Identity Construction in The Comments Section of TomandLorenzo.com
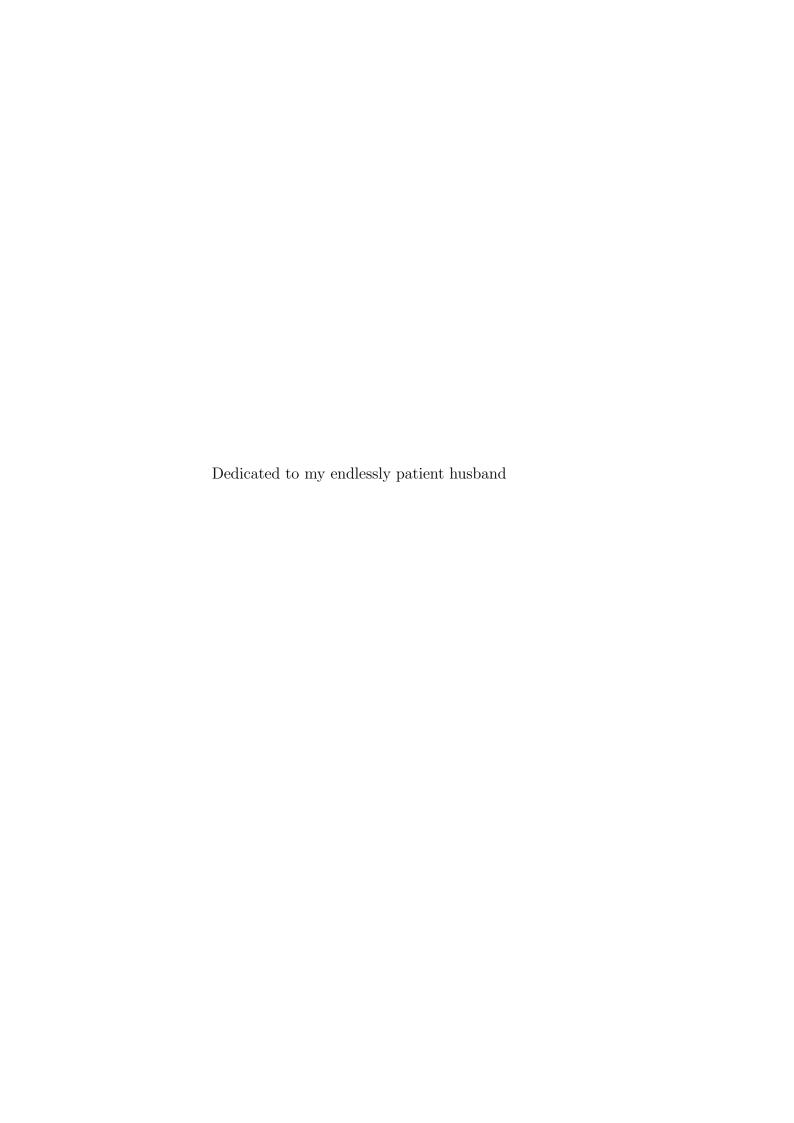
Master's thesis
Aline Prantl

Dedicated to my endlessly patient husband

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JYVÄSKYLÄN YLIOPISTO

Tiedekunta – Faculty	Laitos – Department
Faculty of Humanities	Department of Languages

Tekijä – Author
Aline Prantl

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Virtual spaces as sites of social interactions and therefore identity work have become common over the past few decades. Alongside, research focus on such spaces has increased. This MA thesis constitutes a small contribution to the study of interactional identity building through computer mediated communication. The study was conducted on data gathered from a subsection of popular-culture blog tomandlorenzo.com. The aim was to identify how interactants in this space interactively work their identities. The qualitative discourse analysis focused on three mechanics of identity building, those of indexicality, performativity and stance taking. The investigation also took the influence of the medium on interactional identity work into account.

Findings were that participants used indexicality mostly to position themselves in a broader social context independent of the local community. Contrarily, performances of identity in the Goffmanian sense were used to authenticate contributors in this specific virtual space. Displays of sympathy and emphases on similarities simultaneously served to convey individual's identities and build local group belonging. Interactants' stances and stance uptakes further assisted in positioning individuals inside the group and augmented a sense of community. The emphasis on community building was also apparent from the lack of dissent and conflicts in the data. The study reinforced previous research findings that identity is an accumulation of overlapping and complementary facets that are influenced by the medium of interaction.

Contents

1. INTRODUCTION

Computer-mediated communication is a fairly recent cultural phenomenon and might seem confusing or even alienating to outsiders. It is therefore not surprising that early research on language use in computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC) has focused on language features unique to the medium. As more and more people participate in CMC, the registers used in CMC have broadened, and research focus has shifted from mapping genre specific language features to analyzing interactional patterns. Indeed it has been argued that CMC cannot be considered a genre per se, as it encompasses many different ways of communicating, from emails to live chats to weblogs (blogs) (Androutsopoulos 2006).

When researching interactional patterns in face to face interactions, the notion of 'speech community' (Gumperz 2009) has been very helpful in defining and separating interactional groups. This notion cannot be applied to most computer-mediated communication, as it refers to face to face interactional groups. Thus new terms, such as 'online community' and 'virtual community' have emerged to define interactional communities in CMC (Androutsopoulos 2006: these terms will also be discussed below). Just as there exist many different speech communities, there exist many different online and virtual communities. These communities share some features of what constitutes a speech community, such as regularity of interaction, while also differing in other aspects, most notable the lack of face to face interaction. In addition, members of online communities, similarly to participants in real life speech communities, have to negotiate rules and norms of interaction, e.g. what

are acceptable words to use, which might differ considerably from community to community.

The notion of a speech community is strongly linked to identity. While (Gumperz 2009) mostly considers macro-level indicators as defining the identity/ identities of the members of a speech community, later research has put the emphasis on identity as constructed through and within interactions, while also acknowledging macro-level factors (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). The way of interacting is in turn shaped and influenced by the participants' identities. The assumption of the role of expert, the way people perceive and react to each other, and advising a new member of the group on what is acceptable behavior within, are tasks for community members. Unlike real-life interactions, some forms of CMC have a reduced context insofar as interlocutors are not physically visible to each other. In certain virtual spaces communication happens through typed text. Physical features such as age, sex or way of dressing, which help shape identity, are absent in these spaces. This gives participants in such communities the opportunity to actively construct their own identity, as they can choose what to reveal, what to hide and when to lie. In CMC identity is more strongly linked to language use and choice than in real life encounters.

This idea of being an active contributor to one's own identity, and that this identity is not a fixed entity, but rather evolves, is fascinating to me. Growing up in a small town in Switzerland, I had always struggled with my identity, which had evolved during first grade, and that I was only able to leave behind by leaving town in my twenties. As a young woman, I am also aware that first (physical) impressions serve as identity labels, which lead to specific interaction patterns such as questioning of expertise in professional contexts. Therefore to observe identity construction and negotiation in an environment that often lacks these initial labels is very appealing, precisely because the emphasis is on language usage and members are able to choose more freely than in real life which parts of their identity to reveal.

Blogs have become a way of constructing identity and broader social meaning independent of provenance or formal education. Among other forms of computer mediated communication, blogs have allowed individuals and groups formerly excluded from opinion building to have a voice alongside main stream media. This has led to blogs becoming spaces in which members of sub-cultures and non-mainstream communities can express and exchange views and co-construct identities. As a relatively young medium of interaction, as compared to newspapers, radio or TV, interactional norms in blogs and their comments sections are still emerging. Individuals might rely on new and interesting strategies to construct their identities and co-construct interactional norms. All of these factors make blogs an interesting site of research for language use in identity construction.

In this thesis I will analyze identity construction in the comments section of pop culture blog tomandlorenzo.com. Tom Fitzgerald and Lorenzo Marquez, the two main contributors to the blog, are an openly gay (now married) couple. Their current blog originated from the blog projectrungay.com, which discussed and recapitulated the reality television series "Project Runway". While TLo, as the two bloggers refer to themselves, still recapitulate and comment on this TV-series, the focus has shifted to criticizing fashion choices of celebrities, and reviewing other television series.

I chose to study this blog because I was a regular reader, though not commenter myself, and was very impressed with how the discussions in the comments section differ from other comments sections of similar blogs. The members of the community treat each other and the objects of discussion with a certain level of respect, which I feel is unusual. Analyzing the interactional patterns will be interesting, as that will provide insight into how this online community functions with respect to interactional norms.

The blog has a steady and loyal community, where members know each other and each others' views fairly well, albeit not under their real names nor seldom in real

life. As one member has put it in a comment "200,000 viewers a DAY! And yet we feel like such a close little community. Amazing."

To be able to comment on the blog, a Disqus (a centralised comments service for blogs) profile is necessary. This provides members with a fixed identity in this particular virtual community. The Disqus profile allows users to either use their real name, or a screen name. Choosing a public name is the only requirement to create a profile, with possibilities for further identification. Thus most profiles are not very informative of who the real person behind the screen name is.

In blog's posts, while not present in all of the contributions, sexuality and gender identity is a recurring topic. This has been taken over into the commenters' community, where sometimes sexuality and gender identity and gender norms are presented, discussed and disputed. Initially the present study's aim was to compare and contrast the commenter's gendered identity construction with the way male and female bodies were discussed. This was based on a hunch that developed from regularly reading the blog. After the data collection this hunch could not be verified. Subsequently the research question was adapted to allow for studying a broader range of identity displays:

> **Which interactive means do commenters on the blog tomandlorenzo.com use to present, shape and negotiate their identity?**

To answer this question the present study first gives an overview of previous research on computer mediated communication (Chapter 2), starting with defining the type of CMC scrutinized in the present study, followed by a presentation on how linguists have analyzed this type of CMC and a discussion on what constitutes a virtual community. Chapter 3 then covers notions of identity relevant to the current study, namely the concepts of *indexicality, performativity* and *positionality and relationality*, each discussed in separate sections. Chapter 4 first states the present study's aims, then outlines methods of data collection and selection, illustrates the

study's relevance, addresses ethical concerns and finally presents the methods of data analysis. Chapter 5 introduces the studied community and its participants in Section 5.1 to then delve into the analysis of the present data in Section 5.2. This section mirrors the structure of Chapter 3 in dividing the analysis in three parts along the notions of *indexing, performing* and *positioning.* Chapter 6 concludes the present study with a discussion of the findings and an outlook on possible future investigation of the community studied in the present work.

2. RESEARCH ON COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

CMC has attracted the attention of researchers already since 1963 (Kiesler et al. 1984). Early studies focused on the technical aspects of CMC. As the technology became available to a broader public, it attracted broader academic attention from diverse research fields. While the first linguistic studies on CMC and computer-mediated discourse (CMD) appeared as early as 1984 (Herring 2001), it was only during the 1990's that research started to be conducted by a larger number of researchers. Since this 'first wave' of linguists' interest on CMC, research has been rapidly expanding and has become a focus of much attention.

While the term *computer-mediated communication* might seem self-explanatory, it is nonetheless important to have a clear definition of what CMC is, in what way the medium differs from other communication-channels, and how technical specifics and limitations influence communication. The first section of this chapter is dedicated to clarifying these points.

The second section's focus is on linguistic research of computer-mediated communication and which factors need to be taken into account when doing research on CMC. The third and final section of this chapter explains what constitutes an 'online' or 'virtual' community.

2.1   Defining CMC

According to Herring (2001) "most CMC [...] is *text-based*, that is, messages are typed on a computer keyboard and read as text on a computer screen." (Herring 2001: 612) While this is probably still true, the introduction of audiovisual services such as YouTube and Skype in the 2000's, and Instagram and Snapchat in the 2010's, to name few, has broadened the spectrum of CMC. Recent technical developments has allowed users to embed videos, GIFs, emoticons, emojis and similar into written interactions, further enriching formerly text-only interactions. The data of the present study consists of typed interactions containing only few emoticons. The following section on CMC will focus on theories concerning text-based CMC.

Even though written, typed CMC is an independent form of interaction, situated on a continuum between spoken language on the one end, and written language on the other. (Herring 2001) Thus, textual CMC can simultaneously contain linguistic features typically attributed to both spoken and/or written language. Moreover, the technical particularities of the medium influence language use. More recent technical developments have broadened the spectrum CMC occupies on this continuum. Considering the present study's data is text-based, definitions that do not take these recent developments into account are still useful and will be presented here.

As mentioned before, text-based CMC is a reduced context medium, since audiovisual and gestural clues are often missing. As Herring (2001: 614) points out, this lack of interactional features is often compensated for textually. Participants might use textual representations of actions or emoticons and emojis to re-introduce context into the interaction. Other features, e.g. the possibility of lurking (only passively participating in a conversation) and learning about norms in a given community before participating, might even facilitate interactions online, as Zhang and Watts (2008: 58) point out.

The biggest influence on language use in CMC, according to Herring (2001, 2004), is the dichotomy between *synchronous* and *asynchronous* CMC. Synchronous communication forms, such as internet relay chat (IRC), require participants to be logged in at the same time, allowing for almost immediate feedback. This results in messages quickly scrolling out of sight. Asynchronous communication forms, for example emails or web-forums, do not require simultaneous presence, and messages are stored and accessible for longer periods of time. This strict distinction, however, might not always be useful. Some forms of what might be considered asynchronous CMC, such as comments on blog posts, might temporarily become synchronous or near-synchronous, as is the case for the present study.

Other technical aspects that influence CMC include restrictions on message length, possibility of remaining anonymous, the length of time and ease of message access, quotation systems, integration of audiovisual sources. (Herring 2001: 616).

As can already be seen from these variables, CMC is not a homogeneous form of communication. Rather, CMC has developed along with the diversification of technology and communication channels, from originally only email to IRC, web-forums, newsgroups, weblogs and many more today. CMC does not exist in a vacuum and participants most likely take part in offline speech communities, which likely influences their computer-mediated interactions. How these variables, developments and influences have been considered by linguists in connection with interaction patterns in CMC is discussed in the next section.

