LEARNING TO BE: IDENTITY CONSTRUCTION
IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES

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# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Acknowledgments</th>
<th>iii</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Abstract</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

## CHAPTER

### I. Introduction ................................................................. 1

### II. Review of the Literature .................................................. 5

- Purpose Built Identities ....................................................... 5
- Ceding the Executive to an Aspect of the Surround ....................... 8
- Identity Resources and Communities ........................................ 12
- The Influence of Online Mediums ............................................. 19

### III. Methodology ...................................................................... 25

- Selection of Target Communities ............................................. 25
- Structure of Target Communities ............................................. 27
- Selection of Interview Subjects and Study Population .................. 30
- Interview Protocol ............................................................... 31
- Treatment of the Interview Data .............................................. 35

### IV. Findings 1: Advantages and Challenges of the Medium .............. 38

- What is an Online Forum.......................................................... 38
- Profile Customization ............................................................ 38
- Asynchronous Communication ................................................. 40
- Semi-Anonymous Community ................................................... 44
- Interest Specific ................................................................. 51
- Stigma ................................................................................. 53
- Written Communication .......................................................... 54

### V. Findings 2: Access to Identity Resources ................................... 58

- Identity Resources and Inbound Trajectories ............................... 58
- Ideational Resources .............................................................. 59
- Material Resources ............................................................... 67
- Knowledge Artifacts as a Material Resource ............................... 70
- Relational Resources ............................................................. 75
- Ethan and the Inbound Identity Trajectory ................................... 79
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>CHAPTER</th>
<th>PAGE</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>VI. Conclusion</td>
<td>85</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Works Cited</td>
<td>92</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Appendices</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A. Figures</td>
<td>94</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>B. Introductory Posts</td>
<td>98</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>C. Informed Consent Form</td>
<td>101</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
ABSTRACT

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When an individual enters a new field of practice, an integral part of that process is the development of an identity that situates the individual as a legitimate participant in that practice. This study combines elements of identity theory with theories of distributed cognition to examine the possibility that the identity construction process can be distributed across multiple contexts and platforms. To approach this question, the author interviewed members of two online forums in order to reach an understanding of the extent to which their participation in the online communities impacted their overall identity development. The author argues that individuals use participation in online forum communities to access crucial “identity resources” that help them develop and maintain identities related to their fields of practice. It was also found that online contexts offered certain affordances to the identity development process which were not available in offline contexts, suggesting that some aspects of identity construction could be more profitably pursued in online communities. Furthermore, the transfer of these identities between online and offline contexts was found to be routine and constant, with users often benefitting in offline spaces from identity construction work performed online.
CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION:

This project is of particular interest to me because it represents a sort of homecoming. Growing up home schooled in the backwoods of northern California I had a lot of free time as a child, and I spent a large portion of it on the computer. By the time I was a teenager my family had committed to the technological craze of the 90’s by starting a computer sales and repair business, and as a byproduct of that I found myself with a personal computer and high (for the time) speed internet access. During this time the internet became one of my main social outlets, with online chat programs replacing the lengthy phone calls typical to the teenage experience. Then, in 2001 at the age of sixteen, I encountered my first love: Brazilian Jiujitsu. From the moment I first stepped onto the mat I was completely obsessed with Jiujitsu, and in order to feed that obsession I turned immediately to the internet. By 2002 I had registered an account on the same Grappling Forum that appears in this study and over the next eight years I participated extensively in that community. Eventually I drifted away from that community, but my time there helped to define me as a grappler and I still maintain some of the relationships I made there. Later on, when I became an obsessive soccer fan, I joined the Soccer Forum that appears in this study in order to have an opportunity to discuss the game with other fans. This was before the games were available on American television, and even now the sport is not especially popular in this country, so fellow fans were hard to come by in person. I am still active on the Soccer Forum, and it remains a daily fixture in my life and is my go-to source for news and vitriol related to my favorite team.
Throughout my life I have relied extensively on internet communities to feed and support my interests, passions, and hobbies. Because of my position among the first generation to have grown up around the internet, it was a natural thing for me to turn to online communities to supplement or act in place of the communities available in person. Creating and maintaining distinct online personas for different purposes connected to my “offline” pursuits has been second-nature to me since childhood. Furthermore, my case is in no way unique or even unusual, each generation that has followed mine has become even more deeply entrenched in the interconnectivity of our online world, and the line between “online” and “offline” experiences continues to erode as mobile internet access becomes ubiquitous. This progression means that the study of how people interact and participate in communities built around online spaces will be crucial to understanding these “millennial” generations.

It was this conviction in the belief that online experiences will be key to understanding 21st century life that directed my research towards online communities. Inspired by the work of people like Mizuko Ito and the Digital Youth Project, I was determined to add to the ongoing research on digital human interaction in my own small way. Though I had this vague idea of the field that I would like to contribute to, it was only while taking a seminar on “Literacy as Distributed Cognition” that I determined the exact direction of my research. In that seminar I was exposed to the idea, obvious in retrospect, that people create external structures to enhance their cognitive capacities. This in turn led me to think about the construction of an identity, or a new facet of an existing identity, for the specific purpose of enhancing one’s abilities. When observed through the lens of “distributed cognition” some aspects of a person’s identity can be seen to act as a purpose-built structure that provides very specific benefits to the individual. It was this revelation, combined with my belief that the study of online communities is crucial to
understanding 21st century humanity, that caused me to eventually settle on trying to determine the role that online forums can play in this sort of “purpose-built” identity construction.

Part of the process of getting good at something is developing an identity, a way of seeing yourself, as a person who does that thing. This identity as “a person who does the thing” is what anchors the individual in their chosen practice and provides them with the sense of capability and belonging that allows them to succeed. This work of identity development has historically been located largely within the immediate physical environment of an individual’s community of practice, happening through the actions and interactions that occur within that space. This study moves the locus of identity development work outside the local community of practice and instead attempts to situate it as a distributed process that can take place across different distinct contexts at different times. The fruits of this distributed labor, though completed in different spaces, can then be reassembled into a single coherent identity that situates the individual both in their “offline” community of practice and across the other avenues through which they may participate in their chosen practice. The focus of this study is on the instances of identity development work that are undertaken by the users of online message boards, or “forums,” and the ways in which they fit into the larger identity construction and community integration processes involved in entering a new practice. By examining the identity development work that takes place within the day-to-day practices of online forum users, and the points of intersection between these online identity construction processes and their offline counterparts, we can develop a clearer understanding of identity development as a distributed process.

