

**“YOU’LL NEVER WALK ALONE”:**

Formation of sense of community through language on the  
subreddit r/LiverpoolFC

Bachelor’s thesis

Jonna Kauria

University of Jyväskylä

Department of Language and Communication Studies

English

May 2017

## JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty Humanistis-yhteiskuntatieteellinen tiedekunta	Laitos – Department Kieli- ja viestintätieteiden laitos
Tekijä – Author Jonna Kauria	
Työn nimi – Title ”You’ll Never Walk Alone”: How sense of community is formed through language on the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC	
Oppiaine – Subject Englannin kieli	Työn laji – Level Kandidaatintutkielma
Aika – Month and year Toukokuu 2017	Sivumäärä – Number of pages 30 + 3 liitettä
Tiivistelmä – Abstract <p>Internetin merkitys arjessa on kasvanut huomattavasti suurelle osalle maapallon ihmisiä viime vuosikymmeninä. Verkossa on lukemattomia sivustoja, joista useaa voisi kutsua internet-yhteisöksi. Yksi suosituista sivustoista on reddit, joka koostuu erilaisista yhteisöistä eli aliredditeista. Aliredditit rakentuvat yleensä kiinnostuksenkohteiden tai ajankohtaisten aiheiden ympärille, ja niiden sisällön tuottamisen ja ylläpidon toteuttavat sivuston käyttäjät.</p> <p>Tutkielmani tarkoituksena on selvittää, miten redditin käyttäjät luovat yhteisöllisyyden tunnetta kielellisin keinoin aliredditeissa. Tutkimukseni kohteena on alireddit r/LiverpoolFC, joka on suunnattu Liverpoolin jalkapallojoukkueen faneille. Jalkapallo on maailman seuratuin urheilulaji, ja sen fanikulttuuri tarjoaakin otollisen alustan yhteisöjen syntymiselle. Aliredditista r/LiverpoolFC keräämääni tekstipohjaista dataa analysoimalla pyrin osoittamaan keinoja, joilla yhteisön jäsenet luovat ja vahvistavat yhteisöllisyyden tunnetta aliredditissaan. Analyysini pohjana toimivat McMillanin ja Chavisin yhteisöllisyysteoria, jonka mukaan yhteisöllisyys rakentuu neljästä eri elementistä, sekä Herringin laatimat kriteerit verkkoyhteisöille.</p> <p>Tutkimustulosteni mukaan kaikki yhteisöllisyysteorian elementit ovat läsnä aliredditin r/Liverpool viestinnässä. Yhteisöllisyyttä rakennetaan aliredditissa monin kielellisin keinoin, kuten käyttämällä ryhmälle spesifejä lyhenteitä ja sanoja sekä loitontamalla ryhmää muista faniryhmistä kielen avulla. Alireddit r/LiverpoolFC myös täyttää lähes kaikki kuusi Herringin luomaa verkkoyhteisöiden kriteeriä. Tulosten perusteella voidaan todeta, että kielelliset keinot ovat aliredditissa merkittävässä asemassa yhteisöllisyyden luomisessa ja vahvistamisessa. Vaikka tutkimuksen laajuus on rajallinen, se tarjoaa esimerkkejä yhteisöllisyyden rakentumisesta redditissa ja antaa pohjan jatkotutkimuksille samankaltaisista aiheista.</p>	
Asiasanat – Keywords sense of community, online community, football, Liverpool FC	
Säilytyspaikka – Depository JYX	
Muita tietoja – Additional information	

## TABLE OF CONTENTS

<b>1 INTRODUCTION</b> .....	3
<b>2 BACKGROUND</b> .....	4
2.1 Reddit as a platform .....	4
2.1.1 Subreddit r/LiverpoolFC.....	4
2.2 Defining online communities .....	5
2.3 Football as an object of research .....	6
2.4 Sense of community .....	7
2.5 Community of practice .....	7
2.6 Identification and disidentification.....	8
<b>3 THE PRESENT STUDY</b> .....	9
3.1 Aim and research questions.....	9
3.2 Data collection.....	10
3.3 Methods of analysis.....	11
3.3.1 Discourse analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis .....	11
3.3.2 Ethnography.....	11
3.4 Ethical issues .....	12
<b>4 FINDINGS</b> .....	13
4.1 Establishing membership .....	14
4.1.1 The use of insider language .....	14
4.1.2 "Us versus them" language.....	18
4.2 Influence .....	19
4.3 Integrity and fulfilment of needs .....	22
4.4 Shared emotional connection .....	24
<b>5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION</b> .....	26
<b>BIBLIOGRAPHY</b> .....	28
<b>APPENDICES</b> .....	31
Appendix 1: Correspondence concerning data collection .....	31
Appendix 2: Context for the data excerpts .....	32
Appendix 3: Context for the data excerpts .....	33

## 1 INTRODUCTION

The Internet and its different social media channels play a significant role in the lives of a large part of the globe's population. Internet environments provide an opportunity to connect with people all over the world regardless of the participants' geographical locations. It is a reality that the majority of the world's population lives without Internet, and Internet access and the ability to produce Internet content are still largely determined by socio-economic status (Schradié 2011). However, in many countries Internet use is a daily occurrence for nearly the entire population. For instance, in 2016, 88 percent of all Finns used the Internet, and almost all Finns under the age of 55 used it (Tilastokeskus 2016). As Leppänen, Westinen and Kytölä (2017: 2) note, social media act as significant sites for everyday life, as habits of 'being in the world', communicating with others, sharing and arranging information, and collectively constructing culture.

One of the popular social media platforms of recent years is reddit. Reddit was founded in 2005, and in 11 years it has gained a user base of over 250 million unique users (Reddit 2017). Moreover, Duggan and Smith (2013) state that six percent of all online adults in the US use reddit. One of the defining features of reddit is that it is more of a collection of communities rather than one large community. In fact, reddit consists of different kinds of subreddits which usually revolve around a certain interest or theme.

The focus of this study is the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC which is directed at fans of Liverpool Football Club (LFC). The subreddit combines two interesting objects of study: online communities and football. Football communities online have not been studied extensively although football is generally recognised as a topic worth researching due to its large following around the world. With this study, I aim to illustrate whether a community that is built around a specific interest, in this case Liverpool FC, fulfils set criteria of an online community. Moreover, I aim to portray how a sense of community is constructed through linguistic means in the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC.

The study consists of five sections. In the second section, I present relevant research and definitions that relate to my study. I also present previous research on online communities, football communities and reddit as an online platform. I also present the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC which is the object of my study. Moreover, I display the theoretical frameworks and definitions of sense of community, community of practice as well as identification and disidentification. In the third section, the aim of the study and its research questions are introduced. I also describe the data collection of my study. Moreover, the methods used in my study, discourse analysis, computer-mediated discourse analysis and ethnography, are presented in chapter three. Section four consists of the analysis concerning the

construction of a sense of community in the chosen subreddit. In section five, I discuss the findings of the study and their relevance for the study of sense of community and online communities.

## **2 BACKGROUND**

The background section of this thesis aims to introduce relevant previous research and theoretical concepts that are related to the present study. In the following section, I first present important findings of previous research on online communities, football communities and reddit as a platform. Next, I define the concepts of sense of community, community of practice, and identification and disidentification which relate to the present study of the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC.

### **2.1 Reddit as a platform**

Reddit is a social media platform which consists of different user-generated and user-moderated communities. As a platform, it provides its users the opportunity to generate content as well as evaluate the content of others by granting them ‘upvotes’ or ‘downvotes’ which are visible to all users. As Meikle (2016: 85) explains, reddit unifies the affordances of user-generated or curated content with community voting on the interest or relevance of such material. Thus, the users of reddit have the opportunity to influence the content of the site. Overall, reddit has grown into a large online platform which offers people of a variety of interests the opportunity to discuss them with others.

Despite the rising popularity of reddit in recent years, there is little research on it. Previous studies on reddit have focused on topics such as participatory culture, community and play (Massanari 2015), reddit’s effectiveness in campaigning (Mills and Fish 2015), citizen journalism (Meikle 2016) and reddit’s voting dataset (Klapuri et al. 2013). In all but the last study, findings include mentions of reddit’s communality and its participants’ ability to unite despite the fragmental nature of the site. As can be seen, the perspectives of these previous studies have been varying in nature. However, research on reddit is clearly lacking in the field of sociolinguistics, although reddit offers significant potential for research of the field. Since my study is conducted from the perspective of sociolinguistics, I wish to present new kinds of findings on reddit, thus filling the gap in research to a certain extent.

#### **2.1.1 Subreddit r/LiverpoolFC**

The object of this study is the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC. The subreddit is primarily directed at fans of LFC, although it does not require subscription to be viewed and can thus be observed by anyone who wishes to do so. At the time of data collection, the subreddit had approximately 45 000 subscribers, making it the most subscribed LFC-themed subreddit on reddit. Part of the decision to choose this particular subreddit as the object of study was its popularity, which often translates into active

discussion. Since the topic of my thesis is largely focused on community-building through interaction, a subreddit with active discussion seemed to be a suitable choice. The subreddit was also a suitable object of study in the sense that I was not familiar with it beforehand, despite being a LFC fan myself. Thus, I felt that I could observe the community in an objective way without feeling the need to censor or embellish its content.