2.2   Linguistic CMC analysis

Linguistic research on discourse patterns in CMC has been termed computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), according to its "focus on language and language use [...] and its use of methods of discourse analysis" (Herring 2001: 612). While CMDA,

as other discourse analyses, focuses mainly on verbal interaction, it also takes into consideration the social particularities of the involved technology or medium.

CMDA does not constitute a theory or method in itself, but rather is an approach utilizing preexisting theories, ideas, and methods of discourse analysis (DA) on spoken or written discourse and adapting them to CMC (Herring 2004). Its premise is then to identify recurring patterns of interaction, along one or more of four domains of language: "1) structure, 2) meaning, 3) interaction, and 4) social behavior" (Herring 2004: 341). The study of structure is concerned with analyzing special typography or orthography, new words or sentence structures. Meaning relates to single words, utterances or even larger functional units. On the interactional level, turn-taking and other means of negotiating and organizing exchanges are analyzed. Social behavior, finally, refers to bigger interactional phenomena over more than one interaction. (Herring 2004)

All of these phenomena are also studied in other branches of DA. What differentiates CMDA from other sub-categories of DA are two main points: the collection of data and the position of the researcher him/herself. DA and CMDA, analyze naturally occurring verbal interactions. Since online communication often already leaves a textual trace, it is in some ways easier for researchers of CMC to collect such data than it is for researchers analyzing spoken interactions (Herring 2004). Such online data collection allows for the researcher to stay invisible to the participants, should s/he choose to, minimizing or eliminating observer effect.

The 'first wave' of studies on CMC in the 1990's mainly focused on the structural and interactional aspects of CMC, empirically describing the unifying attributes of language used in that medium. This led to such terms as 'netspeak', 'electronic language' and 'computer-mediated register' (Androutsopoulos 2006: 420) and somewhat to an over-generalization of language features typical in CMD (Herring 2001). While there do exist unique medium-based features of language, such as emoticons,

acronyms and textual representations of acts (i.e. *raises hand*), I agree with Androutsopoulos, that these features "are [. . .] resources that particular (groups of) users might draw on in the construction of discourse styles in particular contexts" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421), but that they do not necessarily appear in all CMC. Other concerns were the hybrid nature of CMC and the question whether CMD constitutes a 'spoken' or 'written' form of communication, resulting in the classification along a continuum, as described above. The main distinction between types of CMC was considered as being between synchronous and asynchronous CMC. This first wave is best described as a descriptive phase, shaped by "technological determinism" (Bolander and Locher 2013: 3).

Already during this 'first wave' of CMDA, Herring (1996) looked at the "interplay of technological, social, and contextual factors in the shaping of computer-mediated language practices, and the role of linguistic variability in the formation of social interaction and social identities on the Internet." (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421) Nevertheless, this focus on the interplay of technological and social factors only became more widely adopted in the late 1990's, which started what Androutsopoulos (2006) identifies as the 'second wave' of CMDA. CMC was no longer considered as a uniform and separate form of language, but rather as consisting of several genres or 'modes', which not only refer to technical aspects, "but also to the social and cultural practices that have arisen around their use" (Herring 2007). In this wave, the focus had shifted away from "medium-related to user-related patterns of language" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 421).

With the popularization of the "Web 2.0" and its increased user-generated content and discourse in the mid 2000's the research focus shifted even further away from technical aspects towards user or participant centered factors. In this current 'third wave' of CMDA, the internet is no longer considered purely an "information network" (Bolander and Locher 2013: 3) where users go to exchange information, but an "interpersonal resource", which is used for social purposes (ibid.). Accordingly,

some researchers now look at CMC as a 'place', i.e. "digital communication as a social process and CMC environments as discursively created spaces of human interaction, which are dynamically related to offline activities" (Androutsopoulos 2013: 239). Regarding language use and identity in CMC, concepts such as 'emergence' and 'performativity' have recently gained importance (Bolander and Locher 2013). These terms are discussed in detail in Chapter 3 Notions of identity, as they are important concepts for the present study.

Notable in the context of the present study are results from research on the connection of language and (gendered) identity in CMC during the second and third wave of CMDA. These varied studies led to quite different results. Again, Herring was pioneering research on the relationship between identity and language use in CMC (Androutsopoulos 2006). She found a correlation linking gender and participation patterns and style in CMC, concluding that gender asymmetry and male dominance persist even in the seemingly egalitarian environment that is CMC. Contrastingly, more recent research has found that 'blogs operated by young males and females are more alike than different' (Huffaker and Calvert 2005). Researchers basing their analyses on performative and emergent notions of (gendered) identity, have criticized Herring for her view of gender as a fixed entity (Androutsopoulos 2006). She and Paolillo (2006) found that linguistic features hypothesized to be linked to the biological gender of the author were rather linked to genre.

As can be seen communication patterns in CMD are dependent on technological and non-technological factors. Based on her previous research, Herring (2007) proposed a multi-faceted classification system to analyze CMD and account for the varied influences and manifold approaches to CMDA, taking the following eight situational factors into account:

> **1) participant structure** (One-to-one, one-to-many, many-to-many; Public/private; Degree of anonymity/pseudonymity; Group size; number of active participants; Amount, rate, and balance of participation)

2) participant characteristics (Demographics: gender, age, occupation, etc.; Proficiency: with language/computers/CMC; Experience: with addressee/group/topic; Role/status: in "real life"; of online personae; Pre-existing sociocultural knowledge and interactional norms; Attitudes, beliefs, ideologies, and motivations)
3) purpose (Of group, e.g., professional, social, fantasy/role- playing, aesthetic, experimental)
4) topic/theme (Goal of interaction, e.g., get information, negotiate consensus, develop professional/social relationships, impress/entertain others, have fun; Of group, e.g., politics, linguistics, feminism, soap operas, sex, science fiction, South Asian culture, medieval times, pub; Of exchanges, e.g., the war in Iraq, pro-drop languages, the project budget, gay sex, vacation plans, personal information about participants, meta-discourse about CMC)
5) tone (Serious/playful; Formal/casual; Contentious/friendly; Cooperative/sarcastic, etc.)
6) activity (E.g., debate, job announcement, information exchange, phatic exchange, problem solving, exchange of insults, joking exchange, game, theatrical performance, flirtation, virtual sex)
7) norms (Of organization; Of social appropriateness; Of language)
8) code (Language, language variety; Font/writing system)
(Herring 2007: 18)

Equally to Herring's (2001) CMDA approach, this classification system is neither a methodological, nor a theoretical framework, but should be seen as "a faceted lens through which to view CMD data, in order to facilitate analysis" (Herring 2007: 4). As is evident from the short historical overview on CMDA, there are many possible theoretical and methodological approaches a researcher could take in analyzing CMD. The approaches taken in the present study are presented in chapters 3 and 4, respectively.

Before that one more term related to CMD needs to be discussed. As can be seen from the first two points of Herring's classification system, the role of the participants in online interactions is emphasized. For a group to produce sufficiently coherent patterns of interaction, a sense of community might be necessary. A group of people interacting online does not make a community and it is necessary to define what constitutes such a community. Since in online environments, the otherwise useful notion of 'speech' community' cannot be used in its original sense, new terminology adapted to these environments is necessary, which is presented in the following section.

2.3 Defining virtual community

The terms 'virtual community' or 'online community', as much as they are mentioned in popular press today, are by no means established terms among sociolinguists. Some studies even argue that features that described and defined communities in the sociological sense, such as physical proximity, "stable membership, long-term commitment, and social accountability" (Androutsopoulos 2006: 422) are lacking in CMC, and that virtual or online communities cannot exist (ibid.). Others have argued against this, saying that virtual communities "do not follow the same patterns of communication and interaction as physical communities do. But they are not 'unreal', they work in a different plane of reality". (Castells 2000: 389, as cited from Androutsopoulos (2006: 422))

Additionally one might argue that offline and online or virtual communities, rather than being two mutually exclusive concepts, are at two ends of a spectrum. This parallels the idea that CMC can be seen to fall on a continuum between spoken and written language. While there are many communities that function entirely on one or the other end of the spectrum, distinctions separating the two become blurred with services such as Facebook and Twitter. Facebook is used as an extension of offline communities, while through Twitter people connect offline with formerly unknown members in so called Twitter meet-ups.

Defining what constitutes an online or virtual community seems challenging. Definitions range from the open definition of "a group of people who interact in a virtual environment" (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar and Abras 2003: 1023, as cited from Androutsopoulos (2006: 422)) to having to meet a list of specific conditions. For the context of the present study, the definition by Herring (2004), which falls into the latter category, is most useful.

Through combining pre-existing notions of what constitutes communities, both online and offline, Herring (2004) came up with the following facets of what might characterize a virtual community:

> 1) active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
> 2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values
> 3) solidarity, support, reciprocity
> 4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
> 5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
> 6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals
> (Herring 2004: 352)

Herring also points out that not all of these features need to be present for a virtual community to be considered as one. She implies that there are several stages communities go through from loosely connected to "advanced stages of community" (Herring 2004: 353). Accordingly, some of the facets, e.g. facet 6 *emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals*, might only be present in advanced communities and cannot be applied to all virtual communities. How the community examined in the present study corresponds to these criteria is discussed in Section 5.1 Participant structure and dynamics.

While Herring's faceted lens of what characterizes virtual communities is useful, it does not provide categories with which to distinguish different types of communities. Such distinctions are provided by Henri and Pudelko (2003: 476), who propose four distinct types of online communities, judged by the gathering's "strength of social bond" and "gatherings' intentionality". They range from what they consider 'weak' *communities of interest*, along *goal-oriented community of interest* and *learner's community*, to the 'strongest' form, of a *community of practice*. In the context of the present study the concepts of community of interest (CoI) and community of practice (CoP) seem most suitable, as the other two types of communities are typically set up for a fixed period of time. According to Henri and Pudelko (2003: 478) CoIs are a "gathering of people assembled around a topic of common interest", which applies to the community analyzed in the present study. However, they also postulate that

members of such communities have weak rather than strong social bonds, which, as is shown in Section 5.1 Participant structure and dynamics is not the case for this particular community. Henri and Pudelko (2003: 477) also postulate that "the type of gathering influences the participation that can be described in terms involvement, provision of mutual help and support, sharing of common meanings and affirmation of common identity". Taking into account these terms, the observed community resembles more a CoP than that of a CoI, which is why this type of community is discussed in more detail here.

The concept of 'community of practice' originates from the area of knowledge management and was coined by Lave and Wenger (1991). The concept of CoPs initially referred mainly to face to face knowledge exchange and informal learning in work settings. As the concept was adopted in other research areas, and as it was further developed by Wenger (1998), Wenger and Snyder (2000), Brown and Duguid (2001), other meanings and uses emerged. The descriptions of CoPs have been changed and adapted to include both online and non-work-related communities, such as communities (artificially) created in school environments (Hanson-Smith 2012). Similarly to the term virtual community, the characteristics of CoPs are difficult to define, which according to Cox (2005: 536), is due to "the ambiguity of both the terms 'community' and 'practice'".

According to Hanson-Smith (2012: 1), CoPs are "characterized by a common *domain*, a relatively narrow area of expertise or purpose; a *community* where newcomers and experts alike can build and share expertise in social interactions, [...] and finally, a *practice* [...], the more or less conscious effort to build a repertoire of knowledge over time [...]". Zhang and Watts (2008) identify *informality, shared expertise* and *joint enterprise* as the main characteristics of CoPs. They emphasize the importance of the interdependent terms 'practice' and 'identity' as important features in CoPs. The identity of individuals and the community are shaped through practice, i.e. participation and reification processes. Identity in turn shapes the practice(s)

of the individuals as well as those of the group. This is mirrored along three dimensions: mutual engagement, joint enterprise and shared repertoire. A third approach is provided by Henri and Pudelko (2003), who analyze (online) communities along three axes: *context of emergence, activity* and *learning and identity construction.* For them an online CoP emerges from a "real world community of practice" (Henri and Pudelko 2003: 475), which in its activities "share[s] and pool[s] complementary knowledge among its members" (ibid.) and "allows the development of a collective identity" (ibid.) through learning processes that support the evolution of practices in the community. All three papers mentioned above base their definitions on Wenger (1998). However, they draw attention to different aspects of his definition of CoPs. By combining these three perspectives the following characteristics of CoPs emerge:

> 1) CoPs provide a space or community, where 2) newcomers and experts alike can 3) exchange and build knowledge, expertise and identity 4) in an informal setting 5) for a joint enterprise or joint purpose 6) through practice, i.e. learning through social interaction.

These characteristics are either present or implied (such as the aspect of community) in at least two of the three definitions above. Other aspects, such as the claim by Henri and Pudelko (2003) that online CoPs necessarily emerge from real world CoPs, are not supported by the other definitions. This exclusion in the above list of characteristics is important in the context of the present study, since, apart from this one point the comments section of TomandLorezo.com fulfills all of these criteria, as I will show in Section 5.1 Participant structure and dynamics.

3. NOTIONS OF IDENTITY

Different aspects of identity have been implicitly present in studies of language use from the beginning of sociolinguistic research. Some examples are macro-linguistic categories of identity, such as age, gender, ethnicity, and class. These categories are generally used to determine boundaries between social groups to study linguistic features specific to these groups (e.g. Gumperz' article on *speech community* (Gumperz 2009)).

How identity influences and is influenced by language has increasingly become the focus of sociolinguistic research since the early 1980's (Edwards 2009: 15). In these last thirty years, concepts of identity have developed considerably, and identity is no longer seen to be "a stable structure located primarily in the individual psyche or in fixed social categories" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 586). More current work has adopted the view that identity is a highly complex concept, made up of different facets, which are not linguistically indexed in all interactions (Barrett 1999). As Barrett (1999: 318) puts it: "Speakers may heighten or diminish linguistic displays that index various aspects of their identities according to the context of an utterance and the specific goals they are trying to achieve". Through iterating and indexing certain aspects, or facets, of identity in interactions, these become more prominent over time (Bucholtz and Hall 2005). Moreover, while one's identity influences the way of interacting, over time these interactions in turn influence our view of ourselves.