In addition to developing an understanding of identity construction as a distributed process, this study is intended to evaluate the efficacy of online forums as a medium for identity
construction work by examining the ways in which the structures of the medium interact with the individual tasks involved in such work. Through this study I hope to discover just how complex identity construction work conducted within an online forum platform can be, while also identifying the factors at work that influence that efficacy. Another key goal of this study is to determine to what extent identities developed within online spaces can be said to transfer across to other contexts, such as offline communities of practice. If it can be determined that identities constructed online can be transferred into offline realms it would open up a wide range of considerations for the potential applications of online forum communities in educational or personal development related contexts. In order to accomplish these goals, I collected primary data by interviewing users from two online forums of which I am myself a member. As a measure of the efficacy of online forums in identity construction work, and as a conceptual framework for discussing the contributions of these communities to an individual’s identity development, I have turned to Nasir and Cooks’s ideas about “identity resources” and “identity trajectories,” both of which will be described in detail in later chapters. By analyzing interview data through these lenses I hope to develop an understanding of the ways in which online forum use can facilitate, or hinder, an individual’s access to the identity resources that are required for the construction of new identities on the desired trajectories. It is my hope that the results of this study can deepen our understanding of identity construction as a distributed process while also contributing to the ongoing research around the impact of new technologies on human interaction and learning.
CHAPTER II

REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE:

Purpose-Built Identities

These goals are based on the premise that identities can be constructed to fulfill specific purposes in the lives of individual human beings, an idea which is based in part on Vygotsky’s work in *Mind in Society* where he lays out the concept of the “zone of proximal development.” Vygotsky defines the zone of proximal development as “the distance between the actual developmental level as determined by independent problem solving and the level of potential development as determined by problem solving under adult guidance or in collaboration with more capable peers” (86). From this perspective, the zone of proximal development represents a middle ground between the unaided capabilities of an individual, and what could be classified as “what they can do with help.” While Vygotsky, in this instance, refers specifically to the assistance of other individuals, (teachers, more capable peers), this idea can be expanded to take other possible aides into consideration. This project is primarily concerned with the way in which an identity can be constructed to provide a similar expansion of an individual’s zone of proximal development, stretching an individual’s capabilities beyond what they would otherwise encompass.

Vygotsky references a study that provides an example of this sort of expansion of the zone of proximal development based on non-human aides, wherein students were given a mental task to complete and provided with a set of colored cards that they could, if they so choose, use to help them complete the task. Vygotsky found that “the introduction of cards as a system of auxiliary, external stimuli raises the effectiveness of the child’s activity considerably” (45). The
idea here is that some aspect of the cognitive labor associated with the task at hand is off-loaded (or distributed) onto the cards, and that with this support the individual can complete more difficult tasks than they would otherwise be able to. For an anecdotal example, Vygotsky offers up the traditional practice of tying a string around one’s finger to serve as a reminder to complete some chore or task, and he argues that even such a simple act as the tying such a string, or marking notches on a stick, will “extend the operation of memory beyond the biological dimensions of the human nervous system” (39). There are two key things to take away from this example for our study of identity: First, the construct represented by the string or the notched stick has been created to serve a specific purpose, in this hypothetical example it is to help the individual remember something, and second, the construct serves to expand the individual’s cognitive capacity beyond its original limits. Within the context of participation in online forum communities, this process takes the form of reading, interpreting and composing written posts to and from other members. These acts, and the artifacts that they produce, take the place of the cards or string described by Vygotsky in the process of crafting an identity that pushes the individual’s zone of proximal development further outward.

Through the processes involved in interacting with online forum communities, individuals can develop new aspects of their own identity in order to enhance their abilities or help them complete specific tasks. Vygotsky approaches this concept, which we might frame as a “purpose built identity” in chapter 7 of Mind in Society where he discusses the case of two sisters who learn what it means to be sisters by playing a game in which they adopt exaggerated “sister” identities based on some key concepts of sisterhood. Vygotsky begins this analysis with the somewhat pithy statement that “A child’s greatest self-control occurs in play” (99). This may initially seem to represent a problem, until we consider the idea that in play a child adopts a
different identity, and allows that identity (along with the rules of their game) to dictate their behaviors. This dictated activity can represent quite a high level of self-control compared to the child’s natural inclinations. When expanded further, we can see that this dynamic allows children to use play to develop specific, purpose-oriented, identities that they can then internalize for use in their daily lives. Vygotsky observes that “play gives the child a new form of desires. It teaches her to desire by relating her desires to a fictitious ‘I,’ to her role in the game and its rules” (100). This is a good example of a purpose-built identity, which can then guide or dictate individual motivations and actions, and assist the individual in achieving certain goals. In other words, through the work involved in this sort of “play” we can manipulate the parameters of our own identity, shaping our motivations and actions to suit a perceived need or goal. In this case, the goal is to develop a functional understanding of the “sisterhood” relationship.

The girls approach this goal by using this “play” to practice specific ways of being, as Vygotsky notes: “in the game of sisters playing at ‘sisters,’ however, they are both concerned with displaying their sisterhood; the fact that the two sisters decided to play sisters induces them both to acquire rules of behavior” (95). The sisters playing out these “rules of behavior” represents an action taking place within the zone of proximal development, the girls do not otherwise have a clear understanding of the complexities of a sibling relationship, so they use the act of play to construct new identities that have, at their core, certain key aspects of sisterhood. Through their play with these new identities, the sisters are able to push their understanding of this unique relationship further than they could reach through pure speculation. Crucially, the sisters can then internalize their experience of “playing sisters” and consolidate the gains they have made through play into their natural range of abilities. Vygotsky describes this process by stating that “as a result of playing, the child comes to understand that sisters possess a different
relationship to each other than to other people” (95). It is the construction of a new identity (through play) which has lead the girls to this new understanding, so we can see that during the act of play the girls were operating within the zone of proximal development, and that eventually they were able to solidify this new identity, whereupon the skills or abilities attached to it become part of their natural range, and they can once again push the zone of proximal development further outward in new directions. By substituting the act of “play” in Vygotsky’s example for the practices of reading, writing and interpreting that take place in online forum communities we can begin to understand the potential that these communities have for the facilitation of identity construction. Participation in online forums allows users to “try on” new identities through these written interactions in much the same way that the sisters in Vygotsky’s work try them on through play.

Ceding the Executive to an Aspect of Identity

Lave and Wenger’s *Situated Learning* provides another example of this sort of identity construction process at work, as well as the materials for an analysis of the role of institutions, communities, and other “exterior” objects in that process. In *Situated Learning* Lave and Wenger conduct an in depth analysis of the identity construction processes that take place in the Alcoholics Anonymous community. This provides a practical example similar to that of Vygotsky’s sisters, where people are engaged in identity construction work to expand their capabilities in order to achieve specific goals. According to Lave and Wenger, “the main business of A. A. is the reconstruction of identity, through the process of constructing personal life stories, and with them, the meaning of the teller’s past and future actions in the world” (80). We see here, again, the concept of constructing an identity for a specific purpose, but there is also the key idea that by reconstructing the identity of the person it is possible to change the
meaning of their actions, and that change in meaning can carry with it a change in motivation and, ultimately, a change in future actions. In this way, the restructuring of identity can be a way to guide a person towards more productive practices in a general or, as in the case of Alcoholics Anonymous, specific way.

The precise functionality of the identity created in Alcoholics Anonymous communities can be best explored by referring to D. N. Perkins’ “Person-plus: a Distributed View of Thinking and Learning,” within which Perkins discusses the concept of distributing the executive function. We will find that the identity construction work in Alcoholics Anonymous is intended to function via a cession of the executive function similar to that which Perkins describes. The definition of the “executive function” at work here, as described by Perkins, are the “routines that do the often nonroutine job of making choices, operating at decision points to explore the consequences of options and select a path of action” (96). In the Alcoholics Anonymous example this would represent the “decision point” where an individual is faced with an opportunity to imbibe alcohol. The decision whether or not to take that drink is the operation of that individual’s executive function and, as one can imagine, they may have a hard time selecting the best course of action in such a scenario.

Fortunately for the hypothetical alcoholic, Perkins claims that “ceding the executive function to the surround is often one of the most powerful moves we can make” (97). Briefly described, Perkins uses the concept of the “surround” here to encompass all those things which surround and interact with human beings on a daily basis, this could be materials things such as books or Vygotsky’s notched stick, or socio-cultural structures such as traditional behaviors (which represent a cession of the executive function to a tradition, such as in an American bride’s decision to wear a white dress). Perkins uses the example of an individual following the
directions in an instruction manual during the process of setting up a new stereo system to explore the virtues of ceding the executive function to the surround. Through this cession, the individual’s stereo-building capabilities (assuming they have no pre-existing expertise in the field) can be greatly expanded beyond their usual scope, and they can complete the task by surrendering to the direction of an exterior source of that expertise. Common acts of participation in online forum communities include the composition, distribution and use of similar instructional artifacts through the writing practices inherent in the forum as a medium.