The posts on the subreddit are mostly focused on LFC matches, news concerning the club and the players, and general discussion on LFC-related matters, such as opinions on players, seeking advice for purchasing match tickets and sharing experiences as LFC fans. There are also occasional general chat threads, but I decided not to focus on them since they are not the preliminary content of the subreddit. Overall, the subreddit combines the topic of LFC and the specialties of reddit as a platform in a way that makes it an interesting object of study.

## 2.2 Defining online communities

Online activities are an increasingly important part of the everyday lives of many people. As Leppänen (2012: 233) notes, the globalized nature of the Internet entails the possibility of connecting individuals and groups who can be culturally, geographically and linguistically distant from each other. This unique way of connecting people that the Internet provides could be seen as one of the reasons why online communities are highly interesting objects of study for today's researchers.

In order to study online communities, one must be able to define what an online community entails. With the aid of literature on virtual communities, criteria for such communities have surfaced. Herring (2004: 355) defines six sets of criteria as follows:

1. Active, self-sustaining *participation* and *core participants* who can be identified based on the frequency of posting
2. Shared *history* which can be evaluated through the availability and use of archives, *purpose*, *culture* which is indexed through the use of group-specific abbreviations, jargon and language practices and *norms and values* which can be seen through an examination of netiquette, FAQ, i.e. frequently asked questions, and verbal reactions to abuses of appropriate conduct
3. *Solidarity* which can be evaluated through the use of verbal humour, *support* which can manifest, for instance, as acts of positive politeness, and *reciprocity* which often takes the form of turn initiation and response
4. *Criticism and conflict* which can be examined through speech acts that violate positive politeness and *means of conflict resolution* which can be regarded as an interactive sequence of acts

5. *Self-awareness* of the group as an entity that differs from other groups which can be expressed in its' members' references to the group as a group and in "us versus them" language
6. *Emergence of roles and hierarchy* which can be presented in participation patterns and different kinds of speech acts, as well as *governance and rituals* which usually need to be observed over a period of time in order to be understood by the observer

Some of Herring's (2004: 355) criteria are, in fact, particularly significant for the community of r/LiverpoolFC. Firstly, the expression of the community's culture through abbreviations and jargon which are specific to the group is very common. Secondly, manifestations of solidarity as verbal humour are an important feature of the community's interactions. Lastly, the self-awareness of the group, which is often expressed as "us versus them" language, is especially significant in the community, as well as among football fans in general. In conclusion, Herring's (2004: 355) criteria could be regarded as highly important to the analysis of a community such as r/LiverpoolFC.

### **2.3 Football as an object of research**

Football is one of the most followed sports in the world and has generated a plethora of communities that revolve around the sport. Football and certain features that relate to it, such as fan activities and fan communities, have also gained interest in the field of research. As Kytölä (2016: 379) notes, football is a rich domain for the study of language, globalization and translocality because it is a form of culture, social activity and entertainment that is present in nearly all parts of the world, and involves a significant amount of mobility across nations and social spaces. The fans of football are often highly active on the Internet, forming their own fan communities. A large part of the communities is formed around a certain club that the members support. Thus, there is already a wider common interest (football) that unites the members of the community, as well as a more specific one (a particular club or team). While football has been studied from several perspectives, some of which relate to the topic of my present study, there seems to be little football-centred research that combines both online environments and sociolinguistics. Thus, the present study could offer some new insights into the field of football studies.

As Monaghan (2014: 244) notes, traditionally linguistics defines a community as tied to a certain geographical location, but in online contexts it is clearly the more abstract aspects of community, such as affiliation to common beliefs and ideas, that are at the core of organising the community. The phenomenon applies well to football communities online, in which the shared interest is often football in general or a certain football club. The club in question, such as Liverpool FC, has fans who are

physically all over the globe but they still have a plethora of online communities through which they can discuss their shared interest.

## **2.4 Sense of community**

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), sense of community is constructed upon four components. The first element is membership. Membership is defined as “the feeling of belonging or of sharing a personal relatedness” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986: 9). The second component is influence. Influence in this context means the sense of mattering to a group and the group mattering to its members. The third element is the integration and fulfilment of needs. It serves as reinforcement of the feeling that the members’ needs will be fulfilled by the resources that are offered by the membership of the group. Lastly, the fourth component is shared emotional connection. In other words, it consists of the commitment and belief that the members have shared and will share “history, common places, time together, and similar experiences” (McMillan and Chavis, 1986: 9).

Despite the fact that McMillan and Chavis’ theory (1986) was founded three decades ago, its core ideas are still relevant today in the construction of a community. The manifestations of the four elements may be slightly different, especially in online contexts, but the basis can be seen in many virtual communities. The theory has been applied to some community-related studies. Rotman, Golbeck and Preece (2009) found that YouTube users feel a strong sense of community towards the site despite its scattered and almost non-existent structure. Seeing that YouTube is a very large social networking site, the findings could implicate that a sense of community can be constructed even in vast environments which are diffused in nature. Evidence for the criteria of McMillan and Chavis (1986) is provided by Obst, Zinkiewicz and Smith (2002), who studied the science fiction fandom from the perspective of the criteria of sense of community theory. Although the fan community was based on interest without any geographical boundaries, it was found that the community members reported a strong sense of community. All four criteria of McMillan and Chavis (1986) were found to be present in the science fiction community. These findings strongly suggest that a sense of community does not require physical presence or other conformity. Thus, online communities seem to be a valid object for studies of sense of community.

## **2.5 Community of Practice**

Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 8) describe communities of practice as aggregates of people who come together around joint engagement in a common endeavour. In the midst of the joint activity, different kinds of practices emerge. Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992: 8) also note that a



community of practice is specifically defined at the same time by its membership and the practice in which its members engage.

According to Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002: 4), communities of practice are groups of people who have a shared concern, set of problems or a passion about a particular topic, and who expand their expertise and knowledge in this field by interacting on a continuous basis. The study seems to focus on communities of practice that have the possibility to congregate in a physical space. However, its descriptions of communities of practice are relevant for online communities as well. Wenger et al. (2002: 4) note that when the members of a community of practice spend time together, they usually share insight, information and advice. The notion is as relevant to an online community as it is to a community whose members have the possibility to physically meet each other.

Wenger et al. (2002) express some of the same ideas as Eckert and McConnell-Ginet (1992). For example, Wenger et al. (2002: 5) remark that the members of a community of practice develop “a common body of knowledge, practices and approaches”. Thus, the practices in which the members engage are seen as important by both Eckert and McConnell Ginet and Wenger et al. However, Wenger et al. (2002: 5) also note that the members of a community of practice may even develop a common sense of identity. Thus, the concept of a shared identity is mentioned as a potentially remarkable feature of a community of practice.

## **2.6 Identification and disidentification**

When speaking of belonging to a community, identification is a relevant phenomenon. Identification could be seen as strongly linked with the notion of membership of a community: if one has gained membership of a community, one often also specifically identifies oneself as its member. Identification has been defined as acts in which social actors feel the need to portray the characteristics of themselves and others, to position themselves in consideration of others, to place themselves and others into a narrative, and to place themselves and others in a category or categories in multiple contexts (Leppänen et al. 2017: 15). The described characteristics play a significant role in community construction, in which it is important for social actors to identify as members of the community for the community to be formed.

It is important to note, however, that the concept of identification is not limited to expressions and indications of belonging and alignment. The notion can also encompass acts of disidentification. Disidentification signifies the ways in which social actors disengage, dis-align and distance themselves from specific identification-related stances or possibilities (Leppänen et al. 2017: 15). The concept of disidentification is a particularly important one in the context of football communities. It

is highly typical for football fans to express their membership of a certain fan community and strengthen their fan identity by distancing themselves from the rivalling teams and their fans. Often, slander and mockery directed at rivalling teams and their fans, which could appear as inappropriate to those who are not familiar with football culture, is seen as a traditional and even integral part of expressing one's fan membership.

### **3 THE PRESENT STUDY**

In the following section, I illustrate the research proposal of the present study by presenting its aim and research questions. Moreover, I describe the data collection process of the present study and the methods of analysis that have been used in the analysis of the data. In the end of the section, I also discuss the ethical issues related to the data collection of this thesis.

#### **3.1 Aim and research questions**

The aim of my study is to gain an understanding of how a sense of community is created in the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC, which could be called an Internet community. I will examine the phenomenon from a sociolinguistic perspective. In other words, the aim is to discover how the sense of community is formed through linguistic means.

The research questions of my study are the following:

1. How do linguistic means contribute to the construction of a sense of community on r/LiverpoolFC?
2. Which aspects of online communities does the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC entail?

By finding answers for the research questions, I hope to provide insight into the community construction of the specific subreddit in question. Moreover, I wish to showcase what kind of a role language has in the process. Before conducting the study, my hypothesis concerning the research questions was that linguistic means are used in constructing a sense of community on the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC. For instance, Edwards (2009: 12) suggests that linguistic variations, such as jargon, registers and styles, can indicate group membership, such as belonging to a club or to a gang. My previous experiences with online communities attest to the findings of these previous studies. I have studied online communities before on Imgur and Instagram, and in those studies, language and its varying features proved to be one of the most important tools in constructing a sense of community amongst community members.

