behavior and acting outside the common norms is something that seems to motivate people engaging in acts of trolling. Trolling is first and foremost about entertainment; finding pleasure in acting outside generally accepted limits. This would seem to indicate that trolling can be a liberating way of experimenting with social communication. Far from being a completely negative phenomenon, there are actually communities where good-natured trolling has become a regular feature of the communication amongst group members. While this may be self-evident to the members of they group, outsiders may often attribute this type of trolling as aggressive or threatening (see perceived threats in chapter 2.4.4, p. 40)

Associating trolling exclusively with other types of conflict seeking behavior is another issue which makes examining trolling difficult. Very often it is easy to find people using the term trolling interchangeably with another type of online toxic disinhibition known as *flaming* (i.e. sending aggressive and verbally abusive messages either directly to another person or to a community). Indeed, it sometimes appears that some Internet users may not even be aware there is difference between the two terms. For example, Moor et al. (2010: 1540) report that some of the participants in their study did not fully understand what the term *flaming* encompassed when asked to rate examples of flaming in terms of severity. While it may not appear self evident at first, while it can be said that flaming is a type of trolling, this does not mean that all trolling shares the features of flaming.

The simplest way of differentiate between trolling and flaming is usually to consider the motivations behind the communication. This can be observed in that messages labeled as flaming often include the of use of hostile language combined with non-verbal elements such as question marks and exclamation points, mixture of letters, numbers, and dingbats and use the of colors and font effects (Lapidot-Lefler and Barak 2012). It is also very typical for flaming to use conditional threats that are directed towards a specific target. On the other hand, while trolling may share some features of flaming, it may also come in forms which contain little or not verbal aggression.

One alternative way of trolling is by completely passive utterances, which at first sight do not contain anything unusual or offensive. Indeed, a trolling message may consist of simple remarks not directed at towards any person or community in particular. For example, a troll might go to an online site which allows Internet users to ask questions from other users and pose a seemingly innocent question. However, what the troll is actually using is taking advantage of the dissonance of values and norms between different online communities. While the troll's message may at first appear harmless, based on the community it is posted on it may actually illicit a violently emotive reaction in those who read the message. This way, the troll achieves his/her goal of causing conflict in the community with a bare minimum of effort, as often it is not even necessary for the troll to participate

in the conversation outside of his/her initial message.

Another alternative way of trolling is for the troll to wait until someone asks a question online, then provide a hyperlink to one of the various "shock" sites[9], claiming that this site includes the information the other party wants. If the person is not already familiar with this particular site, they may click the link in good faith expecting information. Instead, they are usually faced with pictures or videos of unpleasant, and quite often pornographic, nature. Strangely enough, while this type of trolling also requires minimum effort from the troll, it can also be seen as a more benign type of trolling. This is because the use of these shock sites is already so ingrained in Internet communication that most active members of online communities are already accustomed to them. This type of trolling is also common among friends, which further implies it is usually not a serious attempt at causing disagreement.

Indeed, linking such as this is one of the types of trolling that does not necessarily fulfill the definition of toxic disinhibition. Very often the goal of the troll is to trick the other person, not necessarily inciting an aggressive response. It could almost be seen as the online equivalent of the whoopee cushion. This type of trolling rarely escalates into full blown arguments, perhaps because it often lacks any type of verbal aggression, often consisting of simple sentences like "This is the information you wanted" or "Check out this site". Indeed most shock sites are so well known that other members of the community are more likely to roll their eyes over the simplicity of the troll and perhaps slightly berate him/her for being so unoriginal.

While the previously mentioned methods of trolling are fairly simple and require very little investment from the troll, they are also comparatively easy to see through and any possible conflict caused by them is usually not of long lasting nature. Therefore, some trolls have felt the need to develop more subtle ways of trolling requiring much more effort and even dedication to the scheme in order to achieve the emotional reaction they desire. One less obvious way of trolling

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9   Web pages which, while possessing a seemingly innocent url such as lemonparty.org, which is often
      promoted as a page containing information on lemons, while in actuality it contains a pornographic
      video of three old men in a sexual encounter.

requires the troll to appear completely serious about a topic, perhaps by supporting an unpopular opinion such as teen pregnancies, in order to initiate an argument. These types of trolls often engage their victims in longer dialogues making increasingly preposterous claims while attempting to appear completely serious. If the troll receives many reactions concerning his initiation, this type of argument can then escalate into what is sometimes known as *drama.*

Drama is a difficult to define, but usually it refers to an argument that has gone on for a long time and taken on ridiculous proportions, so much so that even the unwilling or uninterested members of a community have become involved in it. Drama, as understood, may escalate into a conflict which may potentially disturb the functionability of a whole community, while providing almost soap opera style entertainment for the troll. All through this, the troll usually maintains a facade of complete sincerity, sometimes even going so far as to create a completely new character they "play" as, with his/her own history. Sometimes they may even create profiles on other websites in order to further to illusion that the character they have created truly exists.

It is also the type of trolling that can often trip even an experienced researcher, as sometimes it is virtually impossible to know for sure whether or not a speaker is expressing their true opinion or not. There is even a popular *meme*[10] connected to this phenomenon, which consists of a screen-shot of the character Philip J. Fry from the animation Futurama with a dubious looks on his face while the words "Not sure if trolling or (appropriate response)" appear above him. Many Internet communities recognize this type of trolling as problematic and have tried to find their own ways around it. However, this is very difficult as it is virtually impossible to tell if a person is serious in an online conversation if they wish to appear so. In some communities which are specially easy targets for trolling there has even developed a certain type of paranoia, and opinions not conforming to the group consensus can sometimes be dismissed as *trolling* or *trying to cause drama*. Others, on the other hand, have so far embraced the trolling culture that it has even given birth to the phenomenon "trolls trolling trolls" where it is implied that

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10 "an element of a culture or system of behavior passed from one individual to another by imitation or other non-genetic means." Oxford English Dictionary (2012)

everyone in the thread is actually a troll trying to trick the other speakers, who are also trolls.

The knowledge of the more complex type of trolling is closely linked to examining conversational dominance in online communities. By acting seemingly rational, yet eliciting an emotional reaction, the troll can actually control the flow of conversation by striking verbally where they judge the other speaker will react. Reaction is something that all trolling, even the relatively harmless type, considers as the best result of their efforts. There are even websites dedicated to this type of trolling, where people post screen-shots of their successful trolls for others to see. On these websites (such as artoftrolling.org) one may find trolls bragging about their "victories" and other people praising the trolls for a particularly witty or unique exhibition of trolling. This may seem peculiar to those who think of trolling purely in the terms of toxic disinhibition, but the fact is that trolling in it's several variations has become something that is, if not viewed as perfectly acceptable behavior, then at least tolerated as long as it remains behind generally accepted limits.

This acceptance of trolling seems to be something that many people unacquainted with Internet subcultures still find confusing concerning online communication. This is because trolling is often associated with a much more harmful phenomenon, namely, online bullying. While it may be difficult to draw a line between bullying and trolling, most online communities have a certain socially acceptable limit to how much trolling a member can confess to without causing any irreparable damage to their face-claims. For example, a community might accept a member admitting to trolling websites with already established cultures of trolling, such as *Yahoo Answers*, but object to any admissions of trolling in communities discussing real-life problems, such mental health advise sites. Members who admit to crossing this line can find out very quickly that their status has dropped, and in some cases such confessions can even result in an expulsion from the community. This is why trolling is something that people are not necessarily eager to admit to be doing.

Whatever the reason and the methods of trolling, it is very important to remember

that any conflict that rises from a trolling situation is, in fact, the desired outcome for the troll. This is why it is generally agreed within many online communities that the only way to discourage a true troll is to ignore them. There is no way to "win" an argument with a persistent troll, as any reaction from the other speakers apart from complete indifference is seen as a success. The denial of access (aka ban) to the community may work as a temporary deterrent, but there are many simple ways for a troll to get around most simple methods of banning such as IP blocks (i.e. forbidding access to the community from the offending Internet Protocol address) or simply deletion of account. Many experienced Internet users already know to ignore possible attempts at trolling, which is why trolls often target people who are new to the Internet, or are only casual users with minimal knowledge of the trolling culture. These type of people would benefit greatly from reading about the behavior of trolls and communities that tolerate trolling-type behavior.

For a researcher this calls for constant vigilance when conducting studies in online communities. In order to separate true opinions from this type of conflict seeking behavior the researcher has to posses extensive knowledge of Internet subcultures, memes, communities and their typical members. In the case this study, I have taken advantage of my own knowledge of the aspects of the trolling culture, as a former participant and current observer of several communities well known for the high amount of trolling going on in them. Since I am examining how conflict talk is constructed, instead of examining motivations behind it I do not intend to attempt to diagnose the sincerity of the messages in my data. However, since trolling can often be used as a conversational strategy in order to manipulate the flow of the discussion, I feel that it is important to note the effects it may have in CMC and conflict talk situations.

In my study, I will be examining trolling in connection to reactivity. Trolling, as a phenomenon, can only truly prosper in communities where there exists a high possibility of action-reaction type of communication. Chmiel et al. (2011: 2936) argue that reactive messages constitute over 50% of the total number of posts contributed to the conversation on a politically themed BBC forum. It is not, in my opinion, unreasonable to assume that in communities with higher levels of

reactivity there will also be higher levels of trolling present. Based on this hypothesis, I intend to draw conclusions on how much potential there is for trolling in the communities examined in my study.

2.4.6 Use of sarcastic irony

While I have already discussed threats and trolling in connection to conversational dominance, so far I have not touched perhaps one of the most common strategies employed in establishing power relations in an online conversation; namely, the use of *sarcastic irony*. Toplak and Katz (2000: 1471) define sarcastic irony as including such attributes as exaggeration, explicit mention of contradictions, compering the relationship between speaker and their victim and indirect criticism in the presence of a privileged audience. They conclude that

> ...pragmatic insincerity is employed by a speaker to have some effect on a listener that would differ from the direct, presumably more sincere form, and, conversely, that listeners (or, at least, a subset of listeners) would be aware of the effect intended by the speaker.

This definition supports the idea that use of sarcastic irony is common when competing for conversational dominance.

Toplak and Katz (2000) propose that indirect (sarcastic) criticism expresses several dimensions of feedback, including negative affect, humor, mocking and politeness. By applying these methods of feedback, it is possible for a person to expresses disagreement and strong opinions without resorting to vulgarities or conditional threats. The sarcastic use of language can also be used to undermine opponent's face-claims, as it is inherently aiming to find something amusing or ridiculous in the previous argument, thus damaging the credibility of the maker of that argument. Failing to recognize sarcastic utterances as such can also damage a participant's face, as this can be interpreted as inability to read between the lines. Toplak and Katz (2000: 1469) also suggest that uses of sarcastic irony can influence social and mnemonic functions in that it can enhance the memorability of a message by creating a situation that all participants can relate to, i.e. *common ground*.

The memorability of sarcastic utterances combined with the element of ridicule it posses makes using sarcastic irony a very effective conversational tool in conflict talk situations. Toplak and Katz (2000: 1478) state that even though sarcasm is indirect criticism, the victims in their study reported as feeling more criticized when sarcasm was used, while at the same time direct verbal aggression was found to have a more negative effect on the speaker-victim relationships. This would indicate that sarcasm can be used as a tool in order to elicit a certain reaction from the victim without crossing certain lines of social acceptability.

However, the memorability of sarcastic irony also indicates that as a conversational strategy people are well aware of the possibilities it presents for manipulating the flow of the conversation. This is perhaps where emotional reactions and how involved the participants are with the topic influence the success of sarcastic strategies in conversational dominance. When a speaker has a deep emotional investment in a topic, an impulsive reaction may occur before s/he has time to think about the issue rationally. By acting with this first impulse, it is possible for a person to react immediately to the sarcastic remark of another poster, only to realize later they have acted exactly as their opponent wished.

Good examples of this type of emotional reactions can be found in many online fan communities, which are often easily riled not only against perceived enemies of the group, but also against other members of the same community who express opinions different from the accepted interpretation of the groups subject of interest. A good example of this would be the Twilight fandom[11], where supporters of different romantic pairings between the main characters have formed into loose teams (e.g. *Team Jacob*). These teams share the same interest in the series, but their approach to it differs in a (in their opinion) critical aspect, which makes conversation concerning topic this highly volatile. In conversations involving members from different "teams", a simple sarcastic remark may provoke extremely emotional, and even aggressive, reactions.