A useful theoretical and methodological framework for the present study is the one put forward by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). They propose five facets with which identity construction processes can be analyzed. This following section will give a short overview of all of the facets, then go on to present the relevant facets for the present study, along with the historical background behind them. Briefly summarised, these principles are:

> (1) [*emergence*] identity is the product rather than the source of linguistic and other semiotic practices and therefore is a social and cultural rather than primarily internal psychological phenomenon; (2) [*positionality*] identities encompass macro-level demographic categories, temporary and interactionally specific stances and participant roles, and local, ethnographically emergent cultural positions; (3) [*indexicality*] identities may be linguistically indexed through labels, implicatures, stances, styles, or linguistic structures and systems; (4) [*relationality*] identities are relationally constructed through several, often overlapping, aspects of the relationship between self and other, including similarity/difference, genuineness/artifice and authority/delegitimacy; and (5) [*partialness*] identity may be in part intentional, in part habitual and less than fully conscious, in part an outcome of interactional negotiation, in part a construct of others' perceptions and representations, and in part an outcome of larger ideological processes and structures.
> (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 585).

Emphasized words were added. This framework provides a useful base for analyzing identity building in computer mediated communication. Rather than isolating one aspect of identity to be the single source of language choice, the framework provides the tools to see individual identity in a broader context. Some of the five principles address similar aspects of identity. Thus, some principles by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) will be merged, separated, rearranged or left out for the purpose of the present study. The order in which they are presented here will vary from the one proposed in their article. While the article provides a useful guide to many concepts of identity analysis, it will by no means be the only source for presenting these concepts.

The background and history of the importance of macro-level categories and labels in linguistic research, and their importance for the study of identity will be presented

in Section 3.1 Indexicality. Then follows, in Section 3.2 Performativity, a discussion of the concept of identity as repeated performance, rather than a predetermined and fixed entity. Finally, in Section 3.3 Positionality and relationality notions of identity regarding relations between self and others are treated, namely how stances and roles contribute to both the individual and common identity.

3.1 Indexicality

In the earlier stages of sociolinguistic research, notably that of variationist sociolinguistics, identity research was focused on "broader social structures" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 591). This research was mapping wider sociolinguistic trends, often over long periods. Broad categories, such as gender, age or class, were valuable tools in these quantitative studies. These categories have been criticized as too "crude and monolithic" (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 27) to be of use when analyzing the relations between language and identity. They are often defined and imposed by the researcher and might only marginally correspond to what interactants would orient to themselves locally. Finally, the variationist approach was criticized for proposing causal links between broad categories (i.e. female) and linguistic behaviour (e.g. increased politeness). The criticism is that these correlations might be coincidental, rather than casual, and inferred by the researcher (ibid.).

Even so, categories are a useful tool in identifying one aspect of identity as it is constructed in local interactions. As Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 593) put it: "it is not a matter of choosing one dimension of identity over others, but of considering multiple facets to achieve a more complete understanding of how identity works." Apart from providing the researcher with one of many dimensions to analyze identity in language use, categories are often used and oriented to in local interactions by participants themselves. Categories can be used in micro-linguistic analyses of discourses as well. This membership categorization analysis (MCA), amongst other

things, "pays attention to the situated and reflexive use of categories in everyday [...] interaction" (Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 38).

Categorization, the overt mention of categories in conversations, can be a powerful resource in local identity construction, as "categories are conventionally associated with activities, attributes, motives and so on" and "whatever is known about the category can be invoked as being relevant to the person to whom the label is applied" (Widdicombe, cited after Benwell and Stokoe 2006: 39). In order for this process to be an efficient interactional tool, all parties present in the conversation need to be aware of the properties and ideologies that are associated with the category in question (Wardhaugh 2011: 267). Categories are "socially acquired" (ibid.) and might differ in meaning from community to community. Some categories might be widely known, such as "mother", others might only be familiar to specific groups, e.g. "queen" to reference a homosexual man.

Therefore, in MCA, unlike when using their own macro-level categories, researchers need to be familiar with the culture and categories deployed in local, i.e. micro-level, interactions. This might lead to the criticism of lacking scientific distance to the observed. This familiarity with the group's culture will add another dimension in understanding local identity building processes, as the same category can have different meanings in different cultures. Indeed, Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 594) present categories as being part of both the *positionality* and the *indexicality* principles. The overt mention of a category (which Bucholtz and Hall call a label) is not enough to construct identity. The speaker's position in relation to the category is equally important in shaping identity. This positioning is mentioned in yet another of their principles, the one of *relationality*. Two of these positioning processes, *stances* and the less overt assumption of *roles* are discussed in Section 3.3 Positionality and relationality. First, an important principle of identity construction needs to be addressed, Bucholtz and Hall's *emergence principle*.

3.2   Performativity

Another important criticism of variationist sociolinguistics was based on its premise of a pre-determined internal representation of identity, "something that lies dormant, ready to be "switched on" in the presence of other people" (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). Rather, Bucholtz and Hall (2005: 588) "view identity not simply as a psychological mechanism of self-classification that is reflected in people's social behavior but rather as something that is constituted through social action, and especially through language".

This concept of identity as something that is negotiated in and emerging from interactions has been used in different branches of linguistics. It stems from long traditions in the fields of linguistic anthropology and interactional linguistics that were first promoted in the 1970's by Hymes and Bourdieu, respectively. It has since been adopted by other strands of linguistics, such as functional and structural linguistics, as well as more recently conversation analysis and subsequently "nearly all contemporary linguistic research on identity takes this general perspective at its starting point" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 588). While Hymes postulated that "structure is sometimes emergent in action" (Hymes 1975: 71 cited after Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 587), which undoubtedly attracted the interest of functional and structural linguists, Bourdieu saw identity forming (emergence) as a "sedimentation of habitual action" (Bucholtz and Hall 2004: 378), which appeals to interactional and post-structural linguists.

These two approaches see identity as something habitual happening passively over time. More recently, the more active notion of 'doing' identity was adopted over several branches of linguistics. While all of the concepts have this broad idea of identity as something active at their core, there are still intrinsic differences between the details of them. The approach most useful for the present study is the one of performativity.

Performativity is the conscious decision to present certain identity aspects during an interaction, while suppressing others, to achieve an interpersonal goal in said interaction (Benwell and Stokoe 2006). This highly influential concept was proposed by the sociologist Goffman in the late 1950's. It is based on the premise that participants in an interaction attempt to control which aspects of their identity become apparent to the interlocutors. They present or perform only those aspects of their identity that are relevant and purposeful to the current interaction. In these practices that occur in every interaction he saw parallels to theatrical performances, hence the term performance.

The pragmatist Austin took up the idea of performance in 1962. In pragmatics performance refers to marked speech acts that effect a change in social reality (Bucholtz and Hall 2004). That is, in pragmatics performance relates to certain speech acts that, rather than describe a reality, perform reality. One of the most prominent examples of this is the sentence "I hereby pronounce you husband and wife". Linguistic anthropologists (e.g. Hymes 1975), acknowledged early on that performative speech acts are present even in "frequent and fleeting interactional moments throughout daily life"(Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 381) and are not only reserved for highly marked and ritualized speech events.

The most recent development in the theory of performativity comes from the post-structuralist Butler (1990) who developed and adapted Austin's pragmatic concept of performativity to gender studies. She observed that through performative speech acts such identity aspects as fgender are called into being. Furthermore, she combined Austin's notions of performativity with Hymes' observation that such acts occur in daily interactions and are not necessarily marked events. Performative speech acts only become marked events if they contradict ideological expectations associated with the identity aspect in question, such as male drag queens that use female pronouns in reference to themselves. Through routinely performing or contradicting the roles ideologically associated with an identity aspect, this identity

aspect becomes consolidated over time. Her theory of performativity also includes the reiterative notion of Bourdieu's view on emergence, as well as Goffman's theatrical understanding of performativity.

3.3   Positionality and relationality

The somewhat related concepts of stance, and participant roles, footing and participation frameworks, and *positionality* and *relationality*, are used in Bucholtz and Hall's second and fourth principles. The concept of stance is also used in their third principle, that of *indexicality*. For the present study the term indexicality is reserved for another aspect of their third principle, the use of categories and labels, as discussed above. Similarly to the use of indexicality, the principles of positionality and relationality serve to position the participants in ongoing discourse. This discourse can be both local as well as on a macro-level, and index reference points such as other speakers, events, and ideologies. Through analyzing these processes in interactions, the construction of different facets of identity can be observed.

While the concepts of participant roles, footing and participation frameworks have been in use since the mid-1970's when they were first introduced by Goffman (1974), the research on stance and similar notions has only recently emerged through works by e.g. Pomerantz (1984), Goodwin and Goodwin (1992), Ochs (1992), Hunston and Thompson (2000), Heritage and Raymond (2005), Du Bois (2007). Stance refers to both the position speakers that take in respect to the contents of an interaction, and others' positions to the same content. Contrarily, participant roles, participant framework and footing refer to the organizational positioning of interactants. For the present study the concept of stance is the more useful one, thus Goffman's concepts and their later developments, while interesting, will not be discussed.

Definitions of stance vary considerably, but generally have in common that stance is a way of positioning the speaker in respect to the contents of the interaction and its other participants. The detailed definition used by Du Bois (2007) in his proposal of a framework for analyzing stance will be used for the present study:

> Stance is a public act by a social actor, achieved dialogically through overt communicative means, of simultaneously evaluating objects, positioning subjects (self and others), and aligning with other subjects, with respect to any salient dimension of the sociocultural field. (Du Bois 2007: 163)

This dense definition contains several important concepts regarding stance. Firstly, stance is a performative act in the pragmatic sense. Through linguistic markers a social actor calls his social standing, or position, into being, both locally and on a macro-level. Stance has to be public, as it highly depends on the context of the current or previous interactions and stances and is achieved dialogically (i.e. through dialog). Secondly, stance achieves several interactional purposes at the same time, most notably the ones of evaluation, alignment and positioning. Thirdly, stance is not restricted to local interactions, but through indexing broader sociocultural ideologies, situates the ongoing interaction and its participants in a macro-level discourse.

The smallest unit at which this act can be observed is the stance utterance, which is usually comprised of at least three components, the *stance subject*, a *stance object* and a *stance predicate* (Du Bois 2007). The stance subject (stance taker) is marked by a personal pronoun and is often equivalent with the speaker. The stance object is what the stance subject orients towards, i.e. what is spoken about in an interaction. The stance predicate is the verb that signals the stance taker's position in regard to the stance object.

There are at least three different types of stance predicates: (1) *evaluative*, assigning a value to an object, (2) *affective*, expressing an emotional position, and (3) *epistemic*, showing knowledge and expertise or lack thereof in regard to the object. Since

these predicates index different types of positions, they have often been presented as different types of stances (e.g. Bucholtz and Hall 2005, Ochs 1992). Du Bois sees them as different aspects of the process that underlies stance acts and summarizes them as "evaluating objects" in the above definition. He suggests that there might be more than these three types of stance predicates.

Indeed Du Bois (2007: 144) names another type of stance predicate, that of *alignment*, i.e. agreement with or opposition to a previous stance. He also demonstrates that alignment is present in every stance act, alongside the other stance types. This alignment, be it positive or negative, is often implicit and only becomes apparent through the context of the interaction, be it local or on a macro-level. Taking up Du Bois' ideas, Jaffe (2009) provides a table listing these and other stance types used in stance research.

To account for all elements of a stance act, Du Bois proposes the "stance triangle". In this model a complete stance act is made up of two stance subjects and a stance object. By evaluating a common stance object, a stance subject aligns with another stance subject, in the same interaction, by referencing previous interactions or macro-level ideologies.

Stance, as defined so far, has only had implications for local and temporary identity. As a result of *practice* as discussed above (in this context called *stance accretion*), stances "accumulate into more durable structures of identity" (Bucholtz and Hall 2005: 596). This happens both on the individual as well as the macro-level. Certain ways of using stances by a person or social group can become "associated with particular social categories, such as gender" (ibid.). The scope of the present study does not allow for a longitudinal analysis of stance accretion. Instead, the focus is on stance taking across turns in single conversations.

4. PRESENT STUDY

4.1 Aims

As we have seen, CMDA and sociolinguistic identity research and the analysis of CoPs have many touching points and overlaps. Combining the three, the present study analyzes one virtual community in terms of how different aspects of identity can be built through one specific manifestation of CMC. More specifically, this study will show how participants work their identities within the boundaries of the comments section of the pop-culture blog tomandlorenzo.com. Condensed into one main question:

Which interactive means do commenters on the blog tomandlorenzo.com use to present, shape and negotiate their identity?

As has been presented in the background chapter, identity is made up of several overlapping facets and includes different underlying mechanisms. This main question is therefore split into three sub-questions, with each focusing on a different aspect of identity.

1. How do contributors overtly and covertly index their identities?

Which macro- and micro-level categories do participants use in reference to themselves and others? How are these relevant to the activity the users participate in? Why do participants mention these categories?

2. How do contributors perform their online identity in the comments section of tomandlorenzo.com?

Which aspects of identity do the participants make relevant for the activities they engage in? How does this contribute to the interactional culture of the group? How do participants make use of the available resources of interaction?

3. How do participants take stances toward previous interactions and the identities constructed therein?

How do these stances position the participants in ongoing interactions and thereby contribute to construction of their individual/collective identities?

4.2 Data collection and selection

The data was collected on Sunday January 19, between 6pm and 8pm EET. This time was chosen as the last blog post of the week is usually published on Friday afternoon ET, the first of the week is usually published on Monday morning ET. Collecting the data on Sunday evening made sure that the blog week was fully finished, while still allowing for comments coming in on the week's later posts. From observing the community it became clear that on Sundays there is not much commenting. Therefore conversations would be concluded, making sure entire conversations were recorded. The data was captured using a free program for Mac OS X called SiteSucker and consisted of comments made between Monday January 13 and Sunday January 26.

Before the data collection it was estimated that there were going to be around 10 blog posts a week with 100 comments each. The collected data had to be narrowed down. Posts of the categories "movie", "television" and "whiteboard" were excluded from the data capture. The collected comments came from posts under the categories "fashion" and "celebrity" only. This was due to the original intent

of the present study to observe whether there was a link between the commenter's gendered identity construction and how male and female bodies were discussed. By focusing on "fashion" and "celebrity" it was hoped to capture comments on appearances of people in the public eye. The estimated number of blog posts was rather inaccurate, with the real number consisting of roughly 7000 comments on 50 blog posts published the previous week. A quick sighting of the collected data revealed that there was not enough material available for the initial research focus.

