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UNIVERSITY OF ZAGREB
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Constructing language identity on Reddit
Master's thesis

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Abstract

This thesis explores how language identity is constructed in the Reddit community, specifically within the *r/PeterExplainsTheJoke* subreddit. Reddit's unique forum-based structure provides a rich environment for examining virtual identity formation and group dynamics. Through computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA), this research investigates whether the individuals communicating can be considered a virtual community. Additionally, the focus is placed on the way Reddit users engage in identity-building through shared humor, recurring language patterns, and social interactions, establishing both individual and collective identities within the subreddit. The findings reveal that community members create a micro-community characterized by a shared understanding of inside jokes, mutual support, and various roles which help to establish group cohesion alongside group identity, which shapes the identity of Redditors participating in the discussion.

KEYWORDS: Reddit, CMC, virtual community, virtual identity

Sažetak

Ovaj diplomski rad istražuje način na koji se oblikuje jezični identitet unutar Reddit zajednice, specifično na subreddit-u *r/PeterExplainsTheJoke*. Jedinstvena struktura Reddit-a koji funkcionira poput foruma pruža bogat okvir za proučavanje virtualne izgradnje identiteta i dinamike grupa. Kroz analizu računalno posredovanog diskursa (eng. *computer-mediated discourse analysis*, tj. CMDA), ovo istraživanje ispituje mogu li se osobe koje komuniciraju u specifičnom virtualnom okruženju smatrati virtualnom zajednicom. Također, proučavao se na način na koji korisnici Reddit-a sudjeluju u izgradnji identiteta kroz zajednički humor, ponavljajuće jezične obrasce i društvene interakcije, stvarajući tako individualne i grupne identitete unutar subreddita. Rezultati pokazuju da korisnici koji komuniciraju u navedenom subredditu stvaraju mikro-zajednicu koja se odlikuje zajedničkim razumijevanjem internih šala, međusobnom podrškom i različitim ulogama koje pomažu uspostavljanju kohezije grupe, zajedno s grupnim identitetom koji oblikuje identitet Reddit korisnika koji sudjeluju u diskusiji.

KLJUČNE RIJEČI: Reddit, računalno posredovana komunikacija (eng. CMC), virtualna zajednica, virtualni identitet

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1 INTRODUCTION

A Singaporean study published in October 2024 found that approximately 64 percent of the global population are social media users (DataReportal, 2024). As such, the world of social media platforms nowadays enables individuals to explore, express themselves, find like-minded individuals, and shape their personal and social identities. However, one may wonder if the connections formed online benefit individuals and how they shape their everyday lives both in virtual and non-virtual environments.

The main objective of this thesis is to uncover the mechanisms through which virtual identity is constructed in a specific social media platform, Reddit, and explore whether the individuals interacting within the specific post can be considered a community with its own set of values and norms. More specifically, we will be utilizing computer-mediated discourse analysis (CMDA) to investigate how Redditors engage in identity construction as they interact, joke, and collaborate within a specific post's comment section.

The thesis is structured in three main parts. In the first part, we will present the context linked to the notions of central importance in *computer-mediated communication* (CMC), i.e., *community*, and *identity*. Additionally, we will deal with affordances in CMC and provide a brief overview of the social media platform at the center of our analysis.

The second part will be devoted to methods used to collect and analyze the data. More specifically, one of the portions will be devoted to data formatting to understand the data and its structuring in the third part of our thesis.

In the third and final part, we will present the findings of our case study, analyzing them in light of our research problem. We will examine if the group of individuals within the comment section of a particular post can be considered a virtual community according to its definitional criteria as well as the levels of virtual identity that developed or can be observed under the influence of other Reddit users within the interaction.

2 COMPUTER- MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

2.1 Defining CMC

The invention of the modern-day computer has greatly revolutionized the global population's communication patterns. More than ever, people are communicating by sending text, voice, or video messages to stay in touch or gather some information on the appropriate way of handling a certain situation within or outside of their family dynamics, friendships, or working arrangements. Due to more individuals frequently engaging in online communication patterns like DMing, e-mailing, or commenting, a modern-day communicating principle has been defined under the name *computer-mediated communication* (CMC). Herring (2004) classifies CMC as the kind of communication that humans produce once interacting via networks. While humans communicate both in offline and online settings, those two are vastly different. As such, in certain scenarios, CMC makes behaviors possible that would be difficult or impossible to imagine if disconnected.

While both kinds of communication can be analyzed, social activities online more often leave visible traces making these interactions more accessible for analysis (Herring, 2004). Additionally, although computers were considered cutting-edge technology at the time of the term's definition, this kind of communication is nowadays referred to as 'text-based', meaning that messages were typed and read as text on a screen (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). However, today, smart technology has been implemented with smartphones, smartwatches, and AI voice assistants alongside many other devices that enable communication by sending written text and voice messages, images, or even videos. Therefore, at present, the term *computer* in this communication genre encompasses all types of digital communication devices (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015) For that reason, Yao and Ling (2020) prefer the more current name of *digitally mediated communication*.

Returning to the original meaning of a computer device, ever since the 1980s, when the first research on computer-mediated language was conducted, the CMC's specialization, *computer-mediated discourse analysis* (CMDA) has been attracting research interest (Herring & Androutsopoulos, 2015). Once again, we return to one of the authors who specialized in the field, Herring (2004), who states that CMDA refers to any examination

of online behavior based on empirical, text-based observations that utilize techniques derived from language-centered fields like linguistics, communication, and rhetoric to examine computer-mediated communication. More specifically, CMDA can be applied to investigate micro-level linguistic elements like online word-formation processes, lexical choices, sentence structures, and language switching. Simultaneously, a language-focused approach can explore macro-level issues such as coherence, community dynamics, gender equity, and identity as reflected in discourse (Herring, 2004).

It is important to note that CMDA cannot be considered a theory but rather an approach, as it does not offer any predictions regarding the nature of computer-mediated discourse. This means that people behave differently depending on the situation, which is linked to the complexity of their identities and the various roles they assume. Therefore, we cannot anticipate which role they will take on in other discussions. However, the results of any CMDA cannot be deemed invaluable as they enable the exploration and testing of diverse theories related to discourse and computer-mediated communication, and as such, the approach offers a methodological toolkit alongside a set of theoretical perspectives for researching online behavior and interpretation of empirical analysis results (Herring, 2004).

Additionally, it should be noted that certain authors consider it helpful to conceptualize CMDA as operating across four domains or levels of language, typically ranging from the smallest to the largest unit of analysis: (1) structure, (2) meaning, (3) interaction, and (4) social behavior (Herring, 2004). While we will be dealing with all these domains throughout our analysis, we find it necessary to state that we will not be dividing our results into these levels in greater detail.

2.2 The notion of virtual community

No matter the trait dimension in one's personality, every human being has the innate desire to live in a community. To understand the notion of virtual community, it should be considered that the term *community* from the sociological standpoint is considered different from the layman's perspective. Whereas the community in the times before the internet existed was considered a group of individuals who reside in the same area while sharing similar values and interests, nowadays the location and the shared interests are

no longer considered deciding elements for the utilization of the term defining a set of individuals who exchange information (Androutsopoulos, 2006).

The reason for this change is greatly affected by the fact that people are currently spending more and more time online, therefore the distinction between being online and offline seems 'fuzzy' according to Herring & Androutsopoulos (2015). However, the notion of virtual community presents a new chapter in the book about one of the age-old debates. The debate focuses on how technological advancements affect the nature of a community by making it either flourish or get destroyed (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

Some of the specialists in the field of virtual communities, like Walker, as found in Wellman & Gulia (1999), remind us nevertheless that the Internet is yet another revolutionary means of communication which, just like paved roads or a telephone, connects us rather than separates us from each other. What is more, the Internet should not be regarded as an isolated social phenomenon, but rather as one of the aspects of individuals' lives that enables them to stay in touch both online and offline. As Ellis & Vasconcelos (2004) state, "connections in virtual communities are not necessarily exclusively online" and it is not the community that is changing but our understanding of the notion and its interpretations.

While interest in virtual communities is growing in popularity, we should remember that the notion of virtual communities is difficult to define (Herring, 2004; Ellis & Vasconcelos, 2004; Androutsopoulos, 2006). Androutsopoulos (2006) states that various versions of virtual community definitions exist in the realm of CMC studies ranging from inclusive, more broad versions to those that formulate a set of conditions that must be satisfied for a community in the online space to be considered unity. Zhao (2011) takes the stance for the less inclusive version by stating that clearly defined visions, values, and norms are essential for an online community.

Herring (2004) represents only one of the many authors who explain that the CMDA approach can be used to determine whether a group of individuals interacting can be considered a community. Six distinct sets of criteria have been identified as practical ways to break down the notion of a virtual community into behaviors that can be objectively measured.