Since sarcastic irony is thought to be a memorable as well as a potent tool when vying for conversational dominance, we can make some interesting deductions

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11 A sphere of mutual interest between fans of the book and movie series *Twilight* by Stephanie Meyer

when comparing it to earlier studies on how negative emotions seem to be the driving force behind many online arguments (Chmiel et al. 2011). It may be safe to assume that one way of keeping an argument going includes the clever use of sarcastic irony, as it seems this offers the possibility of keeping the conversation moving without aggravating the other speakers too much. As direct confrontation is subverted by uses of indirect criticism, conditional threats and other more severe forms of confrontation are also less likely to occur. It may also be harder for the targeted party to respond to messages containing sarcastic irony, as there may be no direct argument to which to react to.

However, using sarcastic irony is always going to be tricky. Toplak and Katz (2000) suggest that interpretations, both by the speaker and the victim, play an important role in uses of sarcasm. Just as with threats and face-threatening acts, the speaker intention may not correspond with victim reaction, resulting in the true intent of the message either getting lost or appearing as more severe than was intended. Thus it cannot be said that using sarcastic irony is always a way to avoid aggravation in the speaker-victim relationship. There is also the possibility of misinterpretation, which may deter some people from responding to sarcastic remarks. As each member of the conversation interpreters the use of sarcastic irony subjectively, the use of sarcasm can have unforeseen consequences, especially if the participants are relative strangers to one another.

There have been many attempts to make interpreting sarcastic irony easier for the reader, as CMC lacks the visual and tonal cues that assist identification in FtF communication. One commonly used method is applying a slash before the word (/sarcasm), a method which is derived from the HTML coding language method of formatting text (for example, **this part is in bold**). However, since using these types of methods to indicate sarcasm can, in fact, undermine some of it's effectiveness, they are not used in all conversations. Thus, a reader is often left without assistance when attempting to interpret sarcastic language. As a researcher, I will do my best to reliably identify uses of sarcastic irony in my data, as I believe they play an important part when examining conversational structures in conflict talk. Since sarcastic irony can be extremely subjective, I will do my best to create such parameters that the reader will not have difficulty in

determining what type of utterances I have counted as sarcastic irony.

2.5 Where do we go from here?

While it is clear that online communities interest researchers and there is continuous need for more research, it is also clear that there is room for more research on the specific characteristics of CMC, especially in the case of conflict talk. One reason for this is simply that the Internet is always in a continuous state of change, which also means that methods of communication online are undergoing continuous fluctuations. For example, in the 1990s *IRC* (Internet Relay Chat) emerged as a popular venue of communication, while today it has been largely replaced by instant messanger applications, such as *Skype*, which allow both text and spoken conversations. This means that the researchers need to be aware of the current developments on computer software, but they also have to keep updating their methods if they wish their research to remain relevant in the future. A certain level of technical skills is also required, so that the researcher is able to understand the nature of new software and interface updates concerning the topic of their research.

If a researcher is lacking in both his/her social and technical iKnow it is not only their data which may suffer, but also their connection with their audience. Many young people today are extremely proficient Internet users, which means that they are very likely to have their own opinions and experience concerning CMC. This complicates the traditional setting of an expert observer and target audience, as the audience may also be experts on the topic. Indeed, in some cases it may be possible for the audience to posses much more initial information concerning the subject than the researcher, which may result in negative backslash if the audience feels the results of the study do not correspond with their experiences. At the very least, this type of information will make the reader distrust the possibly accurate information contained in the study. At worst, it will be make the researcher seem incompetent and out of touch with his/her topic.

Especially disastrous for serious attempts of researching CMC is information that has clearly been influenced by the dialogue presented in popular media. One good

example of this would be the word *cyber*, which is even used by researchers and other educated people. While academics still seem quite fond of this term, it has been a long time since it has been used seriously in discourse among information technology professionals. The editor of the popular online magazine *Wired* (which specializes in news concerning developments in IT and technology) Ryan Singel (2010) has written on this subject, remarking that "Nobody uses the word "cyber" anymore, except people trying to scare you and trying to make the internet seem scary or foreign." Cyber, like many other terms, suffers from the simple fact that the impact of the word has been very much influenced by popular media, which has frequently applied it incorrectly and unnecessarily. Thus, a researcher using a word beginning with the affix cyber would already have damaged their credibility in the eyes of at least some of their target audience.

However, an even bigger risk to researcher credibility is simply the fact that researchers themselves are not immune to the effects of conversational dominance and toxic disinhibition even when studying the subject. Especially while showing ignorance and using outdated information and/or language, there is a very real chance that the researcher may provoke conflicts or acts of trolling, resulting either in hostility or distortion of their data. Many communities with an average high level of iKnow among it's members, for example, do not usually respond well to attempts at communication they see as lacking in basic knowledge of information technology. An outsider coming to this type of community with little iKnow is not likely to be taken seriously, nor the integrity of their study respected. This is why knowing some of the popular trends, hoaxes and traps of CMC becomes important, as with just basic knowledge a researcher will be able to make a better impression on their audience while avoiding the most obvious pitfalls.

Even if a researcher does keep all these issues in mind, there is still a risk involved if they decide to make themselves known to a community as an observer. This type of *visible presence* may result in members of the group posting uncharacteristic messages. The behavior of people may change when they imagine they are under supervision, or they may refrain from posting completely in fear of revealing too much about themselves. There have also been cases before when a community has been confronted with a person impersonating a researcher (or

otherwise implying scientific interest in the community) only in order to gain status in the community or exploit it in some way. Many fetish communities, for example, are often approached by supposed "researchers", whose true motivation is to mine data from the community for their own purposes. Television shows such as *Jerry Springer* are also well known for approaching online communities and tempting people appear in the show while hiding it's sensational nature. This makes the members of online subcultures naturally suspicious against outsiders, especially if they express a deeper interest in the workings of the community.

This is also why I have chosen to model my framework around the researchers position as an invisible, but well informed, observer in a CMC. While obviously this model will not suit all types of CMC, I believe it to be the most fitting when studying public forums such as online communities. Unlike a visible observer, as an invisible observer I will not be making my presence known to the subjects of my study, nor will I be informing them of my results (see chapter 1.2 concerning ethics). This type of behavior, known also as *lurking*, is actually quite common in online communities, many of which actually contain many more "lurker" members than active ones.

3. THE AIMS AND FRAMEWORK OF THIS STUDY

3.1 Elaborating on my aims

In my study I will be combining aspects of conflict talk analysis, conversation analysis and content analysis with existing methods of CMC analysis. This is because there currently exists no ready framework which is likely to fit the purposes of my study. Instead of relying on an existing framework and working with unsatisfying data, I have chosen to look to earlier studies and adapt the methods used in those in order to create a framework suitable for the needs of this study.

The focus of this study will be to examine the general structure of the argumentative process in two different online communities, as well as the specific features of conversational dominance that are employed in the arguments. By studying these two communities, I hope to draw informed conclusions concerning the use of conflict talk in online communities, and how it is affected by factors such as anonymity, status, group consensus on the established modes of communication and moderation. I shall be creating my own framework based on the models of Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) and Chen and Chiu (2008) and applying this framework to two different online communities, *Something Awful* and *4chan*, in order to provide a comparative view on how conflict talk is constructed in those communities.

The reason I choose to do a comparative study is because I believe it is the best way to highlight those features which make each online community a different environment even when they share the same type of audience. I also believe, as Arpo (2005) has already stated, that comparative study has been slightly neglected when it comes to studies on CMC in online communities. In order to best take advantage of the comparison method of research, I also decided to select a topic which had a thread dedicated to it on both communities. The topic that I choose was the *Occupy Wall-Street* (OWS) movement, which is the name of the political leftist movement protesting against the negative effects of capitalism in the United States. The reason that I choose politics as my topic is because as a subject it is

very prone of conflict, since there are many emotional and personal influences in play behind political convictions. It is also interesting to see whether anonymity and the level of moderation in a community can influence a topic so volatile as politics.

In this study, I also aim to provide a closer look at the communities of SA and 4chan from an insider point of view. When reading other studies done in the field of conflict talk in CMC, it appeared to me that in many cases the researchers had intentionally taken the position of an outsider, someone not invested in the group. I deliberately choose communities which I am familiar with, in order to take advantage of my experience when interpreting the methods of conflict talk used in each community. My experience with the two communities in the study is also why I have chosen the position of an invisible observer (lurker), since I believe it will provide me with a certain amount of distance from the topic while still allowing me to benefit from my previous knowledge. This way I would not be an outsider, but would also not risk influencing the natural flow of the conversation with my input.

However, the position that I choose for the purposes my study did pose to me with a problem in how to eliminate possible presuppositions I may have concerning the communities. To combat this problem, I first decided to select a topic for the threads which would not only appear in both communities, but would also be on a subject I had no personal emotional investment in. This would provide me with a clear look on group dynamics and conversational dominance, since I would have no personal agenda vis á vis taking sides in the argument. While I cannot claim to be completely without any preconceptions regarding these two communities, in this study I will only contribute opinions concerning SA and 4chan that I have seen shared between multiple people in different online environments, giving at least some credibility to the idea that these opinions are accepted by multiple Internet users.

The communities that I have chosen for my study, Something Awful forums and the 4chan image board, are both popular and well-known communities on the Internet. The reason why I choose these two communities is because inside the

geek[12] subculture they are perhaps the most well known communities, while also boasting the largest user-base, with SA forums currently having 164,142 registered users, 3,110,170 total threads and 129,855,311 total posts (messages), while 4chan to this date reports 94,203 current users, 954,147,703 total posts and 69 GB of active content (as of 26th of May 2012). A second reason why I decided on these two communities is because while different in function, they actually share a similar, sometimes even the same, user base of Internet users with medium to high levels of social and practical iKnow and understanding of Internet subcultures.

3.2 Adapting existing methods

When creating my framework I wished to address some of the issues currently present in existing frameworks, such as Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), while simultaneously creating a method which would address multiple questions about conflict talk in online communities. One issue that I was the most eager to avoid is the inability, or perhaps reluctance, of a researcher to consider the Internet as anything else but an amorphous blob that can be described within a single definition. This is where the choice of a comparative study comes in. As all online communities form their own environment and provide different types of data, I would not think of drawing conclusions about all of them based on just the two communities in my study. However, by comparing these two communities I hope to gain some insight into the kinds of variables which can influence conflict talk online.

For the starting point of my framework, I will be applying the three turn based conflict talk analysis created by Muntigl and Turnbull (1998). To this I will be applying aspects of SIDE theory and the model created by Chen and Chiu (2008) based on the theory of Muntigl and Turnbull (1998). In the following chapters I will be discussing these models in more detail and describing how I have adapted them for the purposes of my study. After this I will be presenting my own, completed framework and the analysis of the data gained from my source

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12 While Oxford English Dictionary defines geek as "an unfashionable or socially inept person", this term is not usually seen as an insult inside the subculture, but refers more to a technologically adept person

material.

3.2.1 Social Identity/De-individualization (SIDE) and Social Information Processing Theory (SIP) in this study

The biggest challenge in my study was adapting existing methods of study to fit the purposes of CMC analysis, as it is by it's very nature a fairly recent environment for conflict talk studies. Indeed, it is only from the late 1980's that personal computers started to make communication through the Internet possible for people outside a small group of experts. However, despite the short history of CMC, the importance of studying the role of computers in human communication is something that has interested researchers from the earliest days of the Internet. By the late eighties two lines of research had already been established (Di Blasio & Milani 2008). Based on these two lines, two different models of CMC analysis, known as SIDE (Social Identity/De-individualization) and SIP (Social Information Processing Theory), were developed in order to examine how people build their identity online and how their behavior is affected by various factors.

