

# The many faces of online community: Images and imaginings of togetherness on Imgur

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*This article discusses the meaning and function of “community” as a discourse on the image-sharing website Imgur. The analysis shows that the community term has many meanings and serves as a shorthand for a wide variety of social practices, and these meanings are shaped by the experiences of social action leading to the use of the term. Based on ethnographic data, nexus analysis provides an understanding of how the interactions related to community on the site come to take place the way they do. In conceiving of these interactions as mediated discourse, the article provides a fresh approach to the long-established academic discussion on the definition of community, suggesting a new conception of the community term as a boundary object, which takes on various meanings and functions as it is employed in social action. On Imgur, the community term is associated with an imagined connection to similar others, a shared culture, and the commitment to participation required by the intertextuality of the site content and the challenge of learning to read and create the content that is popular on the site.*

**Keywords:** online community, virtual community, online social interaction, online ethnography, nexus analysis, mediated discourse analysis

## 1 Introduction

Community as a concept has proven notoriously slippery in efforts to subject it to academic definition. In 1955, George Hillery identified 94 commonly used definitions for the term (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 102), and the drive to distil common themes from the vast body of literature continues (see e.g. Chayko, 2014; Parks, 2011). At the same time, lay usages of the term seem largely untroubled: the word “community” appears frequently in conversations related to all manner of interaction, and its meaning is thought to be implicitly understood. It has become a particularly popular word in online discourse, used by a variety of people to describe different kinds of togetherness or group interaction that occur on the internet (Baym, 2010; Parks, 2011). While some suggest that interest in online community has waned as practices of online interaction have gained variety (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015, pp. 138–139), participation on many popular online sites still evokes ideas of community for their members (Martinviita, 2017).

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The word community is also used regularly in connection with the image-sharing website Imgur, a site that attracts 150 million visitors each month (Perez, 2014). With such large numbers of people interacting through images and 140-character comments, with no tools for following particular users or for creating networks, the site does not appear to offer affordances for building relationships or engaging in sustained interaction with others, elements that are central to many academic and everyday understandings of community. Indeed, Imgur members themselves engage in arguments over whether Imgur is a community or not. This study focuses on the community question on Imgur, unravelling the roots of the argument and thereby providing a fresh real-life example of how community as a term comes to be associated with the interaction in a particular online setting.

The study is built as an ethnography, more particularly as a nexus analysis (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). The study takes a historical view to discourse and analyses the interaction on and around Imgur in terms of the processes that shape the interaction, highlighting some of the most salient elements in creating the understandings of community that are visible on Imgur. In other words, rather than beginning from any established definitions of the concept of community, the study aims to discover what “community” means here for these participants, and what work it does in this context. By moving away from the search for common defining elements and instead focusing on the underlying processes that evoke the idea of community for participants, the study creates space for the description of different experiences of togetherness, and an understanding of the community concept as an object that does different work in different circumstances.

## **2 Theoretical framework**

This study employs nexus analysis, a research strategy for studying real, now-in-the-world social action as part of a historical and sociocultural continuum (Blommaert & Huang, 2009; Scollon, 2013; Scollon & Scollon, 2004; Wohlwend, 2013). Nexus analysis can be described as the ethnographic application of mediated discourse theory, which posits that discourse and action have a dialectical relationship: that discourse is a form of social action as well as a tool for social action, and as discourse shapes action, action shapes discourse (Jones & Norris, 2005). Discourse can here refer to language-in-use and patterns of situated meaning-making, which Gee calls “small d” discourse, or to the more established semiotic systems that people enact as members of discourse communities, which Gee refers to as “big D” Discourses (Gee, 2015).

According to mediated discourse theory, all social action is mediated through the tools used to take the action. These tools include discourse and language, but also any other objects, concepts or beings in the world (Scollon, 2001a). Any such objects or materials, having become recognised as useable for a particular action, become the “mediational means” to achieve that action (Scollon, 2001b, pp. 115, 135, Scollon, 2013, p. 195; Wertsch, 1998). All these means also have their own histories and incorporated meanings which affect the action being taken, while being thus employed in situated action also imbues the tools with new meanings. These views on discourse and action are a distillation of the body of related conceptual work on discourse, language and sociality by, among many others, Bourdieu (1977), Wertsch (1994), Vygotsky (1987), Bakhtin (1981) and Gumperz & Hymes (1986), succinctly summarised by Jones & Norris (2005). Overall, the aim

of nexus analysis is to “keep alive our understanding of the layered simultaneity of human action” (Scollon, 2008, p. 236; see also Blommaert, 2005), and to acknowledge that each instance of social action is packed with meaning that reaches to the past (the past actions that enable and shape that action) as well as the future (what new actions are enabled and shaped by that action).

Nexus analysis aims to grasp this layered simultaneity through the concept of “cycles of discourse”, (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 14–15), also sometimes termed “discourse itineraries” (Scollon, 2008). Both terms direct the analyst’s focus onto the connectivity and interaction between and across all the semantic materials involved in an action. Three central concepts further elaborate the kinds of elements involved in each social action: the history of experience and learning that shapes each participant’s views and actions is described through the notion of “historical body” (Nishida, 1958; Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13); “discourses in place” highlights the fact that places are never neutral, but that places evoke a variety of meanings and practices, shaping the social action that occurs in them (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 14); and the “interaction order” among participants, whether among those present or further away from the scene, also always plays a role (Goffman, 1983; Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13).