The week from which the data originated was the week after the Golden Globes award show. Fashion choices for men are very limited in formal settings and thus the data was strongly biased towards posts about red carpet fashion choices of female celebrities. This, in turn, elicited mostly comments along the lines of agreement/disagreement, which yielded few usable interactions on identity construction, be it gendered or otherwise. Two posts stood out in that respect, as the they were intended to elicit open discussion. These two posts were part of a series of posts called the "T LOunge". Indeed, the comments covered more varied topics and themes of conversation than any other type of blog post from that week. While not more numerous, such exchanges were usually longer, both in terms of length of contributions and number of turns per conversation, allowing for varied displays of identity work. Subsequently the research questions were adapted to reflect the data's potential to yield insights into the mechanics of online identity construction.

To further narrow down the volume of data (there were still 587 comments on these posts), comments with two or lesser replies were eliminated. This was to insure that the interactiveness of identity work could be accounted for. Several conversations exclusively discussing various television series were left out of the data. These conversations again mostly attracted responses of agreement/disagreement. Thus, the core data consists of 27 conversations with 316 comments between them.

4.3   Relevance of data

The chosen data stemmed from the comments on two blog posts from a series that used to be a weekly recurring feature. These posts contained pictures of a real world bar or lounge and an invitation for open discussion. In this way the creators provided a virtual space for their readers to interact among themselves. In many ways these spaces resembled online discussion forums, rather than a comments section of a blog, where contributions orient towards and take up the content of the post itself.

Due to the popularity of these weekly posts, this feature had been turned into a forum in February 2015. In the authors' own words:

> "Our weekly T Lounge [sic] posts weren't going to cut it anymore, mainly because an unthreaded comments section becomes very difficult to keep track of after about 300 comments or so. [...] Instead, we've built a main community forum called (what else?) The T LOunge, where you get to hang out all day, every day, instead of being relegated to only chatting with each other on the weekends."

(Fitzgerald and Marquez 2015)

By February 2016 this T LOunge forum had hundreds of sub-topics, which indicates a lively and active virtual community.

In the current study the focus is on dialogical identity building. Therefore the current data is biased towards discussion forum-like interactions. Some of the analyzed data had elements of typical blog comments, like the aforementioned orientation towards content. The data for the present study can be seen as a snapshot of a community somewhere between a 'weak' *community of interest* and a 'strong' *community of practice*. The strict distinction between these two communities might prove to be a false dichotomy.

4.4   Ethical considerations in CMDA

Whenever research on human behavior and interaction is concerned, the question of ethics should be addressed. When conducting CMDA, it could be easy to forget that humans are concerned. This stems from the fact that data collection may not necessitate direct interactions between researcher and participants, as is the case for the present study. In this section the main ethical aspects in CMDA and their implications for the present study will be examined.

Since the earlier research on language use in CMD in the 1990's, the ethics surrounding CMC data have undergone a change from questions of accessibility to questions of privacy (Bolander and Locher 2013). In the above mentioned 'first wave' of CMDA, the question of accessibility and group size determined as to how sensitive the data was considered. If interactions took place in an environment to which no log in was necessary, or to which a large group had access, the data was not considered sensitive. Contrarily, data that was addressed to a specific recipient, or smaller groups, such as private emails or chats, were considered more delicate.

While this simplistic division is still useful, and indeed the first step in considering ethical issues with research data, it is no longer sufficient. Recently the notions of what constitutes private versus public interactions has evolved away from purely access related towards also acknowledging content related considerations (Bolander and Locher 2013). The distinction of what defines private and public is consequently more gradual than if merely accessibility were observed. As Landert and Jucker (2011) put it:

> "We are confronted with media texts that combine private and public aspects on various levels. They may be public in the sense that they are within the public space and can be read by a large and anonymous audience, while at the same time discussing topics which we think of as 'private' and using language which is associated with informal and private conversations." (Landert and Jucker 2011: 1423)

Theoretically four different types of data can emerge from this setup: closed access and sensitive content (private-private), public in both access and content (public-public), public in access, but sensitive in content (public-private), and closed access yet unproblematic content (private-public) (Bolander and Locher 2013). As Bolander and Locher (2013: 4) rightly say, these distinctions may not only be considered for the entirety of the data, but should also be applied to sections and subsections. Indeed, the constant reviewing of data during the course of a study is one of six guidelines put forward by the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) in 2005 and 2012, respectively.

The AoIR is an interdisciplinary association, which consciously did not propose strict rules and regulations (Markham et al. 2012). The reason for this is because the internet, and therefore CMC, undergoes constant change. Moreover, different research fields have different approaches and needs regarding data. By proposing guidelines rather than fixed rules, the question of ethical research conduct can be adapted to the specific research project at a specific point in time, reflecting the current developments and ethical views. To summarize, the six guidelines are:

> 1) Tte greater the vulnerability of the studied, the greater the researcher's responsibility to protect them.
> 2) in order not to harm the participants, harm has to be defined within the specific context of the participants.
> 3) even though digital data masks the person behind the information, researchers should always be aware of his/her existence as a human being.
> 4) the rights of the subjects should be weighed against the benefits of the study.
> 5) ethical issues should be considered at all stages of a research project.
> 6) ethical decisions should be discussed with other people and compared to similar studies.

As many different topics are discussed in the data of the present study, this evaluation should be applied at least at the level of conversations, maybe even at the level of single comments. This continual (re)assessment of the raw data's ethical implications will insure the integrity of the present study. This is especially relevant, as

participants who contributed to the present study's data could not be contacted to give consent.

4.5   Methods of data analysis

To answer the research questions, the data was scrutinized according to the three different mechanisms of identity work as presented in the background chapter: indexicality, performativity and positioning. The influence of the medium on interactions was also taken into account. To address each of the three research questions, slightly different approaches of data analysis were used. All had qualitative discourse analysis at their core.

To give a better understanding of the investigated community, in Section 5.1 Participant structure and dynamics presents the results of a short quantitative analysis of the participants was conducted. For this the number of present contributors were counted, how many comments were made, and who made how many contributions. In addition to this quantitative analysis, a typical example of an interaction is presented, along with a minimal structural analysis.

In section 5.2.1 Indexing, to see which categories were used, the data was read for certain key labels that indicate macro-level identity categories relating to family ("mother", "kids", "sister"), age ("old", "young") or marital status ("wife", "husband", "partner", "girlfriend"). All of these were extracted from the data itself, meaning these categories were chosen by the participants, rather than the researcher. By taking into account the context and activity of the contributions, it was then determined if these terms were used in self-reference or in reference to others and how this contributed to identity.

To obtain the results presented in section 5.2.2 Performing the data was investigated for influences of the interactional site, an online comments section, on language per-

formance of the participants, i.e. if there were certain linguistic markers referencing the environment. It was then determined how the environment influenced interactional patterns with regard to performance.

Finally, to analyze stance taking, discussed in section 5.2.3 Positioning, whole conversations were interpreted using the analytic tools of a stance triangle. To see different stances in action, stance alignment and each stance type (affective, evaluative, epistemic) were presented separately, using one conversation as example per stance type.

5. ANALYSIS

5.1 Participant structure and dynamics

With the interactional space framed as a virtual bar or lounge, topics of conversation and participant structure of the current data resembled a real life bar or lounge. The space contained a core group of five participants responsible for approximately half of the contributions to the current data. Each of these participants contributed more than 20 comments. One particularly active participant contributed 49 times. The current data consists of selected conversations from two consecutive weeks. The term 'core group' describes the most active users, not the most regular ones as it might in a real bar. There is evidence of regular attendance in the data itself, as is discussed below.

Overall there are fifty contributors (also referred to as participants, interactants and users in the analysis) to the current data. Nothing is known about these contributors apart from what they reveal in their comments. Their screen names were anonymized for the analysis. To be able to follow contributors across interactions, each user has been given a unique pseudonym.

Of these fifty contributors, the vast majority contributed three times or less. Twelve participants commented more than 10 times, the core group included. Six participants started 2 conversations, while the rest initiated at most 1. There was no strong relationship between a user's number of comments and whether that user

initiated a conversation, though participants who initiated 2 conversations usually contributed more than 10 comments.

Conversations consisted mostly of everyday events and problems, though other topics included vaginal rejuvenation, remembering a newly deceased person, film adaptations of Jane Austen novels, and self-censorship in social media.

The dynamics of the conversations resembled real life group meetings, where several conversations are going on at the same time. Sometimes interactions were referenced across conversations, and often threads contained more than one topic as shown in the following example:

Example 1

1   UserB: I've made a pact with myself to work energetically for most of the weekend,
2   I'm sick of the general air of post-holidays doldrums in my office and in my head,
3   and my home's just cluttered, full of looming projects, and inhabited by people
4   whining about their allergies. And sniffling and coughing and taking various pills.
5   These "people" would include me, and when you get on your own nerves it's getting
6   ridiculous.
7   We'll see how this goes. If you all notice me spending a ton of time interacting on
8   this site you'll know it's not looking good for the good guys.

9   UserI: Hey, where's UserAold? I was going to broach the topic of vaginal rejuve-
10 nation, but I don't want her to miss it.

11 UserN: UserAold is now UserA. You must have missed her announcement a
12 couple of weeks ago.

13 UserI: I have been so buried under year end paperwork, I've missed all the
14 important stuff.

15 UserI: Did you used to be someone else, too? Who all has changed their
16 names? WHAT HAVE I MISSED?!?!?!?!

17 UserA: Can I tell you, how deeply it pleases me, that when you want to talk
18 vaginal rejuvenation, you KNOW how much I'd want to be a part of that?

19 UserI: I look forward to your insight.

20 UserJ: Glad to know you're still around, albeit in different "garb." And,
21 uh, vag/rejuv? Since I'm long past juvie, those parts down dere [sic] would
22 have to get in line for the rest of the corpus's unlikely turning back of the
23 Clock o' Age.

24 UserC: January is always the cruelest month. For those who celebrate the holidays
25 with spending, the bills come in. For those who are self-employed, it's time to
26 pay quarterly taxes. Add the crazy weather, and all the respiratory ailments that

27   come with it, it is a tough month all around. It's a good time to force some flower
28   bulbs to bloom inside – a good reminder that beautiful things are always ready
29   to blossom.

Example 1, shown above in its entirety, is a representative example of interactions for this space. Often initial comments recount an everyday event or problem. These threads are then hijacked by someone else and the ensuing conversation veers off-topic, as is the case here in line 9. Example 1 also demonstrates that some contributors interact on a regular level and have a degree of knowledge of each other. Inherent in the interactions is a sense of humor, as exhibited in lines 17 and 21. In the final comment (line 24), someone is ready to give advice or comfort, be it solicited or not.

Participants do not seem to meet outside of this environment. There is therefore a certain distance in some of the interactions, as shall be discussed in the section 5.2.2 Performing. Contributors also seem to be spread geographically, as seen in references to locations in the United States of America and Britain, though none is as specific as the following:

Example 2

1   UserN: [...] If any of you are in Los Angeles, please stop by before I close on February
2   28 and introduce yourselves. I would love to meet fellow BKs. I'm on the corner of
3   [...] Blvd. and [...] in S[...] O[...] .

This quote is the last of a conversation started by UserN about having to close shop. Many other participants subsequently express their sympathy and sadness, which might have contributed to UserN's wish to meet some of them. A will be seen in section 5.2.2 Performing, solidarity and support form a big part of this group's interactions.

As mentioned above, the data for the current study does not allow for a longitudinal analysis of participation. There is some evidence that at least some of the contributors visit this space fairly regularly:

Example 3

UserB: [...] I always try to stop into the Lounges even if I haven't watched for
the BKs. Real life does sometimes get in the way, which I suppose is healthier
than having my life revolve around a blog, but . . . .

Unsurprisingly, UserB is the contributor with the most comments. The statement
"even if I haven't watched" refers to the origins of the T LOunge, which were
initially set up as a space to discuss the newest episode of the television series
"Project Runway". Indeed, many participants still use the lounge for that purpose.
These contributions were explicitly excluded from the current data, as outlined in
Section 4.2 Data collection and selection. Also, both in this example and Example 2
above the contributors use the abbreviation "BK", which stands for "bitter kittens".
This is a name used in self reference to describe commenters on this blog.

In Section 2.3 Defining virtual community, two definitions of virtual communities
were introduced. To recall, Herring (2004) defines virtual community as posessing
at least several of the following aspects:

1) active, self-sustaining participation; a core of regular participants
2) shared history, purpose, culture, norms and values
3) solidarity, support, reciprocity
4) criticism, conflict, means of conflict resolution
5) self-awareness of group as an entity distinct from other groups
6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals
(Herring 2004: 352)

Several of these aspects have been presented here, or will be discussed in the fol-
lowing analysis. The aspects not contained in the present data are (4) criticism,
conflict, means of conflict resolution and (6) emergence of roles, hierarchy, gover-
nance, rituals. From informally observing the space, it is clear that conflict and its
resolution is extremely rare in this community. While there is some dissent, which
will be discussed in section 5.2.3 Positioning, this remains ignored. Apart from the
weekly effort of the blog creators to set the recurring T LOunge there seems to be
little in the way of rituals or hierarchies, though they might become visible through

a longitudinal analysis. In addition to Herring's faceted list, I postulate that the comments section of tomandlorenzo.com resembles a community of practice (CoP), according to the following criteria:

> 1) CoPs provide a space or community, where 2) newcomers and experts alike can 3) exchange and build knowledge, expertise and identity 4) in an informal setting 5) for a joint enterprise or joint purpose 6) through practice, i.e. learning through social interaction.

Most points in this definition are fulfilled, most notably those that overlap with Herring's definition above. The aspects of a CoP that still need to be established as pertaining to the current community are the aspects of learning and exchange of knowledge. While these two aspects are lacking from the current interactions, the building of identity is a big part of interactions in this space. While learning in the context of CoPs initially meant professional learning, one might interpret this statement as any kind of learning. This last point might be dropped, as at the end of every interaction there is an element of learning and new information about the interactants.