The SIDE theory was first introduced by Spears and Lea (1991) in their study on de-individualization in CMC. This theory proposes that the individuals' behavior is influenced by their perception of belonging to a social group. According to SIDE, since CMC does not offer as many cues for identification as FtF communication, people tend to put more weight on those cues they are able to observe. SIP theory introduced by Walther in 1992, on the other hand, examines the relationship between FtF communication and CMC, proposing that an integral difference between the two is that in CMC people have more time to form a detailed impression of the other speakers. The SIP model also aims to provide means for identifying how people succeed in building those impressions (Walther 1993, as cited in Di Blasio and Milani 2008).

While both models concentrated on social cues and identification in CMC, in my study I have chosen to focus more on the SIDE theory when examining online communities. This is because I feel it is more suited for the purposes of large amounts of data, as it focuses on examining individuals in connection to group dynamics. The SIP theory, on the other hand, I feel is not suitable for the purposes

of my study, since it empathizes examining impressions formed by individuals, which is something I am not currently able to observe reliably. Another reason for my preference of the SIDE theory is that one of the main features of 4chan as a community is rapid exchange of opinions that leaves little time for building impressions, making it the very antithesis of the hypothesis the SIP model is based on. Therefore, while group dynamics is important for the purposes of my study, it is not in it's scope to study individual posters.

What makes SIDE theory especially relevant to my study is it's take on the question of anonymity and the effects of anonymity on group dynamics and individual behavior. This includes examining intentional uses of anonymity in CMC in order to take advantage of the benefits granted by unidentifiability. Of particular interest is the claim of Spears and Lea (1991) that factors that are considered de-individualizing, such as anonymity and group immersion, can actually reinforce conformity to the groups norms (Di Blasio & Milani 2008: 799)**.** Spears and Lea (1991) argue that when an individual identifies strongly with a group, anonymity will strengthen the impact of social norms, but will weaken those effects when a person's own identity is more salient. Consequently, individuals with a higher sense of self are less likely to follow social norms. This is very interesting when doing comparative studies on SA and 4chan, as previous observation of the communities seems to show very different levels of group immersion between the two communities. I shall be comparing my findings on the effects of anonymity to those proposed by the SIDE model, and reporting my results in relation to this theory.

3.2.2 Muntigl and Turnbull on conflict talk analysis

While the SIDE theory is important when posing the questions I wish to answer in my study, it does not provide a ready framework which could have been applied for this study. Therefore, when creating my own framework I decided to take advantage of one of the most well known models for analyzing conflict talk in FtF communication created by Muntigl and Turnbull (1998). While there are some very important differences when comparing methods of analyzing conflict talk in FtF communication with computer mediated conflict talk, this does not mean that

the Muntigl and Turnbull model is irrelevant for the purposes of studying CMC. Influencing factors such as group mentality and authority are still present in CMC, although researchers differ on just how large their impact is in online communication situations (Di Blasio & Milani 2008: 802). Nevertheless, it would be unwise to separate CMC so much from FtF communication as to claim they require two completely different models of analysis.

The model in the Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) study, being one of the most often cited in the field of conflict talk analysis (CTA), is an interesting system consisting of examining an argument as a dialogue with three turns. These three turns (T) can be described in terms of initiation (T1), reaction (T2) and counter reaction (T3). Muntigl and Turnbull (1998: 228-229) conclude that there are four main types of responses that are used in T2 and T3 to answer to previous claims. These are as follows:

1)   *Irrelevancy claims*. These are responses that refute the validity of previous claims based on their invalidity to the conversation. These Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) suggest vary largely in form and follow immediately after, or even overlap with, T1 in FtF communication. Muntigl and Turnbull also state that irrelevancy claims challenge the opponents argument by directly challenging it's relevance concerning the topic under debate. For example, "This has nothing to do with the subject" is a fairly common usage of an irrelevancy claim.

2)   *Challenges*. These Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) note as often being preceded by reluctance markers displaying disagreement and often take the form of an interrogative. They also state that articles such as *when*, *what* or *how* are often used. Challenges do not appear to make a specific claim themselves, but implicate that the other party cannot support their claim.

3)   *Contradictions*. Contradictions mostly contain the negated proposition of the previous assessment uttered by the previous speaker. The negative particle *no* is very common in these types of arguments, or in the case of a negative previous claims positive contradiction marker such as *yes* or *yeah* are used (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998).

4)   *Counterclaims*. These do not directly contradict or challenge previous claims made by the other speaker, but instead propose an alternative interpretation of the

issue. Muntigl and Turnbull suggest that these types of responses are often considered more compromising and allowing the further negotiation of the subject matter. They also add that in spoken discourse counterclaims tend to be preceded by pauses, prefaces and mitigating devices.

(Muntigl and Turnbull 1998)

In their study, Muntigl and Turnbull (1998: 233) propose that in most cases T2 and T3 utterances usually only used one type of response. However. they did not find many differences in the types of responses concerning T2 and T3. This similarity between T2 and T3 responses is what makes Muntigl and Turnbull's model suitable for studying conflict talk in online communities. Due to the multiparty aspect of most threads, it is important to consider turns in much larger scale, as well as take into consideration the fact that there may be multiple arguments going on inside one thread. This is why it is vital that the model used to analyze participant reactions is one that can be adapted to include multiple speakers. Concerning my study, I have allocated the original post as T1. Following this, every post connecting directly to T1 will be counted as T2, while all the posts connecting to messages other than T1 will be known as T3 posts.

While an excellent basis for studying conflict talk, the Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) model alone was not enough for the needs of my study. This is because it has some obvious weaknesses when it comes to studying CMC. Firstly, it is essentially a spoken word model with emphasis put on non-verbal aspects of speech, such as overlap and pauses. Secondly, as it has already been stated, it is a model focused on only two speakers engaging in a three turn exchange. This means it is not compatible with the more variable situations and styles of communication present in CMC. A third weakness is that the Muntigl and Turnbull (ibid) study was conducted among people who were very familiar with each other, unlike in the case of online communities where the participants are usually relative strangers to each other.

This difference between the interpersonal relationship of my subjects compared to those of Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) was one of the main issues I had to consider when adapting their model for the purpose of studying CMC. Relating to this,

Muntigl and Turnbull propose that the type of T2-T3 structure they observed may only occur in civil conversation, as there is an element of negotiation involved. In the case of online communities with different established rules and patterns of behavior it becomes more difficult to define the term "civil conversation". However, as it is impossible in online communities to maintain an argument consisting purely of incoherent insults, it is to be expected that conflict talk in CMC environments will at least contain the bare minimum requirements concerning civil conversation, thus meaning it will fulfill this criteria of the Muntigl and Turnbull model. While I cannot expect completely similar behavior from the subjects of my study as Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), I propose that the conversations in question fit the definition of "civil" as used by Muntigl and Turnbull.

Concerning the differences between T2 and T3 utterances, while Muntigl and Turnbull did not notice any differences in the types of responses they employed, Ikeda (2008: 293) makes an interesting addition to the characteristics of T3 utterances while utilizing the Muntigl and Turnbull model in a study. This is the special action of *sticking to the previous claims* in T3 turns. By this Ikeda (ibid) proposes that in a conversational model following the Muntigl and Turnbull formula of two speakers in three exchanges, it is possible for the first speaker to use T3 to repeat or reinforce his/her original argument, instead of responding to the T2 argument. Since Ikeda (2008) introduces this type of response as being exclusive to T3 utterances, it is necessary for me to address how I will be addressing this issue in my study, as I intend to use the same criteria to analyze both T2 and T3 messages.

In my study, I have chosen not to separate this type of response from a regular T3 turn, as I feel analyzing these turns as regular T3 arguments (i.e. by categorizing them as counterclaims) will sufficiently explain their function in the conversation. Moreover, in this type of multiparty environment keeping track of all previous claims in order to verify the cases of repetition is simply beyond the scope of my study. However, it is important to note that in multiparty arguments there is likely to be an element of responding to disagreements with repeated claims. In order to provide at least a cursory view of this type of T3 reaction I have included a review

of posters that come back to defend their earlier claims, as the posters directly identify themselves as the author of the original message and use their turn to defend their original claim. In the case of 4chan, this method of identification is actually one of the only ways to discern connections between posts and posters, as the level of anonymity allowed by the community is so great it is impossible for an outside observer even know the number of participants in a thread.

While the main emphasis of the model of Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) is on the structure of arguments as described above, they also examine the concept of face in CTA. In order to support their opinion that face concerns influence the structure of arguments. Muntigl and Turnbull (ibid) in their study rank the different types of responses based on their level of aggravation. According to these rankings, irrelevance claims (IR) are the most aggravating type of responses, followed by challenges (CH), contradictions (CT), contradictions combined with counter claims(CT + CC[13]), and counter claims (CC) in that order (Muntigl and Turnbull 1998: 243). Muntigl and Turnbull base their system of ranking on the following reasoning:

1.   Irrelevancy claims are the most aggravating, because they express pure opposition without any room for further conversation. There are also elements of speech associated with IR, such as overlap, which people find especially aggravating in conversation situations.
2.   Challenges are the second most aggravating type of evaluation, as in spoken word they are often prefaced by markers of opposition that overlap with the previous turn. Challenges are also face threatening, because they imply that the other party cannot back up their claim.
3.   The next strongest type of responses are contradictions. This is because contradiction is a face-aggravating act which contains direct and unambiguous repudiations of the other speaker's claim(s). However, contradiction is not as aggravating as IR or CH, because it does not make a direct attack against the rationality of the opponents argument or it's competency.
4.   Next aggravating type of reaction is actually a combination of two types of responses CT and CC. While combining two types of responses is not very

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13 This being the most common combination in a turn involving more than one type of response

common, this is the most common type of combination. While this type of response still contains the negative effect of face-threatening aspects of CT, it is mediated by the negotiative potential of CC.

5.   The mitigating aspect of counterclaims and it's indirect type of opposition is why it is the least aggravating type of response when it comes to disagreement acts. CC also does not close the subject, but keeps it open for discussion.

This system of classification is one the main reasons I choose to adapt Muntigl and Turnbull's model for the purposes of my study. With an already existing model of disagreement acts that have been categorized from strong to weak in terms of level of aggravation, examining the effects of anonymity and toxic disinhibition becomes a much simpler process. In this study, I will be examining the types of responses used in each community and trying to determine if more aggravating types of responses are preferred over milder ones. However, instead of simply following the Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) model, I will combining their analysis of responses with an analysis of *evaluations* as defined by Chen and Chiu, which is discussed in the next chapter.

3.2.3 Combining the Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) model with Chen and Chiu (2008) model

While I had originally intended to use only the Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) model as the basis for creating the framework for my study, it soon became apparent that I would need to find an appropriate study in the field of CMC research to support the gaps created by the FtF aspects of the Muntigl and Turnbull study. Fortuitously, a paper written by Chen and Chiu (2008) seemed to fill this gap. They have examined how earlier messages effect later ones in CMC by using their own method incorporating parts from the Muntigl and Turnbull model, which makes their model an excellent addition when building the framework of my study. While separately neither model completely fits my purpose, adapting both into one model is likely to provide all the data I needed.

The advantage of of the Chen and Chiu model lies in it's focus on studying online communities. Chen and Chiu (2008: 679) define an online discussion forum as:

> ...an asynchronous electronic bulletin board for communication and collaboration, where participants can post and respond to messages on the internet.

The Chen and Chiu (2008) approach concentrates on examining the connections between posts based on five different communicative acts.

1) *Evaluations*, meaning either straight agreement or disagreement communication acts as well as neutral acts. Evaluations explain how the current speaker assesses previous messages. This can be directly tied to the Muntigl and Turnbull (1998) classification of response acts, as all of them count as a type of evaluation.

2) *Knowledge content*. This type of act deals with providing information in the form of, for example, contributions and repetition. It is notable that a message can also contain null content, meaning it is devoid of any type of knowledge content.

3) *Social cues*. This category examines how people relate to each other concerning social interactions. Chen and Chiu (2008) propose social cues in CMC work in a way similar to FtF communication, in that positive feelings are returned with positive feelings etc.

4) *Personal information* (aka identifiers). This deals with the visibility and identifying features of a speaker, such as their number of posts on the forum, possible alliances etc. Unidentifiability does not necessarily mean a person has no visible personal information, but rather that there are different amounts of information it is possible to gain from different identifiers. For example, the information that a person's user name provides is on a different level from the information the groups they associate with provide.