Those are:

- 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 the group as an entity distinct from other groups*
- 6. emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, rituals.*

However, the author herself notes that some of these features are more useful than others as potential indicators of a virtual community. That is why there are researchers who declare that it is impossible to offer a single, comprehensive definition of a virtual community (Ellis & Vasconcelos, 2004).

Moving away from the problem of defining the notion of the virtual community, let us turn to the frequently mentioned comparison of real life versus online communities. Jäkälä & Berki (2004) claim that virtual communities can be categorized into permanent infrastructures that coexist with physical communities or as temporary virtual environments that support the functions of a non-virtual space. In addition, Androutsopoulos (2006) explains that “online communities emerge as participants create and codify group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships and create norms that serve to organize interaction and to maintain desirable social climates”.

Due to the rapid development of the Internet, many worry that online interactions will lead people away from in-person interactions (Wellman & Gulia, 1999), Castells in Androutsopoulos (2006) explains why such a concern is unwarranted. Interactions within virtual communities differ from those in ‘real life’ as they are mediated by computers, focus more on shared interests rather than social characteristics, and are primarily geared toward information exchange (Ellis & Vasconcelos, 2004). Therefore, virtual communities do not adhere to the same patterns of communication and interaction as physical ones and to assume this would be problematic (Howard & Magee, 2013). However, they are not imaginary, they simply function in a different dimension of reality (Androutsopoulos, 2006).

While both can exist independently, it is noteworthy to mention that the notions of real-life and virtual communities are not mutually exclusive (Ellis & Vasconcelos, 2004). The interaction on the Internet is only one of the many ways people interact in the modern world (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). Furthermore, communities in both the online and offline spheres of reality often interact and coexist. As Wellman & Gulia (2019) explain, ultimately the relationship is the one that matters and not the medium of communication. Additionally, Ellis & Vasconcelos (2004) find that in many cases, virtual interaction reinforces real-life communities by stating that the “net provides an additional opportunity for interaction with increasingly diverse networked communities, which includes the use of the virtual in the course of everyday life”. As stated by Komito in Ellis & Vasconcelos (2004), virtual communities cannot and should not replicate all the aspects of real ones, however, the motivation to engage in them may be linked to a decline in real-life social and political involvement.

People communicate in virtual spaces to find support and companionship, plan, provide information, or seek advice by investing the desired amount of time and energy from the comfort and safety of their own ‘computer’ device (Wellman & Gulia, 1999). As such, group membership influences people’s perception, motivation, and behavior in the online world (Howard & Magee, 2013). It is noteworthy that the aforementioned practices have been present even before the Internet, however, the ability to communicate without leaving your home has made the process more accessible and visible (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

What is more, online relationships are primarily founded on common interests rather than shared social characteristics, however, the ties that the internet users develop and maintain among themselves are comparable to their real-life counterparts, that is, they are often intermittent, specialized, and vary in strength. Consequently, virtual communication has also enabled people to save time by increasing the capacity to navigate between different relationships (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

2.3 The concept of an affordance

Let us now turn to the term *affordance* which was introduced by James Gibson to describe the unique relationship between animals and their environment. He argued that we perceive our surroundings in terms of affordances, and opportunities for action that

the environment offers. Importantly, he found that affordances are invariant, meaning they are always present and perceivable, even if we do not consciously focus on them. Moreover, affordances have been found not to directly cause behavior; instead, they shape or guide it (Bucher & Helmond, 2017).

Over time, the concept of affordance expanded to encompass social interactions within the same species and the relationship between humans and technology. In the field of *Human-Computer Interaction* (HCI), Norman explored affordances, defining them as “the perceived and actual properties of the thing, primarily those fundamental properties that determine just how the thing could be used” (Bucher & Helmond, 2017). Gaver, as found in Bucher & Helmond (2017), later proposed that affordances should be understood in terms of their actual potential for interaction, rather than just people’s interpretations of an object’s use. His view emphasized objective functionality, both visible and hidden, over subjective perception.

Additionally, Gaver argued that affordances extend beyond individual use to include social interactions. More specifically, he suggested that affordances were not confined to personal engagement with an object but also encompassed how an object or environment can support interactions among people. This was considered an approach with a sensitivity to how objects might bring people together, enable them to communicate, collaborate, or coordinate their actions, as well as how these designs may influence group dynamics (Bucher & Helmond, 2017).

Consequently, communication scholars use the term *social affordances* to describe the potential that technological advancements provide for shaping social relationships and social structures, highlighting how technology enables social practices. More specifically, the term refers to the influence of technology, focusing on how technological properties facilitate or limit social interactions in specific ways (Bucher & Helmond, 2017).

This concept is intimately connected to the notion of virtual communities, where the affordances of social media make it possible for people to connect, share interests, and build relationships online. These online tools make it easier for people to find other like-minded individuals, work together, or just stay in touch by shaping how virtual communities grow and interact over time. The way a specific social media platform is

designed can encourage or discourage these connections and result in a strong sense of community.

2.4 About the data source

Let us now focus on the social media platform at the center of our analysis, Reddit.

Like any other kind of social media, Reddit is considered a platform that surpasses geographical limitations and connects people from all over the world. Reddit users, that is, *Redditors* can connect with like-minded individuals as well as those who challenge their opinions in numerous ways. It is important to note that Reddit is a forum-based platform where discussion is initiated by a user in a particular community. A community that consists of Redditors who have voluntarily joined a specific communication sphere, with its unique set of rules, guidelines, and communication patterns, is called a *Subreddit*.

While it is possible to observe many discussions on Reddit without being a community member, to actively participate, it is necessary to sign up for an account. While X, Facebook, or Instagram represent social media where discussion is based on posts made on private profiles as well as within groups, Reddit has been developed in such a way that it mostly encourages conversations on the posts within a subreddit. Subreddits are “user-generated and user-moderated communities” which group individuals in discussion (Oddný, et al., 2023). Topics range from lighthearted to weighty depending on the niche interest of the participants in the community.

As already mentioned, Reddit’s charm can be found in the autonomy of its subreddits, in which moderators who are Reddit users themselves, can influence as well as guide discussions by providing a set of rules and guidelines for its members. Nonetheless, moderators are not the only ones influencing the development of the community attitude. It is the members of the specific community that determine the value of the post by utilizing the Reddit voting system. Due to the system, the community attitude is ever-changing under the members’ pressure and influence.

2.5 The affordances of Reddit

Let us now turn to Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas (2021) who were among some of the several researchers who focused specifically on the affordances of Reddit. During their

research of an exclusive membership community, *r/The_Donald*, they identified the following four affordances of Reddit: (1) Credibility and Approval (2) Creating membership and belonging, (3) Echoing, (4) Expressing oneself freely. It is essential to note that this is only one of the possible categorizations that we will be utilizing to better understand the affordances of Reddit. Alongside those who have focused directly on Reddit, the works of those who specified affordances of other globally or nationally popular social media should be mentioned. Such as Bucher & Helmond (2017) who focused on Facebook as well and Stanojević and Šarić (under review), who enumerated the affordances of the Croatian forum platforms. The latter have defined the following affordances: (1) (a)synchronicity, (2) persistence, editability, and content control, (3) visibility, (4) publicness, and (5) anonymity. In the following paragraphs, we will be enumerating some of the affordances of Reddit which will help us understand how the media functions and the implications this has on the interaction we have analyzed as the focus of this study.

2.5.1 Anonymity

One of the main appealing points that draws in new members to a community of Redditors is the ability to contribute to a discussion without revealing one's offline identity. This has been enabled firstly through the sign-up process which results in an account with an arbitrary username provided by Reddit. While the username is unrelated to the email address or any other accounts that may be used to access the platform, should a new Redditor wish to change their username the option is available (Reddit. Inc., 2024). This is one of the examples of a way in which the users themselves are mostly the ones determining the amount and the type of information from their personal lives that they are willing to reveal to the public within communities or on their profile.

However, the only personal information that the media reveals about the user, on all occasions, is their *cake day*, meaning the date that they started using Reddit alongside the subreddits for which the users are moderators. There is also the so-called *post karma* and *comment karma*. More specifically, *karma* is a term utilized by users to refer to points provided to a submitter based on the popularity of a submission (Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas, 2021).

Besides the popularity of the Redditor's submission, the other piece of information that Reddit will reveal about a user, if voluntary, can be found in the section *Trophy case*. Trophies are awarded to users as honors for their contribution or for their active participation within a specific community or the media itself. There are general trophies such as 'New User', 'Verified Email', 'One-Year Club', or 'Best Comment' as well as more rarely obtained trophies such as 'Alienator' for a user who designed a logo used on Reddit's front page or 'White Hat' for a user who responsibly reported any holes in the Reddit code (Reddit. Inc., 2024).