5.2   Ways of shaping identity

In this following chapter the data will be analysed according to the identity facets described in Chapter 3. Section 5.2.1 covers the overt and covert use of macro- and micro-level categories. Section 5.2.2 looks at how participants in the comments section of tomandlorenzo.com perform their online identities. Section 5.2.3 then looks at how stance helps build identity, relationships, community and belonging. Each of these facets will be illustrated with excerpts from the data. In each of these excerpts more than one aspect of identity work is present. For clarity in each of the sections the focus will be on only one aspect. Therefore, some of the excerpts will be discussed in more than one section.

5.2.1   Indexing

To recall, the present study conducts a micro-linguistic analysis. Rather than trying to assign the participants into macro-level categories, this following chapter looks at how the participants themselves use and orient towards categories and labels in their posts. First, the functions of overt categories will be addressed, followed by observations on covert use of categories. Furthermore, categories and labels are not the sole way of indexing identity. These are merely overt ways of indicating who one might be. Other less overt strategies do exist, which will become evident from the following analysis.

When analyzing the data, it became soon evident that overt labeling of self and other participants was not a common strategy in building identity. However, macro-level categories were used fairly often to covertly describe identity. In this following section some examples of this are presented. Both the overt and covert use of categories served similar identity goals, as shall be seen here.

The most obvious way of using labels would seem to be to describe one's self or others directly. This type of identity construction was only present in few contributions, two of which follow:

Example 4

1   UserO (21): 'Tis a class I can't graduate without, and I'm an online student. They
2   only offer it on campus (which is too far to commute with my full time job) and I
3   never could have gotten it from them – esp. because the prof for it is on sabbatical
4   this year. I knew this, but my advisor assured me that I could get the class – no
5   problem! – at the university by my house. Surprise: they don't have it. They won't
6   have it this summer, either. I have systematically gone through all universities with
7   online courses in art history in the US, too, and nobody has it this semester. It's just
8   a choice of early, high, or Northern Renaissance art, and I am confounded that it is
9   so hard to find. Especially since I have a fine arts education already, and if there was
10   an equivalency test or something, I could nail it. BUT NO, they will make me take
11   it, even though I may have to wait a year or more. AARGH.

On the first line of Example 4 above, the user reveals a hitherto unknown aspect of his or her identity, namely that of being an online student. This comment is a

follow up on an initial contribution complaining about a number of life events going wrong at the same time. Several other users then tried to comfort and give advice on one aspect, that of UserO not being able to graduate in the time foreseen. By explicitly stating the status as an online student in her response to these attempts at comforting, UserO emphasizes and legitimizes this initial complaint.

The second instance of overt self-labeling is less direct, though through the use of the markers "being" and "I'm" still rather obvious. Of particular interest here is the comment starting on line 9.

Example 5

1   UserA: [...] I'm headed to Mississippi for a funeral. :(
2   Extended family, but I'm going for the moral support of my best cousins and to help
3   ease them into the Dead Patent [sic] Club . It sucks, but we do have a hand shake.
4   [...]

5   UserZ: I'm sorry for your loss. It's still difficult, even if you're going to support
6   someone else. xoxo

7   UserA: Xoxo

8   UserE: Hope the funeral is everything your family needs it to be!

9   UserÇ: Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear it. Being a 24-year-old who has been to
10   entirely too many funerals for her age, I feel your pain. I'm a partial member of
11   the Dead Parents Club , so I'm glad to hear you're offering moral support to the
12   new inductees. Although I never learned the special handshake. Sending good
13   vibes to Mississippi!

Apart from overtly stating the age, UserÇ further indexes a part of identity by using the personal pronoun "her" in self reference. These two labels serve the same purpose as the statement "I'm an online student" above. The utterance "I'm a partial member of the Dead Parents Club" (line 14) also unveils a previously hidden aspect of identity. Again, the overt self indexing serves as a means to legitimize. In this case the legitimizing occurs before the action that requires it, namely the claim to "feel [the same] pain" (line 13) as the initial contributor.

The use of a lengthy euphemism for "orphan" also serves a different purpose, namely as comic relief for the decidedly somber topic and to display a humorous and playful

personality. This is heightened by claiming there is a "secret handshake" (lines 3 and 12) for members of the "Dead Parents Club" (lines 3 and 14). Since both of these terms were introduced in the comment UserÇ replies to, the label "member of the Dead Parents Club" is localized to this conversation. In fact it does not occur anywhere else in the data.

Contrarily, the covert purpose of the label "Dead Parents Club", that of indicating a humorous personality, is prevalent throughout the data. Indeed, humor is an integral part of this group's interactional behavior and culture. Unfortunately, the most telling example for the sense of humor cannot be discussed here for ethical reasons. While the collected data contains the original conversation, one of the participants later censored themselves and removed some of the comments, indicating that these were too delicate to remain in public. Nevertheless, the following examples contain some occurrences of humor, which also happen to be direct self-labeling.

Example 6
UserB: [...] I couldn't watch the final episode of Season 2 until I knew Season 3 was available (I'm a wimp
: as a child I had to hide in the hall during tense moments watching Lassie on t.v. *Lassie!*) [...]

This statement is contained in a side discussion about the television series "Sherlock". The main discussion concerned an abscessed tooth. Here UserB belittles herself as "a wimp". Such self-deprecation is a strategy of humor. It also serves to project an image of modesty and enhance the position of interlocutors.

Example 7

UserJ: Glad to know you're still around, albeit in different "garb." And, uh, vag/rejuv? Since I'm long past juvie, those parts down dere [sic] would have to get in line for the rest of the corpus's unlikely turning back of the Clock o' Age.

Example 7 is contained in Example 1 (page 35) above and has been looked at from a different angle already. Here UserJ utilizes self-deprecation in the form of

a humorous euphemism "I'm long past juvie". The complicated sentence structure
and old fashioned vocabulary augment the humor of the statement.

Example 8

> UserE: [...] Now that's an old wives tale this old wife has never heard!

This last example of humor display stems from the conversation mentioned above
that was deemed too delicate by one of the contributors. This example is included
nevertheless, as this particular participant explicitly stated in a response to the
censoring that she didn't think the conversation was compromising. As in the two
examples before, UserE labels herself self-deprecatingly ("this old wife") to enhance
an already humorous interaction.

Examples 6, 7 and 8 use self-labeling in a self deprecating and ironic manner. Labels
are used in a mocking manner, subverting the idea that they serve to accurately index
identity. This common use of humorous self labeling is a form of group culture.

Another way of indexing identity through the use of macro-level categories is by
invoking the attributes assigned to these categories in a covert manner. As this use
of categories and labels is so common in the data, one could assume that it is a
mechanism of identity building that requires much less conscious effort than direct
labeling. (It takes effort to directly describe oneself from an objective point of view).

Example 9

1   UserA: Oh hells yes, the Lounge.
2   My entire family has fallen victim to a stomach flu this week, but I am better and in
3   much need of grown folks relaxation.
4   [...]

5   UserB: [...]

6   UserA: Well the two younger had it hit them around 2am Tuesday. Nearly
7   simultaneously. It was like something out of a bad comedy.
8   I foolishly thought it was going to pass me by, but at 2am Thursday, I learned
9   how wrong I was. Hubs was only a few hours behind me. My MIL came to
10   get the now better kids, because we could not function. (The older two are
11   at their mom's and spared the joy.) It's been a rough week. But all is better
12   now.

Several macro-level categories are evoked here. Firstly, the term "family" is mentioned in the initial comment (line 2) and then specified in a follow up comment in response to a reply by UserB. In the follow up comment (starting at line 6), UserA indexes her interpretation of the label "family" by describing its composition. By doing so, she also reveals parts of her own identity. By mentioning "the two younger" and "kids", she indexes herself to be a mother. Similarly, mentioning "hubs" (husband) and later "the older two are at their mother's" reveals that she is in addition a spouse and step-parent.

In the following Example 10, which is a response to the above initial comment of Example 9, yet another identity is indexed.

Example 10

UserD: My daughter and her GF were both victims this past week. [...]

By casually using the categories "daughter" and "her girlfriend" in the same sentence, UserD is evoking the identity of an accepting LGBT parent. This example is also interesting, as it is pointing out similarities to the initial telling, a mechanism of identity work that will be examined further in the next section Performing.

Several other ways of covertly indexing identity can be seen in Example 4. In addition to overtly categorizing him/herself, UserO covertly categorizes him/herself as well by expanding the comments initial statement with a narrative. By stating previous academic achievements this user positions and indexes herself as an expert. She simultaneously indexes to be the victim of bureaucracy. By stating the whole story of the searching for the class, she indicates to be a persistent and good student.

5.2.2 Performing

In some of the examples above indexing identity has been achieved through mentioning, making relevant of certain aspects of identity. This is part of the definition of performativity as given in Section 3.2 Performativity. How participants perform identity still warrants a separate analysis, as the analysis of performance also takes interpersonal goals into account. The pervasive theme of the various identity performances in this specific virtual space is community building. Three different aspects on this theme are presented in this section: authenticity, sympathy and similarity. The fourth aspect of identity performance discussed in the current section concerns a different aspect: the medium's influence on interactions. This last part of the section looks at how typographic means are utilized in identity performances.

Authenticity

The contributors, or at least some of them, are aware that identity is something that is performed (in the theatrical sense) differently in different environments, as is evident from Example 11 below. In this extended conversation it becomes evident that online identity can be manipulated to hide one's "true" identity and can have a certain level of artifice. This observation could be seen as threatening to the current community. Participants therefore simultaneously discuss their level of artificiality in other spaces and reassure their authenticity in the current space.

Example 11

1   UserA: [...] Best weekend wishes, Kittens. Come find me on Twitter, I'm horribly
2   followerless.

3   UserO: [...] And I would follow you, but I hate the Tweeterverse. I follow you
4   spiritually instead :D

5   UserA: I'm not sure how I'm going to feel about it. Mostly though, I really
6   enjoy social media, but my facebook is too full of family and coworkers for it
7   to be much fun. Y'all know how I hate to hold back. :)

8   UserO: You make an excellent point, re: FB. I literally don't know who I am
9   on there. Some weird super-young person who is trying to seem upstanding
10 for my vast collection of religious right-leaning relatives and former work
11 associates. (I won't be friends with ppl I work with currently.) Maybe
12 tweeter is not bad if I can be anonymous. Sort of. . .

13 UserG: I basically just use Facebook to play Scrabble [...]. I rarely
14 comment anymore, and generally only look once or twice a week. [...]

15 UserZ: I certainly follow/am followed by a lot of friends on Twitter, but they
16 happen to be the ones who I feel like I don't have to censor/filter myself
17 around. It's nice, sometimes.
18 ;) [...]

19 [...]

20 UserB: I'll follow you! Though I dunno if you'll know it's me. "UserB" is one of
21 my least-self-edited online personas and I don't want to make it stupidly easy to
22 tie it to any of my others. It's a weird decision tree. My FB is strictly limited
23 to people I know and like in real life, or once did and have rediscovered via FB
24 – which excludes many, including relatives. The ones who despise my politics or
25 other life choices are only those I've maintained strong emotional ties with and
26 if we choose not to read most of each others' posts so be it.) I have a twitter
27 that started out "the real me" but has moved to be a kind of fakey "professional
28 persona" and at this point I'm deciding if I should have two separate twitters or
29 just abandon the whole thing.

30 UserG: Ha! I decided recently not to give two fucks about what I post on
31 Facebook. It was a very liberating decision, though it drives my mother crazy.

32 UserÇ: Same here , though luckily my mom is about as cool as they come and
33 shares my views on the things that usually get me deleted from (conservative)
34 people's friend lists — aka, politics and other social issues. I've kinda tamped
35 that down, though. My facebook is as private as I can make it, but I don't
36 want anyone from the area where I work to see what I post. They're not too
37 friendly towards liberals in East Texas, much less liberal newspaper editors ;)

38 UserA: Smiles! Check your messages.

39 UserB: Trickily enough, the UserB on Twitter isn't me. I'm only on there
40 under a version of my actual name (hence my Twitter becoming a place I
41 rarely post, except in safe-for-coworkers-and-bosses mode. Just follow.)

42 [...]

Within this long discussion on the level of artificiality of some of their online personas
there are several reassurances that this artifice does not apply to the current space.
UserA, in a follow up comment on line 7 mentions not being able to "have fun" on
Facebook due to social constraints. This is then followed by the statement "you all
know how I hate to hold back", implying that the restraints on identity display do
not exist in the current space. The goal is to authenticate UserA's interactions as

reflections of their "true self". In the response to this (line 8) UserO does not overtly perform an authentication, but outlines their true identity by stating the particulars of inauthenticity on Facebook. UserG in turn (line 13) picks up on the overarching notion that inauthenticity is "not fun", which is also expressed by UserZ (line 15). However, in a later comment on line 30 the same participant claims to recently have moved back to a more authentic performance of self on that platform. These two statements seem somehow contradictory and might in turn evoke the impression of an inconsistent and inauthentic identity performance in the current space.

UserB is the most explicit in reassuring their authenticity for the current space in line 21 with the statement " "UserB" is one of my least-self-edited online personas". This user then also explains their varying degrees of authenticity for various social websites. This is similar to UserO's outlining of identity, but added to the explicit initial performance of authenticity provides a stronger display of "true" identity. In the comment starting at line 39 UserB then explains that their twitter name is a "version of my actual name". This is a subtle yet powerful display of trust, as in line 21 UserB explains to try and keep some aspects of their online presence hidden from some people. Sharing varied facets of their online persona in this space shows a high level of comfort and sense of group belonging.

All of these displays of authenticity and trust contribute to a sense of community. This allows participants to view the current space as safe for various interactions. By reassuring their honest interest in the group's "realness", participants create an environment where stories of personal struggles are received and treated with sympathy, as shall be seen in this next section.