5) *Elicitation*, meaning simply whether or not the posts elicit a response. Elicitations Chen and Chiu (2008) also considered to be an indicator of the importance of a message, as a high response rate to a post would naturally indicate higher visibility of the message.

(Chen and Chiu 2008: 679-683)

Based on these five categories, the Chen and Chiu model addresses many of the features that have already been discussed as important when it comes to studying online communities; including anonymity, linking and status. By combining it

with the Muntigl and Turnbull model, it allows for the examination of the category of evaluation more deeply.

Chen & Chiu (2008) also found that disagreement acts are more likely to elicit responses in an online communication, a claim which is supported by Chmiel et al (2011). This is what makes their study especially important for my research, as I will be examining the effects of different types of evaluation acts in T2 and T3 posts. However, interestingly enough, Chen & Chiu also found that negative social cues reduce the likelihood of a poster responding with a contribution. This would seem to indicate that posts that receive most responses express disagreeing opinions without containing negative social links to other speakers. This is something that I found interesting for to purpose of my study, and another reason the Chen and Chiu study was perfect for my purposes.

4. THE METHODS AND INITIAL DATA ANALYSIS

4.1 Disclaimer

This analysis was conducted in the spring and summer of 2012 and uses the data and information concerning the Something Awful (SA) and 4chan online communities as available during that period of time. While I have aimed to provide access to the material of this study when possible, no links will be made with actually people and their messages as discussed in this study. However, since some of the material collected for the purposes of this study is no longer available online, it is recommended that the reader visit the links provided to each community's web-page and take some time to examine the visual and technical structures of both SA and 4chan, as this will make it easier for them to follow along with the analysis.

4.2 Introducing the communities

The title of the SA thread examined in this study is *React to OWS ITT*, with OWS being an acronym for Occupy Wall Street and ITT being Internet shorthand for *In This Thread*. The OP (*Original Post*, note that this acronym is also used in Internet slang to refer to the *Original Poster*) consists of a fairly long text introduction (twelve paragraphs) with an addition of an image depicting one of the OWS protests. Participants in the thread are given instructions by the OP on what type of content belongs in this particular thread, and why the OP has decided to start a thread based on this topic. The OP also asks the participants to considers such issues as what exactly is the OWS trying to achieve and if they are at all likely to succeed, as well as encourages them to find more information about the subject.

Comparing this with the 4chan OP, in the 4chan thread the original post consist of only one sentence, namely "Why did OWS fail?". Next to this text we have a fairly chaotic image of the OWS protests, an interesting contrast to the more peaceful image in the SA thread of a middle-aged man standing next to a sign. In the 4chan picture, on the other hand, there is a collage of images from all over the world depicting suffering and misery with the text "99%" superimposed on top, while below these images is a collage of the OWS protesters holding signs. This is a direct reference to the slogan of the OWS protesters claiming that they are the

99% of the populous that has been exploited by the 1%. Thus, while the text in the OP may not indicate a direct opinion, the use of the word "fail" combined with the image makes an implicit statement that the original poster does not appear to agree with the OWS protesters.

From the introduction of the topic alone it is easy to tell that these threads exhibit a fundamental difference in how a debate is initiated. This difference in presentation is one reason why, in order to understand the what methods of conflict talk are used in each community, a cursory look of their layout and functions is required. While fundamentally conforming with the norm of online discussion forums, the posting process of both SA and 4chan does have some particularities which I will be examining in the next two chapters.

4.2.1 Preview of the Something Awful forums

The first community examined in this study is the Something Awful forums (SA). Something Awful is an Internet site consisting largely of different types of humorous articles and columns, most discussing topics related to the geek subculture such as technology, video games and Japanese animation (*anime*). The SA community boasts of being one of the largest and most strictly moderated communities on the Internet. This community requires a considerable investment from it's members, as if a person wishes to post content to the community they must first purchase an account. Registering a basic account on the SA forum costs 10 dollars and registered users agree to follow all forum rules with the threat of probation, ban or even a permanent ban (aka *permaban*) from the community. Additional privileges, such as avatars, signature texts or archive access can cost anywhere from 5 to 10 dollars, meaning that the investment of an SA member on the community is not only ideological, but also financial.

Mechanically, the SA community does not differ much from the typical layout of online discussion forums. At the top of the forum homepage are the statistics of the community at the current moment, indicating such things as amount of members online, banned users and active threads. When it comes to content, the community consists of several sub-forums organized under topics, which in turn

may contain other sub-forums. For example, the *Discussion* forum contains the sub-category *Games*, which in turn contains such sub-forums as *Traditional Games* and *Let's Play*. Each of these sub-forums in turn has a list of ongoing threads (conversations), where the most recently updated thread is placed at the top of the page. Each thread opens with an official OP (original post*)* which introduces the topic. The responses from other members appear beneath the OP in the linear order of posting from top to bottom.

Like previously mentioned, members of the SA community are able to purchase several privileges for their account. These privileges can be used to customize the users profile (adding identifiers), but perhaps more important to gain access to closed parts of the community (archive access) and alternative methods of contacting other members of the community (private messaging),. The amount of these personal identifiers is usually a good indication of a person's investment towards a membership in the community, as more identifiers means a greater financial investment. All newcomers to the community automatically start with an avatar picture declaring them as *newbies* aka newcomers to the forum, and just getting rid of this status indicator will cost five dollars. Some people immediately invest more money in order to remove this label of a newbie, while some forgo this investment, appearing to posses no interest in paying money to elevate their status.

What makes this type of purchasing system especially interesting when examining status in online communities is that it is also possible for forum members to purchase privileges as a gift to other members of the community. The members of SA have established a peculiar system, where purchasing identifiers has become a part of social power play in some of the conversations. This system consists of a fairly basic, at least in theory, reward/punishment system, where one member subjectively evaluates another member's post and then reacts to it with a positive or negative identifier he wishes to attach to the poster. This type of identifier can take many forms, but red text (sometimes combined with a picture) appearing underneath the victim's user-name is usually a preferred negative identifier**.** This type of communication can sometimes happen as a joke between two members who know each other, but it can also be seen as a form of confrontation or a face-

threatening action, as if a person wishes to rid themselves of a negative identifier they will have to pay in order to do this.

Whatever the reasons behind this type of behavior, social identifiers play an important part when it comes to interpersonal relationships in the SA forums. Members identified as newbies are clearly indicated as having the least invested in the community, which can affect they way other members view messages and threads posted by members with this type of identifiers. As newbies also have the least to lose when it comes to their face-claims in the community, they sometimes have to deal with accusations of registering in order to troll the community or spread their own agenda. This is especially true if the person is identified as just recently becoming a member of the community. An example of this would be a thread discussing the behavior of person X, who is a member of another online community. While everyone else seems to be of the same opinion about the topic, person Y stoutly defends person X. If the other members in this occasion see that person Y is labeled with status-lowering identifiers (newbie avatar, just registered an account), it is very likely that someone will accuse person Y of being, in fact, person X, or at least one of their close supporters.

A very different position is reserved for the other end of the scale, where we have the moderators (mods) and administrators (admins) of the community. These are often people who have spent years in the community and posses a special interest in the particular sub-forum they are supervising. The moderators have the right to punish members that break the established rules of the community, or otherwise act in an undesirable way. These punishments can take many forms, ranging from a temporary probation for minor offenses to a permanent ban from the whole community, in which case the offender is not only evicted, but also denied the right to ever purchase another account. Considering that registering just a basic account on SA costs 10 dollars, one can see that the moderators hold a fair amount of power in this particular community. In order to prevent the moderators from abusing their power, the rules of the community require that a suggested punishment by one mod is reinforced by another before it can be put into action.

Since the punishments for an offense can be quite severe, SA is also known for

having a well documented, extensive list of rules, which the members often consult in dispute situations. These rules are recommended reading to newcomers to the community, and the SA rules even include a section called "Message to the Newbies".

> We here on the Something Awful Forums are very elitist and strict assholes. We pride ourselves on running one of the most entertaining and troll-free forums on the internet. This is accomplished by charging a $10 fee to filter out folks not serious about adhering to the rules, and banning those who manage to slip through and break them. We are very serious about keeping our forums clean and troll-free, so please consider your account an investment and treat it accordingly. Read the rules, use common sense, and help keep the SA Forums the best message board on the internet!

It is also strongly suggested that before registering an account on the forums a person should lurk for a while, in order to understand what type of behavior could potentially be frowned upon in the community. The main rules stated on the actual SA rules page are as follows and concern all the sub-forums in the community.

> **Low Content Posts:** Please do not make posts containing no content (i.e, "first post," "hello, I'm new here," etc.). These just litter up the forums and with over 100,000 registered users, we need to eliminate these as much as possible. If you do not like a thread, then just vote it a "1" and move on; replies consisting solely of trolling fall into this category. As a general rule, write as if you were speaking in real life to another human being. Do not use any catchphrases, memes, internet slang, or any other crap that makes you look like a 12-year old.

> **Worthless Posts:** We do not care if you are drunk or high; please do not inform us of either. Please do not register gimmick accounts and make posts as a gimmick, as they are not funny. Please do not post crap asking us to vote for you on some website, give you referrals for free i Pods / flatscreens / spare tires, or any other semi-spam things.

> **Forum Fuckery:** Don't fuck up the forums or any user on the forums. If you post a malicious link (any URL with spyware or code designed to annoy people) you will be banned. Do not vote spam a thread with your friends because you don't like the person who posted it; this makes the voting feature useless. Do not make plans to annoy / destroy other forums.

> **Stay On Target:** Try to use the appropriate thread tag for your post. This helps people find your thread and makes the forums more user friendly. Do not use the mod-only tags or you will be autobanned by the server.

> **Contained Conflict:** Keep all flamewars and other arguments in their appropriate forums (FYAD, YCS, etc).

> **Respect the Mods and Writers:** The moderators are here to keep the forums safe, sane, and secure. If they ask you to do something, please do it. Please do not harass or intentionally annoy the mods or insult the front page writers. If you do not like the mods or the moderation, feel free to not post here.

> **Harass and Sass:** If somebody is harassing you on the forums then discuss it with them

over PM or email before contacting a mod about it. Flames and insults do not constitute harassment. Please do not post others' personal information (phone number, addresses, emails, etc.). Try to stay out of other peoples' personal lives as well. **Keep in mind there's a good distinction between the Internet and real life.**

Account Ability: Only one person may use a forum account. Account sharing is a bannable offense, so please keep your password secure.

Crazy Catchall: Please do not try to cleverly circumvent some rule listed here. These rules are general guidelines and are very flexible.

FYAD Freedoms: You cannot post illegal material, harass others by posting their personal information or nude photos, spam thread subject lines to break the forum tables, harass any admins or mods, or start forum invasions in FYAD.

I Hate Speech: Offensive terms such as "faggot" or "nigger" may or may not be bannable based on context of the sentence. If they were meant as humor with absolutely no offensive slurs meant, the user may not be banned or probated. This rule is completely, 100% subjective and is based on the mod reading the post at the time. Use at your own peril.

<div align="right">(SA forums 2012)</div>

Aside from these general rules, there are also specific guidelines for posting images, dealing with moderators and even a list of issues that may "annoy" the moderators. This is not all, as each sub-forum may also have their own set of rules, which are usually stated in a *sticky* (i.e. a thread which will always remain at the top of the page by default) and enforced by the particular moderators of the sub-forum. For example, the Let's Play sub-forum contains an additional rule prohibiting games with explicit sexual content (aka *hentai* games).

If a member of the community does break the rules enough to warrant a punishment from a moderator, their personal profile is changed to point out the nature of the punishment (probation, ban etc), the moderator who decided on that punishment and the possible duration of it. By clicking on this person's punishment, which is visible beneath their name on every post they have made, the other users are directed to a page where all that member's violations and punishments are viewable by everyone else belonging to the community. These violations may also include comments from the moderator who requested the punishment in the first place, such as "Trolling, don't come back here" or "No need to get angry, take some time off".