In order to highlight the fluidity of semantic materials, nexus analysis employs the concept of resemiotisation (Iedema, 2001, 2003). Resemiotisation refers to the transformations that occur in the materials used to take social action: any piece of knowledge, thought, word or object we use to take social action has a tendency to change shape depending on the context of the action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Discourses may be resemiotised into social practices, or become “frozen” in objects, and objects and practices may in turn become resemiotised into discourses (ibid., p. 170; Jones & Norris, 2005, pp. 8–9). For example, the analysis below shows how various discourses of technology development and online interaction have become resemiotised into the elements of the graphical interface seen on *Imgur*.

Overall, the following analysis first highlights the key elements identified as affecting and enabling participation on *Imgur*, moving then to focus particularly on the journey of the concept of community on to the site. The analysis notes that the concept of community arises as a mediational means in many instances, taking on different meanings as required by the participants in different actions. While the participants work to construct and identify the community that is unique on this site, they also invoke meanings and understandings of community coming from elsewhere in their life worlds. Considering the many meanings also discussed in the ongoing academic conversation on definitions of community, the article therefore suggests a more useful conceptualization of community as a “boundary object” (Star & Griesemer, 1989) to describe the fluctuating meanings it takes on and the many usages it is put to, as seen in this case study.

The roots of the notion of boundaries can be traced to the work of Bakhtin (e.g. 1986) (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011): the dialogical nature of human understanding means that ideas attain their meaning in dialogue with other ideas or other minds. In effect, it is the boundaries between understandings that provide meaning. The article argues that the concept of community becomes a boundary object on *Imgur*, as participants employ the concept as a mediational means to understand and explain their participation on the site. Community can therefore be thought of as an “ideal type” boundary object: an object which does not accurately describe any one thing but is rather an abstract, and even fairly vague description that can be

adapted to different locations to serve as a tool for communication and cooperation (Star & Griesemer, 1989, p. 410). The concept of community has often been criticised for its vagueness in terms of academic analysis (Fernback, 2007; Postill, 2008), but this article argues that in enabling and explaining social action this vagueness becomes a positive aspect. Analysed in this materialistic way, the word “community” can be seen to be and do many different things in the context of the internet, and of Imgur; the meaning of “community” may change as the processes and practices behind it change.

This is a departure from the online community research produced thus far, which has involved a recurring struggle to develop or agree upon academically robust definitions (Day, 2006; Parks, 2011). Beyond the issue of definition, several distinct streams of research on online community can be identified: research which focuses on the experience of community using specific psychological concepts, often based on the theory of sense of community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004); research that utilises community as a pragmatic term signifying “a group of people who interact in the same context regularly”, as is prevalent in work that concentrates on the technological or business aspects of online social environments (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009); and research which acknowledges the emotional aspects of community without strictly defining them, referring to community as imagined (Anderson, 1991; Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman, & Mai, 2016) or an image that can be used to make the experience of participation more visible or tangible (Chayko, 2014). While the abovementioned studies have discovered and described many important aspects of the online community phenomenon, this study aims to provide a more holistic, yet pragmatic view: instead of favouring a particular aspect of or viewpoint towards social action, the nexus analytic approach suggests that experience, imagination and pragmatic function are all incorporated in any act of using a word. Thus, when an Imgur member uses the word “community”, they could be leveraging the idea of the group both in its practical and imagined aspects, as well as the experience of participating in that group, while through the act producing yet new associations for the word.

### **3 Data and methods**

The data collection methods used in nexus analysis build on the standards of ethnographic research (see e.g. Scollon & Scollon, 2004). These centre on collecting the knowledge and materials required to build rich descriptions of moments of social action that are truthful to the experience of participants; long-term immersion in the social scene being studied is required to gain a nuanced understanding of what is happening and why, and data should be collected from multiple viewpoints apart from the researcher's own to verify and extend the observations made (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005). In online ethnography, organising the data collection is a particular challenge, as the online environment with all its recorded interaction gives the researcher a “panoptic gaze” into everything that goes on (Stone, 1995, p. 243). Data collection should only continue as long as new insight is being gained (Kozinets, 2010 p. 116). In this study, the data collection focused on finding the central processes of meaning-making related to the community question on Imgur, embedded in the practices of participation on the site.

The main challenge in designing a study exploring the experience of participation on Imgur was accounting for the necessarily large variety of experiences among a member base of millions. The very first observations on the site showed discrepancies, with members having very different understandings of what it is to participate on the site. Thus, it was important to collect a range of data that would allow the exploration of these different understandings, and how they might relate to how “community” was understood on the site. Therefore the data collection process was designed to cover multiple viewpoints into the phenomenon of participation on Imgur: those of the researcher, the site members (both in terms of what they think of the site and what they actually do) and outside commentators. As a result, this case study relies on four different data sets, as follows:

1. Participant observation data, collected over a period of two years between 2014 and 2016;
2. A survey of open-ended questions (49 responses) developed based on six test interviews;
3. Qualitative analysis of site interactions, focusing on the “community” topic (roughly 100 image posts and their associated comment threads);
4. A “discourses survey” of what is being said about Imgur elsewhere (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 156–157).