Sympathy

As seen from many of the previous examples, participants are willing to offer comfort to each other. Indeed, seeking comfort and sympathy through troubles-telling

seems to be one of the major purposes for participants to initiate a conversation. Only few of the conversations recorded in the core data concern non-problematic initial narratives. A bias might exist because non-problematic comments might not have garnered any responses and were left out of the core data. Accordingly, the above examples show sympathy and comfort given in response. For some of the contributors this is not enough. They seek to actively engage in and show sympathy and concern for each other, as can be gleaned from the following Example 12.

Example 12

1   UserN: Hey, UserJ, how's your sister doing?

2   UserJ: UserN, how thoughtful of you to ask! [...] it has shrunk the golf-ball-
3   sized tumor to un-feelable size, so that's terrifically encouraging.The A/C chemo,
4   though, really knocked her for a loop. Every side effect – extreme fatigue and
5   weakness, low BP, hair loss, bad taste in the mouth, feeling flu-y for days and
6   days after the infusion, sores in wretched places, headaches. But yesterday she
7   started in on her next chemo phase [...] the same regimen I was on in 2012.
8   [...] She's got a long fight ahead of her. Fortunately, she has great docs and an
9   excellent hospital delivering the chemo. And a very involved and smart husband
10   and a caring son, who's just been sworn in as a Michigan attorney – a milestone
11   that really cheered her.

12   UserB: UserN thanks for asking and UserJ thanks for the update. It is very
13   good to hear the tumor has shrunk. I hope that within my lifetime chemo
14   and radiation are improved enough that they are not such mental and bodily
15   tortures. [...] UserJ: I was puny and had pain during my chemo, but I was
16   never as sick as my sis has been [...]
17   My sis is triple-negative, and that's a bad BCA, so her response now gives us
18   some hope.
19   UserB: Well, here's hoping for the best. Maybe excellent response to cancer
20   treatment & good outcomes are a family trait.
21   UserJ: I wish I could vote this up multiple times! Thanks, UserB!
22   UserE: Very positive news! And how are things for your other friend who was
23   diagnosed recently?
24   UserC: Healing thoughts for your sis. Very encouraging news the tumor has
25   been so responsive to treatment.
26   UserN: I'm glad to hear that this has been a better week for her. Mazel tov
27   on your nephew. It certainly helps to receive such good news.
28   UserS: Just wanted to chime in to say that healng [sic] thoughts for your
29   sister are on their way; with a tough road to go, it's good that she's got great
30   M.D.and supportive family!

The initial statement of the above Example 12 is a hijacking of an entirely different comment thread (Example 13 below). It might be that by addressing UserJ in an unrelated conversation, UserN is trying to heighten the impact of the question,

as most likely people already involved in the previous comments will get notified of follow up comments. This would serve to position them as a sympathetic online friend not only in the eyes of UserJ, but also everyone else who happens to be present. Another explanation would be that UserJ had not initiated any conversation yet and addressing them in this manner was the only way to get their attention and possibly a response.

The goal of establishing themselves as a good online friend seems to have worked, as UserJ acknowledges the effort on line 2 in their response to the question. After the initial demonstration of sympathy and interest, other participants are quick to assume their own role as good online friends. UserB does this in line 12 by first acknowledging and praising UserN for their question and thanking UserJ for their answer and then by contributing their own take on the story. This helps to establish and maintain a good relationship between UserB and both of the previous contributors. UserJ seems to be eager to also contribute to this relationship by carrying on the conversation for several turns after that.

Other interactions are less successful at relationship building. In line 22 UserE tries to emulate UserN's successful contribution by asking a very similar question. Here the goal they try to achieve isn't met, since the question remains unanswered. Similarly, in line 24 UserC tries to achieve a similar goal to UserB, but like UserE, fails to get a response. UserS then tries a third approach in line 26, by simply stating well-wishes, but again does not seem to accomplish the goal. All of the responses to UserJ's update, whether locally successful or not, are performances of roles of concerned community members and contribute to an overall sense of group solidarity. As we have seen in Section 2.3 Defining virtual community, part of what constitutes a virtual community is the expression of solidarity, sympathy and support.

Similarities

Another way of achieving a sense of group belonging is by up playing of similarities. Stories of similarities are part of many of the examples shown so far. The emphasis on similarities serve different purposes throughout the data, though the overarching theme is stressing similarities to achieve feeling of community and group belonging.

Example 13

1 UserW: I need wine. I'm working full time and studying for the bar and everything
2 is blaaah. I look forward to weekend TLo updates though, those are always a treat.

3 UserJ: Keep plugging away, UserW; you'll be glad you did at the end of next
4 month. My nephew was just sworn in yesterday into the Michigan Bar, much joy
5 expressed by family and friends. It's a hard row to hoe, but it's doable. I took
6 and passed three bar exams with the third taken 8 years after I'd graduated from
7 law school, during which time my practice was (and still is) IP. Of course, that's
8 not on the test, so I had to re-learn 35 areas of the law for my 3rd Multi-State
9 and the short answers and essays. I felt your pain then, 32 (and going on 40)
10 years ago, and I do now.

11   [...]

12 UserW: Thanks so much! It's always good to hear advice and support from
13 practitioners. Wish you all the best, especially for your sister's sake.

Here UserJ, through the use of a narrative, stresses similarities with the initial commenter. This is to legitimize her statement of feeling "your pain", just like it was for UserÇ in Example 5. With this narrative UserJ performs her status as an expert on the subject, since having passed not just one, but three of these exams is a demonstration of experience. Mentioning the long time UserJ was practicing the profession adds to that. This show of expertise is examined in more detail in the following Section 5.2.3 Positioning.

Similarities are not only used to legitimize contributions and advice in problematic interactions. The following Example 14 showcases emphases of similarities for relationship building.

Example 14

49

1   UserO: TLounge! Hello. I got a four day weekend, which I should pack with need-
2   to-dos, but I ate quiche, watched Maury, and snoozed instead. I just got up from an
3   afternoon-now-its-evening nap.

4   [...]

5   UserP: Sounds like my beginning to this four day weekend except I went to "The
6   Melting Pot" to cap it off. . . you made good choices.

7   [...]

8   UserC: Your start to the 4-day weekend sounds great to me. I'm rewatching
9   old episodes of Grey's Anatomy. [...]

Again, the conversation starts with a story, the telling of that day's events. Though this example contains a mildly problematizing statement "I should", the comment is not as serious as others presented so far. Through comparing the similarities in their days, UserP and UserC simultaneously reassure UserO, justify their own actions of that day, and build a sense of community.

While this emphasis on similarities helps to create a sense of community, the fact such demonstrations are necessary also indicates that there is a certain degree of distance. Participants The following section looks at how the medium influences language choices that, amongst other things, contribute to the sense of distance.

Typographic means

The most overt indication of the environment is the use of the word "virtual" in Examples 15 (lines 13 and 18) and 16 (line 14) below. This indicates that these interactions, and the identity work done through them, differ from other sites of interaction the participants might engage in. They also serve to overtly situate participants in this virtual space, as the reference to the current space in line 2 shows.

Example 15

1   UserU: It's been a rough few months for me. I started a new job back in October,
2   which leaves me exactly zero time to doss on my favorite website, which is giving

3   me the sad. and I hate the job, mostly because my boss is a condescending ass who
4   expects everyone to know how to do everything – he wants me to do graphic design.
5   Do I know how to do graphic design? No, I do not. Do I have time to teach myself?
6   No, I do not. But it doesn't matter, he wants me to do it, and to do it in five minutes.
7   And when I tell him I don't know what I'm doing, he just gets shirty. It sucks.
8   And my ex picked right before Christmas to stop paying child support, so financially,
9   I'm up shit creek. It's stressing me out.
10   On the upside, all this stress has made me lose 14 pounds.

11   [...]

12   UserA: Ouch. That's a lot of waves coming at ya. I have no wisdom, just words
13   of virtual support from afar. Which will *totally*pay your bills. So, better?
14   Take what little time can for yourself, you've got to take care of you. Hugs.

15   UserB: OH, boo hiss. I hope you live in a state that will pursue nonpayers. Not
16   that even *that* will make things all better, or in a soon-enough timeframe. Good
17   luck. Wish I had anything useful to add.

18   UserC: Big virtual hugs to you. Hope you can find a way to work around the boss
19   with unrealistic expectations. May your ex restart bearing his responsibilities. As
20   UserB says, trust your state is one that will aid in securing the back payments.
21   Hang in there, and be good to yourself. Don't let the turkeys drag you down.

In this interaction, similar to Examples 4 and 9, the initial contributor starts with a narrated complaint about life problems. UserU reveals why their participation in the community has declined recently, as evident from the statement "I started a new job back in October, which leaves me exactly zero time to doss on my favorite website" (line 2). A new job might be a positive thing, which is why UserU needs to state that it is overwhelming and the boss is a "condescending ass" (line 3). The next statement, "my ex [...]stop[ed] paying child support" (line 8), speaks for itself and does not need as long an explanation. UserU then also tries to alleviate the tone of the post with the last line (line 10) sounding slightly more upbeat.

Other users then try to comfort the initial contributor, which seems the norm in such interactions in this space. What is noticeable in Example 15, is the construction of community, while still showing distance between the participants. The overt mentioning of the virtual space they use for the interaction (lines 13 and 18), as well as the phrase "from afar" (line 13) establishes that the participants do not meet in real life. Neither do they know the exact geographical location of each other. This is indicated by UserB's hope that UserU "live[s] in a state that will pursue nonpayers"

(line —refboo) and UserC's similar wish that "your state is one that will aid in securing the back payments" (line 20). Despite this physical distance, Users A, B and C construct a group belonging where members are given moral support and advice.

Participants use and contribute to this space as a place where they can vent and complain about unpleasant situations without having to fear negative consequences in real life. Part of that construction of a safe space is the performance of supportive acts through the possibilities of the medium. The focus of the following analysis on Examples 15 above and 16 below is on how the comforters use the "restrictions" of typed language to convey their support and sympathy.

Example 16

1 UserI: I'm raising a glass tonight to my beloved patient, Frenchie. She passed away
2 this week. She had awesome pink and purple hair (at the age of 84!), she never got
3 out of bed before noon, she loved her music and wasn't shy about admitting that
4 she was tipsy most of the time. I hope the afterlife has endless pots of jam to spoon
5 onto white toast, Bach playing softly on a HiFi, and lots and lots of handsome men
6 to dazzle with her kisses.

7 UserA: Oh, sweet Frenchie!! I remember you telling us about her a while back.
8 What a a pistol. The world will be a little dimmer with her not in it.
9 >>>To Frenchie<<<

10 [...]

11 UserB: We can all hope that when we die, the people who've taken care of us call
12 us "beloved" and want to mark our passing somehow.

13 UserI: Hear, hear! I'll drink to that!

14 UserB: *raises virtual gin*

15 UserJ: oh, YES.

16 UserD: She sounds like a love. I happen to agree with this interchange from
17 "Four Weddings and a funeral." "A toast before we go into battle. True love.
18 In whatever shape or form it may come. May we all in our dotage be proud to
19 say, "I was adored once too." Fortunately, I haven't long for dotage to show
20 up.

21 UserC: Bless you! She's moving through the cosmos now. Someone with that
22 much brio shines on for a long time.

23 UserH: Here's to Frenchie!

24   UserE: To Frenchie! My role model for my later years.

25   UserI: If only I'd known her back then, she'd have been my role model for my
26   early years, too.

Example 16 is represented almost in its entirety, with only an off-topic side conversation omitted. Unlike the other examples presented so far, this string of interactions is not a complaint. The interaction resembles a gathering of people after a friend's funeral and feels like a virtual wake. Differences are that excepting the initial contributor, none of the participants have ever met the deceased person.

Although Examples 15 and 16 have different purposes, they do share some similarities. As mentioned in Chapter 2 Research on Computer- Mediated Communication, the medium through which these interactions take place reduces visual context. Participants rely on linguistic and typographic cues to compensate, some of which are also present in Example 15. More specifically, the typing of an action, such as "hugs" in lines 14 and 18 (note the combination with the word "virtual" here), respectively, or the onomatopoeic "boo hiss" line 15 Example 15, is reserved for written interactions, as in face-to-face interactions this is usually carried out instead of spoken.

Similarly, for actions that require more than one word to be conveyed, typographic means are employed. In Example 16, line 14 the asterisks signal the beginning and end of an action, the raising of a glass in this case. This use of asterisks in combination of an action typed in third person to indicate actions stems from the chatrooms and MUDs of the late 1980's and early 1990', but has since become widespread in mainstream online media. In the present data the use is not strictly limited to actions, as in Example 15 (lines 13 and 16) the asterisk is used for emphasis. UserB employs both uses of the asterisk, as well as the typing of an action without typographic marker. None of these could be seen as a standard way of expressing actions. Indeed, there might be even a third way of hinting at action. This, if referencing an action, would be more of an implication, as the phrase contained in the typographic

sequence >>>To Frenchie<<<, does not represent any action. The implication here is an action that usually accompanies this phrase, namely the raising of a glass in honor of a person.

Contrarily, other typographic representations of actions have become more standardized, at least in Western CMC culture. First, the use of "xoxo" (Example 5, page 40, lines 6 and 10) to indicate hugs and kisses, which has its roots in early medieval history. In more recent years there is of course the use of emoticons, which can be traced back to the very beginnings of CMC. In the present data there are several instances of this, which can be found in Example 5 (line 1), and Example 11 (lines 4, 7, **??**, 18 and 37) at the beginning of the section. All of these examples could be seen as part of 'netspeak', and a typical feature of interactions in typed CMC in general. However, as outlined at the beginning of this section, typographic peculiarities are not the only way in which virtuality is constructed. Participants in the current virtual space use the "limitations" of the medium to create a sense of community and belonging. This overarching theme is also examined through the lens of stance analysis in the following section.

5.2.3   Positioning

The concept of stance and how it influences identity was presented in Section 3.3 Positionality and relationality. To summarize, stance refers to the position speakers take in respect to the contents of previous and current interactions, as well as others' positions to the same content. Every statement means taking a stance and consequently all of the interactions of the current data could be analyzed with that viewpoint. Often interactions and even single statements contain more than one stance. For the sake of brevity and clarity, the following analysis presents select examples under the heading of the most common stance types. These stance types are

evaluative stance, affective stance and *epistemic stance.* First follows a discussion on stance alignment and what it reveals about the community's culture.