Perkins also makes another important claim, stating that “people select and build their physical and social environments, and do so in part to support cognition. In this sense, there is a mutual assimilation and accommodation between the person and the surround - a complex equilibration process” (106). What this offers us is a way to look at the intersection between the individual and the artifacts to which they might cede their executive function, and the way in which both items constantly co-inform each other. In the Alcoholics Anonymous example we can see this in how the impetus to develop a new identity to address the “alcoholism problem” arises from the interaction between the individual’s drinking habits and the pressures in their life that push back against this single-minded devotion to alcohol. An example of this pressure can be found in the discursive routines established in Alcoholics Anonymous, particularly the “life story” which carries with it an implicit condemnation of alcohol use as a key component of the genre. This conflict between the individual’s behavior and the expectations of their community creates the need for the individual to “build” some new aspect of their environment in order to support them in the difficult task of resolving the conflict at hand. The decision to cede the executive function, and the construction or selection of “elements of the surround” to cede it
into, arise out of the complex interactions between the individual, their community, and their environment.

For the Alcoholics Anonymous example we are moving “the surround” back inside the individual, to include the new identity that an individual has constructed, through the practices of the Alcoholics Anonymous community, to help them resolve their drinking problem. The individual will rely on this new identity in order to sidestep “the capriciousness of human judgment” (97) and make better decisions (of course, “better” is a relative term defined in a negotiation between the individual and the community) regarding their alcohol use. Lave and Wenger (quoting Cain) describe the ultimate result of participation in Alcoholics Anonymous practices as “a transformation of their identities from drinking non-alcoholics to non-drinking alcoholics” and go on to add that this transformation “affects how they view and act in the world” (80). With Perkins in mind, we can see this process as the cession of the executive to an element of the surround. The individual has crafted a new identity that includes the characteristic “non-drinking” and off-loaded their executive function (in regards to the consumption of alcohol) to that aspect of their identity. Thus, rather than facing a moment of personal decision whenever they are offered alcohol, the individual has taken their own “capricious judgment” out of the equation, and relies instead on the identity that they have crafted as a “non-drinking alcoholic” through their use of the materials of the practice (such as the texts of the “personal story” genre) and their participation in the community. This represents the same sort of expansion of capabilities referred to earlier, where the individual alone may not be able to resist the lure of alcohol, they stand a much better chance of it when armed with this purpose-built identity as a “non-drinking alcoholic.”
We have seen here a situation where an individual, when faced with a specific problem which arises from the constant negotiation and “equilibration process” between the individual, physical elements of the surround (access to alcohol), and their community, engages in the work of identity construction in order to increase the capabilities that they can bring to bear in solving that particular problem. The need for the new identity comes out of the interaction between the individual and the surround, and the new identity is specifically tailored to best address that need. With this in mind, we can consider applying the same process in response to other needs or problems that arise from similar conflicts (or, less aggressively, negotiations) between individual, community, and surround. The key take-away is that an identity, or new facets of an existing identity, can be intentionally developed in order to respond to specific challenges faced in the world, and that these identities or facets can provide a significant and identifiable advantage to an individual as they face such challenges. In this study we will be looking at the construction of identities in response to the challenges inherent in an individual’s integration into a new community, and their penetration into deeper levels of a community of practice.

Identity Resources and Communities

With the concept established, it now remains to dig into the process of identity construction itself and examine the elements that make this sort of purpose-oriented identity building possible, and the ways in which those elements are made available to or withheld from individuals. In “Becoming a Hurdler: How Learning Settings Afford Identities,” Nasir and Cooks set out the terminology for describing the resources with which identities are constructed, and also examine the ways in which access to those resources is regulated. Nasir and Cooks’s study centers around the idea of inbound and peripheral identity trajectories, which provides a useful evaluative framework to use when judging the effectiveness of identity construction in the
service of certain tasks. This viewpoint is linked to the concept of “Legitimate Peripheral Participation” set out by Lave and Wenger, in that an inbound identity trajectory indicates an individual who is penetrating from the peripheral zones or practices, deeper into the community of practice, taking up more responsibilities while also being afforded more opportunities and more respect in the community. This sort of inbound trajectory is necessary in that it legitimizes the new identity under construction, as members of the community validate the individual’s new identity as they move deeper “inward” in the community of practice. Conversely, identities on a peripheral trajectory are not recognized as legitimate members of the community, and do not penetrate deeper into the community’s practices over time, instead remaining stagnant on the periphery.

In order to accomplish the sort of goals laid out in the Alcoholics Anonymous example of the previous section, the individual’s new identity must be on an inbound trajectory so that they are officially recognized as a member of the community, thus validating their identity as a “non-drinking alcoholic” and giving that identity weight enough to support the burden of their executive function when called upon. In order for these sorts of purpose built identities to be effective they must be validated by members of the community, for it would have little or no impact to announce to an empty room that “My name is Bob, and I am an alcoholic,” as it is the crucial response “Hello, Bob” that validates such a statement and makes it real. If the individual is not recognized by the community as a non-drinking alcoholic, that aspect of their identity will not be stable (or “real”) enough to help them make the decision to abstain from alcohol. Nasir and Cooks’s own study observed a high school track team and found that improvement in track performances was closely linked to the development of inbound identity trajectories, with those athletes maintaining peripheral identities improving little, while those who developed identities
on an inbound trajectory saw significant improvement in their performances. Thus, developing a sense of oneself as “a track athlete” and a valued member of the community (the team) was key to enhancing the capability of the individual to complete the specific tasks involved in track and field competition. Just as the identity of “non-drinking alcoholic” helps the individual manage their alcohol use, the identity of “track athlete and team member” can help the individual perform the tasks related to that identity.

What this idea of inbound and peripheral identity trajectories carries with it is the concept that “different participants in the same practice can be offered different identities” (Nasir and Cooks, 51), and that difference could carry with it a difference in effectiveness when it comes to fulfilling the purpose for which the identity facet was constructed. This difference in offered identities is born out of a different level of access to the resources which are crucial to the task of identity construction. Without access to these resources inbound identity trajectories are generally not possible, and thus the effectiveness of a purpose built identity relies almost entirely on the individual having access to the necessary identity resources. Nasir and Cooks describe three distinct types of identity resources that are crucial to the process of developing an identity with an inbound trajectory, those are material resources, relational resources, and ideational resources, (47) with a combination of all three being required for best results.

Material resources refer to “the physical environment, its organization, and [how] the artifacts in it support one’s sense of connection to the practice” (47). In the context of a track and field team, these resources could include “the track itself, uniforms, spikes, hurdles, and starting blocks” as well as “how the athletes came to use the artifacts in an expert way and how they moved through the space with expertise and ownership” (48). Access to these resources, and the
maintenance of the athlete’s relationship to them, are crucial to developing the inbound identity as a track and field athlete. As Nasir and Cooks note:

. . . a football player who had recently joined the track team showed up for the first meet with football cleats instead of the specialized track shoes (spikes) that he needed. Obtaining the specialized track shoes and coming to understand the difference between football cleats and track spikes were aspects of his becoming competent and coming to see himself as a track athlete (48).