One interesting feature of the SA rules is that aside from the normal practice of

stating the norms of acceptable behavior, SA rules also control the level of knowledge content present in the messages posted to the community. As an example of this, issues as "low content" and "worthless posts" seem to be equally punishable compared to offenses such as "hate-speech" or "spamming". Indeed, it appears that the SA community takes a fairly strict view on the type of Internet slang which is used freely on many other online communities. For example, while the acronyms such as LOL (*laughing out loud*) may not be officially forbidden, I have witnessed many occasions where a member of the community has been punished for using Internet slang, or failing to express themselves understandably.

4.2.2 Preview of the 4chan image boards

When compared to the well moderated community of SA, 4chan may at first appear to have completely different standards when it comes to online communication. However, interestingly enough these two forums actually share a common history, as the 4chan web-page was actually founded by a member of the SA community as an extension of the SA section dedicated for discussing anime. Currently, these two communities share a peculiar love/hate relationship in that, while users of both SA and 4chan are more than likely to follow the discussions going on in the other community, it is not uncommon to see derisive remarks in one community concerning the other.

In this battle of impressions it is not surprising that 4chan is usually the target of much more severe opinions than SA, as it is very different from what is traditionally understood as a community. At a first glance 4chan seems to lack the common goals and/or norms which are usually seen as necessary for a functioning community. However, despite this lack of cohesion, in other online communities communities 4chan is almost always understood as community of some sort, as certain types of behavior seem to be commonly linked with the user-base of 4chan. The term *channer* is sometimes used to refer to a person who acts in a way one would expect from a 4chan contributor, even if there are no visible indicators of the person's affiliation with the site. Thus, 4chan appears to be a community based not on ideas or interests, but on certain types of behavior and patterns of communication.

The fact that the 4chan website is something different from a typical online community is also something that is structurally evident when we examine the layout of the site. Unlike SA, 4chan is not connected to a website offering "official" content, but works purely as a discussion platform for various topics. On top of the home page there is a welcome message which describes the community as "an image-based bulletin board where anyone can post comments and share images "[14]. In this text there are also two hyperlinks, one directing the visitor to the rules page and one to the FAQ (*Frequent Asked Questions*) section. Underneath this message there is a list of sub-boards arranged vertically under topics such as *Japanese Culture* or *Adult*. Unlike SA, 4chan also includes two areas that are clearly marked +18, indicating that those particular sub-boards will likely include material that is only suitable for adults. Underneath the topics there are statistic concerning the community and some suggestions on where to start, such as recent pictures, latest posts and popular threads.

When entering the boards themselves it is immediately apparent that the layout is much more simplistic than the layout of the SA forums. The topics are organized so that the most recent are at the top, while older topics get automatically deleted after a sufficient amount of time and/or when new topics replace them. When a thread is automatically deleted it cannot be viewed or commented on by the users ever again. The threads are simply introduced by a title and the original post, which can contain almost any type of content from genuinely informative to completely irrelevant or biased. What is interesting is that each original topic usually contains a picture relating to the topic and the original posters opinion on it.

One peculiar thing concerning the 4chan homepage is that while both 4chan and SA homepages include several links directing the reader to the more practically oriented parts of the site (i.e. *tools* or *account*), in the 4chan page one of these buttons is written in Japanese characters. When this button is clicked, it takes the

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14 Note that while 4chan is technically called an image-board and not a forum, in practical terms it functions much like any other online community, thus you will see me using the terms interchangeably in this study. It is however important to note that an image-board differs from the forum environment in that that posting of images and hyperlinks is highly encouraged and sometimes even required.

reader to a page with a short message written in Japanese, which welcomes any Japanese people to the site and tells a little bit about it's purpose and functions. It also requests that the reader use English when posting on the boards. This is relevant to another interesting feature of the community, namely that some of the sub-boards have names that use Japanese titles instead of English, such as *Hentai* or *Oekaki*. This indicates a certain presumption about the type of user that would visit the 4chan community, which dates back to it's beginnings as an extension of the SA anime community.

If a reader chooses to view the rules section of the 4chan site, s/he may notice that it does not appear that 4chan is any more lenient towards disruptive and conflict seeking behavior than other online communities. 4chan, like SA, has several sets of rules. The so called *global* rules are universal to all the sub-communities and everyone is expected to adhere to these regardless of the specific board they are posting to.

1. Do not upload, post, discuss, request, or link to, anything that violates local or United States law. This will be severely punished and strictly enforced.

2. If you are under the age of 18, or it is illegal for you to view the materials contained on this website, discontinue browsing immediately.

3. Do not post the following outside of /b/: Trolls, flames, racism, off-topic replies, uncalled for catchphrases, macro image replies, indecipherable text (example: "lol u tk him 2da bar|?"), anthropomorphic ("furry"), grotesque ("guro"), or loli/shota pornography.

4. The posting of personal information or calls to invasion is prohibited.

5. All boards that default to the Yotsuba B or Burichan (blue) theme are to be considered "work safe". Violators may be temporarily banned and their posts removed.

6. The quality of posts is extremely important to this community. Contributors are encouraged to provide high-quality images and informative comments.

7. Submitting false reports or otherwise abusing the report system will result in a ban of indeterminate length.

8. Complaining about 4chan (its policies, moderation, etc.) on the image boards can result in post deletion and banishment. The administrator will address your questions, comments, complaints, and concerns via e-mail.

9. Ban evasion will result in permanent bans. No exceptions—DO NOT EVADE YOUR BAN. Instead, wait and appeal it!

10. No spamming or flooding of any kind.

11. Advertising (all forms) is also not welcome—this includes any type of referral linking, "offers", etc.

12. Impersonating the 4chan administrator, moderators, or janitors is strictly forbidden.

13. The use of scrapers, bots, or other automated posting or downloading scripts is prohibited.

14. Remember: The use of 4chan is a privilege, not a right. The 4chan staff reserves the right to revoke access and remove content without notice.

<div align="right">(4chan rules 2012)</div>

Aside from these global rules, there are also board-specific rules which are also listed in the general rules section. The board that is important for the purposes of this study is the *Politically Incorrect* (aka politics, or /pol/) sub-board, which has the following specific rules connected with it:

1. Debate and discussion related to politics and current events is welcome.

2. You are free to speak your mind, but do not attack other users. You may challenge one another, but keep it civil! ”

While these rules may at first appear similar to the rules of the SA community, even a cursory glance at the 4chan discussions reveals that there is a difference in just how exactly these rules are enforced. Among the first comments discussing the conflicts in Middle-East there is a message that reads:

> They are living the dream.. removing one mudslime at a time. meh, jews and mudslimes killing of eachother? let them...

While the rules clearly state that this type of hate speech is not allowed outside the sub-board /b/, it does not appear that this has in any way prevented this particular poster from expressing their opinion in, quite simply, terms that can only be described as racist. Nor does it appear that they have suffered any type of punishment for their rule-breaking. As we read more of the content posted to the 4chan community, it becomes apparent that this is not a unique case. Indeed, 4chan has for a long time had a reputation as containing some of the most controversial material on the Internet. It has been called with names like the ”asshole” or the ”sewer” of the Internet, which is perhaps not surprising

considering many threads posted to the community contain material such as pornography, hate-speech or violent images. Some service providers, AT&T for example, have even tried censoring the site completely, and there have been several connections made between *Anonymous* and 4chan. However, as 4chan does not require a registration from the users of the community, who are all identified simply by the monicker *anonymous,* it is difficult to draw any incontestable conclusions about how much this is actually true

What makes 4chan an especially challenging environment for research is perhaps just this lack of identifiers, as all the relevant information anyone can see of the other participants in a conversation is the time of posting and the number of the post. This level of unidentifiability makes it difficult to determine whether a poster is serious, trolling, or merely seeking attention. However, as I will not be examining the motivations of the posters, but purely how they express themselves and what methods of conversational dominance they use in conflict talk situations, ascertaining the sincerity of the participants is not necessary for the purposes of my study.

4.3 Framework and methods of analysis

In the following section I will do my best to describe my method so as to make it replicable, after which I will present my analysis. The analysis is divided into two parts, structural and content analysis, which are each presented in their own section with the method that was used to create the framework for the analysis. I will also be providing examples of my data, i.e. messages that were posted to SA and 4chan communities. When collecting the data, every message examined for the purposes of this study was read three times altogether, once for the preliminary examination of the material, once for structure analysis and once for content analysis. The posts marked unclear after all three readings were examined a fourth time in order to ensure they were classified correctly.

4.3.1 Structure analysis

In order to examine the structure of the communication on the forums and the relationships between messages, the posts were examined in as belonging to a

branch of of discourse inside the thread (see p. 17 concerning the definition of branches). The branches were structured so that the OP of the thread was designed as T1, while posts commenting directly on the OP were marked as T2 posts. All the other posts that linked either to T2 posts or did not link to any posts at all (i.e. were directed to the whole thread) were designed as T3 posts. This made examining which types of posts successfully initiated conversation easier. In the case of T2, the posts were also further classified into three categories, in order to accetain what type of response they made to T1. Three types of initial reactions concerning T2 were observed as occurring in both community. These were:

1) *Direct reactions*. The posts including this type of reaction either directly linked to the OP in the text or commented directly on the issue presented in the OP. For example, in the 4chan thread the OP posed a question "Why did the OWS fail?" Any messages answering this question were considered direct reactions, as they had a clear pragmatical link to the OP. Messages which did not directly answer the OP's question, but nevertheless addressed the issue discussed in it were also considered direct reactions. For example, contradictions such as in Example 1

> (1) Did it fail? I thought it was still going on?

were considered direct reactions, since they were clearly commenting on the issue posted by the OP.

2) *Indirect reactions*. The posts including indirect reactions usually discussed topics vaguely related to the subject as presented in the OP, but they did not directly answer any questions or address the issues raised in it. These posts often contained anecdotes, or aimed to provide some additional information (for example, in the form of hyperlinks) without actually expressing their opinion of the topic at any point. For example, messages such as

> (2) this is probably one of the greatest things that has ever come out of OWS
> http://www.thedailyshow.com/watch/wed-november-16-2011/occupy-wall-street-divided

contained no links to the OP aside from the choice of topic. Indirect reaction were also more prone for going of tangent than direct reactions. In one part of the 4chan thread, an indirect reaction to the OP led to people posting pictures of starving children in Africa while making sarcastic comments, such as

(3) maybe if you worked harder like me you wouldnt be in this mess

3) *Meta-conversation*. The type of posts were not reactions to the topic, but reactions to the discussion itself. The posts often included comments such as "This thread is getting more and more off-topic" or "Lots of people in this thread can't spell".

Following this model, the amount of T2 and T3 messages was first compared with both communities, after which the types of T2 reactions were analyzed. Thus we can asses the significance of initiations in each community, as shown in the next figure.

Table 1. The number of initiations

	Initiations	Direct	Indirect	Meta	All Posts
4chan	65	42	18	5	242
SA	35	12	18	5	240

When contrasting the data from Something Awful and 4chan it was immediately apparent that there was an interesting difference in the amount of direct initiations between the two communities. Out of 240 messages posted to the SA thread 35 (14.58% of the total) were classified as T2 type initiative posts, while in the case of 4chan out of 242 posts 65 (25.86%) were T2 initiations. This would seem to indicate that the users of 4chan preferred taking initiative action and making their own opinion heard concerning the original topic, while the posters on SA were less likely to initiate a whole new branch of conversation, preferring instead to contribute to the already existing discussion. However, in the case of 4chan there were more rejections of initiative acts, as in the SA thread 23 (65.71%) out of all the initiative acts resulted in less than 5 exchanges of messages, while in the case of 4chan the number or rejections was 49 (75.38%). This would seem to indicate that while taking initiative action was a popular method of communication in the 4chan thread, there was also more competition between initiative messages.

What did connect both communities was that direct T2 reactions seemed to occur

mostly in the early stages of the conversation, between posts 1 and 20. In the case of 4chan the number of T2 direct reactions dropped significantly somewhere round the 100th post, as before post 94 there were 31 this type of posts (73.81% of the total), but in between posts 95 and 242 this number was only 8 (19.05%). In the case of SA, there were 7 (58,33%) T2 type messages containing direct initiation before post 100. Initiations of indirect T2 reactions and T2 meta-conversation did not seem to occur more in any specific stage of the conversation.