### 3.2 Data collection

The data for my thesis has been collected on the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC. The data consists of instances of language use that is in connection with the construction of the sense of community of r/LiverpoolFC. The data collection consists of several stages: observation, collection of data excerpts, final selection and categorisation of data excerpts, and analysis of the data according to suitable theoretical frameworks.

Firstly, I observed the community r/LiverpoolFC and acquainted myself with its content and practices. This first stage is highly important for the study since it aids me to see the larger context of the community's communication. In other words, I familiarised myself with the ways in which the members of the community interact with one another and learnt to decipher recurring communication patterns and other linguistic features, such as insider language. The recurring features seem to be particularly interesting and significant in constructing a sense of community and group identities on Reddit. Thus, it is essential for me to have an understanding of the recurring linguistic features of the community in order to be able to analyse its communication as precisely as possible.

Secondly, I collected data excerpts from the community's online interactions. For this purpose, I used screen shots for short excerpts and images. I also saved entire pages of the website at given moments using the Google Chrome extension SingleFile. SingleFile saves the chosen web page in its entirety at the moment of observation. With its technique, I was able to preserve whole discussions at once without having to take multiple screen captures of each one of them. Moreover, I could observe the conversations of r/LiverpoolFC in the exact form they were in at the moment of collection. All the data excerpts of the thesis were collected from r/LiverpoolFC between October 2016 and December 2016.

Thirdly, I chose data excerpts for closer analysis. The excerpts were chosen on the basis of their relevance regarding the sense of community of r/LiverpoolFC. The other criterion for the selection of the excerpts was that they had generated conversation that spans multiple comments. The reason for the criterion is that the analysis of interaction between the community members is more closely connected with the topic of my study than the analysis of singular comments that have generated no responses. At this stage, I also divided the data excerpts into categories according to the four criteria of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community theory. Lastly, I analysed the chosen data, incorporating the theoretical frameworks of discourse analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis in the process. In this thesis, I attempt to illustrate larger connections between data excerpts

of different categories as well as the links between the data and the wider theoretical frameworks connected to the issues which have arisen.

### **3.3 Methods of Analysis**

In the analysis of the collected data, I widely utilised McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community theory and Herring's (2004) criteria for virtual communities which have been presented in the previous section of this thesis. Since the two theories are strongly connected with the research questions of this thesis, they have been incorporated into the analysis in order to illustrate how the community construction on r/LiverpoolFC is performed. In order to gain a deeper understanding of the collected data, I have also drawn from the fields of discourse analysis, computer-mediated discourse analysis, and ethnography. These methods are presented in the following sub-sections.

#### **3.3.1 Discourse analysis and computer-mediated discourse analysis**

As Reddit is a highly text-centric website, the majority of my data is text-based. The focus of my study is the use of linguistic features in the construction of sense of community. Regarding the focus of my study, Discourse Analysis (DA) is a logical choice for the basis of my analysis. DA as a collection of methodologies examines how the use of language is affected by the relationships between the participants and the influence the use of language has upon social identities and relations (Paltridge 2012: 2). Considering that Reddit, and thus r/LiverpoolFC, is an online environment, the analysis also draws from the findings of Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis (CMDA). As Herring (2004: 342) notes, CMDA offers a methodological toolkit and a collection of theoretical ideas through which to make observations and construe the results of empirical analysis on online behaviour.

It is also important that the methods are connected to the communal aspects of the study, i.e. the construction of a sense of community on r/LiverpoolFC. I feel that both DA and CMDA fit the requirement. Paltridge (2012: 17) remarks that speakers often have a variety of social identities and discourse community memberships as well as a collection of languages or language varieties they use to interact in within certain communities. Thus, DA can be used to pinpoint particular uses of such language varieties within the community in focus. CMDA, in turn, is highly useful when observing online communities, i.e. virtual communities. As Herring (2004: 344) notes, CMDA can be used to determine whether a group of people that interacts online establishes a community and how the characteristics of a virtual community can be determined.

#### **3.3.2 Ethnography**

Since my study also contains a period of observation, it draws from the field of linguistic ethnography as well. However, linguistic ethnography is not as central a method in the study as DA and CMDA. Rather, it provides some ideas that have been incorporated into the present study. Ethnographers seek to capture and comprehend the meanings and dynamics in particular cultural settings by observing and participating in the environments they aim to describe (Rampton et al. 2004: 2). In the present study, I have observed the community in focus for a period of time in order to gain an understanding of its conventions and patterns of communication. By integrating these features of ethnography into my study, I have been able to analyse the collected data with more insight and precision. In conclusion, selected features of ethnography have mostly been relevant to the observation period of the study. While the observation period itself may have helped the analysis, ethnographic features have not been extensively utilised or presented in the analysis of the gathered data.

### **3.4 Ethical issues**

When collecting and analysing online data in a study, one must consider the ethical aspects of the process. As Kytölä (2013: 69) remarks, computer-mediated communication is a particularly grey area in regards with research ethics, since it entails online environments that are neither clearly open or public, nor distinguishably closed or private. Thus, researchers of online data must consider their conduct of study carefully. Markham and Buchanan (2012: 12) specifically emphasise the significance of acknowledging and resolving ethical issues as they surface in each stage of the research. My aim was to do exactly this by considering ethical issues in each step of writing my thesis, from choosing the topic to deciding how to present the data and whether to anonymise the discussants of the collected content.

The object of this BA thesis, the subreddit *r/LiverpoolFC*, is openly accessible to anyone who wishes to view it. One does not need to subscribe to the subreddit to see its content, nor does one need to have a reddit account in order to observe the subreddit. However, such an easy accessibility is not self-evident in social media environments. For example, Zimmer (2010) illustrates difficulties that researchers of a certain study faced with successfully anonymising data collected from college students' Facebook accounts, having accessed some of the data through the resident advisors of the college and thus potentially bypassing some participants' privacy settings. Due to these kinds of issues, the accessibility of the subreddit was one reason for which I felt that *r/LiverpoolFC* could be a suitable object of study from an ethical viewpoint. However, despite the accessibility of the data, I took some measures to protect the anonymity of the discussants in my data excerpts. Although reddit users operate on the site under pseudonyms, I anonymised their usernames in order to avoid recognition of the participants. In recent years, there has also been discussion on whether the

researcher should aim to preserve the anonymity of the participants by anonymising them or give them due credit based on their original content and thoughts (Leppänen et al. 2015: 5). In the case of this thesis, I felt that anonymization was a safer choice, due to the nature of the data content. While the discussants whose messages have been included in the data certainly express their own idea in their texts, there are no distinguishable revelations or innovations that would seem to absolutely require recognition. Moreover, the anonymization of participants also seems to be the more suitable choice since there is some content that could be regarded as personal in nature.

As my aim was to act as ethically as possible when conducting my research for this thesis, I emailed reddit support and inquired from them whether it is allowed to collect data in the form of screenshots from reddit. The community manager of reddit answered me, stating that reddit content is in principle owned by the users who create it. The reply then advised me to contact the moderators of the subreddit, as they usually have a good idea of their subreddit's community norms. I did as was advised and contacted the moderators of r/LiverpoolFC through a private message on reddit. As the moderators deemed the screenshots that were collected from the subreddit as suitable, I felt that it was justifiable to present them in the thesis. The correspondence I had with the community manager and the moderators can be seen in Appendix 1. Zimmer (2010: 324) remarks that apprehensions over consent, privacy, and anonymity do not disappear because subjects participate in online social networks, but rather become even more significant. I share the view and thus attempted to consider ethical issues at every stage of the thesis process.

#### **4 FINDINGS**

In the following sections, I will present the findings that I have acquired through the analysis of the collected data. The data excerpts have been divided into categories based on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community theory. The four categories are (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integrity and fulfilment of needs, and (4) shared emotional connection. I have also incorporated Herring's (2004) six sets of criteria for virtual communities in the analysis of the data. The broader theoretical frameworks from which I have drawn for the analysis are discourse analysis (DA) and, more specifically, computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA).

In the collected data, there were a total of 13 examples of category (1) membership, 12 examples of category (2) influence, six instances of category (3) integrity and fulfilment of needs, and seven examples of category (4) shared emotional connection. In many instances, the examples were highly similar in nature. Thus, the selection of a few representative examples seemed to be the most logical course of action, considering the limited scope of the study. When selecting the examples that are

presented in this thesis, my aim was to choose examples that represent and illustrate the recurring themes that surfaced in the data. In other words, I attempted to not omit anything that represents the general attitudes, practices and interaction of r/LiverpoolFC in a relevant way.

In the first category, membership, I present the analysis of six data examples which illustrate the establishing of membership on r/LiverpoolFC. Four of the examples relate to the use of insider language, while two of the examples demonstrate instances of identification and disidentification in the form of “us versus them” language. In the following category of influence, analysis of three data examples is presented. The examples entail interaction between the community members which shows how they can influence the community and how the community influences them. The first two examples showcase the reciprocal influence between the community members and the community’s moderators, and the third example focuses on a dispute between community members and its resolution. The third category of integrity and fulfilment of needs contains two data examples which present a community member’s original content and other community members’ reactions to it. The fourth and final category, shared emotional connection, entails two data examples which show different ways in which the community members’ shared experiences as fans of LFC and members of the subreddit can present themselves. The first example focuses on the shared emotions and experiences of the community members, while the second example presents how community members use shared experiences as a basis for insider humour. All data excerpts are presented in their original written form. However, all usernames of the discussants have been anonymised by replacing them with coloured blocks. The colour of a certain user remains consistently the same in the examples.