Another key material resource for the athletes was the starting blocks, and while the use of the starting blocks “supported students’ sense of themselves as track athletes and was part of the way athletes positioned themselves as expert” (48) access to this resource was not universally offered. Instead, Nasir and Cooks point to a case where two first year athletes, Gloria and Harrell, both asked for training in the use of the starting blocks, the coach (“Coach J”) “differentially distributed access to the specialized equipment” based on his evaluation of their respective talents. Gloria was given access, while Harrell, whom Coach J did not consider to have much potential as a track athlete, was denied access “perhaps strengthening Gloria’s track identity but not Harrell’s” (48). Thus, access to material resources impacts the identities available to an individual for construction, which can in turn impact their ultimate capabilities in that particular sphere of activity.

Relational resources refer to the opportunity that individuals have to form connections with members of the community, and are crucial to members of the track team because they “strengthened their sense of connection to the practice itself, because they came to define themselves as a member of a community that participated in track” (48). Relational resources were made available in part by the structure of track meets, which include a lot of down-time between the events in which an individual is scheduled to participate, during which athletes can socialize and strengthen their bonds with other community members. However, these resources
were also under the direction, at least in part, of Coach J, who was able to fashion specific opportunities for certain athletes to avail themselves of this particular resource, by engaging in conversations with them, or assigning them to specific subgroups (such as the relay teams) which encourage them to form deeper bonds with certain members of the team (49).

Ideational resources “refer to the ideas about oneself and one’s relationship to and place in the practice and the world, as well as ideas about what is valued or good” (47). These resources can appear in the track and field context as the events that athletes compete in, as this provides a crucial idea of the role that the individual plays in the community and the ways in which they contribute to the team. In one such example, Coach J refers to a struggling first year athlete by stating “you’re going to be a hurdler” (50) offering her a key ideational resource to build her new, track related, identity around. The ideational resource of “hurdler” provides the student with a clear idea of their place in the community (and, crucially, it is a productive position), as well as some specific goals for them to strive for in order to contribute to the success of the team.

Naturally, these three resources must work in concert for the identity construction process to be fully realized. Even if one is given access to the ideational resource of “oneself as a hurdler,” it would be impossible to realize that idea without access to the physical resources represented by the hurdles themselves and the opportunity to practice with them, nor would it be possible without the development of relationships within the team which validate the new identity as it begins to form. Without being seen as a hurdler, and crucially one who contributes to the success of the team, the individual would just be “someone who jumps over things for no reason,” a distinctly less attractive and less effective identity to develop. Finally, access to
relationships and materials do no good without an idea of how one fits into the grand scheme of the community and contributes to achieving its goals.

With the idea of these identity resources in mind, it is worth returning to Lave and Wenger’s Alcoholics Anonymous example, and examining the ways in which these resources are made available to the individual who is interested in developing an identity to help them manage their alcohol use. I have already mentioned the key function of the traditional “Hello, my name is Bob and I am an alcoholic / Hello Bob” exchange, in which we can see all three resources being made available. First, an ideational resource is being made available to Bob, as he is offered an opportunity to view himself as an alcoholic (a crucial component of the target “non-drinking alcoholic” identity), but there is also a relational resource at work here in that the oration is scripted to provide an introduction between Bob and the community, as well as a sort of “naming ceremony” that establishes Bob as a member of the community, both of which will facilitate the development of personal relationships between Bob and individual members of the community in the future. Finally, there is a material resource being made available in this as well, as Bob is afforded the opportunity to “hold the floor” and given both a forum to speak in and a captive audience for that speech.

Another key material resource that can be found in Lave and Wenger’s work is the “personal life story” (80) as a format of expression. This gives the individual a tool through which to envision (and, crucially, re-envision) the events of their life and their own actions therein. According to Cain (quoted by Lave & Wenger), “A. A. stories provide a set of criteria through which an alcoholic can be identified” (81), in this way the personal life story functions much as the track does for the track and field athletes, it provides the arena for the activities of the community to take place within, and access to that arena is key in the identity development
process. However, the personal life story also takes on an ideational aspect, as they provide “a model of alcoholism, so that other drinkers may find so much of themselves in the lives of professed alcoholics that they cannot help but ask whether they, too, are alcoholics” (81). This offers the initiate both a material resource as a model of the practices of the community, as well as an ideational resource in that it indicates the “way of seeing oneself” which they must adopt in order to be a legitimate member of the Alcoholics Anonymous community. The “personal life story” also gives us an idea of the impact that a specific genre can have in mediating community members’ access to identity resources. The “personal life story” genre is constructed to bring the initiate inevitably into contact with all three types of identity resource through its very structure. The structure of an online forum as a medium, and the genres that such a medium affords, also play a key role in mediating the access of its users to identity resources, which will be discussed in the findings of this study.

The Alcoholics Anonymous community also takes pains to provide relational resources to initiates through the “sponsor” system, which pairs new members with a veteran mentor to help guide them through the process of becoming a legitimate member of the community. The relationship between an initiate and their sponsor helps to bridge the gap between the newcomer and the established community, and provides a sense of belonging to the initiate as they have at least one close relationship to an established member of the community from which to draw upon as they work to establish further relationships within the group.

These are just some of the ways in which the Alcoholics Anonymous program endeavors to make identity resources available to new members, and it is this commitment to providing access to resources that, in large part, makes the Alcoholics Anonymous program so successful in its efforts to promote the construction of new, “non-drinking” identities among those who
need them. The onus still rests on the individual to undertake the process of constructing a new facet of their identity with this specific objective in mind, but once undertaken, access to the Alcoholics Anonymous community, along with the array of resources that such a community offers to its constituents, provides a much greater chance of developing a successful identity on an inbound trajectory.

The Influence of Online Mediums

With these ideas in mind, we can turn our attention to the impact of online mediums and genres on the identity construction process. In her publication “Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere” Carolyn Miller performs a deep analysis of the evolution of the blog as a medium containing a set of genres. Even though this study is concerned with online forums instead of blogs, Miller’s description of online mediums and the impact that their unique structural elements can have on the genres and activities that work within them can provide some key insights that help direct our analysis of the online forum. One of the significant conclusions that Miller comes to in this piece is that “the blog, it seems clear now, is a technology, a medium, a constellation of affordances - and not a genre” (283). This description of the medium of the blog as a “constellation of affordances” can easily be applied to the online forum as a medium as well. The forum itself acts as the framework within which various genres are enacted, in the form of individual posts, thread types, and even elements of profile customization such as the signatures that appear below a user’s posts, or the personal description found in a user profile. Because these genres arise “from the combination of exigence and affordances” it becomes important to examine in detail the affordances, and constraints, offered or imposed by the forum as a medium. We have chosen a particular exigency to focus on for this study, the need to construct a practice-linked identity on an inbound trajectory, which makes it possible to examine
the ways in which the affordances of the forum as a medium, and the genres enabled by that medium, influence individual users’ pursuit of that particular goal.