2.5.2 Customizability

Redditors can choose to make their profiles private or as anonymous as wanted concerning the biographies, posts, and comments they create, whether on their profile or within communities. More specifically, the option to customize one's avatar or profile picture exists alongside the possibility to create a unique banner image. What is more, any user can alter their display name, provide links to various other social media as well, and decide whether they want to allow others to follow their profile and whether their posts can appear on *r/all* alongside their profile on the list of Reddit users, *r/users*. Moreover, various feed settings let each Redditor customize their experience, including the types of content, the automatic playing of the media, and the sorting of content within communities.

Another customizable feature is the ability to select from three different frontpage layouts on Reddit, which vary depending on whether the platform is accessed through a search engine or the Reddit app: (1) Home – which shows posts from subreddits that a Redditor is a member of, (2) Popular – which puts forward most popular posts, at that time, depending on one's geographical location, (3) All – which is a combination of user-specific posts and highly popular posts.

In addition to the front-page sorting options, Reddit also offers subreddit sorting options that any user can tailor to their preferences. The available sorting options within subreddits are: (1) Hot – meaning popular (at the moment), (2) New – meaning most recent, (3) Top – meaning that they gained the most upvotes for the period that we have selected such as that day, that month, that year or overall and (4) Rising – meaning it is

currently getting upvoted, its position in the overall discussions is rising (Reddit, Inc., 2024).

2.5.3 Visibility

Now, let us explore the visibility aspect of this forum-based social media platform which can be accessed on any mobile or computer device.

Many discussions and communities on Reddit are publicly accessible, with few restrictions on viewing content without logging in. This means that one can follow conversations without creating an account. However, signing up is necessary to participate actively. Users can log in using a Google or Apple account, or any email address. Despite having an account, though, certain content visibility limitations still apply (Reddit, Inc., 2024).

There are four types of subreddits depending on the visibility of the content: (1) Public – meaning that any Redditor can view, post, or comment within the community; (2) Restricted – meaning that anyone can view content, but only approved users can contribute to the discussion; (3) Private – meaning that only members of the particular community can view its' post and submit new ones; (4) NSFW - 18+-year-old community (Reddit, Inc., 2024)

There are also those communities with radical opinions, and should the users want to participate in their community discussion, an active search for such subreddits is required as they cannot simply be found on Reddit's front page due to its general policy violations.

It is also important to consider how posts appear on the front page and how comments are positioned within a post, as both rely heavily on Reddit's voting system. Members can upvote posts and comments they find valuable to the discussion while downvoting is used for content deemed unhelpful or discouraging (👍👎) (Reddit, Inc., 2024).

A high number of upvotes increases the visibility of a post or comment as the platform's main setting prioritizes the most popular interactions, labeled as "Best". This means that posts or comments with many upvotes are more prominently displayed, making them

easier for community members or viewers to notice. Conversely, each downvote reduces the relevance of a post or comment, causing it to drop lower in the community's front page or comment thread. This voting system aligns with Prakasam & Huxtable-Thomas's concept of Credibility and Approval affordance (2021).

2.5.4 Publicness/editability

As mentioned earlier, Reddit content is accessible even without an account, though the amount available depends on each community's visibility settings. If a discussion takes place in a public community, any internet user can view its full thread, including all comments, gifs, images, and upvote/downvote counts. Therefore, many Redditors often forget that “content published online remains searchable and retrievable beyond the normal lifetime expected or perceived by the user who produced it” and consequently the information or advice may no longer align with their current opinions (Aresta, et al., 2013). Although anonymity significantly influences the comfort Redditors feel when sharing information online, it is essential to recognize that they often do not view their discussions as intended for those outside their community bubble, nor do they believe that outsiders are particularly interested (Anon., 2024).

Regarding content editability, the title of any post cannot be altered once it is published. However, the text of the post and any comments, whether on one's own or another Redditor's post, can be edited or deleted across all communities. It is important to note that such actions will leave a permanent record on the post or comment. There is a brief window of about three minutes during which the original post can be edited without Reddit logging it as an edit, treating it instead as a part of the original posting (Anon., 2023).

2.5.5 Building belonging

Reddit encourages individuals to contribute to the discussion and as such encourages participation. A subreddit's focus can range widely, from niche interests, like *r/shitzu*, which is dedicated to a specific dog breed, to broader topics like *r/men*, where the content covers any questions or issues that someone may want a man's perspective on, without any single topic dominating members' attention.

It is essential to note that, on the one hand, certain communities have been created to express opposing opinions and usually as such require more in-depth and longer format answers. On the other hand, there are those that possibly encourage shorter format answers since people agree on a specific viewpoint. Nevertheless, the length of an answer is not an indicator of the existence of a conflicting opinion or a lack thereof.

Moreover, if one feels free to express oneself within a community and gets praised for it, a feeling of belonging and responsibility to a community develops. Additionally, a strong sense of community is developed by the members who, while using their anonymous username, are still able to interact with frequent posters and commentators around whom they develop parasocial relationships (Jäkälä & Berki, 2004).

What is more, there are community rules that have initially been created by moderators, but which change under the members' influence. More specifically, moderators are the ones that have the ability to withhold the approval of a post or delete a specific comment if it opposes the previously determined protocol and as such can encourage or discourage certain behaviors in the community. While individual expression is encouraged, it should be contextualized within the broader framework of community norms and expectations (Oddný, et al., 2023).

Thus, if a member disagrees with the moderators, they have the option to create their community, focused on the same topic, with a distinct set of norms that align better with their style of online expression. However, this is not frequently done, as many individuals fear rejection and, despite the rules, often develop a strong sense of belonging to the existing community along with its principles and opinions. This leads to a community where members are hesitant to share new opinions or alternative viewpoints, often only engaging in discussions where others express similar beliefs and where they can advocate for their views with the backing of like-minded individuals (Oddný, et al., 2023).

2.6 About the data

The data analyzed in this study was taken from a post in a popular Reddit community known as *r/PeterExplainsTheJoke*. The origin of the Reddit community name allegedly stems from one of the fictional characters in an American animated sitcom, *Family Guy*. In one of the show's episodes, Peter Griffin, explains a joke as well as the meaning that

should be found between the lines (Anon., 2023). Over time, the character gained mainstream attention in the form of a meme explaining things for those who do not understand because of which the community was created on the social network.

More specifically, the subreddit gathers 801 thousand members (November 2024) who participate in lively discussions and joking sessions over the meaning of confusing situations depicted in various images. What is more, communication in the community revolves around jokes and joking patterns. It is not rare to find that alongside beneficial input about the meanings of the joke, many comments are often created only to continue the joking pattern and the lively atmosphere within the comment thread. This subreddit was discovered randomly while searching for a community on social media that could be analyzed more deeply. However, it was selected because its membership is continually evolving, and the motivation for participation differs among its members.

Now that we have briefly described our general community, let us turn to the post that was chosen for our analysis. It is important to mention that the post was created roughly seven months before conducting this research and was selected for analysis because of the considerable number of comments generated in response, as well as their creativity and the recurring joking patterns that dominated the discussion. What is more, the original poster was, at the time, a relatively recent Redditor who had previously posted only once in the subreddit. In the analyzed Reddit post, the user was trying to find the reasoning for a joke written on dough packaging. The post acquired 26 thousand upvotes and 639 comments. The joke stated “Two muffins were sitting in an oven. One says ‘Geez, it’s hot in here.’ The other screams.”

Approximately 270 comments were closely analyzed to determine if participants in *r/PeterExplainsTheJoke* subreddit created a virtual community with its own set of rules within the post as well as the way in which their digital identity is built by participating in this community’s discussion.

2.7 The notion of identity

Let us now turn to the notion of identity in non-virtual and virtual settings.

Starting with identity from the general point of view, we reference Buckingham’s definition of identity as the product of a unique personal biography and the social

environment, which can be found in many pieces of research (Aresta, et al., 2013; Greenhow & Robelia, 2009; Hu, et al., 2014). Additionally, identity formation is considered a process, as Greenhow & Robelia (2009) explain, it is not something that simply exists, but rather something dynamic, performed, and self-reflective. Simpson & Carroll (2008) agree with this opinion by stating that researchers have gradually been shifting their focus from the ‘being’ of identity to ‘becoming’.

Thus, the concept of identity is seen as being “fluid and permanently negotiated” by the individuals and the situations in which they find themselves (Aresta, et al., 2013; Androutsopoulos, 2006; Huang, et al., 2021). What is more, identity can be seen as a puzzle, an ever-evolving work-in-progress (Aresta, et al., 2013) as each individual consists of multiple, populated selves, each with various voices that may not always be in harmony (Talamo & Ligorio, 2000). Moreover, identity is something that people construct over time often through struggle. Therefore, at a certain point in life, it is difficult to change it or lose some of its characteristics (Mutanen, 2010; Simpson & Carroll, 2008).