Stance alignment

As mentioned in Section 3.3 Positionality and relationality stance taking involves aligning or misaligning with previous contributions. Thus every stance act falls under this category. It might be helpful to start with pointing out some examples from the data. On a side note, the first sentence of the initial comment of this following example is what a typical response to a blog post would look like. Here, UserF is responding directly to the content of the post, in this case the pictures of a lounge in Geneva. This is followed up by a statement geared towards community building. In fact the first response is a stance uptake, i.e. the part others take a stance on, on this latter half of the initial comment.

Example 17

1 UserF: I've been there! I spent a summer in Geneva during college. Simply perfection.
2 Hope everyone gets to enjoy their long weekend (those who actually get them, of
3 course).

4 UserA: I am having the great responsibility debate. We have PTO instead of paid
5 holidays, however it's assumed everyone will take off Monday. But I've missed 3
6 days this week, so a good little worker bee would go in Monday and catch up.
7 But loves long weekends me is loving the idea of going with the office crowd.

8 UserF: I don't know about you, but I LOOOOOOOVE days when fewer people
9 are around the office. Sometimes those are the only days I can actually get
10 work done!

11 [...]

12 UserB: With UserF on the increased productivity when the office is empty.
13 Other point: will your home be full of cranky, barely-over-the-flu people whin-
14 ing to you about how bored they are? If so, go to work.
15 But if it's a normal weekend, I am a fan of extra consecutive days off. It always
16 feels deliciously as if I could do and get done so many things!

The example of positive stance alignment to focus on here is the response beginning at line 12. Stance alignment is obvious through the use of "with UserF" on line

12. Even though this contribution contains neither a stance subject, nor a stance predicate, both can be inferred. The sentence should read "I'm with UserF", which then makes it a stance utterance, with the remaining part of the sentence being the stance object. This alignment and the statement "I LOOOOOOOVE days when fewer people are around the office" (line 8) can also be read as an evaluative stance, which is discussed further down.

Another noteworthy thing about this last comment is the referencing of another conversation. UserB, by mentioning "cranky, barely-over-the-flu people", evokes the conversation presented partly in Example 9, which was going on at the same time.

The current data shows mostly positive stance alignment, keeping with the underlying pattern of community building through emphasizing similarities. However, there is one example that shows negative stance, given here:

Example 18

1   Userß: Oh, but Matthew MacFadyen is SO lovely as Mr. Darcy. He's a great,
2   versatile actor. I saw him on the stage in London in a comedic role, and he was
3   HILARIOUS. The guy has serious talent. I also like that he was able to find more
4   layers to Mr. Darcy than Colin Firth did (sorry, CF had about one facial expression,
5   one stance, and one tone of voice the entire movie–however beautiful a man he is!)

6   Userß: also, Tom Hollander as Mr. Collins in the contemporary (Joe Wright ver-
7   sion/AKA KK version) was sheer genius. SO much better than the (sorry) oily,
8   fawning Mr. Collins of the BBC version. And yes, it's controversial, but overall I
9   liked the casting choice of KK. From what I can tell, Wright was really trying to show
10   that Elizabeth Bennett is NOT the perfect Jane Austen surrogate that we often like
11   to wish she was. Wright showed her with her faults, too, and I thought it opened up
12   some really great new territory into the P&P fantasy. *Caveat*: Joe Wright has a
13   thing for Keira Knightley (not a "thing" thing, but some kind of artistic thing). He
14   has directed her in multiple movies, and judging from the director's commentary, he
15   just doesn't have a lot of critical distance when it comes to her performances. I think
16   he could push her more. OMMV, obviously

These two comments appear consecutively in an extended conversation about Jane Austen characters and how they are portrayed in different film adaptations. Two particular adaptations of "Pride and Prejudice" were compared. The general consensus was that the adaptation featuring Colin Firth (the "BBC version", line 8)

was preferred over the more recent one starring Keira Knightley referred to as the "KK version" on line 7. Userß disagrees with the rest of the contributors, indicated by the initial, "Oh, but". This is an unusual act and possibly threatening to the integrity of the group, as well as Userß' own position in it. Userß feels compelled to justify that opinion. To soften the potential harm of their statements, Userß also uses hedging language, such as "sorry" (lines 4 and 7), "yes, it's controversial" (line 8), "*Caveat*" (line 12) and "OMMV" (line 16), which stands for "own mileage may vary". Through taking an unpopular stance, Userß is positioning their self as slightly apart of the crowd, though still part of what can be considered "Austenites". These two comments did not get any replies, even though the conversation was one of the longest in terms of number of contributions. The reason why can only be speculated about.

Evaluative stance

To address this type of stance we return to Example 17. Besides showing stance alignment, this example contains several instances of evaluative stance, the first of which appears in the first line.

> **Example 19**
>
> UserF: I've been there! I spent a summer in Geneva during college. Simply perfection.

Here, the evaluation is in the sentence "Simply perfection", in reference to the bar depicted in the original blog post. By stating "I've been there" alongside this evaluative stance, UserF positions their self as the kind of person who visits places like this bar in Geneva, and as a person who enjoys this kind of environment.

This user also positions herself as a hardworking person, through the following statement of loving to work in a less crowded office space (line 5):

> **Example 20**

1   UserA: I am having the great responsibility debate. We have PTO instead of paid
2   holidays, however it's assumed everyone will take off Monday. But I've missed 3 days
3   this week, so a good little worker bee would go in Monday and catch up. But loves
4   long weekends me is loving the idea of going with the office crowd.

5   UserF: I don't know about you, but I LOOOOOOOVE days when fewer people
6   are around the office. Sometimes those are the only days I can actually get work
7   done!

The emphasized "LOOOOOOOVE" might be read as affective stance, discussed

below, due to the use of an emotional verb. However, here love is used to evaluate

the previous contributor's indecision about going to the office. By doing so, she

indirectly offers advice on which decision to take. Building upon this evaluative

stance, UserB then also takes an evaluative stance, this time evaluating both UserA's

and UserF's statements.

Example 21

UserB: With UserF on the increased productivity when the office is empty. Other
point: will your home be full of cranky, barely-over-the-flu people whining to you
about how bored they are? If so, go to work.
But if it's a normal weekend, I am a fan of extra consecutive days off. It always feels
deliciously as if I could do and get done so many things!

By positively evaluating UserF's statement, UserB also takes up and reinforces that

contributor's evaluative stance on UserA's statement. This strengthens the rela-

tionship between all three participants involved. Indeed positive evaluation serves

to strengthen relationships, as can be further seen from the following Example 22,

which has already been presented in section 5.2.2 Performing:

Example 22

1   UserO: TLounge! Hello. I got a four day weekend, which I should pack with need-
2   to-dos, but I ate quiche, watched Maury, and snoozed instead. I just got up from an
3   afternoon-now-its-evening nap.

4   UserB: This strikes me as an EXCELLENT use of the first of 4 days off. If perhaps
5   not the way to spend all four . . .

6   [...]

7   UserP: Sounds like my beginning to this four day weekend except I went to "The
8   Melting Pot" to cap it off. . . you made good choices.

9   [...]

Already the first response contains a strong positive evaluation through the use of the emphasized "EXCELLENT" (line 4), which is then tamped down by the statement that maybe the next days should be spent in a different manner. This evaluation serves to put the original contributor at ease with their decisions. Similarly, by ending his comment (starting at line 7) with the evaluative "you made good choices" UserP approves these actions and reinforces UserB's positive evaluative stance. As mentioned in the earlier analysis of this example, this positive feedback helps to create a sense of belonging and community by saying "we are all the same".

Affective stance

When taking an affective stance, contributors convey how they feel about a subject, event, or person.

Example 23

1   UserA: I'm so excited for y'all. I can't wait to buy it and have it signed, because,
2   surely you're coming to the ATL.
3   [...] I'm headed to Mississippi for a funeral. :(
4   Extended family, but I'm going for the moral support of my best cousins and to help
5   ease them into the Dead Patent [sic] Club . It sucks, but we do have a hand shake.
6
7   [...]

8   UserZ: I'm sorry for your loss. It's still difficult, even if you're going to support
9   someone else. xoxo

10   UserA: Xoxo

11   UserE: Hope the funeral is everything your family needs it to be!

12   UserÇ: Oh dear. I'm sorry to hear it. Being a 24-year-old who has been to
13   entirely too many funerals for her age, I feel your pain. I'm a partial member of
14   the Dead Parents Club , so I'm glad to hear you're offering moral support to the
15   new inductees. Although I never learned the special handshake. Sending good
16   vibes to Mississippi!

In Example 23 there are several different affective stances. The initial contributor starts with an upbeat affective stance, the "I'm so excited". This excitement

concerns an announcement by the blog creators about them publishing a book and the ensuing book signing tour. This happiness is then gradually lessened until the final line, where the affective stance is presenting the opposite of how the comment started, through "it sucks". Also note, that here the sad emoticon on line 3 constitutes an affective stance act in itself as well. There is some difference in these two stances, not only from the point of view of content. The first stance includes the stance taker. UserA expresses this by using the personal pronoun "I", while in the last stance there is a certain removal from the emotion through the use of the neuter third person pronoun "it". This removal also serves to make the last statement a generalization, and an evaluative stance as well as an affective one.

Despite the initial happy affective stance, and the attempt to alleviate the somber tone of "it sucks" through the humorous handshake remark (line 5), the stance uptake by the following interactants focuses on the negative stance. These affective stances are taken by two different users in exactly the same way, through "I'm sorry" (lines 8 and 12). Here the expression "sorry" is one of affect, as the use of the personal pronoun "I" suggests, unlike in Example 18 where sorry was used as a single word and indicated apology, rather than emotion. UserZ also follows this initial stance with another affective one, again a generalization: "it's still difficult" (line 8). Finally, the "xoxo" (line 9), which is echoed in the response by the initial contributor, also serves to emphasize this stance uptake as a successful attempt to strengthen the relationship with UserA and positioning as a good friend.

The contributions by UserE and UserÇ seem to be less successful, since they don't get any reply from UserA. They do have the same intention of providing support. UserE uses a less common stance in reaction to the announcement of the funeral, that of hope (line 11). This hope is geared towards the feelings of UserA, not to the stance taker themself.

UserÇ's stance uptake is introduced by "Oh dear" (line 12), an exclamation usually

reserved for expressing concern and surprise. Even though UserÇ uses the same phrase as UserZ, "I'm sorry", she needs to follow up on why this reaction is legitimate for her. This might be an indication that she and UserA are not usually interacting on this site and that, unlike UserZ, she is not a friend.

Regarding the somber topic of the initial statement, all the reactions are appropriate and expected. In the data there was another conversation regarding death, also analyzed in section 5.2.2 Performing. As already mentioned in that discussion, the initial comment is an almost happy one.

Example 24

1   UserI: I'm raising a glass tonight to my beloved patient, Frenchie. She passed away
2   this week. She had awesome pink and purple hair (at the age of 84!), she never got
3   out of bed before noon, she loved her music and wasn't shy about admitting that
4   she was tipsy most of the time. I hope the afterlife has endless pots of jam to spoon
5   onto white toast, Bach playing softly on a HiFi, and lots and lots of handsome men
6   to dazzle with her kisses.

7   UserA: Oh, sweet Frenchie!! I remember you telling us about her a while back.
8   What a a pistol. The world will be a little dimmer with her not in it.
9   >>>To Frenchie<<<

10   [...]

11   UserB: We can all hope that when we die, the people who've taken care of us call
12   us "beloved" and want to mark our passing somehow.

13   UserI: Hear, hear! I'll drink to that!

14   UserB: *raises virtual gin*

15   UserJ: oh, YES.

16   UserD: She sounds like a love. I happen to agree with this interchange from
17   "Four Weddings and a funeral." "A toast before we go into battle. True love.
18   In whatever shape or form it may come. May we all in our dotage be proud to
19   say, "I was adored once too." Fortunately, I haven't long for dotage to show
20   up.

21   UserC: Bless you! She's moving through the cosmos now. Someone with that
22   much brio shines on for a long time.

23   UserH: Here's to Frenchie!

24   UserE: To Frenchie! My role model for my later years.

25   UserI: If only I'd known her back then, she'd have been my role model for my
26   early years, too.

Despite the same topic, a person passing away, the reactions could not be more different. This is due to the stance in the initial comments. Whereas in Example 5 the beginning of the conversation was framed as a sad and unpleasant event, the initial contribution in Example 24 is filled with happy memories. Setting the tone for the rest of the comments with the stance predicate of "beloved" (line 1), UserI then proceeds to present the deceased person's personality, including the evaluative stance "awesome" on line 2, all in a warm tone. The comment is then ended with another affective stance, introduced with "I hope" (line 4). This whole comment can be read as an eulogy, a generally emotional act. In contrast to UserA in Example 23, UserI is less emotionally involved as the relationship to the deceased was a professional one.

Accordingly, reactions of other users are of a different nature than in Example 23. Through stance uptake participants respond in the same tone as the original contributor initiated the conversation. This is shown through the repetitive use of the phrase "to Frenchie" throughout the whole conversation, echoing the first response (line 9), which in turn echoes the raising of the glass in the first line.

All of this positive affect is increased through several evaluative stances like "sweet Frenchie!!" (line 7), "what a pistol" (line 8), "She sounds like a love" (line 16) and calling her a "role model" (line 24). These indicate that Frenchie's positive outlook on life described in the initial comment should be something to aspire to.

Epistemic stance

Epistemic stance refers to the degree of certainty interactants have about a subject. This can be expressed in different ways, the most noticeable is by clearly stating this degree of certainty, as in Example 25:

Example 25

1   UserS: I know that the director wanted to do a versiion [sic] of P&P that didn't have
2   the "masterpiece theater" feel, but he did take risks in bringing a more contemporary
3   feel to Elizabeth Bennett, et al. For directors and screenwriters who want to do that,
4   they ought to look at how Amy Heckerling took "Emma" and moved it to SoCal in
5   a modern setting-that was brilliant.Granted, not everyone is capable of that, but it
6   beats severely mucking with true classics.
7   UserL: Good point, UserS. [...]