The influence of the medium in this sort of process becomes clear as Miller writes that: “An affordance, or a suite of affordances, is directional, it appeals to us, by making some forms of communicative interaction possible or easy and others difficult or impossible, by leading us to engage in or to attempt certain kinds of rhetorical actions rather than others” (281). This directionality implies that in order to develop a deep understanding of the identity construction work that takes place within online forum communities, special attention will have to be paid to an analysis of the forum itself as a medium, and how its affordances steer, facilitate or hinder the social interactions that make up the process of identity development. Miller goes on to state, “In the context of the internet, affordances take the form not of material properties or ecological niches but rather properties of information and interaction that can be put to particular cognitive and communicative uses” (281). Thus, in order to understand the particular directionality of an online medium, one must develop an understanding of the “properties of information and interaction” that such a medium affords, and the sorts of “cognitive and communicative uses” to which those affordances are suited. Once determined, these details can provide clues to the contribution that an online forum makes to the overall existence of a user, that is to say, what the person gets out of the time they spend on the forum, and why they feel that the time they spend on the forum is worthwhile. Different communities or mediums, with different suites of affordances, could then be seen to be more appropriate for providing certain kinds of contributions to an individual’s life than others, depending on the nature of the “properties of information and interaction” that are present in that space. Miller’s work implies that we will find some specific elements of the forum as a medium that make certain kinds of interaction
easier than they might be using other mediums, such as face-to-face communication. The
question for this study will then be a matter of whether or not the forum medium is conducive,
based on its particular affordances, to the work of identity development.

With the importance of the medium, and its collection of affordances, firmly in mind we
can look to Shanyang Zhao’s “Identity Construction on Facebook: Digital Empowerment in
Anchored Relationships” for some insight into how the affordances of an online medium can
mediate some of the processes involved in identity development. Zhao spends a significant
portion of this essay describing the impact of Facebook as a medium on the way in which
individuals navigate “gating features,” which he describes as hurdles that stand in between the
individual and the creation of their desired identity (1818). These gating features preclude the
construction of the desired identity, perhaps by blocking access to resources, or by preventing the
full realization of the identity in other ways.

There are a wide variety of possible gating features, which would depend in part on the
type of identity under construction, and the locus of that identity construction work. In his essay,
Zhao is primarily concerned with the way in which identity can be developed within online
communities, and there are some specific gating features which access to the internet can help
individuals to bypass. According to Zhao, in certain online communities “the removal of
physical ‘gating features’ (stigmatized appearance, stuttering, shyness, etc.) enables certain
disadvantaged people to bypass the usual obstacles that prevent them from constructing desired
identities in face to face settings” (1818). This removal of physical gating features can be traced
to structural elements, such as an increased focus on asynchronous written communication rather
than live visual interactions, of the genres offered by online mediums like forums or Facebook
that dictate the interpersonal communication within those communities. Zhao focused his study
on the ways in which individuals utilized Facebook to bypass some of these gating features and
develop what he called the “hoped-for possible self,” which he described as “socially desirable
identities an individual would like to establish and believes that they can be established given the
right conditions” (1819). These identities represent a sort of “improved version” of the
individual’s previously held identity and, once created on Facebook, can be carried across to
other contexts and perhaps be assimilated into the individual’s “main” identity.

Zhao makes the connection between this new “online” identity and an individual’s
overarching “offline” identity clear when he states that “users regard their online presentations as
an integral part of their overall identity production and seek to coordinate their online identity
claims with their offline self-performance” (1819-20). So we can see that the identity
construction work done online has close ties to the individual’s overall identity, meaning that the
gains made in identity construction online could be applied to the offline portions of an
individual’s life as well. This connection is absolutely crucial, because as we will see later on,
the identities that are available for construction in online spaces (due to access to resources and
the ability to bypass gating features) are commonly much wider in scope than those that are
available in strictly offline settings. As Zhao puts it, “online production strategies enable people
to stage a public display of their hoped-for possible selves that were unknown to others offline”
(1820). Thus, the ability to develop a new identity aspect online, and carry it over into offline
life, expands an individual’s options with regards to the construction of purpose-built identities
immensely.

Zhao claims that Facebook “served as a vehicle that empowered the users to produce
socially desirable identities that they were presumably not capable of producing in the offline
world for various reasons, including the presence of ‘gating’ obstacles” (1828-9). One of the key
features of Facebook (and other online communities) that makes this possible is the process of asynchronous communication. According to Zhao, “the asynchronous communication mode gave users plenty of time to carefully craft an attractive persona” (1819). This potentially eliminates many of the gating features mentioned by Zhao earlier, such as shyness, stuttering and so on. By giving users time and what you might call emotional space to carefully craft their identity construction acts, the asynchronous communication model eliminates many gating features related to the difficulty of performance under social pressure. One way to look at this is to consider every time you may have typed something into an email or Facebook, and then deleted it without sending it. In person, those words, which you ultimately rejected because they did not serve the identity you wish to maintain, would have already been said and the damage would be done. The asynchronous communication model offers users the opportunity to exercise greater and more delicate control over exactly what utterances go into the construction of their identity, and thus afford them more control over the identity that is ultimately created through those utterances.

Online communities also eliminate or alleviate many physical (or geographical) gating features that would otherwise prevent an individual from gaining access to the communities necessary for the development of their target identity, and with access to communities comes access to identity resources. In “Living and Learning with New Media: Summary of Findings from the Digital Youth Project” Mizuko Ito (et al) provide some excellent examples of this process at work. Ito’s case study of “Gepetto,” an 18 year old Brazilian video editor, provides prime examples of the way in which access to online communities can bypass these physical or geographical gating features. According to Ito, Gepetto “relies heavily on the networked community of editors as sources of knowledge and expertise and as models to aspire to” (29).
What we can see here is that Gepetto’s access to this online community in turn affords him access to the essential identity construction resources, including material resources (the examples of others’ work), relational resources (feedback from established editors) and ideational resources (genre related expectations and “models to aspire to”).

These resources in turn allow Gepetto to develop an identity as a legitimate member of this online video editing community, which he is then able to “carry over” into his offline life in much the way that Zhao described. In Gepetto’s local community “he is now known as a video expert by both his peers and adults” (29). Another interesting element is that Gepetto is then able to act as a conduit between the online and offline communities, allowing the transfer of resources from the first to members of the second who would not otherwise have access: “After seeing his AMV work, one of his high-school teachers asked him to teach a video workshop to younger students” (29). Gepetto provides an excellent example of the way in which access to online communities can bypass many of the limitations present in the offline world, Gepetto did not have access to a video editing community locally, but “his engagement with the online interest group helped develop his identity and competence as a video editor well beyond what is typical in his local community” (29). This opens up a vast variety of “hoped-for possible selves” that are available for individuals to pursue, regardless of the limitations (beyond internet access) of their local communities.
CHAPTER III

METHODOLOGY:

This is a qualitative study that investigates how individuals construct practice-linked identities on an inbound trajectory by leveraging the resources available in online spaces, using Nasir and Cooks’s concept of “identity resources” as a framework for that analysis. By using the “identity resources” framework to examine identity construction in online spaces this study can add a new perspective to the ongoing discussions surrounding online learning. By bringing Nasir and Cooks’s concepts into contact with the ongoing research of groups like the Digital Youth Project, I hope that this study can push outward the boundaries of both, and deepen our understanding of the connections between identity, community and learning, particularly in relation to the unique settings made available by the internet. Because the identity development process is personal and unique to each individual, this project uses a case study approach in order to achieve an in-depth understanding of each respondent’s individual experience. I decided that developing this in-depth understanding of the experiences of a few subjects would be more valuable at this juncture than conducting a less detailed survey of a larger population.

Selection of Target Communities

This study was designed to examine online forums specifically for two main reasons. First, there seems to be a gap in recent research around this particular medium, with most studies focusing on more recent inventions like Facebook and other “social networks” -- while the online forum medium remains alive and well, and worth studying. Second, because of the way online forums are often structured around specific activities or pursuits, they afford researchers an opportunity to focus specifically on how the individuals involved interact within that practice. In
short, because forums are often practice-linked communities, they make an excellent place to
study the development of practice-linked identities. For the purpose of this study, two different
forums were selected from which to draw interview candidates. Both forums were chosen in part
because they are large and vibrant communities with hundreds of active participants, and in part
because they are closely tied to a specific practice.