Additionally, identity helps us relate to things in our environment (Mutanen, 2010). As such, *the roles* that people adopt to construct society and ‘the self’ are essential. Roles are considered, by many experts in the field, as part of the identity construction process. In the process, individuals can choose to embrace a certain role or distance themselves from it (Simpson & Carroll, 2008). As has been noted in Greenhow & Robelia (2009), people are considered to be actors “playing different roles on different stages to different audiences”. That is why Gündüz (2017) affirms that observing how other people act may cause behavioral changes in particular situations.

Shafie, et al. (2012) go a step further by stating that identity is shaped by belonging to a particular social group which requires that an individual meet the roles and expectations associated with that identity. Regarding virtual environments, experts on the matter view them as redefining identity boundaries and creating new opportunities for personal identity growth and group affiliation (Costa Pinto, et al., 2015).

Before delving deeper into the analysis of the way one’s identity can be influenced by the perception of others, especially in the online context, it is necessary to differentiate the physical, as in real-life identity from the virtual, online identity. In the physical world,

an individual's identity is revealed through gestures, both verbal and nonverbal expressions, and choice of clothing and accessories. However, digital identity can be displayed by utilizing different avatars, nicknames, and signatures, and making specific linguistic choices. Aresta et al. (2013) dive deeper by claiming that "the online identity of the individual can reveal to the wide community the sum of their experiences, skills and their ability to communicate, interact and share online".

While factors that affect an individual's physical identity, in connection with their corporal body and situations in which they might find themselves, are often beyond their control, in the online world, individuals can freely construct their identity without any connection to their non-virtual selves (Huang, et al., 2021; Hu, et al., 2014). Some may wish to hide personal information, while others may manipulate it to the desired level, that is, partially or completely (Hu, et al., 2014). It has been found that those who struggle with a sense of lost control in their offline lives often reclaim it by reinventing themselves in the virtual world (Arfini, et al., 2020).

Even so, virtual interactions can add a layer of complexity as non-virtual identity is a complex personal and social construct (Jäkälä & Berki, 2004). Due to the persistence of data, frequent platform updates, and decontextualization of information, internet users in fact have little control over the real presentation of their identity online (Arfini, et al., 2020). It is important to remember that the production of an online identity is not a necessity, in today's globally-connected world, however, life can be more complex for those who choose not to participate in the virtual world (Aresta, et al., 2013). Therefore, some may choose to engage in virtual communication but only by presenting their *faceted identity*. The term was taken from Aresta et al. (2013) article which referenced Boyd's explanation of the expression as the identity in which individuals online choose to make known different parts of their identity to different audiences.

Before shifting our focus to the more detailed analysis of virtual identity, it should be noted that the term *real life* for the non-virtual, that is, physical identity is considered to be misleading by many. As Gunduz explains it, communication in the online world does not follow the same patterns of the physical world, however, this does not mean that the identity created online is unreal. Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) state "virtual identities, created and maintained by users' non-virtual identities, can be just as real to

users as their non-virtual identities”. In addition, virtual expression is under the influence of the real world and as such it creates real identity in the non-physical medium (Gündüz, 2017).

Nevertheless, no matter the reality aspect of the two dimensions of identity, we should always remember that identity is changeable. In the virtual world, how internet users interact online and present themselves adds to the personal dimension of their digital identity (Aresta, et al., 2013). Since people need to present themselves differently in different situations, online environments offer social media users the opportunity to showcase and adopt various identities (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013). As such, they can redefine their identity through multiple perspectives and parallel existences (Costa Pinto, et al., 2015). It is social media that makes people engage in self-discovery and self-presentation different from the one they are used to in the non-virtual world (Greenhow & Robelia, 2009).

Furthermore, the new virtual identities are often embellished as the presentation of the self online is frequently directed by different factors (Bullingham & Vasconcelos, 2013) such as one’s psychological status, personality traits, non-virtual physical attractiveness, or perhaps performative goals (Huang, et al., 2021). Nowadays, digital identity is thought of as a form of certification (Gündüz, 2017). It enables the recipient of information online to confirm that the information was genuinely shared by the individual under a specific user name. Therefore, *digital identity* serves as a means to introduce one’s professional, social, and private lives to others both genuinely as well as insincerely (Aresta, et al., 2013).

While digital literacy has become increasingly important in today’s technological world (Gündüz, 2017), it is essential to remember that internet users can still be divided into *digital natives* or *residents* and *digital immigrants* or *visitors* (Aresta, et al., 2013).

Digital natives are young individuals who have made technology an integral part of their daily routines. They are the ones who have accepted the virtual world as the one in which they can create an identity and maintain social relationships, while digital immigrants are those who use the internet solely as a tool to perform certain tasks such as getting bills paid and communicating professionally (Aresta, et al., 2013). What is more, the culture

and the time in which an individual has grown up can vastly influence how they construct their identity online.

However, no matter the level of confidence when using the internet, many choose to partially or completely hide their identity in the virtual space. The process of reinventing one's characteristics online is defined as *online identity reconstruction* (Huang, et al., 2021). Huang, et al. have enumerated some of the reasons for the individuals' wish to conceal their physical identity online. Those would be vanity, enjoyment, self-exploration, real self-representation, attracting sexual partners, privacy concerns and disinhibition, peer perception, and self-promotion. It is important to note that as they become more involved in the virtual sphere and move to the realm of internet residents, the once-internet immigrants may start to desire a more solid virtual identity and may reveal more about their identity outside of social media (Aresta, et al., 2013).

We will end this portion of the analysis of the notion of identity by referencing Arresta, et al.'s thoughts which state that in the physical world, forming one's identity is a gradual process shaped by personal development and learning that starts in childhood and continues throughout life. Online, where things move at a much faster pace than individuals might prefer, the development of an identity should be a more conscious, deliberate, and reflective effort.

2.7.1. Construction of virtual community identity

While, in the preceding paragraphs, we examined an individual's identity both offline and online, in the upcoming sections, we will concentrate on the individual's identity in relation to the virtual community they engage with.

As we have already mentioned, online communities represent a new environment where personal identity evolves (Arfini, et al., 2020). As such online communities provide their members with important outcomes for their identity. That is, internauts use CMC to engage with like-minded individuals, and over time, they categorize, identify, and compare themselves as members of these online groups. Concerning this, it is important to remember that individuals compare themselves and others within their groups, doing so both consciously and subconsciously (Howard & Magee, 2013).

What is more, online groups are formed based on shared characteristics or common activities, which influence the motivation and behavior of their members (Howard & Magee, 2013). This can be explained by the concept of *homophily* which states that similarity drives attraction, as people are more likely to be influenced by individuals who share their views (Spears, 2021).

However, before engaging in group discussions, online participants are generally unaware of other members' positions. As a result, they often express moderate opinions to stay close to what they assume is the group's central viewpoint (Lee, 2007). However, with time, social influence arises as individuals become unsure whether to trust the group's perspective or their own beliefs. Concerning this, Spears (2021) references Deutsch & Gerard's distinction of *informational influence* from *normative influence*. While *informational influence* occurs when individuals look to others for guidance on what to believe or how to act, *normative influence* happens when they conform to fit in with a group or to gain acceptance. Conformity does not inherently mean that the individual assumes that the group is correct.

For the groups' members to exchange information and knowledge as well as comply with the group norms in the construction of their future identity, the identity of the community must be powerful enough to motivate such a change (Jäkälä & Berki, 2004). Genuine group influence is the only force that can lead to the private acceptance of identity traits (Spears, 2021). If the influence is not sufficiently strong, individuals may be hesitant to acknowledge their membership in the group (Howard & Magee, 2013). More precisely, Purohit et al. (2012) recognize community celebrities as key figures in shaping and guiding discussions. That is, social groups often center around opinion leaders who guide and organize community activities, encouraging members to spread their newly formed identities to other external communities.

Despite the 'internet celebrity' influence, for a group of individuals interacting online to be considered a community, members must agree on shared goals and expectations (Zhou, 2011). That is the reason why authors such as Spears claim that group identity shapes values, sets norms, and thus can imply a collective morality (Spears, 2021). However, the opinion of the new members of such communities is likely to change to comply with the majority's viewpoint. In other words, opinion changes are influenced by

how individuals perceive the group membership of the information source, rather than the information itself (Lee, 2007).

Apart from this, it has been shown that individuals tend to identify more strongly with online groups than with offline ones (Howard & Magee, 2013). For members of forum-based communities online, such as the one we observed, where the information exchange is text-based, precise and clear language is seen as a tool for identity negotiation. As such the interlocutors in virtual communication can embrace others' identities based on the way they express themselves in the written form online (Talamo & Ligorio, 2000).