This example was taken from the same conversation thread as Example 18. UserS is displaying a great degree of certainty with the initial statement "I know". This contributor then goes on to elaborate on their knowledge of film adaptations and the proper handling of "classic" material. The source of the knowledge is never revealed. Still, the expertise is accepted by at least one participant, UserL, who reinforces UserS' stance with "good point" (line 7), an evaluative stance.

On the opposite end of the certainty spectrum there is lack of knowledge. In the following Example 26 UserU uses the lack of knowledge in an interesting manner:

Example 26

1   UserU: [...] I started a new job back in October, which leaves me exactly zero time to
2   doss on my favorite website, which is giving me the sad. and I hate the job, mostly
3   because my boss is a condescending ass who expects everyone to know how to do
4   everything – he wants me to do graphic design. Do I know how to do graphic design?
5   No, I do not. Do I have time to teach myself? No, I do not. But it doesn't matter,
6   he wants me to do it, and to do it in five minutes. And when I tell him I don't know
7   what I'm doing, he just gets shirty. It sucks.

The full conversation this example stems from was analyzed in section 5.2.2. Usually one would think that a lack of knowledge needs to be hidden to legitimize statements, but for the above the opposite is true. In this comment UserU uses the lack of knowledge to legitimize their story and to position their self as a victim of circumstance person. The lack of knowledge about graphic design (line 4) is used in conjunction with the statement of lacking time to learn it (line 5). The restricted time is already mentioned in line 1 with regards to personal time. Overall these stances build an atmosphere of anxiety, legitimizing the final phrase "It sucks" (line 7). In this contribution UserU is venting their frustrations with their life situation. This activity is common practice in this community, as seen in section 5.2.2. The

epistemic stance taken in this example is another expression of this community's interactional culture, which contributes to the group's interactional identity.

Not all epistemic stance taking is this apparent. An epistemic stance can be implied from the performances of certain roles, as the following Example 27 shows. This example has been discussed in two parts before. Here, these two conversations are reproduced in their original configuration. While thematically very different, both conversations show similar stance taking.

Example 27

1 UserW: I need wine. I'm working full time and studying for the bar and everything
2 is blaaah. I look forward to weekend TLo updates though, those are always a treat.

3 UserJ: Keep plugging away, UserW; you'll be glad you did at the end of next
4 month. My nephew was just sworn in yesterday into the Michigan Bar, much joy
5 expressed by family and friends. It's a hard row to hoe, but it's doable. I took
6 and passed three bar exams with the third taken 8 years after I'd graduated from
7 law school, during which time my practice was (and still is) IP. Of course, that's
8 not on the test, so I had to re-learn 35 areas of the law for my 3rd Multi-State
9 and the short answers and essays. I felt your pain then, 32 (and going on 40)
10 years ago, and I do now.

11 UserN: Hey, UserJ, how's your sister doing?

12 UserJ: UserN, how thoughtful of you to ask! [...] She's finished her first
13 four cycles of Adriamycin-Cytoxan chemotherapy, and it has shrunk the
14 golf-ball-sized tumor to un-feelable size, so that's terrifically encouraging.
15 The A/C chemo, though, really knocked her for a loop. Every side effect –
16 extreme fatigue and weakness, low BP, hair loss, bad taste in the mouth,
17 feeling flu-y for days and days after the infusion, sores in wretched places,
18 headaches. But yesterday she started in on her next chemo phase: 12
19 weeks of Paraplatin-Taxol, the same regimen I was on back in 2012.
20 She'll get Paraplatin every three weeks and Taxol every week. Once that
21 concludes (and the finish depends on whether she qualifies every week
22 or has to postpone for low WBC) she'll have a month off and then her
23 mastectomies and reconstruction. She might have to have radiation after
24 that, too. She's got a long fight ahead of her. Fortunately, she has great
25 docs and an excellent hospital delivering the chemo. And a very involved
26 and smart husband and a caring son, who's just been sworn in as a Michigan
27 attorney – a milestone that really cheered her.

28 UserB: UserN thanks for asking and UserJ thanks for the update. It is
29 very good to hear the tumor has shrunk. I hope that within my life-
30 time chemo and radiation are improved enough that they are not such
31 mental and bodily tortures. That they come to be seen as a necessary
32 barbarism inflicted on patients in the "bad old days." (Though I am
33 grateful for the improvements already seen in my lifetime, don't get me
34 wrong. Especially in outcomes.)
35 UserJ: I was puny and had pain during my chemo, but I was never as

36   sick as my sis has been [...]
37   My sis is triple-negative, and that's a bad BCA, so her response now
38   gives us some hope.
39   UserB: Well, here's hoping for the best. Maybe excellent response to
40   cancer treatment & good outcomes are a family trait.
41   [...]
42   UserC: Healing thoughts for your sis. Very encouraging news the tumor
43   has been so responsive to treatment.
44   UserN: I'm glad to hear that this has been a better week for her. Mazel
45   tov on your nephew. It certainly helps to receive such good news.
46
47   UserS: Just wanted to chime in to say that healng [sic] thoughts for
48   your sister are on their way; with a tough road to go, it's good that
49   she's got great M.D.and supportive family!

50   UserW: Thanks so much! It's always good to hear advice and support from
51   practitioners. Wish you all the best, especially for your sister's sake.

In the first discussion of the interaction concerning the studying for the bar exam (Example 13, page 49) it was established that UserJ performs their status as an expert in their comment starting on line 3. The stance is of someone giving advice, which is an activity reserved for experts. As mentioned before, this stance has to be justified through the backstory, thus UserJ's expert stance on the subject probably has no precedent. UserW accepts the advice and epistemic stance by an evaluative stance act "It's always good" (line 50) and then stance uptake "to hear [...] from practitioners". UserJ's epistemic stance is validated, and her status as expert is consolidated.

UserJ also shows expertise in breast cancer treatment, the theme of the sub-conversation. This is evident from her contributions starting at line 12 and 37, respectively. She uses abbreviations for cancer treatments and lists drug names, but mentioning her own cancer treatment (line 19) is especially powerful in establishing expertise. The follow up comments by UserN (line 44) and UserB (lines 28 and 39) also display expertise, as the contributors seem to be familiar with the terminology as well.

There are several failed attempts at positioning their self as an expert throughout the data. One that is telling is the case of one participant, UserC, who repeatedly tries to make claims of epistemic authority through epistemic stances, but does

not get any responses to them. This lack of responses undermines the claims to expertise more pointedly than any overt challenge could. An overt challenge would imply some level of respect for the stance taker by acknowledging their existence. Ignoring claims to epistemic stance goes further by denying the contributor the right to participate in conversations and the community. Following are some short examples of the failed attempts of UserC:

Example 28

> UserC: Pedialyte is your friend for tummy troubles. Much easier on even adult systems than Gatorade. Get the fluid levels back up.

This comment is one of the answers to the everyday story of the sick family in Example 9. The statement is framed as a general fact and in contrast to the other epistemic stances analyzed so far, UserC fails to follow up with a legitimization. This failure to provide background might be the reason no response is given. Alternatively the knowledge purveyed in the comment is so widely known that it is not considered new and worthy of acknowledging. In the next Example 29, in addition to the generalization "January is [...] the cruelest month" (line 10) the claim to epistemic authority is heightened through the extreme case formulation "January is *always* the cruelest month" (emphasis added):

Example 29

1 UserB: I've made a pact with myself to work energetically for most of the weekend,
2 I'm sick of the general air of post-holidays doldrums in my office and in my head,
3 and my home's just cluttered, full of looming projects, and inhabited by people
4 whining about their allergies. And sniffling and coughing and taking various pills.
5 These "people" would include me, and when you get on your own nerves it's getting
6 ridiculous.
7 We'll see how this goes. If you all notice me spending a ton of time interacting on
8 this site you'll know it's not looking good for the good guys.

9   [...]

10 UserC: January is always the cruelest month. For those who celebrate the holidays
11 with spending, the bills come in. For those who are self-employed, it's time to
12 pay quarterly taxes. Add the crazy weather, and all the respiratory ailments that
13 come with it, it is a tough month all around. It's a good time to force some flower
14 bulbs to bloom inside – a good reminder that beautiful things are always ready
15 to blossom.

This excerpt has been presented before in Example 1. In the comment starting on line 10 UserC does follow up the generalized epistemic stance with an explanation. However, the comment is a paraphrasing of UserB's original comment. Again this failure to provide additional and useful information might be the cause for absent stance uptakes. The reason for lack of responses for the following contribution might be similar, with an added dimension.

Example 30

> UserC: [...] This is why we have to shop local, BKs. Best of luck of you in this new journey, UserN.

This comment is a reply to UserN announcing the closing of their local business. In addition to repeating common knowledge, here the claim to epistemic authority resembles a teacher talking to students or of a parent lecturing their children. As presented in section 5.2.2 Performing, this community constructs their group identity through stressing similarities. UserC's epistemic stance in Example 30 attempts to positioning their self on a higher moral level than the other contributors. This violates the group's culture of interaction, as does the following contribution:

Example 31

1 UserP: FUCKING FINISHED BABYSITTING my 14 and 17 y/o nephews from the
2 ENTIRE week! After catching the 17 y/o smoking pot in his bedroom and him telling
3 me that "it wasn't his" when he was the ONLY person home, I am ready to go out
4 drinking.

5 [...]

6 UserC: Sometime in the future, have a casual private conversation with the 17
7 year old, and mention that he needs to bone up on his grasp of reality as well
8 his recognition of your authority. When there's only one person and a smoking
9 gun. . . son, please.

10 [...]

This statement (line 6), shown along with the initial comment, is situated in an extensive conversation about children and teenagers denying their guilt even in the face of overwhelming facts. UserC is one of the very few interactants in the conversation

not to receive any response. Again, UserC offers no explanation or legitimization for the taken stance, tries to lecture UserP and fails to add any new information or point of view.

All of these failed attempts at establishing expert status are accumulating into the picture of a person who seems to know it all without being able to back it up or get recognition for it. This minimal example of stance accretion, the accumulation of stances to form identity, shows that repeated failing at stance taking can undermine and counteract the intended identity projection.

6. CONCLUSION

The present study set out to be a small contribution to the study of interactional identity building through computer mediated communication (CMC). As the use of CMC has become ubiquitous and a systematic study of all CMC is impossible, the present study focused on interactions in a subsection of a popular culture blog, tomandlorenzo.com. Furthermore, identity and how it is made salient in interaction is a complex affair made up of many aspects. The present study focused on three of these aspects, as outlined in section Aims.

Summary

The findings were as diverse as the research questions and are discussed in separate sections throughout the conclusion. First follows a summary of the results of the analysis in the sequence they appeared, beginning with the description of the community. Then the findings according to the different facets of identity building, *indexing, performing* and *positioning*, are presented.

In Section 5.1 Participant structure and dynamics it was established that the interactional space the current data was collected from can be characterized as a virtual community according to the definition given in Section 2.3 Defining virtual community. Whether the community could be called a community of practice is not clear.

Analyzing the use of categorization in section 5.2.1 Indexing showed that overt use of categories and labels in self-reference was not as prevalent as expected. Contributors used categorization to project parts of their identity by assigning categories to third parties in narratives about everyday situations. Through this type of indexing, contributors positioned themselves in a broader social setting outside the current site of interaction. The categories that participants used to index their identities could be summarized as pertaining to everyday life inside family, work and education. These categories were often used to clarify and emphasize the implications of a certain narrative, to justify reactions to other comments, or to convey humor.

The influence of the medium on interactions became apparent when observing participants' performances of local identities in section 5.2.2 Performing. There were some medium specific linguistic and non-linguistic acts of interaction. Most apparent was the use of typographic means to perform interactional acts. Less obvious, though equally important, was the influence on social performances. This was most obvious in the way solidarity and similarities were used as a strategy in interpersonal relationship building.

As stated in section 5.2.3 Positioning, the taking of stances is an inevitable part of social interaction and was present in all interactions. Most stances in the data were taken in positive stance alignment and disagreement was rarely expressed. Through stance uptake, initial stances were usually consolidated. According to the different stances taken by the interactants, the positions that were achieved varied. The most prevalent, besides positive stance alignment and emphasis on similarities, was the expression of solidarity through affective stance. In many cases, the affective stance could also be interpreted as evaluative stance. Thus identities depend also on the interpretation of and by others. This became evident in the analysis of epistemic stance, where some interactants were assigned epistemic authority through stance uptake, whereas other attempts at establishing expertise were ignored. All of these

stances contribute to a group identity of an inclusive and supportive community, where opinions and identities are scarcely overtly questioned.

Implications

The main premise for the present study was that identity is an accumulation of overlapping and complementary facets as proposed by Bucholtz and Hall (2005). This premise was confirmed throughout the investigation. In addition it emerged from the analysis that some interactions and the mechanics of identity building can be read and analyzed from different viewpoints, leading to a deeper understanding of the complexities behind people's actions. Different viewpoints could lead to different interpretations of the same action. This was also mentioned by Bucholtz and Hall (2005) and is something to keep in mind for future studies.

Another premise was that the medium influences interactions that take place through it. This premise has existed for a long time, as lined out in Chapter 2 Research on Computer- Mediated Communication, and proved to be accurate also. This influence unexpectedly related to interactional patterns, not just language choices.

Limitations of the study and future topics of investigation

Through the narrow selection in terms of timescale and number of interactions, only a glimpse into the workings of identities in one specific virtual community could be provided. Even so, a surprising amount of information on identities and the mechanics behind them could be extracted. Since the time of data collection and the completion of the present study the community in question has undoubtedly undergone some change, as has been pointed out in section 4.3 Relevance of data. It might be interesting to return to the same interactional space and do a comparative analysis to map the trajectory of a virtual community. Furthermore, certain inter-

esting aspects of identity building, such as identity emerging from repeated practice or stance accretion, were not part of the present study. Future investigations into the same community could include a longitudinal study of one or more participants' contributions.

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