One of these forums was focused on the practice of various martial arts, such as
wrestling, Judo and Brazilian Jiujitsu, unified by the larger theme of “grappling” on which all of
these martial arts place their focus. This forum was attractive as a subject for research because of
its design as a place to actively seek advice on how to participate in the practice. This is made
clear by the subtitle of the main forum, which reads “You don’t know a heel hook from a toe
hold, and that’s why you need to come here.” With this forum clearly framed as a place for
“learning to be a better grappler,” it is well positioned for an investigation into the role that the
development of practice-linked identities can play in that process. It was also helpful that, as a
thirteen year veteran of the grappling arts, I could understand the jargon of the community and
translate it easily for those outside the practice. Finally, this forum’s connection to a specific set
of skills affords researchers an opportunity to assess how much of an impact the process of
identity construction can have on the skill development of a learner.

The second forum chosen for this study is focused on a soccer team located in the English
North-East. The team itself is an important part of local culture, but does not have a large
national or international following compared to many other English soccer teams, such as
Chelsea or Manchester United. The smaller and more locally focused community around this
team makes the forum an attractive research subject because of the tight-knit atmosphere and the
interplay between the local culture and the culture that has grown up around the team. This
second forum was also chosen because of its differences from the first forum. The soccer-related forum is not framed as a place for “learning to be a soccer fan” but instead as a meeting place for people who already are fans. While the Grappling Forum uses an unrestricted registration process, the Soccer Forum gates its registration with a team-related quiz question (“what is the most famous shirt number at [the club]”) that requires prospective users to demonstrate at least a rudimentary familiarity with the team and its history. Also, while the appreciation of soccer matches can be viewed as a skill of sorts, similar in a lot of ways to the skills involved in literary interpretation, the focus of the forum is less on the skill development process offered by the Grappling forum, and more on providing a venue for active participation in the practice. It is through this participation in the key practices of soccer fandom that the Soccer Forum users approach skill development, as a side benefit of the activities of the community rather than one of the explicit focuses of those activities. By choosing two such disparate environments from which to draw interview subjects it is possible to achieve a greater scope of results, and develop a deeper understanding of the identity construction process across different communities.

Structure of Target Communities

The structure of the “online forum” as a medium is integral in mediating the access of individual users to the identity resources under consideration in this study. As such, I consider it necessary to include a structural description of each forum in order to provide the necessary context for future analysis of the interactions that take place within them. Most online forums operate within a hierarchical structure of venues for interaction composed of forums, sub-forums and individual threads. The forum itself is usually, but not always, centered around a certain topic or theme, such as the Soccer Forum’s focus on a specific team in the British Premier League. Underneath that thematic umbrella, forums are often split into sub-forums that further
delineate the appropriate conversational subject matter. Staying with the Soccer Forum, we can see in Figure 1 (all figures are located in Appendix A) that there are several sub-forums clearly labeled with different topic categories. Within these categories, discussions are further sorted by the thread system, which allows users to start new topics of conversation with an initial post and then collects all future replies within that thread. Threads are generally titled in accordance with their subject matter, a variety of which can be seen in Figure 2. This “forum > sub-forum > thread > post” hierarchy serves as the organizational structure that maintains order by ensuring that users can find the topics they are looking for and maintain coherent discussions about them. The Grappling Forum itself is actually a sub-forum of a larger forum community dedicated to the discussion of combat sports. However, I approached it as an individual community because of its size and the tendency of many of its users to participate solely within the Grappling Forum, without venturing into the other sub-forums that make up the larger community.

In addition to the hierarchical structure, both forums offer side venues for communication in the form of private message systems. These private messages function like an internal email system, with users able to discreetly communicate by sending messages directly to individual users or groups of users. Because anything posted in most threads is completely open for public viewing, the private message functions offer users a more direct and less visible alternative. Both forums also feature a robust search function that allows users to search for posts or threads that contain specific keywords, either in the body of the post or in thread titles only, or to search for all the posts or threads made by a specific user. This search can be further refined by selecting specific sub-forums to include or leave out of the search, choosing a certain time period within which to search, or even filtering results based on the number of posts in the thread. The Grappling Forum’s search tool is shown in Figure 3.
As of 10/27/2014, the Grappling Forum had 58,245 individual threads active within it, made up of 1,351,964 unique posts, with the oldest thread in the archive dating back to 2002. Unfortunately the number of unique users for the Grappling Forum is not available, as that information would reflect the number of users (73,483 total accounts) throughout the entire forum community of which the Grappling Forum is one section. On the same date, the Soccer Forum had 40,348 total threads made up of 4,442,058 unique posts, with the oldest thread dating back to 2005. The Soccer Forum community was made up of 2,485 total accounts, though there is nothing stopping one user from establishing multiple accounts. The dramatic difference in the number of posts per thread between these two communities (with ~23 posts per thread on the Grappling Forum and ~110 posts per thread on the Soccer Forum) can be traced to a difference in the way the two communities organize their forums. The practice on the Soccer Forum is to maintain large single threads that cover everything related to a certain topic, such as an individual player on the team, or even a larger concept like “games played by other teams.” Every post related to that topic is then collected in that single thread, with any duplicate threads started by users flouting this convention being merged into the main thread by the moderators. Once the thread reaches 1,000 posts it is locked, archived, and a replacement thread bearing a similar title is created. Conversely, the Grappling Forum allows new threads to be made about old topics as the interest in those topics resurfaces, meaning that there may be multiple smaller threads about a certain topic where the Soccer Forum would have one large thread. This is one example of the ways in which different communities commonly customize the genres (in this case, thread types) available within the online forum medium to suit their unique needs and purposes. Throughout the existence of the forum these conventions are being constantly
informed by the needs and desires of the forum users, whose interactions with each other are likewise informed by those conventions.

Selection of Interview Subjects and Study Population

In order to select participants for the interview process, I started a new thread on each of the involved forums. This thread provided a basic overview of the background, process and intentions of the study and called for volunteers who would be willing to be interviewed in depth. The full text of each introductory post can be found in appendix B. In order to increase their exposure on the forums, these threads also posed a discussion question about the role of the forum in the users’ lives. All users who volunteered in response to these threads were interviewed, and in order to increase the study population some users who responded to the discussion question but did not volunteer were solicited to participate via “private message”. I also solicited participation from one Soccer Forum user who did not respond to the thread created for this study, because the user’s status as an American deeply entrenched in an English community could provide a unique perspective on community membership. No incentive for participation was offered to anyone involved in the study, though I hoped that the description of the study in each thread would provide motivation to participate through interest in the subject matter.

Throughout the study, I interviewed nine participants, five from the Grappling Forum and four from the Soccer Forum. Biographical information was not collected from the participants, as they were promised anonymity and such information was not deemed essential to the objectives of the study. However, based on the content of their interviews it is clear that all subjects are either American or English, and that they are all male. The lack of gender diversity represents one of the main challenges in conducting this study; female members of either forum make up a
very small minority of the population and were not available to participate. This could indicate a limitation of these particular communities; both do revolve around typically male dominated sports (although that is happily changing more every year), and the lack of female users could reflect that. It could also be indicative of some aspect of the nature of online forums as a medium for communication, in which case the value of the medium would need to be reassessed. Future research could focus on addressing this issue by examining forums which are focused around gender-neutral subjects, in order to determine whether the format itself is related to this lack of gender diversity, or if it is simply a question of each community’s subject matter.