Additionally, *group membership* and *group identity* can be considered determinants of an individual's belongingness to the online group (Howard & Magee, 2013). *Group identity* is understood as a facet of the self that is distinct from personal identity, yet it significantly contributes to one's self-perception. That is, group identification occurs when individuals see themselves primarily through the lens of their group membership. (Leach, et al., 2008). Unlike identity, *group membership* primarily involves categorizing individuals into specific groups, a process typically carried out by others (Howard & Magee, 2013).

Leach, et al. (2008) have created a scale consisting of five components for measuring in-group identification, that is, *group identity*. They are the following:

1. *individual self-stereotyping* – the extent to which individuals view themselves as typical of their group
2. *in-group homogeneity* – the perception that group members are similar to one another
3. *solidarity* – the feeling of unity and bond among group members
4. *satisfaction* – the sense of pride and fulfillment in being part of the group
5. *centrality* – the importance of group identity in an individual's overall self-concept.

However, it is also noteworthy that identities formed during virtual interactions depend not only on what each member chooses to reveal about themselves but also on the context, which actively shapes and influences their possible choices (Talamo & Ligorio, 2000). In addition, research shows that the way individuals join communities and how these communities expand is influenced by the structure of the underlying network (Purohit, et al., 2012).

In the previous sections of this paper, we have briefly mentioned the concept of *roles*. While *social markers* in the virtual context are often omitted due to their presenting of characteristics that help define an individual's identity within a social context, such as their age, gender, occupation, and affiliations, *roles* refer to expected behaviors, responsibilities, and norms associated with a particular social position or status within a group or society. Both exist in non-virtual and virtual environments, which means that the behavior of online community members is also associated with specific roles. Jäkälä & Berki (2004) organized group roles into task roles such as information giver or seeker, administrator, elaborator, initiator, and socioemotional roles such as sensor, gatekeeper, and harmonizer. However, members can have multiple roles, as the multiplicity of roles is linked to expressing communication needs to achieve a desired state of being, whether consciously or unconsciously. Even more so, we should bear in mind that the growth of maturity among group members in their roles takes time (Jäkälä & Berki, 2004).

Let us now turn to levels of attachment to the group. According to Ren, et al. (2012), attachment operates through group identity, allowing individuals to feel a sense of connection to the character or purpose of the group as well as interpersonal bonds whereby members of a group develop relationships with other people within the community. Accordingly, the two levels of attachment are *identity-based attachment* and *bond-based attachment* which result in *attachment to the large community*.

Identity-based attachment is enhanced as people are given information about the group, as activities are made more visible to the members and their personal relationships are downplayed (Ren, et al., 2012). When individuals discover that their values and goals align with those of other group members, they are more likely to intend to participate actively in the community discussion (Zhou, 2011). Moreover, once an individual's identity merges with the group, their sense of self becomes closely linked to that group and they are less likely to leave it. Over time members create emotional ties to the group which results in shared enjoyment or disappointment (Howard & Magee, 2013). What is more, the stronger the attachment to the group the more its members see other groups as competitors which could threaten their group homogeneity (Leach, et al., 2008).

However, *bond-based attachment* develops as individuals are attracted to other group members and their unique attributes (Ren, et al., 2012). If people who are important to

the user make a recommendation about participation in a particular group, no matter the user's attitudes towards the group, they will comply (Zhou, 2011). That is, group members rely on like-minded individuals to offer reliable information when faced with a judgment question or when they have gaps in their own experience or knowledge (Spears, 2021). Ultimately, research has shown that *identity-based attachment* is easier to form than *bond-based attachment* (Ren, et al., 2012)

Based on everything that has been said so far, we can conclude that the process of constructing a virtual identity is dynamic and self-reflective, evolving over time. This identity can be expressed through various avatars, usernames, and signatures, as well as through specific linguistic choices. Influenced by a range of factors, individuals may embellish or completely alter their virtual identities to present themselves in a way that aligns with personal or professional goals. The opinions and behaviors of like-minded individuals or community influencers can also impact how one presents themselves online. As a result, people may come to see themselves primarily through the lens of their group affiliations. However, the formation of virtual identities is also context-dependent, with the online environment shaping the choices made during virtual interactions. Additionally, we have referred to the concept of *roles*, where individuals can either embrace or distance themselves from particular identities. Finally, we have discussed the varying levels of attachment individuals may feel when constructing their virtual identities in relation to others within a specific community.

Therefore, in this paper, we have focused on the Redditors' discourse, the cooperation and lack thereof to determine whether the Redditors participating in the discussion under the post can be considered a virtual community as well as how they create identity online under the community's influence. As such we have directly focused on the notions of central importance in CMC, community, and identity.

3 METHODS

3.1 Methods of data analysis

To answer the research question, computer-mediated discourse analysis was used. More specifically, the data was analyzed according to the set of criteria for the creation of a virtual community (Androutsopoulos, 2006), alongside Leach's (2008) work on group

identity. Of 640 comments created under the post, approximately 40% of comments were analyzed to determine whether the users participating in the lively discussion could be considered a virtual community with its own set of norms and practices that influenced how an individual's identity conforms to the identity of other participating in the interaction. During the investigation process, the visibility of the comments was set for the primary sorting setting, “Best”, in which the selected comments were the ones that were referenced the most as well as most voted for. To make the data accessible as well as not to lose any information in case of altering or deleting comments, the whole interaction was copied and saved into a Word document.

3.2 Data formatting

Within the findings section of our study, the data from the original post has been reduced to comments. Due to possible privacy concerns, the usernames of the members who participated in the discussion have been omitted, while the only identifiers of participants are the letters that were randomly assigned to the individuals (A, B, C, etc.). This was done to depict how comments appeared, were responded to, or evaluated[↓][↑]. What is more, items of interest that we focus on have been bolded, resulting in the following format of a data fragment:

A: No, the other muffin screams because he's realized his purpose is to be devoured.

[↑] 10

B: It's kind of a deeply existential thing if you think about it ...

[muffled sounds of gorilla violence]

[↑] 10

4 FINDINGS

4.1 The notion of community in the post's comment section

Using Herring's six criteria for identifying a virtual community, we began our analysis by reviewing the 270 comments in the post's comment section to assess whether the participants formed an active, self-sustaining group with a core of regular contributors. It has been found that at the time of the ongoing discussion, the participants were actively conversing with each other to share different explanations of the joke and provide

appreciation for the laughs that were caused as well as similar humorous situations. Specifically, evidence of the group's activity is visible in the media information displayed directly after each username, which indicates the approximate time each comment was posted. Although, at the time of writing, most comments display only a generic timestamp like "8m ago", the original times were recorded at the time when the discussion was ongoing, offering a timeline of roughly two days during which interactions on this post remained engaging.

While the discussion was lively, it cannot be concluded that regular community members were primarily involved, as about 90% of Reddit users who participated contributed only a single comment, with just sixteen users posting two or more times. As far as the self-sustainability of the group goes, none of the eleven Reddit users that have been granted the role of a moderator within the *r/PeterExplainsTheJoke* subreddit participated in the interaction or guided the group in a particular direction. Therefore, we could argue that the group was self-sustaining, that is, did not need any kind of intervention from those providing the community with support in any sort of manner.

In conclusion, based on the initial criteria, this group of interacting individuals does not qualify as a virtual community. Although the Reddit users were actively engaged during the discussion, the post quickly lost relevance within 48 hours, and only a limited number of participants contributed consistently to the conversation. The primary indication that this group could resemble a community lies in its self-sustaining nature, as it functioned independently without requiring any moderation from subreddit administrators.

Now, let us examine the criteria related to shared history, purpose, culture, norms, and values. Before we start enumerating the findings, it is essential to remember that the subreddit was created due to many members not having the same life experience. As such, the context for many humorous situations is not known by everybody nor do all members understand situations in the same manner. What is more, due to the lack of geographical boundaries when conversing within social media, people from different cultures can provide each other with possibly unprofessional, but culturally correct explanations for certain humorous scenarios.

In our analysis, we observed that participants developed several recurring models throughout the interaction. The first model emerged from a joke about a gorilla escaping from the zoo.¹

A: Punchline after screams is missing: “a talking muffin”

↑ 3.1K

B: “Holy shit a talking muffin”

(muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 1.5K

As can be seen from the example, the second user repurposed the punchline, “Muffled sounds of gorilla violence” from the original gorilla joke to subtly express disappointment with the lack of originality in the original “muffin joke”. This comment quickly gained traction, receiving numerous upvotes and rose in visibility. Its popularity triggered a wave of humorous variations, such as “muffled sounds of guerrilla violence,” “muffin sounds of gorilla violence,” “muffled muffin screams,” and “muffled sounds of gorilla weeping violently.” This model appeared in about one-third of the 270 comments (83 in total).