Based on this data, it appears that the smaller number of T2 initiations increased the possibility of a reaction in the SA conversation. While most of the actual conversation concentrated on few main branches, there were only 13 initiations (37.14% of the total) that completely failed to elicit a reaction. In the case of 4chan this number was 35 (71.23%), which seems to support the theory that there was more competition for T3 reactions among the 4chan messages. In both SA and 4chan there were 18 posts with T2 initiation acts that were classified as indirect reactions, while 5 posts initiated T2 meta-conversation. In terms of percentages, this means that in the SA thread 51.43% of all the initiations were indirect, while in the 4chan thread this number was only 36.73%. This means that in the community where competition for attention was harsher, posters preferred to use direct methods of initiation instead of indirect ones.

Concerning the different branches of conversation (see Figure 1), in the SA there emerged fairly quickly a branch which could be considered to be the main part of the conversation. This branch initiated from post number 2, and continued all throughout the thread in some form. There were only a few drastic changes in the direction of the conversation in this main branch, one occurring in post 143 where the previous part of the branch was no-longer directly linked to in new messages. However, thematically the conversation of this branch continued from post 141, where another T2 indirect response elicited reactions from many of the active participants in the main branch. This situation repeats itself again later in the conversation, where the main branch is again derailed by a T2 indirect reaction in post 191, only to thematically continue in post 193.

In the case of 4chan, finding this type of main branch of the conversation is not as

easy as with SA. While there are some branches that in terms of quantitative dominance can be referred to as the most visible part of the conversation, these branches very were much more intertwined, with one message potentially containing direct links to two different branches at the same time. The branches in the 4chan discussion were also made less coherent by the fact that some of the messages linking into them contained interjections, such as images or single word responses, which derailed the branch when the other participants attempted to interpret these interjections. For example, post 147 attempted to correct an earlier poster on their interpretation of two earlier messages.

(4)   >>374900
         no
        >>374922
         yes
        >>374960
        they disagree l2textcasm

To which another poster responded,

(5)   >>374977

        They are arguing for the same fucking point, you fucking retard.

        /facepalm x infinity

This lead to a long derail where the argument of both posters was debated, while the original topic of the thread was completely dismissed.

This tendency of 4chan threads for being easily derailed is relevant when discussing the position of T2 responses containing meta-commentary in both communities. It appears from the data that meta-conversation played an important role in the 4chan discussion. Out of 5 T2 initiations containing meta-conversation, 2 initiated an exchange of messages longer than 10 posts. This is significant considering that meta-conversation does not discuss the topic at all, but instead offers opinions on the discussion itself. Concerning the number of reactions to type T2 initiations, 47 (out of 242) posts in the 4chan thread linked to a branches initiated by T2 response containing meta-conversation, while in the SA thread this number was 25 (out of 240), even though they had the same amount of T2 meta-

conversation initiations. This would seem to indicate that meta-conversation is a much more popular way of communication in the 4chan community. It is also noteworthy that one of the largest branches of meta-conversation in the SA thread was initiated by a moderator, which might have increased the number of responses to the initiation compared to a meta-conversation initiation made by a regular member of the community.

All in all, despite the differences in conversational structures of the threads between the communities, there seemed to exist a tendency between participants to form communicative chains by linking directly to other messages. It also appears that there was a certain desire to keep communication relatively linear, as most posts only directly addressed one, or at most two, previous messages, usually within the same branch of conversation. Indeed, the communication on 4chan was exceedingly linear in nature, while SA only contained a few cases of forward referencing (i.e. editing posts to orient to messages that come later in the linear posting order). However, concerning the ease of understanding the 4chan thread suffers from it's anonymous nature. As other posters can only be referred to as numbers, the person who wishes to view all the linked messages in their entirety was faced with an unpleasant task of scrolling up and down the page. There was also much less direct quotation used in the 4chan thread, which made it even more challenging for the reader to keep track of the conversation.

These difficulties in following the overall direction of the conversation might explain why in the 4chan thread there were several cases of repetition, misunderstandings and paraphrasing of previous messages. For example, while there were requests for clarification on a specific point in the SA thread, in the 4chan thread there were several messages that implied the poster did not understand the previous message at all. One of they ways this could be seen is how the word "wat" (a corrupted from of *what* indicating a total bemusement) was used to respond to several posts in the 4chan; a strategy which had no equivalent in the SA thread.

It is clear that the structure of the conversation is directly related to the types of conversational strategies used, as the participants are forced to use their turns for

other purposes than expressing an opinion or responding to an earlier message. In the next chapter, I will be discussing the content of the messages posted to both communities and attempting to find out more specifically what types of strategies were employed in the discussions. It is my belief that just like there were differences in conversational structures between SA and 4chan, I will be able to find examples of different types of content and methods of communication.

4.3.2 Content analysis

In the content analysis part of my study I wanted to pay particular attention to signs of social and conversational dominance, as I believe dominance and conversational methods relating to it are very important tools in online conflict talk. I also wish to particularly examine the position of direct and indirect responses in the conversation, as I believe that indirect expression plays a much larger part in online communication than previously though. I decided to conduct my study by defining the different features of conflict talk and CMC that I wished to examine, based on the models of Chen and Chiu (2008) and Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), and then analyzing my data based on whether or not a message contained a certain attribute. All the messages analyzed in this study were evaluated as either containing attribute (+) or not containing attribute (-) as shown in appendix 1[15]. If a message was found to contain an attribute, said attribute was then analyzed as possibly belonging to a specific type, as explained below.

1)   **Opinions**. These referred to whether or not the poster disagreed (d) or agreed (a) with the post they were responding to. Messages which contained no direct opinion acts were designed as the null-group (x), aka *indirect opinion acts*. Although messages belonging to this group could still imply an opinion, the did not do so directly. To be considered an agreement or disagreement act a post had to fulfill two conditions. Firstly, it had to contain a direct semantic link to the post it was commenting on, for example, by repeating parts of the post, or answering a question posed in it. Secondly, the post had to contain a direct verbal indicator of agreement or disagreement. For example, a post such as

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15 This template was used for content analysis. The structure analysis was done with branch charts as shown in Figure 1.

(6)   >Most of them are poor because of their own decisions
        Completely wrong

fulfills the criteria of a direct opinion act +/d, since it repeats parts of the previous message (indicated by >) and directly refutes the claims made in it. On the other hand, a message such as

(7)   Nobody wants to be a smelly hipster living in a park with the homeless.

is an in direct opinion act (-), since it does not contain any semantic links previous messages, nor does it offer an opinion responding to another poster. These type of messages were usually directed to all of the participants in a thread, and therefore did not directly address any single other message.

2)   **Evaluations**. Originally, Chen & Chiu, (2008) have classified opinions as part of this category of communicative actions. However, I decided to separate opinions and evaluations to their own categories, as based on my preliminary reading of the data it appeared clearly that evaluations could exist separately from direct opinion acts. As I wished to provide more insight on the types of evaluation that are used in computer mediated conflict talk, all evaluations were further classified as belong in four subcategories according to the model of Muntigl and Turnbull, namely irrelevancy claims (IR), challenges (CH), counterclaims (CC) and contradictions (CT). For example, the message

(8)   >>374590
        what change have they accomplished?
        I wouldn't use terms like inevitable, since I highly doubt you can predict the future

is an evaluation containing the attribute of challenge (evaluation +/CH), since it directly questions the other person's claims (Muntigl and Turnbull, 1998). Note that it was possible for a message to be an indirect opinion act while still containing an evaluation, such as in the following post.

(9)   >Most of which have 10-20 people in them

        [citation needed]

Here the second speaker challenges the claim made by the first speaker (>) by

using sarcastic irony without expressing a direct opinion. The words "citation needed" refer to the online encyclopedia *Wikipedia*, where these words appear as a a footnote when a piece of information does not mention the source of that information.

3)   Dominance. Dominance deals with both social and conversational aspects of the attempts of one person to influence the opinions of the other speakers. Methods of conversational include the use of sarcastic irony, appealing to one's status as an expert, appealing to one's status in the community and accusations of conflict seeking behavior, such as trolling. Not included were direct insults such as "You are stupid", because they were classified as being more emotional responses than direct attempts to influence the flow of the conversation. For example, a person might try to influence other participants in a conversation by citing personal experiences which support his/her point of view, such as in the following message.

(10)   Here's the Occupy event in my town on its first day, at its biggest. (And this is a college town so there's lots of potential useful idiots around.) I count roughly 30 people in frame. Immediately to the left is a street, to the right is more sidewalk of roughly the same length before the next corner. (Although half of that space is fronted by a parking lot, and the Occupiers chose this spot because it's in front of a Chase bank. Nobody wants to protest in front of the parking lot.)

In this message the writer attempts to use textual and photographic evidence in order to dominate an opponent who had earlier claimed that the OWS movement had thousands of supporters in cities all over the United States. The writer also employs a sarcastic tone ("Nobody wants to protest in front of the parking lot.") in order to ridicule the group the previous poster has associated him/herself with.

4)   **Knowledge content**. In this study, the term knowledge content was used to refer to information presented as unquestionably true, and not actual factual information. For example, "There are 1000 protests going on" counts as knowledge content for the purposes of this study, even if there is a way to accetain an objective truth about the issue, as the writer is stating what s/he supposes to be an undeniable fact. On the other hand, opinions such as "Capitalism is always evil" do not count as knowledge content, because they use adjectives in order to

provide an emotional evaluation of a concept.

5) **Social connectors**. In the case of this study, these were understood to mean direct connectors that formed links between the messages in the thread. The two most common types of social connectors are directly addressing the other poster by name and linking to a previous post or it's content, either in the form of a quotation, paraphrasing or a hyperlink. In order to qualify as containing social connectors, a posts need to contain one of these two types of connectors. Implied connections with an earlier message were not counted as belonging to this group. In the 4chan thread the marker > is commonly used to refer to content belonging to previous posts. For example,

(11)   >You are not a protester unless you protest something.

indicates that the poster is citing (or paraphrasing) content from a earlier post. Users in the 4chan thread also link directly to previous posts by using hyperlinks such as >>374612, which when clicked guide the reader directly to the post of the corresponding number.

6) **Nonverbal coding**. This refers to the presence of objects other than regular English words in the message. These were commonly used to communicate an opinion or evaluation as well as to emphasize the position of the poster in the conversation. Non-verbal coding consist of pictures, hyperlinks, emoticons and text-effects etc. Common text-effects included the use of italics, bolding and capital letters. Other textual forms of nonverbal coding were paraphrasing and so-called "netspeak" (i.e. the use of acronyms and Internet slang). Another category included in the section was *FtF replacing coding*, which indicates actions that describe physical processes used in FtF communication, but which are not visible in CMC. This category sometimes overlaps with netspeak, for example, in the message

(12)   >>374995
        >I'm going to tell her proudly that I was apart of it, for the attention

        FTFY

the poster is using non verbal coding by highlighting the supposed citation (actually a sarcastic paraphrase) from an earlier message with a yellow color (a default setting in 4chan) while also using the acronym FTFY ("Fixed that for you"), thus using several different forms of nonverbal coding in order to undermine the opponent's argument.

7)   **Identifiers**. These refer to the indicators that help to determine the visibility of the posters. This includes face-defining visual indicators such as avatars or signatures, but also face-face-damaging indicators such as a sign announcing the user has been banned from the community. This category also includes *I-claims*, i.e. speech acts made in defense of posters own claims which are identified with the pronoun "I". This is because by referring to his/herself in the first person the poster directly connects his/her post with earlier messages in the thread, thus diminishing their unidentifiablity. The addition of I-claims was essential in order to examine identifiers in the 4chan thread, as the high level of anonymity in this community prevents observers from associating posts with any particular poster.

In conclusion, each message of the thread was analyzed according to these categories in order to accetain why types of communication methods were used in both communities. For example, a message might be identified thusly:

> **Post number 98:** Opinion (+/a), Evaluation (+/CH), Dominance (+),
> Knowledge content (-), Social connectors (+), Non-verbal coding (-),
> Identifiers (+/avatar, signature)

A message classified as above contains a direct opinion act (agreement), evaluation in the form of a challenge (which may be directed towards a different person than the agreement), has examples of conversational dominance but no knowledge content, uses social connectors but no non-verbal coding and the author of the post is identified with an avatar and a signature in each of their posts. By applying this framework to each message in my data certain patterns emerged, which shall be explored in the following analysis.