The participant observation, the content analysis and the discourses survey cover a time period of two years, allowing for the maturation of an understanding of what is constant and what are the changing phenomena on the site. Participant observation focused on the overall activity on the site and on interactions related to the community topic, found in the course of observation as well as through searches with the keyword “community”. The discourses survey consisted of periodic web searches for content related to Imgur, resulting in a selection of news articles and posts on other websites, particularly Reddit.

In the final stage of data collection, six interviews with recently active members were first conducted to gauge the response to questions designed on the basis of the observations already made in the study, and to elicit any detail the study may not yet have uncovered. The questions were then developed into a survey. Where the content analysis had focused on the micro-level of instances of interaction that members actually engaged in, the interviews and survey gauged the overarching opinions and experiences of members.

Participants for the interviews as well as the survey were sought by directly contacting individuals who had been recently active on the site (11 individuals in total), as well as through posting on the so-called “Imgur Community”, a new segment of the site with a discussion board structure (where the post may be assumed to have reached hundreds of individuals). The 55 individuals who responded to the interview and the survey were not expected to represent the entire site userbase of millions, but rather to provide expert commentary on an issue familiar to them: participation on Imgur.

All in all, the data collection in its different forms captured the actions of thousands of Imgur members to some degree. Assisted by the length of the period of participant observation, this enabled the identification of key practices and understandings specific to the site, and the maturation of the researcher’s own sense-making of what is happening on the site. The data supplied multiple

viewpoints into the social scene on Imgur, giving voice to the variety of opinions and experiences present. The analysis chapter explores the key processes thus identified that contributed to the understandings of community seen on the site; first, a description of the site as it functioned at the time of the study is provided. This description is built from information accumulated during the study, through all the forms of data collection.

### *3.1 Imgur in brief*

Imgur is a social site for browsing and commenting on popular images from the internet. Imgur was first created in 2009 to provide a simple tool for uploading and sharing images on the content aggregator site Reddit. At first, the site provided no tools for interaction, but this soon began to change. A gallery of the most popular images was added first in 2009, while usage of the image-sharing tool also began to spread outside Reddit. Voting and commenting tools were added soon after and remain the central interactive tool on the site. Image comments were first conceived of as captions, with the highest-scoring caption displayed directly underneath the image. Captions were later renamed as comments, and functionality such as comment responses (displayed as threads) was added.

The content in the public gallery is broadly organised into two categories: viral content drawn from across the web, and user-submitted content from within Imgur. This study focused largely on the user-submitted section as providing the richest interaction on the site: in addition to votes and comments, here site members also create the images and their captions themselves. All content on the site – images and comments – can be voted on, and votes determine the order in which the images are displayed on the site, and the order in which the comments (limited to 140 characters in length) are displayed underneath the images. Contents can be downvoted as well as upvoted, with the total score defining the visibility of the content. Site members gain points based on the votes they receive on their shared images and comments. Thus the voting system strongly influences the interaction that takes place on Imgur, encouraging users to create content that is more likely to gain upvotes – and therefore, visibility. As users typically browse images beginning from the front page of the gallery (which displays the highest-ranking images), votes strongly influence how many individuals will view a posted image.

Each registered member has a profile page with mostly automated content: previous images and comments posted by the member, as well as the points from votes and any trophies the member has earned through participation. The profile page contains an optional space for a profile text the member may create, based on text only. The site does not use profile pictures or avatars; members are identifiable across the site only through their usernames which are linked to their profile page. The profile page provides the option of privately direct messaging an individual member, but there are no tools for group messaging or following particular users; all the group interaction on the site takes place via the images and their comments. This means that the interaction on Imgur is very much focused on content, not relationship-building, and the data shows that members rarely spend a lot of time getting to know others. Rather, the majority of the interaction that takes place is based on voting and commenting only, and due to the large number of members and vast amount of content posted, usernames are not likely to become recognizable.