Another model that emerged from the Reddit discussion was joke chaining, which developed from the previously mentioned punchline. Subsequent jokes in the conversation centered around the multiple meanings of the word ‘tank’, referring to a heavily armored combat vehicle, an aquarium, or a type of skateboard. Additionally, other homonyms became the basis for further humor, such as ‘army’, which can mean either a small arm or an organized military force, and ‘perch’, which can refer to both a type of fish and a surface on which something sits.

The humorous exchanges within the comments highlight that the participants’ purposes in this interaction were not consistent. Although the subreddit was described by its creators as a place “where you post a meme/joke you don’t understand so it can be

¹ The joke (cf. <https://thatsbelievable.com/post/630010289000169473>):
Gorilla: Did you hear about the gorilla who escaped from the zoo?
Zookeeper responds, No, I did not.
Gorilla: That is because I am a quiet gorilla.
[Muffled sounds of gorilla violence].

explained to you” (Anon., 2024), many users in the comment section ignored the goal of offering helpful explanations. Instead, they engaged with comments that provided entertainment, even if they did not offer any useful insight.

The last element of the second criterion would be the common background and shared values that were found within the comments. As far as common background goes, let us remind ourselves of the original punchline that started the comical avalanche, “Muffled sounds of gorilla violence”. The mention of a gorilla recalled for many the 2016 tragic incident at the Cincinnati Zoo, where a male gorilla was shot and killed to save the life of a three-year-old who had fallen into the enclosure. These were some of the following comments made by different users concerning the Cincinnati gorilla named Harambe:

*A: Do you remember **Harambe**? [muffled sounds of gorilla violence]*

↑ 25

...

*B: My son fell into **the Gorilla enclosure**, and has sent our timeline into the darkest path for the 4 years.*

[Muffled sounds of Gorilla Violence]

↑ 51

*C: I put a **kid** into a coma **4 years ago**.*

[Muffled sounds of Gorilla Violence]

↑ 22

*D: **4 years**? It's been **8***

[Muffled sounds of gorilla violence]

↑ 10

*E: **8 years**? Boss, it's been **9 years**.*

↑ 7

...

*F: Should have been the phrase of **2016**.*

/#gonebutnotforgotten

↑ 12

...

*G: Leave **Harambe** out of this. Coincidentally, I was just reading his Wikipedia. He died at 17.*

↑ 1

These examples illustrate that the participants in this discussion shared a common awareness of the tragic event and sympathized with the gorilla's experience. Some had detailed knowledge, while others, like users C and F, were commenting primarily to stay engaged in the conversation. Additionally, within these comments, other noticeable

elements support the idea of this group of individuals as a virtual community, however, these will be discussed at later points.

Some of the other examples of shared knowledge are the references to the original gorilla joke, the British virtual band Gorillaz, or comebacks that involve internet slang such as:

A: Google en passant

↑ 41

B: Holy Hell

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 53

C: A new response just dropped

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 37

All these references are used, much like the original gorilla punchline, to poke fun at the commenter and keep the conversation going. For those unfamiliar with these expressions, they may seem nonsensical, but for those who recognize them, they are meaningful and easily understood.

Ultimately, let us consider Herring's second criterion for defining a virtual community, which again suggests that this group does not fully qualify. The main reason lies in the subreddit's intended purpose: it was created to assist users struggling to understand certain comedic images due to varying cultural backgrounds, values, and perspectives. Furthermore, although the group ideally would have a shared purpose, over half of the comments strayed from explaining the original muffin joke and instead simply continued the humor. While, the original purpose was often ignored by those interacting within the comments of our post, we could regard this situation as though resulting in a new common purpose among the participants, having fun. As far as the shared history, the only indication of its existence is the recurring reference to the tragic incident involving a gorilla in Cincinnati.

Moving forward, we examine the levels of solidarity, support, and reciprocity within the analyzed comment section. Many individuals participating in the discussion expressed gratitude for the laughs that the comments provided them with as well as the positive atmosphere in the thread such as:

*A: This was **genuinely funny**, and I needed the laugh today. **Thank you.***

↑ 2

...

B: LMFO fuckin' love that joke

↑ 2

...

*C: I've been **laughing the hardest** I've laughed in a long time with these joke.
[Muffled sounds of gorilla violence]*

↑ 1

...

*D: "Muffled sounds of grilla violence" **gets me every time.***

↑ 9

*E: Same **I laughed at this for 5 minutes** and have just been waiting to use it*

↑ 2

In the examples provided, it is clear that individuals were enjoying themselves by browsing through the variety of comments. This enjoyment could be seen as a subtle form of approval for these humorous exchanges. Once again in relation to purpose element mentioned in the previous paragraphs, we observed that, subtly, the new sense of purpose that was developing through the support expressed by the participants in the interaction. However, a more explicit form of support is evident in the number of upvotes specific comments received, such as:

A: Punchline after screams is missing: "a talking muffin"

↑ 3.1K

...

B: It's a joke like "two fish are swimming in a tank. One looks to the other and says, "Do you know how to drive this?""

↑ 2.8K

Although there are numerous ways in which members of this group showed support for one another, we will conclude this section of the analysis with examples that directly illustrate how this humor, especially the gorilla punchline, inspired users to apply it in other contexts. Some users expressed a desire to use it privately in professional communication, while others aimed to spark its virality online. Both types of engagement are evident in the following examples:

*A: **That's gonna be my new way to end any and all conversations/sentences**
(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)*

↑ 329

...

*B: I feel the need to **bring back text message signatures.***

↑ 6

...
C: *I'm gonna add that to my email signature. Tho there might eventually be questions at work but probably not as no one actually seem to read them. Lol*

↑ 1

...
D: *Let's make muffled sounds of gorilla violence the phrase of 2024.*

↑ 816

...
E: *Let's make muffled sounds of gorilla violence the song of the summer bruh!!*

↑ 11

Regarding the third criterion, this group of individuals interacting in the comment section could indeed be seen as a virtual community. This classification is supported by their ongoing, both direct and indirect, encouragement for those who creatively repurposed the punchline, contributed with new jokes, or offered witty comebacks, demonstrating mutual support and a collaborative spirit in sustaining the conversation.

Let us now examine the presence of criticism, instances of conflict, and the methods of conflict resolution within the discussion. As we have mentioned previously, many individuals highly enjoyed the humorous exchange, however, some decided to criticize certain individuals due to unwarranted as well as incorrect utilization of the phrase. More specifically, let us analyze the following comment:

A: *"Holy shit a talking muffin"*

(muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 1.5K

B: *That's gonna be my new way to end any and all conversations/sentences*

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 329

A: **Sounds like your stealing**

(muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 127

C: **you're**

[muffled sounds of gorilla violence]

↑ 48

D: **You used the wrong symbol** it's "(" not "["

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 11

E: *What's the difference?*

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 2

F: "(" and "[" both create groups around additional information

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)
[Readers might also inquire: I lost the Game]

↑ 3

G: *You can't lose a game you're not playing.*
(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 3

G: *Easy there, Noah Webster...*

↑ 1

Looking at these comments, participants were critical of user B's intention to reuse the punchline in different contexts. Additionally, there was noticeable criticism regarding poor grammar and punctuation in the comments. Although the objections to repurposing the gorilla phrase did not prevent its continued use in subsequent comments, the feedback on the correct use of brackets did lead others in the discussion to exclusively use parentheses.

Let us examine the following conflict that emerged between three users in the comment section to better understand how it came about and the way in which it was resolved.

A: *No I'm not using **my taxes for reperati**....*

(Muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 12

B: *That's probably **a valid use** for gorilla violence*

↑ 0

C: ***Stop calling them gorillas** if you want change.*

↑ -1

A: *We didn't call anyone gorillas, but we all now know what you are thinkkking. **Racist asshole.***

↑ 1

C: *Why are you using "we" as "y'all" pronoun French??*

↑ 1

A: *We as in [user B] and myself. You as in **your racist ass.** Does that explain my wording enough?*

↑ 0

C: *Uh...don't assume my ass is racist, it hasn't even been seated in Formula 1.*

↑ 1

A: ***I'm not calling you out to be a racer.***

***I'm calling you out to be a racist**-someone who judges others by the color of their skin or ethnic background.*

And the bad thing is you are beating around the bush so hard to deny it. That makes you a bigger piece of shit because you can't own up and be a man about it. Typical

↑ 1

C: *I don't need to beat around to understand **you calling tax repers...gorillas**, at least own up to ur joke. Beating around is comedy in general*

↑ 1

B: *Did you seriously just associate this chain of jokes and the word gorillas used in it **to mean black people? Holy racist jackass Batman**. Not only has no one been called a gorilla throughout this thread but when someone made a joke suggesting someone wouldn't want to contribute their taxes to reparations I suggested in a **joking manner that using gorilla violence would actually be acceptable for such a belief**.*

Now, you're either too simple to understand any of that on your own or you're intentionally being obtuse. Neither option is a flattering representation of one's intellectual capacity.