When it came to opinion acts, this study appears to confirm the earlier findings of Chen and Chiu (2008: 681) concerning the position of disagreement acts in arguments. Chen and Chiu (ibid) propose that disagreement acts are much more likely to elicit responses than agreement acts, which certainly seems to be the case with my study. Out of all the messages posted to the communities, only 5 (2.1% of the total) messages in the 4chan thread expressed direct agreement, while this number for SA was 26 (10.83%). In comparison, the 4chan thread included 61 (24.21%) posts containing a direct disagreement act and 174 (71.9%) messages containing no direct opinion acts, while in the SA thread there were 100 (41.67%) disagreement acts, 26 (10.83%) agreement acts and 128 (53.33%) null-acts.[16]

It is very interesting that while the structural analysis showed that there was more competition concerning initiations and reactions in the 4chan thread, it appears that the SA thread contained more direct confrontations in the form of direct disagreement acts. This is especially relevant when examined in connection with evaluation, as in the analysis of different types of evaluation irrelevancy claims (IR), the strongest form of confrontation according to Muntigl and Turnbull (1998: 243), were actually used least in both communities. Out of all the messages containing evaluation only 12 out of 146 (8.22% of the total)were IR in the SA thread, while all the other three types, challenges (CH), counterclaims (CC) and contradictions (CT)) were used in more than 40 posts. The 4chan thread provided similar results, with 13 acts out of 99 (13.13%) evaluations being IR, while the numbers of other types of evaluation were 22 (22.22%) for both CH and CC, and 38 for CT. This would seem to support the hypothesis that more indirect and seemingly less aggressive means of confrontation were preferred in both communities.

At this point of the analysis these findings may seem relatively surprising, as based on the previous knowledge concerning the 4chan community it would appear logical to assume that direct forms of confrontation would have been preferred over indirect ones. This issue becomes perhaps more understandable when in connection with the use of social and conversational dominance in the

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16 Note that there were a few cases where a message contained both a disagreement and an agreement act. However, the number of those post was so small it is estimated to amount to only <0.1% of the total and thus is unlikely to affect the results.

communities. In the SA thread there were 110 messages (45.83% of the total) that contained methods of social or conversational dominance, while in the case of 4chan this number was 138 (57.02%). For example, both threads provided numerous examples of the use of sarcastic irony, so that while in the SA thread there were such messages as

(13)   Is attacking people for using things made by corporations still A Thing? Like what alternative is there. I think you can make these things through less exploitative methods too, but hey, what do I know I guess

similar messages could also be found in the 4chan thread, including the following example:

(14)   Thanks for the citation. It's good to know you pulled that assumption out of your ass based on one day, in one town, in one protest.

One difference that is visible between the threads is that in the case of SA the number of messages containing conversational dominance does not seem to be effected by the types of opinion acts (null or direct), while in the 4chan thread 105 (76.01%) out of 138 posts did not contain a direct opinion act. Therefore, it would appear that while in the SA thread a most common reaction was a opinion (+/d) act or a null-act potentially containing dominance, in the case of 4chan the most used method was an opinion act (-) combined attempts at domination. The results of the 4chan analysis are very interesting when compared with the results of the study of Toplak and Katz (2000), where they state that sarcastic irony can, in fact, be a more severe and memorable from of criticism. When also contrasted with the fact that 4chan was found to be a more competitive environment for initiations, it appears that there is a potential connection between dominance, indirect expression and for attention seeking in the community.

While competition was found to be an important motivating factor in conflict talk situations, it also appears that the social aspect of the communication act is very important in both SA and 4chan. Out of 240 SA posts and 242 4chan posts 205 (85.42%) and 180 (74.38%) respectively contained direct social connectors. The smaller number in the case of 4chan can at least partially be explained by the amount of failed indirect T2 initiations, as they did not contain social connectors

by default. In the 4chan thread it is also noticeable that social connectors increased drastically after post number 8. This can potentially be explained by the relatively fast pace of the conversation in many 4chan threads compared to other online communities. For example, concerning this study in the SA thread 240 posts were made between Oct 13, 2011 02:39 and Oct 14, 2011 04:07, while in the 4chan thread 242 messages were posted between 11/21/11(Mon) 01:34 and 11/21/11(Mon) 04:36[17]. This means that within few hours the 4chan thread received the same amount of messages as the SA thread did in a day.

Even though it is already apparent that there are differences between conversational structures of the two communities, perhaps the most obvious gap between them becomes obvious when we examine the position of identifiers. In the SA thread most of the post were made by members who were identified by either positive or neutral identifiers. Out of 240 posts 187 (77.92%) were posted by members of the community with an identifier (+) attached to them and of those posts 125 (66.84%) possessed an identifier with a positive face value, while 59 (31.55%) posts included an identifier with a mild or severe negative face value. From this we can conclude that the conversation in the SA threat was quantitatively dominated by members who were willing to invest financially in the community in order to increase their visible status.

Concerning face value, all post with a (+) identifier were analyzed according to what type of face value their identifier held. Three types of face values were considered, namely positive, negative and null (0). For example, if assumed that "Nickname" is actually the members user-name examples of each type of face value would be as follows.

Nickname= no change in face-value
Nickname+"Every moment I'm alive, I pray for death!"= +face-value
Nickname+"I'm a horrible extreme leftist moron who developed my political opinions through a long and trying process of smelling my own farts until my brain died. Please ignore all my stupid posts----------> "= -face-value

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17 These times were copied directly from the forum data and have not been modified in any way.

In this example, a participant with only a nickname as an identifier was classified as having identifier (+) with a (0) face value, as everyone in the community of SA is in possession of a user-name. A member in possession of combination such as nickname + signature possesses and identifier (+) with a (+) value, as the signature indicates in investment in the community, and a participant with a nickname with red text underneath it would be identifier (+) with a (-) face value, as read text in the SA community indicates that someone else has invested money in order to say something negative about the member.

It is important to note that in the 4chan thread there was only one post made which contained an identifier, thus there is not enough data to determine how that identifier should have been categorized. However, this lack of identifiers was somewhat mediated with the use of non-verbal coding in the messages. In the SA thread there were altogether 59 (24.58% of the total)messages containing non-verbal coding, the majority of which, 32 (54.24%) posts exactly, was in the form of text-effects, especially the use of bolding and italics. However, in the case of 4chan there were 139 posts (57.44% of the total) which contained non-verbal coding. While other types of non-verbal coding than text-effects were used occasionally in the SA thread, while in the 4chan thread there was large amounts of variation in the types of non-verbal coding used.

In the case of 4chan non-verbal coding was not only used in many posts, but there were also many messages which contained several types of non-verbal coding. For example, in the message

(15)   >>374911
        uh NO
        She was the spirit of the planet whom embodied them with powers. Their
        respect and love for the planet is more than enough drive for them to save the
        planet, gaias primary role was to HELP them achieve their missions, and never
        was she demanding

        >link me youtube of her demanding something of a planeteer or STFU *(shut
        the fuck up)*

the poster uses capitalization (also an example of netspeak) and font colors to empathize parts of his/her message, but also applies FtF replacing coding ("uh" indicating a sound here) as well as paraphrasing the post s/he is commenting on.

This would seem to indicate that non-verbal coding is very important part of communication in the 4chan thread, with a special emphasis on the types on non-verbal communication that are tailor-made for CMC, such as netspeak, hyperlinks and images.

All in all, while in my analysis I found some similarities between the methods of conflict talk employed both in the SA and the 4chan threads, it was clear from the data that both the structure and content of the messages was different in conflict talk situations in both communities. Even in a basic structural level there were integral differences, which also influenced the way the conversations were conducted and what methods of communication were employed by the members of the communities. Some of the most important differences occurred in initiation, non-verbal coding, the use of identifiers and the position of direct and indirect opinion acts. However, similarities were found between the use of social and conversational dominance as well as the use of social connectors. In the next chapter I shall be elaborating more on these findings and their possible significance.

In this study I have aimed to provide an informative look on conflict talk in online communities. However, there were some discrepancies that forced me to reevaluate my data and apply some conditions for it's use in the analysis. Firstly, it was discovered that the category of knowledge content was extremely difficult to objectively evaluate, since much of the information that was presented as knowledge content was either highly subjective or impossible to verify. For example, when expressing political opinions many participants stated their preferred opinion as a stated fact, and also reviewed the opinions of others through their subjective point of view. Likewise, many people used personal anecdotes or hearsay as proof of their claims, making these claims almost impossible to prove either true or false.

For these reasons, I have reluctantly decided not to include the results of the analysis concerning knowledge content in this study. While I may still allude to those results in connection with other types of content it is my suggestion that anything in this study related to knowledge content should only be viewed as a

guideline of the themes associated with it. In other aspects, I have found the data to be accurate, so that I feel confident in presenting my own conclusions based on the analysis of that data. In the following chapter I will be examining the significance of the results gained from the data and elaborating on their relevance for studying conflict talk in online communities.

5. RESULTS IN REVIEW

The present analysis seems to confirm earlier claims concerning the nature of data gained from online communities, i.e. that different sources of data produce different results even with the same method of analysis. This is clearly the case with SA and 4chan online communities, as comparative analysis of both communities showed clearly that how people constructed conflict talk changed depending on the environment, just like in FtF communication. Even in the case of communities that share a similar audience and discuss similar topics, the methods of conflict talk varied depending on several environmental factors.

These influencing factors seemed to include at least the level of visibility (anonymity) of the participants as well as their observability (level of visible moderation in the community), but also other factors such as linearity (the participants were not limited to answering only messages immediately preceding their turn) asynchronicity (the participants were able to review messages posted while they were not present in the conversation) and visuality (the participants could use methods other than text or writing to convey their opinion). More specifically, there were several types of conversational methods discovered which employed different strategies in order to best convey the message intended by the author.

5.1 Structure, anonymity and initiation in the arguments

The structure of each community seemed to play an important part in how arguments were constructed. In the case of SA with it's more complex and flexible comment system people were more likely to leave longer messages containing different types of text effects, while the simpler system of 4chan preferred visuality in the form of images and colors. There was also more competition in the 4chan thread when it came to T2 initiations, which shaped the conversation in that people used more indirect opinions combined with non-verbal coding and language of dominance in order to make their posts more memorable. The SA thread was also constructed of several distinct branches of conversation where the

participants posted lengthy arguments and detailed analysis' of their opponents' arguments, while the conversation in the 4chan thread was more fragmented and prone to confusion.

This more fragmented nature of the 4chan conversation could at least partly be attributed to the lack of identifiablity associated with the participants. Concerning anonymity, it would appear that, if evaluated according to the SIDE theory, there was considerably more group immersion on the SA forum compared to the 4chan forum, as the SIDE theory connects group immersion to the amount of personal identifiers (which were absent in the 4chan conversation). Since the 4chan community displayed more examples of toxic disinhibition as well as more competitive initiation actions, it is safe to conclude that the members of that community have a higher sense of self, which impedes them from acquiring a similar feeling of group solidity as the SA community according to the SIDE theory (Spears and Lea 1991).

However, this does not seem to have affected the fact that in both communities the the members showed awareness of the other participants in the conversation, even when they did not refer to them directly. There was also a clear difference made between the people who were participants in the conversation and "others".For example, in the message

(16)   He isn't some brainwashed stooge, he's just been mislead by the fallacy of the American Dream. He is in school, makes barely above minimum wage and scrapes by with little extras and probably very little time for his own pursuits. I see this as a problem with the system. If he wants to work hard and be barely getting ahead in life, so be it. That is not acceptable to me however, I want a better future for me and my kids if/when I choose to have them.

I'm not saying everyone should live in some Great Socialist Paradise or something that won't happen in the US but if that was my kid I would pity him. I know where he's been and that's not a life I wanted to live. It's not fun being constantly broke and working your ass off to barely make ends meet.

the writer refers to *he*, a person mentioned in an earlier post who is not a participant in this conversation, and distances his/herself from the said *he*, while also bringing his/herself closer to the group by engaging in a dialogue with it. They also use the same type of language and terminology (allusions to "Socialist

Paradise") that had already been used earlier in the discussion.