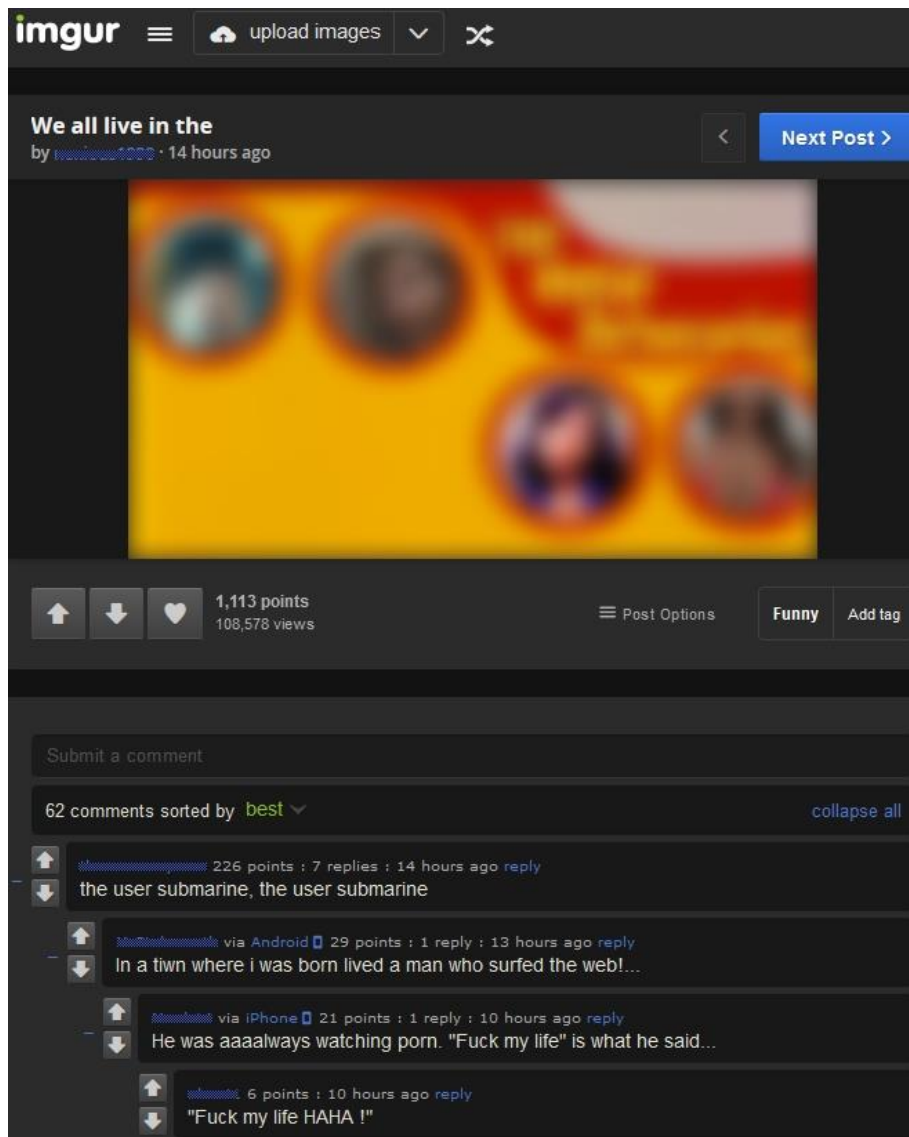
In addition to still images, Imgur enables the posting of gifs (moving images) and galleries (several images within one post). The voting structure promotes the sharing of certain types of content; posts tends to be humorous and entertaining, but political commentary and the sharing of personal stories are also common. The content tends to be highly intertextual through references to popular culture, current events, online phenomena and Imgur-specific phenomena and practices. These references can be direct or veiled, simple or complex combinations and remixes of content from elsewhere; often quite extensive knowledge of popular culture and previous events on Imgur is required to fully penetrate the meaning of a post. As comments are limited to 140 characters, concise commentary is required. As the comments were originally conceived of as captions, the most popular kind of comment on the site is still the witty one-liner that illustrates or comments on the image in some way.

## 4 Analysis

The following analysis is presented in two parts. First, the focus is on the discourse cycles that shape the social action of “participating on Imgur”, in other words, the discourse cycles that are most salient to developing a shared understanding among Imgur members of what Imgur is for and how it is supposed to be used. The analysis then moves to observing the life of the concept of community on the site, showing how the concept moves through and along the cycles identified in the first part to gain different meanings and usages on the site. Excerpts from the data are provided throughout to illustrate the different observations; these excerpts have been chosen as being particularly representative of the observations they illustrate, but all the findings thus discussed rely on multiple data sources, as discussed above.

### 4.1 *Identifying discourse cycles*

To begin identifying the discourse cycles that affect the use and meaning of the community concept on Imgur, it is necessary to develop an awareness of the different levels at which participation on the site can be described, in terms of space as well as time (Scollon, 2008). Observation shows that the social action which produces site content such as the image and comments seen in Figure 1 involves a complex nexus of action as follows. On a short-term timescale, the action of “participating on Imgur” involves loading the site or the app, scrolling pages, moving from one page to the next, voting on content, and posting comments. On a wider time-scale, participation on Imgur involves the process of learning about social media and what actions are possible there, in order to first discover the site. Further, it involves learning what actions are appropriate on social media, beginning with what kind of language should be used, whether to be polite or rude, whether to share private details or not, and so on. In the case of Imgur, a basic understanding of the social media practices of posting images and text for public viewing and commentary will enable a first-time viewer to interpret to some extent what is visible on a typical page on the site, as seen in Figure 1.



**Figure 1.** View of the top left (main segment) of an image post when viewed on a computer (see <https://imgur.com/gallery/3hKU1zF> for the unedited view)<sup>1</sup>.

More experience is required to fully understand and engage with the multi-layered, highly intertextual content that is typical on the site and also seen in Figure 1; the image itself takes the Beatles song “The Yellow Submarine” and its lyrics and related graphics as a starting point, incorporates images of famous film and TV characters popular on Imgur, and links the whole to the idea of the “user submitted” section of Imgur as a place to live. This linking is achieved somewhat in cooperation among several users, as the original poster has given the image the headline “We all live in the”, which commenters recognise as an invitation to engage in the popular practice of posting subsequent lines of song lyrics as responses to a previous user, with words changed to fit the context. Here, the first commenter in particular completes the idea of the “user submarine”, suggested by the original poster’s image manipulation and headline. Thus, the historical body (previous experience & knowledge) of the individuals involved enables their ability to participate in the expected way, while others may struggle to read the content in the manner it is designed by its contributor(s) to be read.