↑ 0

C: ***No one was thinking** that until [user A] mentioned reparations 🤡
No one brings up reparations unless speaking of a certain tribe...*

↑ 1

B: *Exactly, I was just goofing around, and then some asshole comes along taking the whole thing WAAAAAY too seriously. **People need to grow the fuck up and stop assuming everything. Now they've ruined a perfectly serviceable thread about Muffled gorilla violence**. How often are we able to enjoy..*

(Sounds of overt gorilla violence)

↑ 2

C: *Don't you mean,
Monkeying around?*

↑ 2

B: *Ooooh, I see what you did there. Touché*

↑ 1

The three users involved in this discussion were labeled as user A, user B, and user C. The conflict between users B and C, on one hand, and user A, on the other, stemmed from a comment about an imagined scenario in which user B expressed disapproval of someone's decision to refuse to pay reparations, compensation for damages caused to another nation because of hostilities, in this case, the Native Americans. User C joined the discussion seemingly to defend Native Americans. However, according to users A and B, C's comment revealed a racist mindset that even thought of Native Americans in relation to the derogatory term. This choice of language led the other two users to accuse C of harboring racist views. After several exchanges, user C stopped responding, while users A and B attempted to understand the root cause of the conflict. Notably, no moderators intervened in the situation. Although both users B and C expressed clear

frustration with the unnecessary confrontation, they managed to lighten the mood and restore a sense of good humor by referencing the ‘gorilla violence’ model and playing with synonyms like ‘to goof around’ and ‘to monkey around’.

While we have only highlighted one instance of conflict in the comment section, there were several other occurrences where users expressed criticism towards each other. However, in many of these situations, even though the conflict was not directly resolved between the involved users, the overall mood was restored to a lighter, more humorous tone after brief periods of tension. These moments of humor helped to quickly diffuse the negative atmosphere created by the heated exchanges. Therefore, we can conclude that Redditors were often critical of each other, leading to several brief conflicts. However, these moments of tension did not significantly impact the users’ overall positive mood, as the humor and camaraderie among participants helped restore a lighthearted atmosphere. This aligns with Herring’s fourth criterion, further supporting the idea that these Reddit users formed a virtual community.

Turning to the self-awareness of the group as an entity distinct from other groups, let us remember this comment:

*A: I’m gonna add that to my email signature. **Tho there might eventually be questions at work** but probably not as no one actually seem to read them. Lol*
↑ 1

Through this comment, it is evident that the user intended to reuse the punchline in other contexts to appear mysterious and confuse their coworkers. In doing so, they aimed to create a sense of exclusivity for those involved in this conversation, making it clear that the participants in the discussion would be in on the humorous reference, while outsiders would be left puzzled by the phrase. This approach effectively distinguished the group of individuals engaged in this comment section from other groups, where the “gorilla joke” was not shared as an inside joke. Consequently, this distinction supports Herring’s fifth criterion defining this group of Redditors in on the joke as a virtual community.

To conclude the virtual community analysis, we address the emergence of roles, hierarchy, governance, and rituals observed in the data. Since we have already discussed the concept of roles and their significance for identity formation both within and beyond the virtual environment, the following paragraphs will simply list some examples of

roles, and the hierarchy established by participants in our study. We will begin by identifying some of the roles present in the comment section, categorized by Jakala's two main types, task roles and socioemotional roles (Jäkälä & Berki, 2004).

Task roles observed include:

a) Information Seeker

*A: Where did the gorillas come from? Why are you putting gorillas in an oven? **I have so many questions***

↑ 1

...

*B: **I thought it was screaming because it was being baked...?***

↑ 1

...

*C: How does that **explain the joke?***

↑ 1

...

*D: **So it's not a joke** about inconsistent oven hot spots?*

↑ 15

Some users adopted the role of information seekers by actively requesting clarification about the joke in the original post. What is more, despite other users' repeated inquiries some after a few explanations struggled to grasp the joke's intended meaning or understand its appeal.

b) Information Giver

*A: I think "**Holy shit, a talking muffin**" came first, and then the screaming one was an antijoke or something.*

↑ 33

...

*B: No, the other muffin screams because **he's realized his purpose is to be devoured.***

↑ 10

...

*C: **The punchline is cut off.** The other muffin screams "**ahh! A talking muffin!**"*

↑ 51

Redditors familiar with the joke attempted to clarify why it was nonsensical, offering both objective explanations and personal interpretations. Their responses aimed to support information-seeking users by sharing insights, aligned with the main purpose of

the subreddit, to provide and exchange explanations of supposedly humorous images and texts within the community.

c) Initiator

A: *“Holy shit a talking muffin”*
(*muffled sounds of gorilla violence*)

↑ 1.5K

B: *That’s gonna be my new way to end any and all conversations/sentences*
(*Muffled sounds of gorilla violence*)

↑ 329

...

C: *It’s a joke like “two fish are swimming in a **tank**. One looks to the other and says, “Do you know how to **drive this?**””*

↑ 2.8K

D: *Two soldiers are in a **tank**. One looks to the other and says “**glub glub glub**”*

↑ 2

E: *Just bought **my fish a new tank**. And now he won’t stop **skateboarding***

↑ 2

In the selected comments, two instances of new idea introductions are evident. In the first pair, user B demonstrates the impact of the “gorilla” punchline and the influence on many other members in the subreddit discussion we have already discussed. In the second set of comments, we see how a homonym in the initial comment sparked a trend, with other users referencing or creating similar jokes. These are just two examples where users initiated specific uses of terms, phrases, or humor styles within the community.

For socioemotional roles, we identified the following:

a) Harmonizer/Compromiser

A: *No I’m not using my taxes for reperati....*

(*Muffled sounds of gorilla violence*)

↑ 12

B: *That’s probably a valid use for gorilla violence*

↑ 0

C: *Stop calling them gorillas if you want change.*

↑ -1

...

B: *Exactly, I was just goofing around, and then some asshole comes along taking the whole thing WAAAAAY too seriously. People need to grow the fuck up and stop*

assuming everything. Now they've ruined a perfectly serviceable thread about Muffled gorilla violence. How often are we able to enjoy..

(Sounds of overt gorilla violence)

↑ 2

*C: Don't you mean,
Monkeying around?*

↑ 2

B: Ooooh, I see what you did there. Touché

↑ 1

Let us consider the example of a conflict where users B and C were unsettled by a negative comment made by user A. In the responses following this criticism, both users clearly expressed frustration with the exchange, yet they managed to shift back to humor. This change in tone occurred when user C assumed the role of a harmonizer, steering the conversation away from the tense topic and introducing a lighthearted joke.

b) Follower

In terms of the follower role, many Reddit users involved in the discussion fit this category. To illustrate, numerous participants were directly influenced by one user, the initiator, to repeatedly use the “gorilla” punchline, sometimes even tweaking it slightly.

A: “Holy shit a talking muffin”

(muffled sounds of gorilla violence)

↑ 1.5K

...

B: Just like how in the army, we leave no man behind

[muffled sounds of guerilla violence]

↑ 1

...

C: mmmmmmmmmmmmm dessert!

[Truffled sounds of gorilla violence]

A similar pattern emerged in homonymy discussions, where the initiator introduced an entirely new topic within a comment thread that had previously focused solely on explaining the “muffin” joke and reusing the gorilla punchline. Inspired by the initiator, many users followed suit, creating their own variations of the joke.

A: It's a joke like “two fish are swimming in a tank. One looks to the other and says, “Do you know how to drive this?””

↑ 2.8K

*B: Two soldiers are in a **tank**. One looks to the other and says “glub glub glub”*

↑ 2

C: *Just bought my fish a **new tank**. And now he won't stop skateboarding*

↑ 2

c) Expresser

A: *I've been **laughing the hardest** I've laughed in a long time with these joke.*

[Muffled sounds of gorilla violence]

↑ 1

...

B: *No, but like, **that's legitimately funny**.*

↑ 20

Returning to the examples we have previously analyzed from other perspectives, let us now explore the socioemotional roles of these users. They openly expressed positive emotions toward the humor exchanged among participants, reinforcing the lighthearted and collaborative atmosphere in the discussion. Conversely, some users took on the role of the expresser to communicate their irritation with what they perceived as 'purposeless' comments. These individuals openly conveyed their annoyance, often challenging the flow of lighthearted exchanges by questioning the value or relevance of such remarks. As such, their responses introduced a contrasting tone to the generally lighthearted atmosphere.

A: ***Sigh***

↑ 20

...

B: ***I don't understand why this is so well received**. Are we returning to a new 'lol so random' era, or do people genuinely believe this is from 1897?*

↑ 2

d) Encourager

In a similar vein to earlier examples, we can point to several instances where participants took it upon themselves to motivate others by providing positive feedback and encouraging the continued use of the punchline in different contexts. By offering this type of reinforcement, these users played the role of encouragers, creating a supportive atmosphere that inspired others to keep the humor going. Their efforts not only sustained the ongoing joke but also invited more users to join in, expanding the playful exchange and fostering a sense of camaraderie among participants.