This would seem to indicate that while a community such as SA may form a more cohesive group than 4chan, in both communities there seemed to be a clear division between *us* and *others*, indicating that even though the 4chan thread was more prone to toxic disinhibition, the participants still shared a type of group identity. Thus, the discussion that took place in the SA thread could almost be compared to something like an inside conflict in a political party, the 4chan conversation could more accurately be said to resemble a shouting match between representatives of two different political parties, while the "others" in both cases would be the people not involved in politics at all.

However, the difference in levels of the group immersion between the community did appear to have an effect on one important aspect of conflict talk, namely the position of initiations. In the SA thread participants were often willing to follow up on previous comments, while in the 4chan thread there appeared to be a general desire of getting one's own message heard above everything else. thus the difference between the number of T2 initiations in the threads. While there were as many cases of indirect initiations in both communities, the number of successful initiations was much greater on SA than in 4chan. SA initiations were also more likely to include pragmatic links (i.e. using similar vocabulary) to the main topic of the conversation, while 4chan T2 indirect initiations often focused on irrelevant sidetracks not necessarily related to the topic at all. There were also some fairly bizarre derails in the 4chan discussion, such as a branch going from debating the political benefits of capitalism to an argument about who was the leader of the *Planeteers* from the cartoon *Captain Planet*. This would seem to indicate that for the 4chan thread the process of debating is actually more important than the subject of the debate.

Regarding all possible types of initiation, it is also possible to draw some interesting conclusions concerning the position of T2 messages in the linear structure of the thread. Since T2 post seemed to occur more often in the early stages of the discussion, it can be argued that while online communities are essentially asynchronous, time does affect the way participants orient themselves

when posting messages. The earlier posts in both SA and 4chan threads were more prone to including initiative acts and orienting towards the OP, while later posts did not contain as many initiations and oriented mostly towards other messages and users.

In the case of SA this can be at least partly attributed to the fact that the main branch of the conversation was dominated by posts from small group of members dedicated to the topic. New T2 initiation acts from people who did not already have a role in the conversation found it harder to elicit a reaction from the members belonging to this group. In the case of 4chan this type of grouping was not observable, as the lack of personal identifiers made it very difficult to find repeat posters. However, in the 4chan thread self-defensive reactions (I-claims) increased greatly in the later part of the conversation, indicating that at least some of the participants contributed multiple messages to a particular branch of the conversation.

Based on SA and 4chan it would appear that online communities where rivalry is more prevalent and group immersion not as strong tend towards the more provocative and memorable types of conflict talk, while in environments where group immersion is stronger there is less rivalry and quantitative and sequential dominance play a larger part than initiations or in the debate. There also seems to be a connection between FtF and CMC conflict talk in that the participants in the conversation in both threads seemed to prefer more indirect ways of confrontation in conflict talk situations, perhaps relating to the previous studies who found them to be more memorable (Chmiel et al. 2011). This was apparent in the way that even in the more aggressive and competitive atmosphere of the 4chan community indirect responses were still preferred over direct confrontations.

5.2 Conversational dominance and identifiably

The fact that indirect forms of confrontation were popular in the communities does not mean that there were no attempts to use dominance in the conversations. It appears that in the case of 4chan visuality was often used in combination with aggressive forms of sarcastic irony to elicit reactions from the other posters. The

nature of these reactions, whether negative or positive, appeared less important than the reaction itself. Nevertheless, some arguments were formed so that they seemed to deliberately provoke negative reactions from the other posters. For example, in the message

(17)   [>>374995](>>374995)
I too will proudly say i was apart of it. you greed filled, ignorant, ruthless people disgust me. please leave my parks and public spaces

provocative and emotional language is used, as if the writer is daring the other posters to disagree with his/her opinion. The goal of conflict talk in the 4chan thread appears to have been to be the most "vocal" participant in the conversation, which is perhaps why brevity was preferred in the posts (as the longer posts invariably risk the "Too long, didn't read" response), while **q**uantitative dominance did not appear to be a popular method of conversational dominance.

The desire to separate one's self from the crowd might also account for the more prevalent nature of meta-conversation in the 4chan thread, as one way to gain attention to one's own initiation is to use social connectors to link it to as many other posts as possible. Using meta-conversation can also be seen as an attempt to gain a position of superiority, as by commenting on the whole thread, i.e. all the other speakers, a poster separates his/herself from the other participants. This complements Chen and Chiu's (2008) theory of high status members appearing as more distant and less likeable than low status members in a community.

Thus, creating distance between the group and oneself can be taken as an attempt to raise one's status. Whether or not this actually works is debatable, as the sheer number of responses elicited by these type of T2 initiations seemed to indicate, at least in the case of 4chan, that other speakers responded to these initiations either by dismissing the supposed face claims of the T2 poster ("What do you know about this issue?" or "You're just a troll") or by attempting to close the distance by continuing the conversation in the same tone (i.e. agreeing with the T2 poster, or expanding on their comments). Comparatively, the posts containing meta-conversation in the SA thread mostly concentrated on actual issues with the dialogue. For example, a small branch of meta-conversation was born when a

moderator commented on the OP, asking why a new thread has been created when the forum already had an ongoing thread discussing an almost identical topic.

It may appear surprising at first that meta-conversation played such a minor part in the SA thread, as verbosity was clearly something that was appreciated in the conversation with an average post containing more than two paragraphs of text. It also appears that the members of the SA community were more careful when reading other users' posts, as in several cases previous messages were quoted ad verbatim and their content analyzed not only on the semantic, but also pragmatic level. The participants in the 4chan thread, on the other hand, rarely posted more than one or two sentences of text and commented only on those parts of the previous messages they had special interest on. These differences can at least party be attributed to the time element of the conversations. The 4chan users aimed at a rapid exchange of opinions in the knowledge that a thread which did not gain new content would quickly disappear, while the SA users were aware that everything they wrote was likely be viewable to people even years after the posting date and therefore put more time and care in composing their messages.

The time invested into composing a message effected directly what methods of conversational dominance were preferred in the communities. While SA members seemed to prefer quantitative dominance, structured arguments and detailed deconstructions of the opponents arguments, 4chan members concentrated more on swift attacks that combined the use of sarcastic irony and/or intertextuality (in the form of citations and paraphrasing) with conversational strategies used specifically in CMC, such as memes. Visuality also played an important part in the 4chan discourse, as many messages attempted to argue their point simply by the posting of an image. These images often related to an opinion expressed in an earlier post, either by containing knowledge content disputing the claims made in that post, or by portraying a subject that created an ironic contrast to the previous argument.

It appears that unlike in the FtF study conducted by Muntigl and Turnbull (1998), the participants in the SA and 4chan threads were much more inventive when composing their arguments and responses. One example of this was the use of

mock agreements. Sarcastic paraphrasing was a method often evoke an image, where a poster supposedly quoted a previous message while actually changing some or all of the contents of that message so that the argument made in it was made to look implausible or ridiculous. This method of using sarcasm as tool for influencing people is interesting when analyzed in context with the fact that embarrassing one's opponent seems to be one of the more popular ways in which opinions are influenced through CMC, at least in the case of these two communities.

5.3 Rules and moderation

In the previous chapter I already mentioned that in the SA thread there was one meta-conversation initiation from a moderator, while no such interruptions occurred in the 4chan thread. This absence of visible signs of supervision is one of the main differences between the two communities. The moderators in the SA are very easy to identify, even when they are only taking part in a conversation as a regular commentator. Thus, the participants in the SA thread were aware that their actions were being observed and offenses would be punished, while the participants in 4chan thread received no visible cues of a controlling party's presence. Perhaps this lack of visible control contributed to the fact that in the 4chan thread competition for dominance took on a more visual and aggressive approach, even going so far as many participants directly broke the community's rules concerning hate-speech and offensive material. For example, the words "faggot" and "retard" were used more than once as an insult, even though they could fairly be considered as "offensive" to some people, as well as "hate-speech" depending on the situation.

It appears that while the level of visibility of the poster affects they way in which they conduct themselves in online environments, the visibility of authority is also important when attempting to limit the amount of toxic disinhibition in online communities. Although it is impossible to draw reliable conclusions from such a small sample of data, it does appear that visual examples of accountability can encourage people to follow the rules more strictly. Interestingly enough, it does not appear that punishments are only effective if they result in face-loss to a

person's actual identity, as in the SA thread we can see that posters are prevented from overstepping the limits by threatening their constructed identities in the community which they have invested time and money on.

It also appears that people who were willing to put time and money into constructing their online identities (i.e. SA members) were more much more eager to appear well-informed and erudite than those with a disposable identity (4chan members). While the data concerning knowledge content in this study did not provide 100% reliable results, it would appear that with more group immersion and investment in the community, the amount of knowledge content in the posts also increases. On the other hand, the posters with disposable identities seemed primarily concerned about being noticed and having their opinion dominate the conversation. In the future it could be interesting to study further the effects of moderation and constructed identities on online communication and especially on conflict talk.

6. CONCLUSION

Knowledge of conflict talk in online environments is vital in order to properly take advantage of the possibilities new technologies around us offer, but also when it comes to ideological clashes and conflicts. It can fairly be said that these days the opinions of Internet users are influenced by the type of online content they access. Many traditional newspapers have already moved to digital publishing in addition to their paper copies, while media companies are also starting to understand the importance of digital presence and make more and more content available to the online audience. With the traditional tools of communication moving to the digital world, the discussion concerning them has also moved, so that the old letters to the editor pages have been replaced with online forums dedicated to current news and other relevant topics. This is why researchers can no-longer afford to neglect the full potential of conflict talk in computer mediated communication (CMC).

It is clear from my analysis that more research is needed concerning conflict talk in online communities. It is necessary to study online conflict talk outside laboratory environments, since the actual online communication act happens in naturally occurring communities. Even when examining two communities sharing the same audience, this study found enough differences to make it apparent that applying results of one study conducted in an online environment to another environment is not a reliable strategy when attempting to explain conflict talk in CMC. Therefore, before any attempts at analyzing online discussions are made it is vital to make sure that the analysis is based on data that is relevant to the subject. It is also only logical to conclude that special attention is required concerning making any generalizations about online communication based on a single source of data. Since both structural and contextual methods of conflict talk influence each other in online communication, it is also vital that both should be taken into consideration when studying online communication.

It also fair to conclude that in order for a researcher to conduct productive studies on the topic of online communities, it is vital that they posses a certain level of knowledge about their research subject as well as a certain amount of knowledge

about the Internet in general. This is because there are many contextual features present in online discussions that rely on a certain level of social or technical iKnow, if they are to be interpreted correctly. More research is needed on how higher levels of iKnow can help researchers avoid negative reactions from their subjects. Since questioning the other party's information or intelligence was a major aspect of conversational dominance in both communities, it is only fair to assume that revealing a lack of preliminary information will lower the status of the researcher in the eyes of their subject.

In this study I wished to provide an example of the variety and complexity behind the use of conflict talk in online communities. While being fully aware that my data only concerns a small example of the multiple types of online communication, I have aimed to engage the interest of the reader and encourage others to study the subject. My goal is to inspire and encourage not only other researchers, but people, organizations and companies to increase their iKnow in all aspects, and help others to understand that the Internet is a platform of communication consisting of several different environments and in a constant state of change. The key to success in all CMC is to learn to navigate these environments and to be able to understand the need to adapt to these environments. This way, not only is it possible to behave appropriately in conflict talk situations, but also avoid unwanted conflict talk situations, or at least minimize the damage to face-claims in those situation.

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Figures:

Tables:

Abbreviations:

AOIR	Association of Internet Researchers
CC	Counterclaims
CH	Challenges
CMC	Computer mediated communication
CT	Contradictions
CTA	Conflict talk analysis
FtF	Face-to-face
HSM	High status member
iKnow	Internet Knowledge quota
IR	Irrelevancy claims
LSM	Low status member
SA	Something Awful
SIDE	Social Identity/De-individualization theory
SIP	Social Information Processing Theory

Template for content analysis

Post numb.	Opinion		Evaluation								
	No direct op.	Agree/Disag.	IR	CC	CH	CT	Dominance	Knowledge cont.	Social conn.	Nonverbal cod.	Indentifiers
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