#### **4.1 Establishing membership**

According to McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory, the first criterion of a sense of community is membership. They define membership as “the feeling of belonging or of sharing a sense of personal relatedness”. Membership could be seen as a more complex issue in online communities than in real-life ones due to the ambiguity of what membership of a certain community entails. In the following sub-sections, I aim to illustrate how membership of r/LiverpoolFC is expressed through linguistics means. In the collected data, expressions of membership were most often realised through insider language and “us versus them” language. Examples of such instances are presented in the two following sub-sections.

##### **4.1.1 The use of insider language**

On r/LiverpoolFC, one prominent feature of membership expression is the community members’ use of insider language. The community members tend to use football and LFC related terms in their

speech, thus expressing their knowledge on the topic and their belonging to the fan community. Football-related expressions include, for instance, “EPL” (= English Premier League), EFL (= English Football League) and UCL (= UEFA Champions’ League). Examples of specifically LFC-themed expressions include “YNWA” (= You’ll Never Walk Alone) and “the scum” (= a derogatory term for Manchester United fans). The community members also use language that is typical for online communities. This vernacular is shown, for example, in frequent use of acronyms and abbreviations, such as “tbh” (= to be honest) and “mods” (= moderators). Community members also use some terms which are more specific to reddit, such as “sub” (= subreddit) and “downvotes”. There is even an instance of a term which is only understandable in this particular subreddit, when a community member mentions a “Huge Hog video”, referring to a user who regularly posts edited videos in the subreddit.

One of the most popular ways of expressing LFC fandom is to use the phrase *You’ll Never Walk Alone* or the acronym that has been derived from it, YNWA. The phrase’s origin is in the song *You’ll Never Walk Alone* which was composed for the musical *Carousel* in 1945. In 1963, the Liverpoolian band *Gerry and the Pacemakers* recorded the song, and Liverpool FC fans swiftly adopted the song as the club’s supporter song. Today, the phrase is even included in the official logo of LFC. YNWA as an acronym is sometimes used by the r/LiverpoolFC members, but its connotations might vary slightly in different contexts. Examples on the use of YNWA in the subreddit can be seen below.

The first set of examples are replies to a community member’s story of how Liverpool FC has strengthened his relationship with his mother (Appendix 2). The story recounts that they have had a rocky relationship in the past, but watching LFC matches has brought them closer together. In the replies, the acronym YNWA plays a significant role.



*Example 1.* Replies to the original poster’s story.





*Example 2.* Another reply to the original poster's story.

In the replies of Example 1, the use of acronym YNWA could be seen as either expressing Liverpool fandom in general or expressing membership of the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC. While YNWA is a general expression of support for LFC and for other LFC fans, the context of the replies ties it with the subreddit as well. In the first reply, the expression “great story mate” ties the expression to the storytelling of the original poster (OP). Thus, it could be seen as an encouragement of sharing personal stories on the subreddit as well as an expression of the unity of LFC fans. The second reply is also slightly ambiguous in meaning and could be interpreted in different ways. Welcoming the OP “to the family” might refer to Liverpool fandom in general or to the subreddit's community.

In the reply of Example 2, the focus is on football in general. The responder seems to regard football as a valuable source of personal stories such as the story of the OP. Therefore, the YNWA at the end could be regarded as a general expression of LFC, and thus football, fandom.

In some cases, the acronym YNWA seems to be more strongly related to the subreddit itself, rather than Liverpool fandom in general. Such a case is presented below in the form of a reply to a thread in which the moderators and community members discuss the state of the subreddit.



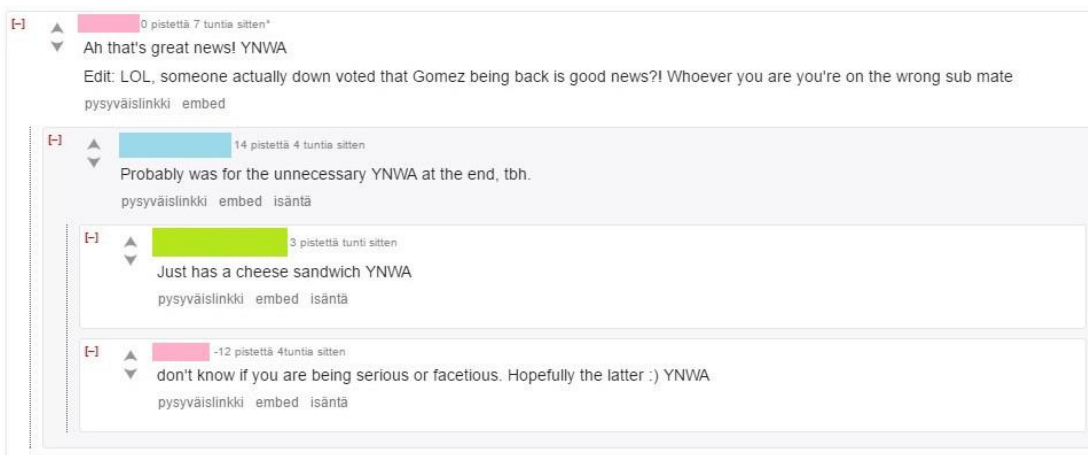
*Example 3.* Community member's description of the subreddit.

In the comment of Example 3, the commenter compares the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC to the subreddits of rivaling clubs and deems it superior in the aspects of “content, moderation, critique, and of course bantz”. He then praises both the moderators and the community and ends the comment with the acronym YNWA. In the context of the comment, YNWA seems to refer more to the communality of the subreddit itself than act as a general indication of LFC fandom.

Despite the ambiguity and variance of what the YNWA refers to as an expression in Examples 1 and 2, YNWA seems to be a strong expression of support and solidarity in the subreddit. As an acronym that is likely to be unfamiliar to non-members of football fandom in general and the LFC community, YNWA could be considered to be a community-specific abbreviation. According to Herring (2004:

355), the use of group-specific abbreviations, jargon and language practices is an important element of a community's culture. Indeed, recurring expressions, such as YNWA, can be significant building blocks in the construction of a sense of community and joint identity.

Despite the highly positive connotations of YNWA in the previous examples, the use of the acronym is not always seen as positive in the subreddit. In fact, the appropriateness of its use seems to be somewhat tied to the context of the discussion. In the following example, I present comments and replies made by the community members in a thread that discusses the fact that LFC player Joe Gomez had been selected for the LFC squad for a match versus Middlesbrough.



*Example 4.* Differing opinions on the use of YNWA amongst community members.

In the discussion presented in Example 4, the original poster of a comment reacts to the news of Gomez joining the squad with elation and an added YNWA in the end of the comment. The comment sits at zero points, meaning that it has been downvoted at least once. In the edit of the comment, he reacts to his comment having been downvoted with disbelief and states that the downvoter is on the wrong subreddit. In a reply to his comment, another community member remarks that the most probable reason for the downvoting was the “unnecessary YNWA at the end”. Another community member shows that he shares the feeling of the replier by replying to his comment with an evidently mocking comment “Just has [sic.] a cheese sandwich YNWA”. The OP of the downvoted comment remains unmoved by the criticism, posting another comment with YNWA at its end.

Interestingly, the first comment of the original commenter sits at zero points, while the second one sits at minus 12 points. However, the first reply, which states the probable reason for the downvoting, sits at 14 points, and the second one, which mocks the original commenter's comment, has three points. Considering the clear differences between the evaluations of the comments, it seems that the members of r/LiverpoolFC regard the use of YNWA unnecessary if the subject matter of the original

post is not explicitly related to the sentiment of unity amongst the fans. In conclusion, some implicit norms seem to have formed in the community around the use of the acronym YNWA, and breaking the norms seems to lead to others downvoting the “unnecessary” content.

#### 4.1.2 “Us versus them” language

Herring (2004: 355) lists self-awareness as a criterion for virtual communities. She defines it as the feeling of the group as a separate entity that differs from other groups and often manifests as references to the group as a group and as “us versus them” language. The identification with the group and the dis-identification with other groups seem to be at the core of football fan communities. While fans tend to strongly express their identities as fans of their clubs, they also often want to clearly distance themselves from other football fan groups. For instance, both of the practices can be seen implemented in the comment of Example 3 that was presented in the previous sub-section on page x. The commenter explicitly refers to the subreddit as a community, thus expressing that it is a unified group that differs from other groups. The sense of community is also built in the comment through pronoun use, since the commenter consistently calls the subreddit “our sub”, as compared to “this sub” or something similar. Moreover, he compares the subreddit to other football clubs’ subreddits and evaluates it as superior to the other ones.