D: Let's make muffled sounds of gorilla violence the phrase of 2024.

↑ 816

...

E: Let's make muffled sounds of gorilla violence the song of the summer bruh!!

↑ 11

In summary, this part of the analysis shows that the participants in the discussion can be seen as a virtual community where everyone contributes through a different role. These roles from information seekers to harmonizers and expressers shape the conversation and create a structured environment where members interact, support each other, and maintain a common social framework.

4.2. The notion of identity in the post's comment section

Let us now turn to the virtual identity of an individual within the group of users interacting in the comment section central to our analysis. It is important to remember that identity construction is a dynamic process, meaning the identity of a Reddit user observed during this interaction may have evolved or changed entirely since their comment(s) were posted. Additionally, concerning the roles people adopted, it is worth noting that while some assumed specific roles within this community, they may take on entirely different roles in other communities on the same platform.

Although we will not be focusing on visual differences among Reddit users in the discussion, such as their avatars, we find it essential to state that their usernames varied widely and did not appear to have any clear connection to real-world personal information. Furthermore, there was no way for us to determine how closely the information users revealed about their lives and opinions in Reddit comments or posts aligned with their real-world experiences. Consequently, we could not know which aspects of their real-life identities they chose to share with others within this subreddit, especially those interacting within the comments of our post, and which they decided to fabricate to present themselves in a specific way within this group of individuals.

Moving past the possible identity reconstruction of Redditors in our analysis, let us recall Aresta's classification of internet users into *digital natives* and *digital immigrants*. While

many might argue that Reddit could be considered a distinct type of social media platform whose complexity places all its users into the category of *digital natives*, we argue that a clear distinction between *digital natives* and *digital immigrants* can be observed in our comment section. It is essential to mention that while all these Redditors, as far as we are concerned, possessed the knowledge and skill to navigate the platform, some users, those we previously identified in relation to the task roles as information seekers and information givers, appeared to be using the social media and subreddit primarily as a tool for acquiring and sharing information. Thus, we might consider these individuals as *digital immigrants* within the context of our comment section. In contrast, we might also highlight those who chose to bend the rules by using various joking patterns and providing comments unrelated to the topic, which treated the comment section as a playground they could shape according to their preferences. We would classify those individuals as *digital natives* within our discussion.

Regarding levels of confidence in internet use within the discussion thread, we also observed both types of influence defined by Deutsch and Gerard. First, *informational influence* appears directly tied to the virtual community's purpose. Those seeking clear explanations for the humor behind the original jokes had fallen under informational influence. Whether the individuals providing the information were correct was not examined, nor do we know if those seeking answers accepted these explanations as true.

As for *normative influence*, we suggest that it aligns with the socioemotional role of a follower. Specifically, those Redditors who took on a follower role by repurposing a punchline or reusing a particular humorous pattern likely did so to fit in with the group and earn their respect. However, some individuals actively resisted this kind of influence precisely because they disagreed with the group. Let us recall the example previously referenced in the analysis of the role of the expresser.

A: I don't understand why this is so well received. Are we returning to a new 'lol so random' era, or do people genuinely believe this is from 1897?

↑ 2

This user refused to accept the claimed origin date of the gorilla joke and was not amused by the joke itself. They were puzzled by the attention the joke received and actively chose not to conform to the rest of the users, who, on the surface, all seemed to enjoy the humorous exchanges. Therefore, we could argue that for the other Redditors, group

influence was strong enough to prompt a change in opinion and behavior. However, user A was not sufficiently influenced and refused to see themselves as part of the group engaging in the analyzed discussion thread.

Let us now examine some of the other comments made by Reddit users participating in this interaction to determine if any of Leach's five components for measuring group identity were present. However, as we have not interviewed any of the users participating in the discussion at the center of our analysis, we may only assume some of the ways in which an individual constructs their identity online as part of the community.

1. *individual self-stereotyping*

Although none of the users directly stated anything that would make us consider them as typical members of the community, we would argue that the first model defined, the use of the gorilla punchline and its various iterations, could serve as the first component of group identity. We would identify as the typical member of this group someone who decided to use the punchline to express annoyance or to be accepted within the group. If used for the first situation, the user chose to imagine or retell a situation where something nonsensical was said and followed with the reaction in the form of the variations of the gorilla punchline, as seen in the following examples.

A: "I voted for Trump"

[Muffled sounds of Gorilla Violence]

↑ 50

...

B: Hey, can you help me change my tire

[muffled sounds of gorilla violence]

↑ 227

2. *in-group homogeneity*

Regarding the second component of Leach's scale, we observed moments in the discussion where Redditors seemed to perceive others as having opinions similar to their own. This led two participants to create subreddits called *r/MuffledGorillaViolence* and *r/peterexplainsmuffledsoundsofgorillaviolence*, presumably as spaces to continue enjoying the punchline together, assuming other members would want to join in even after the original post lost its relevance. However, one of these subreddits has only a

single member, and the other no longer exists. This suggests that, while these two users felt a sense of connection with others, their expectation of shared enthusiasm was not reflected by the broader community.

3. *solidarity and satisfaction*

Turning to the second to last components, let us discuss solidarity and satisfaction in terms of individual virtual identity in relation to the group. Although none of the Redditors explicitly voiced feelings of unity or fulfillment from being part of the group, we believe there is a sense of pride, particularly among those reusing the gorilla punchline. It is clear from the responses to various comments that participants were enjoying themselves as they added to the conversation. Therefore, we suggest that a temporary bond formed between those involved in the exchange, though we doubt it was lasting or measurable in any concrete way.

4. *centrality*

Finally, let us consider the last component in Leach's scale for measuring in-group identification, centrality. Given that our analysis is qualitative, we were unable to measure precisely how much group identity contributes to someone's sense of self. That is, we found it impossible to assess to what extent being part of this group shaped an individual's self-concept or how deeply it impacted them.

Regarding the level of attachment, we would argue that there were no instances of *bond-based attachment* present within the discussion thread. However, some users did seem to develop an *identity-based attachment*. This is especially apparent when certain individuals critique the joke's originality. Here, we see a divide, those on the "outside", who did not understand the joke and criticize it, and those on the "inside", who enjoyed it, found it amusing, and eventually became defensive. This defensiveness appears to stem from the attachment that the members developed to the practices created by some of the members which were under occasional attack by repeated reminders about the joke's origin and criticisms of its quality.

A: Its so entertaining to think that the folks of 1897 were also massive fucking goofballs.
↑ 15

B: This was an old Tublr post, it's not actually from 1897.

↑ 11

C: Yes, humor wasn't developed until a few years later, in 1907.

↑ 9

D: No but like, that's legitimately funny.

↑ 20

E: This is an old Tumblr joke, not real

↑ 2

F: Still fucking funny

↑ 1

In conclusion, we have found that users engaged in dynamic identity construction, adopting various roles and behaviors that align with, or resist, group norms. While some users developed an identity-based attachment, others distanced themselves from the group by challenging the content's value. By using Aresta's framework, we identified both digital natives and digital immigrants within the comment section. Overall, we argue that while the virtual identities of individuals within the group were changed to a certain degree, the changes were nuanced, transient, and often shaped by individual motivations as much as by group influence.

5 CONCLUSION

This research aimed to examine the discourse among Redditors, analyzing both their cooperative and uncooperative interactions to assess whether those participating in the discussion can be regarded as a virtual community. Additionally, we explored how these Redditors shape their online identities under the influence of this community.

While we have focused on Reddit within our analysis, it must be stressed that the post that we analyzed was one among many that could have been chosen for the specified platform. Moreover, although much data was gathered solely from the interactions among participants within this post, the analysis as well as the findings could have been more precise if the Redditors themselves had been contacted. The subjective input could have helped to determine whether the participants felt as though partaking in community activity and were under the group's influence.

Our findings suggest that the group of individuals participating in the discussion in the analyzed comment section can be considered a virtual community as four out of six of Herring's criteria for identifying a virtual community have been fulfilled once approximately 40 percent of data has been analyzed. Concerning the presence and the changes in the participants' virtual identity, we have found that Redditors participated in the process of group identity formation, taking on different roles and behaviors that either align with or push against the group, and as a result, some developed identity-based attachment.

While these findings provide insight into the community culture and the process of identity construction within the Reddit platform, future research should be conducted for other communities on the platform with a different set of norms and created for different purposes alongside any other media platforms.

While undertaking this research, I gained valuable insight into the world of this community-based platform which was unknown to me prior to the research. It has made me question the instances in my online presence when I have felt as though part of a virtual community as well as the individuals who have influenced me to change my identity online to what it is now.

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