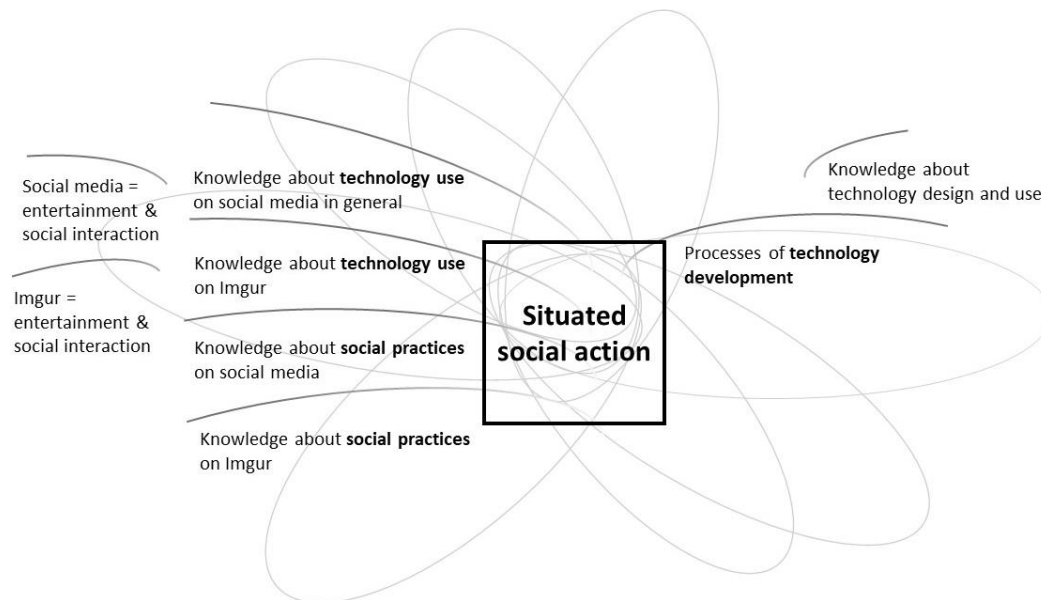
A closer examination of the page's technical and visual construction also presents a distribution of levels of action and discourse across different timescales and spaces. In the short-term the page is loaded and displayed according to the programming and other technological structures behind it, which imply the much longer-term cycles of technology development to do with for instance the graphical design of the user interface and solutions related to the uploading and sharing of images, and all the decisions that have been made in the design of those technologies. Incorporated into the page design are a large number of functions for the viewer; an experienced user will be able to identify many areas of the page where a click or a tap will result in an action such as moving to another image page, voting or commenting on the image or sharing it elsewhere on the web. The button-like images give access to the central functionality on the site: for example, clicking on an "up" arrow gives the related content a plus point, while clicking on a "down" arrow gives the related content a minus point. An active participant will soon learn to pay attention to the numbers near the voting buttons, which indicate the current total points the content has received. The same area of the page also includes functions for posting comments, for changing the view so that different selections of comments are visible, and accessing each commenter's profile page through the link included in their username.

The design of the site thus implies that it is a place for interaction and the rating of content. Other sources of information further specify the understandings of the developers, such as the "about Imgur" page easily accessible from the main menu of the site, which states: "Every day, millions of people use Imgur to be entertained and inspired by funny, heart-warming and helpful images and stories from all around the world" (Imgur, 2016). The case study data in turn illustrates the views of the participants. Starting with the momentary timescale, the data shows that the act of participating on Imgur (browsing, commenting, posting images) is usually an act following the desire to be entertained, distracted or to interact with others. This is again linked to a longer timescale of having learned that Imgur is a place where one can find entertainment, distraction and interaction, probably related to an understanding that "online" is where one can go quickly and easily to find places like this. The following survey responses describe typical experiences (responding to the question "Why do you go on Imgur?"):

- 1) "Entertainment, as a fun distraction, to remove boredom." (survey response)
- 2) "Many reasons. To kill time. To laugh. To see a great post with humanity not being complete shitbags to each other. To laugh." (survey response)
- 3) "I live in middle of woods, alone all day, it's a social thing to do. And makes me laugh and brings news to my front door faster than a news channel." (survey response)

These descriptions of the actions involved in participating on Imgur highlight the different temporal extensions and spatial distributions involved in a single action: the Imgur member who loads a page and posts a comment is simultaneously engaging in several cycles of discourse, some immediate, such as the posting of a comment on this content just seen, in the space of this one page on the site; and some extended, such as the enacting of the established identity "I like to go on Imgur", in the space of the whole site as well as the physical space of the mobile phone or computer and its surroundings, as the case might be. Processes of

technology development are also involved, as well as the many understandings and learned practices embedded in the historical body of the developers and the site members. The following figure illustrates the nexus of discourse cycles here identified as contributing to the action of “participating on Imgur”.



**Figure 2.** Cycles of discourse shaping social action on Imgur.

#### 4.2 Resemiotisations transforming action

The discourse cycles identified above involve many processes of resemitisation which contribute to the development of the resulting action. For example, the developers' ideas of providing a way for people to share images and engage in interaction related to those images have been resemitised in various ways into the page that the site users see. Another resemitisation occurs when a person sees the page and reads it based on the knowledge and experience they have, transforming it into some particular understanding of its purpose and potential for action. Again, individuals with different historical bodies may perform quite different readings of the same page; what to one “reader” represents a familiar environment for friendly banter among like-minded people may to another appear as a sparse selection of tools for shallow entertainment and unempathetic jibes between strangers, or indeed just a jumble of images and text with no discernible patterns at all.