The main target of dis-identification to LFC fans is Manchester United fans. The reason for this is mainly historical and cultural, since LFC and Man Utd fans have regarded each other as one another’s arch nemesis since the 1970s. Members of the subreddit tend to call Manchester United fans with strongly derogatory terms without it being considered inappropriate. In fact, Manchester United fans and Manchester United as a club are almost solely referred to in a negative manner. An example of strong disidentification from Manchester United fans is presented below.



*Example 5.* Disidentification from Manchester United fans (underlining added).

The comment and replies of Example 5 are from a thread in which the original poster recounted that he was going to see the match against Manchester United and Liverpool FC at Old Trafford with his

father, who is a Man Utd fan, sitting in the Man Utd crowd (Appendix 2). In the comments, other community members express rather strong opinions on the matter. In them, Manchester United fans are referred to as “the mancs” and “the scum fans”. The original commenter also states that he could never sit with Man Utd fans in a match. The original poster has also replied to the comment, remarking that sitting with the rivalling team’s fans will be tough since he “can’t stand the scum fans”. In conclusion, Manchester United fans are almost exclusively presented in a negative way and clearly presented as an out-group from which LFC fans distance themselves.

Despite disidentification from other football clubs being a significant feature of forming a sense of community in the subreddit, the practice seems to be context-related. In other words, disidentification from other fan groups is supported selectively. As opposed to the previous examples that all have positive points, there is at least one example of dis-identification from other clubs that has been downvoted more than upvoted. The thread in question features a picture of LFC player Philippe Coutinho and former LFC player Luis Suárez who now plays for FC Barcelona.



*Example 6.* Disidentification from FC Barcelona and the reaction to it.

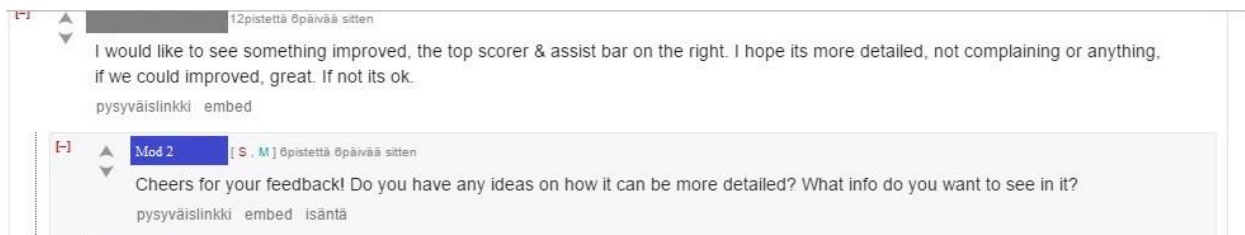
In the original comment of Example 7, the commenter expresses a strong, negative opinion towards FC Barcelona by stating that he hates the club and that the picture, featuring Barcelona player Suárez, gives him “the chills”. The comment has been downvoted since it sits at minus three points, and the commenter has reacted to the downvotes through an edit. His edit states that he believes the downvotes are caused by a herd mentality which obligates everyone to like Barcelona. However, another community member has replied to the comment, stating that the reason for the downvotes is probably the fact that the statement does not contribute to the conversation and further remarks that it is the reason why he himself has downvoted the comment. The sentiment of the replier is probably caused by the fact that FC Barcelona does not play in the same national league as Liverpool FC, and thus the negative comment is not seen as relevant in a discussion that revolves around LFC.

## 4.2 Influence

Influence is considered to be an important element in building a community. McMillan and Chavis (1986: 9) define influence as the members mattering to a community and the community mattering

to its members. Therefore, it is significant that the members of a community have some influence on how the community works. On the other hand, the influence would most likely not be important to the members if the community itself did not matter to them. Indeed, McMillan and Chavis (1986) state that members are more drawn to a community in which they feel that they have influence. Moreover, the impact of a member on a community and the influence of a community on a member are performed simultaneously.

On r/LiverpoolFC, one of the most significant forms of influence is the community members' and the moderators' reciprocal relationship. The community has a quarterly roundup of matters related to the subreddit, dubbed *State of the Subreddit*. During my observation period of the data, one *State of the Subreddit* thread was posted in November 2016 (Appendices 2-3). The thread was posted by one of the community's moderators who informed and reminded the subreddit's members of rules, practices and upcoming event of the subreddit. In the comment section, members of the subreddit gave feedback on certain features of the subreddit, which led to conversations between the members and the moderators. Thus, the community members were given an opportunity to influence the workings of the community. Examples of the discussions the members and the moderators had in the thread and analysis on them can be seen below.



*Example 7.* Interaction between a regular subreddit member and a moderator.

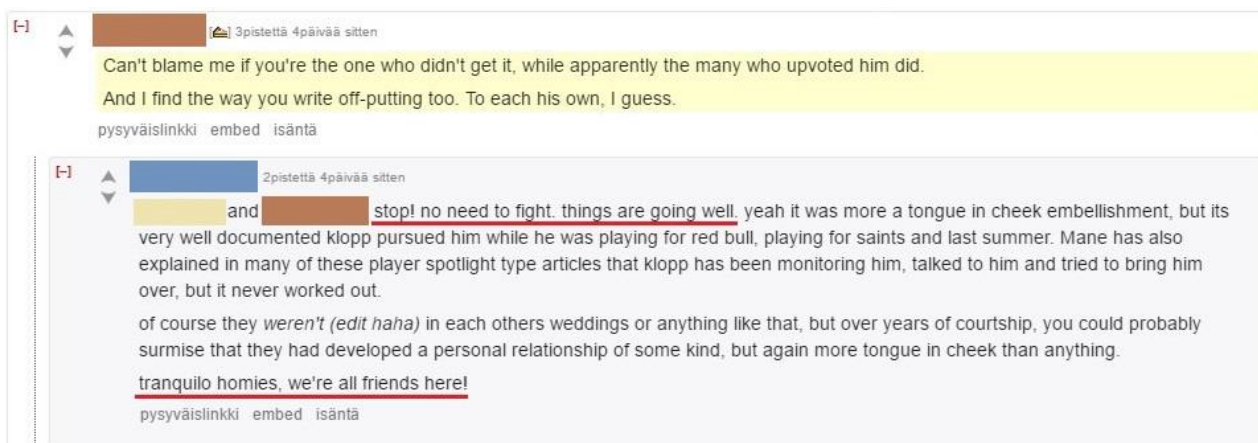


*Example 8.* Continuation of the conversation in *example 7*.

In the interaction presented in Examples 7 and 8, a regular member of the community suggests some improvements to the content and layout of the subreddit page. A moderator, who is the original poster,

replies to the comment by first thanking the member for the feedback and then asking for more detailed wishes. In a reply, the community member provides more detailed information, and the moderator replies to it by asking for more clarifications. Throughout the interaction, the tone of the discussants is highly polite and supportive. The moderator thanks the community member for the feedback, while the community member thanks the moderator for listening. Indeed, the conversation entails examples of Herring's (2004: 355) definitions of support, which is usually displayed as acts of positive politeness, and reciprocity, which generally manifests in the form of turn initiation and response. The features seem to be used in order to demonstrate the community member's appreciation for the moderator and the community, as well as showcasing the moderator's appreciation for the input of the community member. In conclusion, the community members are regularly provided with an opportunity to influence the practices of the community.

Community members' influence on the community and the community's significance to its members can also be seen in an instance of a conflict between two community members. The topic of the thread in question was LFC player Sadio Mané's story of how he gained his position as a top-level player. In the comment section, two community members got into an argument about whether it could be proved that LFC manager Jürgen Klopp and player Mané had an established personal relationship, as some commenters stated. The two commenters replied to each other's comments with disdain and condescension, and the original topic of conversation soon switched to the commenters critiquing each other. Eventually, the community member who posted the original comment to which the disputers replied intervened in the argument in an attempt to regain peace in the discussion.



*Example 9.* Original commenter resolving an argument between two other community members (underlining added).

In his attempt to calm the argument between the two other members, the original commenter first addresses both of them by their Reddit usernames and then uses the imperative “stop”. He then

remarks that there is no need to fight, and that “things are going well”, thus implying that the argument is not relevant in the situation. The commenter continues to list reasons for his own comment that sparked the dispute between the other two members and remarks that it was an embellishment to the story. In the end, he states, “Tranquilo homies, we’re all friends here!”

In the resolution of the argument, the original commenter seems to regard the good atmosphere of the subreddit as highly significant and wants to preserve it. Thus, the state and atmosphere of the community seem to strongly affect its members. On the other hand, the original commenter who resolves the dispute also seems to have influence on the other community members, since the argument does not continue further after his intervention. At least in this case, it seems that the influence of the community members can be seen in conflicts through means of conflict resolution. Criticism and conflict, which often manifest as speech acts that violate positive politeness, are in fact important elements of a community, as are means of conflict resolution (Herring 2004: 355). The importance of the community and its atmosphere also seems to surface in the conflict, through the contrast of the negative atmosphere at the moment of conflict and the regular positive spirit of the community.

#### **4.3 Integrity and fulfilment of needs**

The third element of McMillan and Chavis’ (1986) sense of community theory is integration and fulfilment of needs, which could be called reinforcement in other words. They state that the individual-group connotation must be positive for the group’s members in order to preserve a positive sense of togetherness. In a large online community, fulfilment of needs might not be as strong or as imminent as in real-life communities where the community members are able to be physically co-present. However, fulfilment of needs can be gained in different ways in online environments as well. Instances of integration and fulfilment of needs can also be detected on the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC.