Interview Protocol

All data for this study was gathered through the use of personal interviews with the participants. Each respondent was sent a copy of the Informed Consent Form (see appendix C) via email along with a brief description of their rights and role in regards to the project. Upon receipt of written confirmation that the respondent had read, understood and agreed to the material in the Informed Consent Form, each individual was sent a standardized set of opening questions. Two sets of opening questions were used, one for each forum. For interviews with the Grappling Forum users I initially asked the following questions:

So to start out with, how/why did you start training, how long have you been training, and how/why did you start posting on [the Grappling Forum]? Where were you in your Jiujitsu career when you started posting? And did you find that there is any cross-over between posting on [the forum] and your training experience on that mat? Were there things you learned from the forum that were useful? Or have you used your experience on the mat to give advice to beginners on the forum?

These questions were intended to establish the context surrounding each respondent’s forum use, as well as to start a conversation about the roles that their participation on the forum might play in their overall lives. Occasionally additional material was added in addition to or substituted for
the standardized opening questions if there were special circumstances or unique perspectives related to an individual. For example, if one of the volunteers also posted an anecdote in the project’s discussion thread on the forum, then I would add follow up questions related to that anecdote alongside the standardized opening questions in order to get at the issues raised in their post. This was more common in opening questions for Soccer Forum users, because the conversation in the introductory thread on that forum was more robust and offered more material for specific follow up questions. Similarly, respondents in unique circumstances, such as the American user on the predominantly English Soccer Forum, were asked additional questions relating to their experience as a foreigner in the community in an effort to tease out the impact of those circumstances on their overall experience. Though the opening questions used for interviews with users of the Soccer Forum were not identical, they shared a general focus on the individual’s background as a fan of the team, whether their use of the forum brought them closer to the team or fan community, and whether their experience on the forum made their overall experience as a fan more enjoyable.

After the initial round of opening questions, a semi-structured interview system was utilized, with each respondent being issued multiple rounds of individualized follow up questions. The move away from standardized interview questions was made in light of the fact that each individual’s experience was different, and would have different things to tell us about the identity-construction process as a whole. Thus, I decided that it would be more beneficial to use the semi-structured interview approach, as described by Elaine Chin (270), and allow each interview to develop organically by focusing on that specific respondent’s experience, thoughts and values. While this may have limited the quantitative value of the study, as not all respondents answered the same questions, the focus of this study was on performing a deep
qualitative analysis of individual experiences. Personalizing the follow up questions allowed me to delve deeper into the important features in each subject’s responses, and collect a diverse set of results that accurately reflects the differences in each individual’s personal experience. For example, when Matt mentioned the impact of forum posting on his writing skills, the semi-structured interview approach allowed me to pose these follow up questions such as these in order to better understand his perspective:

Finally, I was hoping you could expand a little bit on how posting on the forum has made you a more poignant writer, and helped you argue points in your graduate work. This is fascinating, how did the practices or skills from writing on the forum transfer over? What is it about the forum experience that was so helpful? You mention that people jump all over mistakes there, do you feel like that encouraged you to make your writing "tighter"? Can you think of any specific examples or anecdotes?

However, while there were occasional diversions onto other topics of this sort, a general focus on identity construction and community membership was maintained throughout the entire interview process.

All interviews were conducted either via email or the “private messaging” feature of each forum. The private messaging feature worked the same on both forums, as a kind of internal email service between members of the forum. This feature allowed the same level of communication and affordances as email to both researcher and respondent, without requiring the respondent to disclose their personal email address. The choice to conduct interviews via email and private messaging was made for a few key reasons, foremost among which was the automatic creation of exact transcripts of each interview. Because of the detailed and personal nature of the subject matter for this study, and its reliance on each individual’s self-perception, I determined that access to the exact wording used by each respondent would be key to interpreting the results. The use of email and private messaging as interview mediums facilitated the collection, storage, and analysis of these transcripts. In addition to this, the asynchronous
nature of this format allowed interview respondents to carefully consider and compose their responses over a period of several hours or even days, allowing for a high level of detail and clarity in each response. This also afforded respondents the convenience of conducting their portions of the interview process in the time that they already have available in their schedule, rather than having to arrange for set interview times that may conflict with other areas of their lives, inviting the possibility of distraction or a reduced willingness to participate. The email and private messaging medium also afforded respondents the opportunity to remain completely anonymous if they wished, allowing them to speak frankly about sensitive or personal topics in their interviews. Finally, using these mediums allowed me to expand the search for interview subjects to include distant countries without the problems posed by time differences and other logistical concerns.

I also clearly framed each interview as “an informal conversation” in order to allow for the honest expression of respondents’ personal thoughts and feelings. A large part of both the identity construction and community membership processes is caught up in the emotion and personal feelings of the individual involved, so it was important to make sure that the interview process was arranged as a “safe place” in order to encourage the honest discussion of such sensitive materials. I therefore decided to phrase each question in a casual, non-threatening conversational tone, and to encourage each respondent to reply freely, without worrying about whether their language was appropriate for an academic discussion. Because of this, there are instances of slang, jargon, and even profanity that appear throughout the interview transcripts. I have attempted to clarify any such passages that are potentially confusing with footnotes, leaving the original language intact whenever possible. Instances of profanity have been left in the text,
but are censored. Minor changes have been made for purposes of clarity, such as capitalizing acronyms or correcting typos. I have endeavored to limit these changes to the absolute minimum.

Treatment of the Interview Data

Throughout the interview process transcripts of each interview were collected in a single Google document, sorted by respondent and arranged in chronological order. This allowed me to continuously collate the interview data and look for emerging themes or questions as the interviews progressed. Midway through the interview process I took time out to go back through each of the interview transcripts and annotate them by describing connections to the theory material and other interviews. I was particularly interested in moments where multiple respondents referenced similar feelings or events, as these could begin to develop a pattern from which I could draw robust conclusions. I then produced brief write-ups describing the general content of each interview, the themes present, and the relationships or similarities, if any, to other interviews and theory articles. Once these write-ups were complete they were cross referenced to look for trends across multiple respondents, recurring phenomena, or discrepancies in personal experience or opinion that could be clarified, with particular attention paid to matters related to self-perception, community membership and the advancement of the individual involved to deeper levels of their practice. This information was then used to draft a round of follow up questions tailored to the individual respondents to better get at the details of their own experience in online communities.

Upon completion of the second round of interviews the resulting data was once again collected in the google document and I annotated each interview and arranged them as case studies, describing how they relate to the material. At this point the initial research question for the study, “How do online forums facilitate the construction of practice-linked identities” was
modified to reflect the information revealed in the data. This initial broad question was split into two more specific questions based on the key themes present in the interview responses. The first question was “How do online forums as a medium impact identity construction and community membership?” and is addressed in the first Findings chapter of this publication. The second question was “How do online forums facilitate access to identity resources?” and is addressed in the second Findings chapter. This first shift is representative of one of the key themes that appeared across the majority of the case studies, with the respondents commonly describing ways in which their experience of participation within the forum medium differed from that of their “offline” lives and also from their experiences on other online platforms such as Twitter or Facebook. This commonality necessitated a deeper examination of the online forum itself as a medium, and the affordances and constraints of its use as an identity building platform and a space for engagement with communities. The second question emerged as the data was sorted and I discovered that Nasir and Cooks’s identity resources concept could serve quite well as an overall framework through which to discuss the responses related to identity construction. Because of this, the focus was shifted from a more general view of identity construction to an examination of the specific ways in which individuals access these resources through online forums. This more narrow focus allowed a deeper and more productive inquiry than the generalized approach.