It must also be noted that the developers of the site have stated that they base their development decisions on input from the member base (see excerpt 5 below). This input includes feedback on newly implemented features as well as ideas for new features, and the current site represents an aggregation of such processes of development and feedback. The journey of the prevalent discourses on the site, including community, therefore involve many points of resemitisation, where particular understandings of the site purpose have been coded into the design, then read from a new perspective, and the resulting new understandings again transformed into tools and functions. The longer a member has been on the site, the more such resemitisations they will have witnessed due to the rapid

development of the site. This also contributes to the variety of understandings site members display, discussed below.

All of the actions here identified as having affected or enabled the act of participating on Imgur tend to be internalised, or submerged into the historical bodies of those involved (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 105–106). A member posting a comment is not likely to be actively thinking about all the social and technological knowledge they are using to perform that action, and the developer making a small change to a functionality is not likely to question the existence of touch screen technology. These experiences and understandings are taken for granted in the everyday functioning of those participating in the interaction on Imgur, and ordinarily, nobody needs to spell out e.g. how commenting on social media works (*ibid.*).

Thus we can see that the relatively simple act of loading a page or posting a comment on Imgur is closely connected to all the interaction previously experienced related to that act, by all the participants who contribute to the act. A page on Imgur stands for all of the actions and discourses that have gone into its development; not only the understandings and interpretations of the people who view the page but also the understandings of the developers, and the process of development. In other words, the expectations of the participants make the page appear in a certain light, and drive their actions; but at the same time, the understandings and expectations of the developers have a constraining and enabling effect on the actions of the participants. But all of this is understood implicitly by those familiar with the site, and online interaction in general; it is enough for experienced individuals to see the page to know what it is for, what it represents and how it can be used.

Next, we turn to analysing more closely the meanings and understandings of community that have become incorporated into the social action on Imgur as described above.

### 4.3 *The journey of community to Imgur*

The analysis above identifies two key participant groups who contribute to creating a particular understanding of what Imgur is for: the site members and the site developers. “Developer” here refers to everyone involved in making the site function and appear as it does, and they play a key role in shaping the user expectations of what the site is for and how it should be used. As discussed above, the expectations of the developers are built into the design of the site functionalities, but they are also made visible through direct communication on the official site blog, in “help” and “about” texts, in news media, and on the site itself (where some of the staff use the site tools to interact with members). These sources illustrate the developers' focus on interaction and community-building, visible in the following data excerpts:

- 4) “Imgur is more fun when you contribute to the community. [...] For an insider look into community history and inside jokes, check out this post on Imgur.” *Imgur help pages, “Get Started” section (Imgur, 2016)*
- 5) “When anything goes out on Imgur, the community has already had their hands in that.” *Interview with Imgur Community Director Sarah Schaaf on 22 Sept 2015 (Perez, 2014)*

- 6) “[...] Imgur is where you're going to be entertained and be with a community.” Interview with Imgur Sales Director Kat Fernandez on 19 Aug 2015 (Smith, 2015)

These comments show that the Imgur developers tend to conceive of Imgur as a community. This is probably a usage that is in their historical bodies: it is very common for participants, marketers, developers and academics alike to use “community” when talking about different varieties of online togetherness (Baym, 2010). Often the usage is pragmatic: community is a useful term for referring to particular collectivities of people, such as the Imgur member base. However, the above quotations also show the concept being used in other ways; the developers add qualifiers to describe *this particular* community, which according to them is about entertainment and fun, has inside jokes and a history, and can be relied on for input into development processes. Thus, “community” here is not only referring to Imgur as a collection of people, but it is also describing the experience of participation.

It is not only the Imgur developers who refer to the site as a community, as the following data excerpts show:

- 7) “The humble Reddit image dump has grown into a massive community in its own right.” Journalist Ryan Broderick (2013)
- 8) “It's an incredible community [...] Users are building meaningful relationships with people they might not ever see and are finding people that they have more in common with than anyone at work or school.” Lars Dalgaard from venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, which invested \$40 million in Imgur in April 2014 (Bertoni, 2015)

The word “community” also appears regularly in site interactions, again both as a referent for the member base as a whole, and as a term describing an identifiable group of people with its own culture, as the following excerpts show:

- 9) “Can we promise as a community, not to post spoilers to Star Wars till at least Christmas [...]” (image post)
- 10) “I like hearing stories from people's work - they're OC [original content], interesting, and foster the community on Imgur more than reposts do.” (image post)
- 11) “I love this community. :)” (image comment)

All the above examples show that “community” as a term is very familiar to the key participants and is commonly used to denote both the collectivity of people as well as the experience of togetherness experienced by at least some of the site members. These usages of the word by the different participant groups certainly feed into each other; the site members’ usage of the term must be influenced by the readiness of the developers and outsiders to call the site a community. Some take issue with this usage, stating that calling the site a community does not make it a community:

- 12) “The whole community obsession also makes me feel like I've wandered into an online cult sometimes” (image comment)
- 13) “I check imgur every day and participate in comments, but I don't call it my “imgur family” like some people. This is just a website.” (image comment)

- 14) "Calling imgur a community is stretching the definition of "community". I feel bad for those who order imgur t-shirts and necklaces etc." (image comment)

These criticisms of the community label tend to hint, if between the lines, at a desire to create a sense of togetherness that is misguided in some way, with some also suggesting that the developers are motivated by marketing interests. However, the proliferation of the word in all manner of interactions within and outside the site suggests that the usage is common enough that most Imgur members use the word unprompted by any ulterior motives, and unhampered by too specific a definition, as is the case with how the word is used in general (Baym, 2010; Chayko, 2008; Day, 2006).