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), merely the status of being a member of a group or community might be fulfilling to its members. However, fulfilment of needs often requires other elements as well. One of the recognised features that can provide the feeling of reinforcement to the members of a community is the competence and capabilities of other members. In other words, people gravitate towards others whose skills can benefit them in some way. On r/LiverpoolFC, the community members sometimes express gratitude and appreciation for other members’ competence if they deem it impressive or otherwise noteworthy. One such case is presented below in the form of a comment chain from a thread in which a community member presented his newest LFC-related meme to the r/LiverpoolFC community.



*Example 10.* The original poster comments on his meme.



*Example 11.* Reactions to the member-made meme (underlining added).

The meme video that the thread revolves around is a community member's tribute to the popular *When I'm Liverpool* meme videos made by a certain community member. The videos usually combine clips of Liverpool FC matches with popular internet memes. The original poster states that his video will never be "as good as a [known user] video" but that he wanted to make it regardless. Therefore, OP notes that he has drawn inspiration from the work of the well-known community member and incorporated it into his own product. In a sense, this process is already a form of integration and fulfilment of needs, seeing that OP has appreciated another community member's competence and used it as an aid for his own work. It also seems possible that the well-known community member would gain fulfilment from his status as an especially renowned community member and the "standard meme maker". He does not, however, participate in the conversation in question.

Another component in creating integration and fulfilment of needs are the other community members' reactions to the meme that has been presented to them. The feedback is mainly positive, with added suggestions for what other elements could have been incorporated into the video. A commenter states that "both this one and yesterday's were pretty great". He goes on to describe what he enjoyed about the meme in particular and which features could have perhaps been added to it. After the OP has



given his reasons for what he has included in the meme, the commenter reinforces the fact that he really enjoyed the video nonetheless. The OP then thanks the commenter. The thread also includes other similar instances of positive reactions towards the meme. In general, the community members seem to want to participate in the conversation and show their appreciation for the OP's competence in meme making.

#### 4.4 Shared emotional connection

The fourth criterion for the sense of community according to McMillan and Chavis (1986) is shared emotional connection, which is partly based on shared history. Participation in the history is not required in order to share it, but community members must identify with it. On r/LiverpoolFC, the experiences of shared history are most often related to the history of LFC as a club.

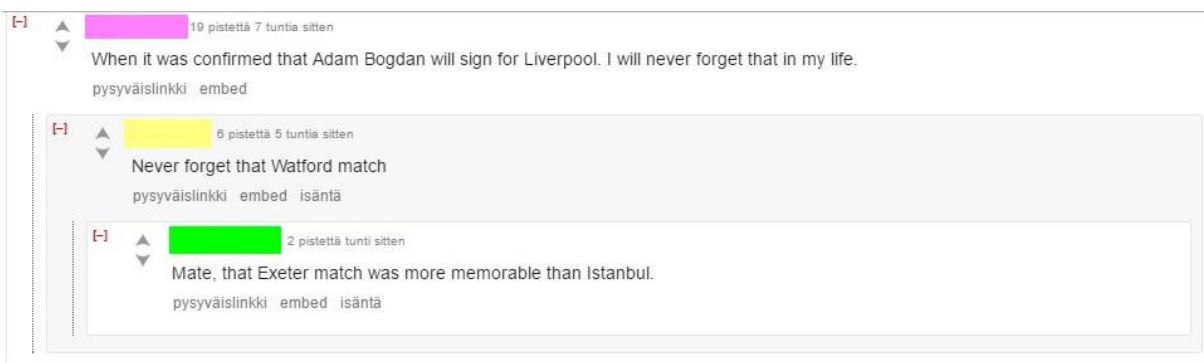


*Example 12.* Shared memories of LFC player Coutinho's progress.

When discussing past events of LFC, the community members often seem to assume that other members share the memory. In the comments of Example 13, community members reminisce about the development of LFC player Philippe Coutinho in a thread where the original post states that Coutinho is only one goal away from becoming Premier League's top Brazilian goal scorer of all time. One community member initiates a comment chain by noting that watching Coutinho's growth has been incredible. Another member replies to the comment by asking, "Remember when we were begging him NOT to shoot?" With the question, the commenter invites the other community members to indicate whether they share the memory or not. However, it strongly seems that the commenter assumes that others remember the time as well since he describes the actor as a collective "we". In a reply, another community member confirms that he remembers the time. He also states that there were times when it was frustrating to watch Coutinho, referring to the same time in the past as the

previous commenter. Yet another community member confirms with a reply that he is familiar with the matter by calling the time in Coutinho's development "character building for the fans".

The entity of turn initiation and responses showcases how the community members share experiences and memories in conversation. Such sharing seems to strengthen the togetherness and sense of community amongst the members by making it clear that they have shared the experience and memory of an event or phenomenon despite not being physically co-present for the occasions. Shared experiences and memories might also manifest in a form that would most likely be misunderstood if the reader were not familiar with the history of LFC. The examples below have been collected from a thread in which the members of the subreddit listed their best memories of LFC.



*Example 13.* An insider joke related to past events at LFC.

In the comments presented in Example 14, the original commenter describes the confirmation of the signing of Adam Bogdán as his best LFC memory. He emphasises the sentiment by stating that he will never forget it in his life. To an outsider, it might seem that Adam Bogdán is a legendary player whose signing was remarkable to LFC as a club. However, *Ádám Bogdán* is in fact a goalkeeper whose most memorable actions during his LFC career have been two disastrous performances in the span of three weeks during season 2015-2016. Bogdán is still officially a LFC player but he has been loaned to Championship club Wigan Athletic since the beginning of season 2016-2017. Therefore, the original comment is in fact a joke, which could be considered an insider joke due to its highly context-bound nature. The comments could also be interpreted as representations of the community's culture, which is indexed through group-specific language practices, as described by Herring (2004: 355). The community members who have replied to the original comment are clearly aware of the player history of Bogdán since they make similar, faux-positive remarks of his performances in matches against Watford and Exeter in order to achieve humorous effect. Bogdán's performance is even ironically compared with Liverpool's Champions' League win in Istanbul which is widely regarded as the club's greatest achievement in the 2000s. In conclusion, the context of the comment

chain is entirely tied with the player history of Bogdán and his undeniably bad performances, and would most likely not be recognised as a joke by people who are not LFC fans.

Overall, the experiences and memories the community members share are often highly context-bound and require quite extensive knowledge of the history of LFC. The history might be shared through stories, questions or sometimes insider humour. Thus, the understanding of some instances of the community's interaction truly requires experience or identification with the history of the club and its fans' experiences.

Based on the excerpts that have been presented in this section, the findings of my study seem to be in line with my original hypothesis. In other words, linguistic means are indeed used to create a sense of community on r/LiverpoolFC. Throughout the examples, it can be seen that a sense of community and belonging is created through the use of abbreviations, acronyms, positive language and insider language that relate to football, Liverpool FC, reddit or the subreddit.

## **5 DISCUSSION AND CONCLUSION**

The aim of this thesis was to examine and present how a sense of community is possibly formed on the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC. The thesis bases on the sense of community theory of McMillan and Chavis (1986), which entails four dimensions of sense of community: (1) membership, (2) influence, (3) integrity and fulfilment of needs, and (4) shared emotional connection. As can be seen in the findings, all of the categories of McMillan and Chavis' (1986) definition of sense of community are present in the data to some extent. However, examples related to certain categories were more prevalent during the data collection phase and are thus more strongly represented in the thesis as well. It would seem, nonetheless, that the dimensions of the sense of community theory can still be detected in online communities of today. Moreover, the interaction and communicational practices that relate to the dimensions created by McMillan and Chavis (1986) seem to have relevance in the construction of a sense of community online, despite the fact that the theory was shaped three decades ago.

While the categorisation according to McMillan and Chavis' (1986) theory seemed logical due to the topic of my thesis, it might have been slightly too straightforward for the collected data. At times, it was challenging to place a data example in only one of the categories as there were slight overlaps between the data examples. The creation of my own categories, based on the sense of community theory, might have been a better solution. However, the present categorisation of the data still offers an organised and clear idea of the data, and is thus a better option than having no categories whatsoever. Moreover, it would have been challenging to create categories solely based on the data

of this thesis. What is more, such a categorisation might have proved to be problematic since it could have led to narrow categories that do not depict the overall practices of r/LiverpoolFC.

Based on my observations, almost all the criteria that Herring (2004) has formed for online communities seem to be present in the community of r/LiverpoolFC. Active participation is at the core of the community, since its content is made entirely by users and, to a much more limited extent, the moderators. Culture, which is indexed with group-specific language practices, is a particularly significant feature of the r/LiverpoolFC community. As the findings of the study show, group-specific use of acronyms, abbreviations and jargon is highly typical for the community. The community members also often express self-awareness as a group by using “us versus them” language in order to distance themselves from other groups. Solidarity, support and reciprocity are also present in the interaction and practices of the community. Some instances of criticism and conflict are also seen in the data examples, and means of conflict resolution are used accordingly.

One of Herring’s criteria that resurfaced repeatedly was norms and values. In fact, I found the extent to which normativity showed in the data slightly surprising. On r/LiverpoolFC, there seems to be a shared sense of appropriateness and inappropriateness concerning the community-specific language. As can be seen in Examples 4 and 6, there seems to be a consensus on when the use of certain acronyms is appropriate and when it is not, although it has not been spelled out anywhere on the subreddit. Thus, it seems that even some of the expressions of membership and belonging are tied with implicit norms of the community, and breaches of conduct warrant downvotes from other community members.

The only criteria that is not be presented in the data of the community’s interactions are governance and rituals. In fact, Herring (2004: 356) notes that the reification of cultural practices as governance and rituals appears to denote a somewhat advanced level of community, and thus it should not necessarily be regarded as a part of the basic criteria of virtual community. Therefore, the lack of these features might imply that r/LiverpoolFC is not in a highly advanced stage as a community. The notion would be plausible since the participants’ engagement and commitment in the community can vary significantly. While some of the people regularly contribute to the community by publishing posts and commenting on other people’s posts, others might only browse the community’s posts without contributing, or contribute very little.

Due to the limited scope of the study, its findings cannot be generalised to create a broader picture of online communities in general. However, the findings provide an insight into the construction and maintenance of a sense of community on a certain subreddit. While reddit has not been researched

extensively before, it could offer information on the interaction and community-building of a vast number of internet users. Its various subreddits certainly provide objects for future research on online communities, particularly considering the popularity of reddit amongst the internet users of today. Moreover, the findings of this study reinforce previous findings of the possibility of applying the sense of community theory in a community that is geographically dispersed and generally scattered in structure (Obst et al. 2002, Rotman et al. 2009) by suggesting that it is entirely possible. Despite the shortcomings of the study, it can hopefully inspire other researchers to conduct more extensive research on similar phenomena in the future.

## **BIBLIOGRAPHY**


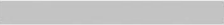

- Duggan, M. and Smith, A. (2013). 6% of online adults are reddit users. Pew Internet & American Life Project, 3. <http://www.pewinternet.org/2013/07/03/6-of-online-adults-are-reddit-users/>. (21 April, 2017).
- Eckert, P. and McConnell-Ginet, S. (1992). Think practically and look locally: Language and gender as community-based practice. *Annual Review of Anthropology* 21, 461-490.
- Edwards, J. (2009). *Language and identity*. New York: Cambridge University Press.
- Herring, S. C. (2004). Computer-Mediated Discourse Analysis: An Approach to Researching Online Behavior. In S. A. Barab, R. Kling, and J.H. Gray (eds.), *Designing for Virtual Communities in the Service of Learning*. New York: Cambridge University Press, 338-376.
- Klapuri, J., Nieminen, I., Raiko, T. and Lagus, K. (2013) Variational Bayesian PCA versus  $k$ -NN on a Very Sparse Reddit Voting Dataset. In A. Tucker, F. Höppner, A. Siebes and S. Swift (eds.), *Advances in Intelligent Data Analysis XII*. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 8207. Berlin: Springer, 249-260.
- Kytölä, S. (2013). *Multilingual language use and metapragmatic reflexivity in Finnish internet football forums: a study in the sociolinguistics of globalization*. Jyväskylä Studies in Humanities 200. University of Jyväskylä. <http://urn.fi/URN:ISBN:978-951-39-5132-0>.
- Kytölä, S. (2016). Translocality. In A. Georgakopoulou and T. Spilioti (eds.), *Routledge Handbook of Language and Digital Communication*. London: Routledge, 371-388.
- Leppänen, S. (2012). Linguistic and Generic Hybridity in Web Writing: The Case of Fan Fiction. In M. Sebba, S. Mahootian and C. Jonsson (eds.), *Language mixing and code-switching in writing: Approaches to mixed-language written discourse*. London: Routledge, 233-254.
- Leppänen, S., Møller, J. S., Nørreby, T. R., Stæhr, A. and Kytölä, S. (2015). Authenticity, normativity and social media. *Discourse, Context & Media* (8), 1-5.



- Leppänen, S., Kytölä, S., Westinen, E. and Peuronen, S. (2017). Introduction. In S. Leppänen, E. Westinen and S. Kytölä (eds.), *Social Media Discourse, (Dis) identifications and Diversities*. New York: Routledge, 1-36.
- Markham, A. and Buchanan, E. (2012). *Ethical decision-making and internet research: Recommendations from the aoir ethics working committee (version 2.0)*. <https://aoir.org/reports/ethics2.pdf>. (25 May, 2017).
- Massanari, A. L. (2015). *Participatory culture, community, and play*. New York: Peter Lang Publishing.
- McMillan, D. and Chavis, D. (1986). Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory. *Journal of Community Psychology* 14, 6-23.
- Meikle, G. (2016). *Social Media: Communication, Sharing and Visibility*. New York: Routledge.
- Mills, R. and Fish, A. (2015). A Computational Study of How and Why reddit.com was an Effective Platform in the Campaign Against SOPA. In G. Meiselwitz (eds.) *Social Computing and Social Media*. Lecture Notes in Computer Science, vol 9182. Cham: Springer, 229-241.
- Monaghan, F. (2014). Seeing Red: social media and football fan activism. In *The Language of Social Media*. Palgrave Macmillan UK, 228-254.
- Obst, P., Zinkiewicz, L. and Smith, S. G. (2002). Sense of community in science fiction fandom, Part 1: Understanding sense of community in an international community of interest. *Journal of Community Psychology*, 30 (1), 87-103.
- Paltridge, P. (2012). *Discourse Analysis: An Introduction*. London: Bloomsbury.
- r/LiverpoolFC. Sorted by Hot. <https://www.reddit.com/r/LiverpoolFC/>. (October 2016 – December 2016).
- Rampton, B., Tusting, K., Maybin, J., Barwell, R., Creese, A. and Lytra, V. (2004). UK Linguistic Ethnography: A Discussion Paper. <http://www.lingethnog.org/docs/rampton-et-al-2004-uk-linguisticethnography-a-discussion-paper/>. (23 April, 2017).
- Reddit: Advertise. (2017). <https://about.reddit.com/advertise/>. (21 April, 2017).
- Rotman, D., Golbeck, J. and Preece, J. (2009). The community is where the rapport is – on sense and structure in the youtube community. In *Proceedings of the fourth international conference on Communities and technologies*, ACM, 41-50.
- Schradie, J. (2011). The digital production gap: The digital divide and Web 2.0 collide. *Poetics*, 39 (2), 145-168.
- Tilastokeskus: Suomalaiset käyttävät internetiä yhä useammin. (2016). [http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/sutivi/2016/sutivi\\_2016\\_2016-12-09\\_tie\\_001\\_fi.html?ad=notify](http://tilastokeskus.fi/til/sutivi/2016/sutivi_2016_2016-12-09_tie_001_fi.html?ad=notify). (20 April, 2017).

- Wenger, E., McDermott, R. A. and Snyder, W. (2002). *Cultivating communities of practice: A guide to managing knowledge*. Boston: Harvard Business Press.
- Zimmer, M. (2010). But the data is already public: On the ethics of research in Facebook. *Ethics and Information Technology* 12 (4), 313-325.

## APPENDICES

### Appendix 1: My correspondence with the community manager of reddit and the moderators of r/LiverpoolFC

 **Jonna Kauria**   
to contact 

19 Apr ☆  

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am a Finnish English major studying at University of Jyväskylä. For my Bachelor's thesis, I have observed the construction of a sense of community in the subreddit r/LiverpoolFC. The subreddit in question is openly available without restrictions to users and non-users of Reddit.

I am now wondering whether I would be allowed to use screenshots of Reddit conversations as data in my thesis. Or would it breach Reddit policies? I could remove the pseudonyms of users from the screenshots for the sake of anonymity. The BA thesis would be published in our university's database but nowhere else. If necessary, I could also choose for it to not be published in the database. I will not receive any commercial benefits from the thesis nor will it be used for any commercial purposes.

With this information, could you possibly tell me whether I would be allowed to use such material collected from Reddit? I have read Reddit's user agreement a few times but I did not gain a clear idea of the rules of this kind of content use.

Kind regards,

Jonna Kauria  
Student  
University of Jyväskylä

  (Reddit Support)

Apr 21, 14:47 PDT

Hi Jonna!

Your better bet for this is to talk to the users who have made the posts, and the mods of the subreddit you're interested in; the users own their content that they create on reddit, and mods will have a good idea of what their community norms around these things are. So you'll want to ask them for sure!

You can message the mods by clicking on "message the moderators" at the bottom of the right-hand sidebar of the subreddit. To message individual users, click on their name and then on "send a private message" on their userpage.

Good luck!

  
Community Manager  
[reddit.com](https://www.reddit.com)

#### **r/LiverpoolFC** Collecting data from r/LiverpoolFC for a BA thesis

laajenna kaikki luhista kaikki

[–] to /r/LiverpoolFC sent 17 tuntia sitten

Dear Sir / Madam,

I am a Finnish English major studying at University of Jyväskylä. For my Bachelor's thesis, I have observed the construction of sense of community in your subreddit, r/LiverpoolFC.