#### 4.4 Meanings of community on Imgur

The previous sections described how particular understandings of purpose become resemiotised into tools, as well as the prevalence of the idea of community when discussing Imgur. To further elaborate on the motivations of individuals to use the community concept, it is relevant to analyse the meanings they associate with the term, particularly in relation to Imgur. The analysis above has already shown that the word is used in a pragmatic way, simply to refer to all the site users as a collectivity, but often the usage also refers to a particular culture on the site or the experience of interacting with others. The following data excerpts highlight other key aspects associated with the community:

- 15) "It has a clear delineation between inside/outside - by that I mean there are numerous inside jokes, references, and traditions which only people who are "part of" the Imgur community will understand and it's that clear delineation which creates the community." (survey response)
- 16) "While really big and there's not much of recognising other users, it has its own inside jokes and understandings. Imgurians keep together in a weird way. Like I know I could always count on a imgurian for stuff, which is weird." (survey response)
- 17) "[...] Support provided to people who post about personal loss or gains" (survey response)

The above comments identify the importance of shared understandings, inside jokes and content that only long-term participants understand for building a sense of togetherness and separation between insiders and outsiders. Additionally, the data reveals a sense of trust towards the collectivity of members, even in the absence of recognition among users. As discussed, however, these experiences are not uniform among the vast member base. At the same time, those who disagree with the idea of Imgur as a community tend to associate similar meanings with the term. Community is associated with a sense of togetherness that requires more than a few moments of entertainment to build:

- 18) "Imgur is also filled with people who come here to laugh not for any latent sense of community." (survey response)
- 19) "There is no brotherly, unified, homogeneous "Imgur Community" that I see people reference from time to time." (survey response)

Some members argue that a community cannot exist in the absence of recognition and relationship-building among users:

- 20) “Yeah I don't get the whole community thing. I've shared a few comments but that's it. I haven't had a conversation ever” (image comment)
- 21) “To a point it is [a community] but to a point, it's more or less just a cluster of people posting crap. There is very little identity except to those who make a name for themselves or frequently reach the front page.” (survey response)

These data excerpts have shown that Imgur members attach many meanings to the idea of community, and to their participation on Imgur, that are deeper than just the pragmatic usage discussed in the previous section. Next, the discussion elaborates on the interplay of the many elements highlighted as contributing to the meaning and use of the community concept on Imgur.

## 5 Discussion

Early on in the age of widely available online connectivity, the unbridled optimism of those who wrote on the internet's potential for community-building was tempered by other voices who questioned the possibility of community existing in a context of loose connections and a lack of “shared histories or narratives” (Malinen, 2016, p. 34; Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Since then, much work has been produced showing that community experiences can indeed take place in a variety of online environments (e.g. Martinviita, 2016a; Obst, Zinkiewicz & Smith, 2002; Rotman, Goldberg & Preece, 2009; Welbourne, Blanchard & Boughton, 2009). This work often centres – quite understandably – on the connections among the participants, and the quality of those connections in terms of producing the feelings of belonging and shared identity associated with community experiences (see Chayko [2014] for a useful overview of the many views into online community in research thus far). At the same time, many researchers have come to focus on the “imagined” aspect of online communities, describing members' sense of connection to a “mental conceptualisation of the people with whom they are communicating”, which may or may not be based on specific, identifiable individuals (Gruzd et al., 2016). This study suggests that it is this imagined connection to similar others which is most relevant in Imgur members' community experiences.

As the analysis here shows, what is apparently light-hearted activity related to seeking entertainment and distraction in fact hides a phenomenon of considerable complexity. Skillful participation on Imgur requires extensive knowledge of the topic areas popular on the site, the ability to express oneself in the style preferred, and an understanding of the practices that make up site participation: it is only those fully wedded to the history and culture of Imgur who can create and understand the highly intertextual, Imgur-specific content seen in Figure 1. Thus the act of skillful participation on Imgur implies an extensive commitment to the particular cultural scene found there; a commitment to learning and maintaining the skill-set that is relevant on the site.

It is this commitment that is particularly relevant to community; the content of the interaction on Imgur may often be frivolous, but the act of participating in the interaction is not. The participation implies membership in a clearly identifiable

group: those who have similar skills and knowledge of (and appreciation for) similar topics of interaction (excerpts 8, 15–16). It is precisely because the activity itself is light-hearted that an idea of community develops: the motivation required to gain the relevant skills is not born from any practical need, but from personal disposition and preference, resulting in a “weird, jokey comradeship” on the site (McCracken, 2016). Those who participate actively are brought together through shared preferences and ideals and for many it is not necessary to build closer relationships with any particular individual on the site. In a social scene based on entertainment and wittiness, it is enough to experience a sense of belonging and observe the teeming activity by others who know and appreciate the same things, even if they are unknown.

Those participants who place less value on the community interpretation or even openly disagree with it (excerpts 18–21) often display experience of other similar sites; in discussions, comparisons of Imgur to other major social sites online are made regularly (excerpt 22 below), and the level of uniqueness perceived by each participant is linked to the idea of community: the community title can only be earned by those sites that distinguish themselves enough from other sites through unique features (excerpts 23–24).