I am now wondering whether I would be allowed to use screenshots of the subreddit's conversations as data in my thesis. Or would it breach your community policies? I could remove the pseudonyms of users from the screenshots for the sake of anonymity. The BA thesis would be published in our university's database but nowhere else. If necessary, I could also choose for it to not be published in the database. I will not receive any commercial benefits from the thesis nor will it be used for any commercial purposes.

With this information, could you possibly tell me whether I would be allowed to use such material collected from your subreddit?

Kind regards,

Jonna Kauria Student University of Jyväskylä

[pysyväslinkki](#) [vastaa](#)

[–] from **Mod 1**  [M] via /r/LiverpoolFC sent 17 tuntia sitten

I don't see any issues with this. Anyone got any concerns? I'd actually be quite interested to read this (if you're writing in English) upon completion.

[pysyväslinkki](#) [poista](#) [ilmianna](#) [estä käyttäjä](#) [merkkää](#) [luetuksi](#) [vastaa](#)

[–] from **Mod 2** [M] via /r/LiverpoolFC sent 10 tuntia sitten

No concerns on my end as long as usernames are covered up. Go for it, sounds interesting.

[pysyväslinkki](#) [poista](#) [ilmianna](#) [estä käyttäjä](#) [merkkää](#) [luetuksi](#) [vastaa](#)



## Appendix 2: Original post as context for Examples 1 and 2

▲  
110  
▼



Just wanted to share a story about Liverpool FC and my Mother (self.LiverpoolFC)

submitted 11 tuntia sitten \* by [REDACTED]

I am an American Liverpool fan who started seriously following the club and the sport post World Cup 2014. I was drunk on a flight to Florida and watched the Merseyside Derby on 14/15 (it was a 0-0 draw with Ibe smashing the post).

I really enjoyed the sport, after growing tired of Hockey & American Football. So I decided to follow Liverpool for the 14/15 season because they were one of the few I knew of (outside of Real, Barcelona, and Manchester United).

I watch every match (be it well after they happen) and own a Lallana & Henderson kit. I absolutely love this club and this team.

For Christmas I asked for an official Liverpool membership and the aforementioned Henderson kit.

I normally watch my beloved Buffalo Bills with my mother on Sundays. She makes great food and also loses her mind watching the games. I'm surprised our neighbors haven't called the police.

I've started posting on Facebook about Liverpool FC and she likes every post. Well last week, she asked if I would watch the next match with her at her house.

I did and we had a great time and she was totally into the match, asking questions and losing her mind when we scored.

She just posted today, she bought herself a Coutinho kit because he's her favorite player. She's never before watch/liked a soccer/football team before.

She wants to book a trip to Liverpool to catch at a match at Anfield and we hope to next year.

I just wanted to share this story, as we did have some rocky relationships in the past. And yet, we have both fallen in love with the sport and the club in the last couple years.

I told her my dream vacation was to go to England and attend a match at Anfield and now we both plan to go to Anfield and I absolutely cannot wait.

I just wanted to thank this club and this fanbase for bringing my mother and I closer together.

16 kommenttia jaa

## Original post as context for Example 5

▲  
42  
▼



My dad (who's a manc) got us tickets to go to the united match next month, in the manc crowd. (self.LiverpoolFC)

lisätty 19 tuntia sitten, lisännyt [REDACTED]

Merry fucking Christmas lads I'm buzzing it's gonna be fucking hard staying quiet around all the dirty Mancs but hopefully it's worth it

19 kommenttia jaa

## Original post as context for Examples 8 and 9

▲  
131  
▼



State of the Subreddit - November 2016 (self.LiverpoolFC)

submitted 3 päivää sitten \* by Mod 2

**WELCOME TO THE QUARTERLY ROUNDUP OF ALL THINGS /R/LIVERPOOL FC**

Afternoon everyone, just wanted to provide a little update for everyone as to what is going on with the sub. We also have some very exciting news, but I'll get to that...

**45k!**

Last night we hit 45,000 subscribers! YAY!

**Sub Rules and Moderation**

We are currently working to finalise a new set of sub rules. There will be a separate post once they have been completed. We hope this new set of rules will help with day to day running of the sub and will work in everybody's best interest.

After a brief period away, we're happy to welcome /u/Plastic\_Mouldsman back to the team

We're also delighted to announce that /u/SylvieK has joined our moderation team on a permanent basis!

Finally for moderation, once the sub rules have been completed, we will start a search for a couple more members of the moderation team. More details will be released at a later date.

**Official Discord Server**

Discord is a voice and text client which is primarily for gamers but has a good app that can be used desktop and mobile. It provides a great space for irc style chat.

The /r/liverpoolfc discord server has been around for a while but we are now happy to officially endorse the server. The mod team over there are great and have put in a good infrastructure to make sure it's a good place for our users to chat.

Once on the server, you will find details on how to get verified so you can take part in all the channels. You can find quick links for an invitation in the side bar - or [here](#).

**Voting**

This is an important section that is in EVERY State of the Subreddit. This of it like the flight attendant telling you the safety rules before a flight. I want to begin this section by saying "**don't be afraid to upvote a comment you disagree with if you think it's furthering the discussion**". That is a direct quote from [Reddit's guide to voting](#) and I think it's an incredibly important thing to keep in mind when discussing a subjective topic like football.

## Appendix 3: Continuation of the original post as context for Examples 7 and 8

With threads:

- **UPVOTE** threads that you like.
- **DOWNVOTE** threads that you dislike and don't want to see more of in the future.

With comments:

- **UPVOTE** comments you like and believe add to the discussion.
- **DOWNVOTE** comments that are irrelevant and **ONLY COMMENTS THAT ARE IRRELEVANT**.

Please refrain from downvoting comments that you disagree with to ensure that the most interesting and relevant discussions raise to the top. Many people who join Reddit aren't aware of the guide to voting and believe voting is a way to denote agreement and disagreement. As you can see, this is not the case! Let's become a vanguard of correct and proper use of the voting system.

### Housekeeping

Just a few simple tips on using the sub to help it run smoothly:

- **Do not use link shorteners!** We've had a few issues of late where people have used link shorteners in Match Threads and Reddit's spam filter has removed them. A URL shortener is a Web site that will create a short Uniform Resource Locator (URL) or Web page address from a long one.
- **Do not link to other club's subreddits or the soccer subreddit.** AutoMod removes such comments by default. If you simply must link to other club's subs you have to use a non participation link.
- **Message the mods using the ModMail and not individually.** You'll get a much faster response if you message us all simultaneously and it'll keep us all in the loop as opposed to just one of us. It's much easier to mod when we're all on the same page with subreddit issues. The ModMail is located above the list of Mods on the sidebar of the subreddit.
- **If you have moderation issues please contact us.** On occasion we see people discussing issues they have with the mod team or the subreddit deep into a comments section. It serves little purpose beyond needless rabble rousing. If you contact us using the ModMail we avoid the echo chamber of complains and we can actually take action on your complaints and hopefully make you happy again! It's frustrating to see people airing their issues but not bringing them to us. It's what we're here for.
- **Use the report button.** If you report a thread or a comment, we receive a notification immediately and our attention is drawn to the offending article. If you see a repost for example, it's better to report to us than write a passive aggressive comment to OP!
- **Please select the correct report option.** There are a number of options to select and people often either simply select SPAM because it's at the top or other and then don't tell us why. It's much easier for us to understand your report if you do it accurately.

### Upcoming Events

A new addition to the sidebar is the 'Upcoming Events' table (just above the 2016-2017 Season table. It is a mini calendar for not just match related events. I aim to keep this up to date looking about 2/3 weeks ahead. It will include ticket sales and international breaks. If there is anything you think would be good to include, just send me a message and I will see what I can do.

This is made with the primary use of having a useful timeline for people who are looking at getting tickets.

While I'm at it, the November sale for the second half of the season is happening in a couple of days so if that interests you, [go here](#)

### Aesthetics

There have been a couple of minor tweaks to the look and feel of the sub over the last few weeks. It is living design so tweaks will still be made but I'll just do a little run down of what has been updated:

- Search bar colour tweaks for slightly better visibility - difficult as we are limited in what we can change with this. Hopefully this subtle change will help bring it out slightly.
- Buttons under links and comments have been restyled. Comments are in bold, the rest are in normal with the report button being in red.
- Link flair updated for competitions incl the new EFL logo. Text colour have also been updated to match.
- New META flair as seen in this thread. This is for official sub posts or special events. This flair should only be used with the approval of the mods.
- A ton of bug fixes

---

So now that's all out of the way, time for the exciting bit...

### Redmentv Ama

Wednesday 9th - 18:00 GMT

It's the fucking International Break and to stop us all going stir crazy, we thought getting an Ama organised would be perfect. The brilliant guys over at **Redmentv** have agreed to do an Ama for us this coming **Wednesday at 18:00 GMT**. We're really excited to have them and hope this will be a really popular event. Get thinking on some good questions and keep an eye out for the thread on Wednesday evening.

We are looking at getting some more of these set up so if you have suggestions or even better, links to anyone, just let us know and we'll see what we can do.

---

Thanks for reading and *enjoy* the international break!