- 22) “I think even though imgurians have their differences at the end of the day we are still one big family and would have each others backs (especially against 9gag or reddit)” (interview response)
- 23) “I have a friend who references Imgur like it's its own thing. I don't correct him.” (comment on subreddit “ignorantimgur”)
- 24) “Imgur thinks it's a community and doesn't realize it's simply an image hosting service for actual, real sites” (comment on Reddit)

As seen here, a particularly significant source of contention is Imgur's relationship with Reddit, due to the sites' shared histories and continued extensive overlap in functionalities as well as member bases. A process of “othering” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) is visible on Imgur, as the members strive to identify the differences between Imgur and Reddit. Two groups of members distinguish themselves: those who feel Imgur is still a part of Reddit and does not merit the title of community in its own right, and those whose experience is of Imgur as a unique site with a unique culture and practices, albeit closely related with Reddit.

At the same time, many of those questioning the status of Imgur as a community display an orientation towards light-hearted, humorous content on the site, rather than emotional or politically-oriented contributions. For these members, Imgur participation has less to do with building a shared identity and more to do with fun (excerpt 18). Studies on YouTube, which provides similar affordances for entertainment without requiring interaction, show that while users may be highly active in commenting, community feelings only arise among the small proportion of users who develop relationships with others (Rotman et al., 2009; Shoham, Arora & Al-Busaidi, 2013). These findings suggest that entertainment sites such as Imgur and YouTube give space for many kinds of experiences of participation, some community-oriented and others less so. Yet, despite the differences in participants' viewpoints and expectations, community continues to be a term that is useful for and used by many kinds of members on Imgur. The reasons for this continued usefulness will be examined next.

### 5.1 *The concept of community as a boundary object*

This study relates to a larger discussion on why academics continue to work with the concept of community, when it has always been plagued by problems of definition (Day 2006; Parks, 2011). The problem has been exacerbated by the prevalence of the term in discussing online social interaction, where some suggest the term has become “diluted” to the point where it would be much more fruitful to allow the data to speak for itself (Fernback 2007; Postill, 2008), that is, to look at the ways people connect in today's technologically augmented social landscape, and to describe those connections as they are, unhampered by the baggage that comes with the term community. However, as this study shows, community continues to be a meaningful term that is in everyday usage by everyone involved in the interaction analysed: participants, developers and commentators alike. To some extent this may be due to a difference in the timescales that govern the interpretation of meanings by humans: the cultural codes we utilize to interpret the meaning of information-carrying objects change much more slowly than the events in which those objects are used and interpreted (Lemke, 2001, p. 83). In other words, the old label of community can be applied to the interaction on Imgur to bring meaning to and explain the participation (Martinviita, 2016b); at the same time, new meanings become associated with the label.

A useful way to think about the continued ubiquity of the community concept and the changing meanings associated with it is to view community as a “boundary object” (Star & Griesemer, 1989), i.e. an object that connects many spheres of meaning, perhaps functioning somewhat differently or implying different meanings in each sphere, and in fact gaining its meaning only in its connection to those different spheres. Thus it could be said that the word “community” functions as a boundary object for many varieties of social interaction, or many different environments in which humans interact in groups; it becomes a term which helps contextualize those environments and explain the interaction that goes on in them, and itself gains meaning from the light in which it appears within those environments. In other words, “community” on Imgur may mean something quite different than “community” on another site (online or offline). And as the analysis here has shown, it is the conflict that occurs at the boundaries of different usages that (re)produces the meaning for the participants in that context.

Seen in this light, the readiness with which the concept of community is invoked in relation to an endless variety of social situations, by all manner of individuals, suggests that there is a deeper significance to the term making it enduring, or simply a useful tool for social action. Studies like the one presented here, delving into the finer details of present-day community experiences, continue to shed light on the meaning of the term. But if the main role of community is to function as a boundary object, then it can only ever be explained to some degree of completeness in the context of each particular appearance, and each such appearance will be somewhat different.

## 6 Conclusion

This article has displayed the richness of historical and cultural elements packed into each simple action of participating on Imgur. There is a wide-ranging



tendency for people to “read” a site like Imgur as a “community”, based on the historical body they have accumulated and the discourses associated with the site, both implicitly – embedded in the design and technology – and explicitly in the interactions of the developers, members and outside commentators. Community is associated with many varieties of social organisation because community is what people have learned to use as a label for group interaction that involves some kind of identifiable togetherness. Applying the “label” of community serves to give meaning to the interaction and to explain it to the participants and outsiders alike. Conceiving of the site as a community helps delineate the boundaries between insiders and outsiders, to make sense of one's identity in relation to others.

By now, research has established that online communities exist and are meaningful to many individuals. What this study has begun to explore are the many varieties of togetherness experienced by individuals in today's technology-rich world, and the underpinnings of those experiences of togetherness: the technological and social affordances that enable and shape experiences of connection to others. In the case of Imgur, the “community” that people perceive is related to a shared culture that can only be fully penetrated through extensive engagement with the site; to the malleableness of the image medium to highly intertextual meaning-making and a system which encourages concise, witty messages; and to the “out in the open” obscurity thus achieved: anyone can view the contents shared, but only an insider can understand – and, perhaps, only a true community member can appreciate.

## Endnote

<sup>1</sup> The image contained within the image post cannot be reproduced here due to copyright issues.

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