Because of the lengthy and in depth nature of each of the case studies, I decided that it would be more effective to organize the project around content-specific categories and reference various case studies across these sections as relevant. I decided that going through each study one by one and addressing the various points of intersection individually would result in a disjointed and unwieldy end product, instead I chose to pull from different case studies as
appropriate during the discussion of each topic in turn. However, in order to include an example of the way in which the various processes under discussion interact with each other, one case study was included “whole” and is used to examine the online forum’s role in one individual’s life as they develop a practice-linked identity and pursue membership in a new community. This case study appears at the end of the second Findings chapter under its own sub-heading.
CHAPTER IV

FINDINGS 1: ADVANTAGES AND CHALLENGES
OF THE MEDIUM:

What is an Online Forum?

Online forums are typically centered around a specific interest or practice, and while there are examples of “off topic” forums which do not have such a specialized purpose, this study is concerned with the former. These forums share several common features that offer intriguing advantages when compared to other mediums, such as face-to-face interaction, along with some unique challenges. This chapter is concerned with identifying the key features that make online forums such intriguing and useful communities to individual learners, and providing a detailed analysis of how these features can facilitate or impede the progress of each member of the online community. The focus of this chapter is on the features of online forums as a medium for communication, leaving the in-depth discussion of the identity construction processes that can take place on such forums for later chapters.

Profile Customization

Online forums offer their users the chance to create a custom profile that will represent them throughout their time in the community. In many ways this customization mirrors the physical representation work that people do on a regular basis in their day-to-day lives. Where a person might strategically select a specific shirt in order to represent themselves to others in a certain way; a member of an online forum can customize various aspects of their own appearance on that forum in order to accomplish similar objectives. One of the most immediately recognizable opportunities for this type of work on an online forum is the selection of an avatar,
the picture chosen by the user that will appear with their username alongside each of their posts on the forum. While a user certainly could choose to use a picture of their own face for their avatar, this also opens up an opportunity for other forms of expression and identity announcements. For example, a user on a forum built around a baseball team might choose to use the logo of that team as their avatar, as a way to signal to other users that they are a fan of that team. This way, other members of the community can immediately recognize and categorize the user as a fellow fan, facilitating that user’s integration into the community. In addition to the choice of avatar, users can also choose to represent themselves from a specific location, real or imagined, and include a “signature” (usually text, such as favorite quotes) that will be automatically placed at the bottom of their posts for others to see. This allows users an opportunity to embed some indicators of their values or beliefs, which can also help them integrate into the community. For example, a member of the baseball team’s forum might include a quote from a favorite player as their signature, providing another indicator to the community that they are a serious fan and are knowledgeable about the team and its players.

Clearly, people engage in similar practices in their interactions offline, such as wearing a team-branded shirt when they go to the stadium to indicate their membership of the fan community, but the opportunity to create a persona from scratch on the online forum platform affords the individual some opportunities for self-representation which are not available in person. Zhao maintains that “In localized face-to-face interactions, identity is constructed under a unique set of constraints. The presence of the corporeal body in social encounters prevents people from claiming identities that are inconsistent with the visible part of their physical characteristics” (1817). The move onto internet forums removes the constraints associated with the corporeal body and its trappings, as one can carefully select which of their physical, social or
economic characteristics to represent in their online identity, and which to abandon or replace. However, an individual’s options for self-representation are instead limited by their facility with the workings of the online forum medium- crafting an online profile to project one’s preferred image to that community can be just as delicate a process as managing one’s corporeal presentation. Still, the disconnect that the online forum provides between a person’s corporeal existence and their presentation on the site allows them to completely reinvent themselves and develop an entirely new identity that is geared towards their own purposes, shielded from the influence of physical characteristics on public perception (Zhao 1818). In short, this sort of profile customization system allows the newcomer to a community to be judged first by the characteristics that they choose to represent their identity, rather than being immediately categorized by race, gender and apparent wealth as they are in their day-to-day lives.

Asynchronous Communication

The online forum medium also allows for a fascinating divorce from the typical constraints of time and space. Typically, online forums maintain a significant archive of past discussion threads (for example, the Grappling Forum discussed in this project maintains an archive of every thread dating back to 2005). This archive is often combined with search functionality which allows users to take advantage of thousands of past conversations, questions, and answers. The ease and value of this process was exemplified in the words of Phil, a Grappling Forum user, who mentioned that, rather than ask people at his gym about the appropriate hygiene practices, it was “easier to see the hygiene threads on there and know what not to do.” Here Phil is referring to threads on the Grappling Forum dealing with commonly asked hygiene-related questions, and rather than asking such a question (i.e. how often should I wash my equipment?) in person, or even by starting a thread on the forum, he is able to glean
that information simply by browsing the forum passively and reading old question and answer threads that deal with the same subject matter. Because of the depth of the archive and the robust search function, it is often possible to find the answers to common questions relatively quickly, and without the potential embarrassment of asking them personally. The searchable and automatically archived nature of forum threads also allows each user to benefit from the wisdom of various experts who may no longer participate in the community, even if they were not present when those experts were making their posts. This affords forum users access to a wide range of resources that may not be available to, or as easily accessed by, members of an offline community.

While the online forum medium offers convenient access to the resources and expertise of the past, it also provides similar access to future resources. The process of starting a thread allows users to drop their question off, and return to it after a day or two to see who has replied. This means that one of the key restrictions on face-to-face communication, the necessity of getting everyone in the same room at the same time, is removed on this medium. This dynamic also helps to alleviate the problems presented by differing time zones. With each member of the community able to engage with the community at their preferred time in their local time zone, it becomes easier to develop a truly international community. Matt, a Grappling Forum user, described another key impact of the asynchronous format when he wrote: “each thread was my ability to have everyone’s head turn to me and answer my question, or help me address a concern ([the forum] is great for that).” The interesting thing about this is that while Matt’s question or concern was receiving the full attention of the group, so too were many other threads from various other members of the community. In a synchronous communication environment this would resemble a cacophony, but the asynchronous format allows for the community to engage
in multiple, distinct discussions simultaneously. Most members of a forum will log in and browse from thread to thread offering their input on each until they bring their session to a close. This means that each thread receives the undivided attention of each of the users that pass through it, allowing multiple people or subjects to be the “center of attention” of the group at once.

A different Grappling Forum user, Mukhtar, referenced another key affordance of the asynchronous format: “My first posts were about gear and equipment certainly because I felt more comfortable contributing to those discussions. I had a bunch of gis¹ and I am tall and thin. Lots of posts in the gear forum are usually about fit of things so I was comfortable sharing my experiences with the things I owned.” Here, Mukhtar shows us an example of the way in which the time and space that each user is afforded to craft their contributions to the community can aid in the identity development process. Each contribution can be carefully crafted to achieve the desired result, which allows individuals a greater amount of control over how they are perceived by others, and the identity that they are building in the community. This comes from having the luxury of having time to write at their leisure, as well as the “emotional space” to do so without feeling pressured (Zhao), and also from the ability to pick and choose the topics on which they engage. The careful choice of topics allows users to play to their strengths as they engage in the identity construction process. Because of the way threads are structured (generally around a specific topic identified in the title) and archived on most forums, a user can sort through them until they find a topic on which they feel qualified to offer their opinion, thus building their identity and confidence as a participant in the community until they feel comfortable enough to branch out to other topics. While he may not have felt comfortable in the community as a whole,

¹ A gi is the uniform worn during Jiujitsu practice.
Mukhtar was able to search through the various topics available and find a niche where he felt confident that he could participate in a meaningful and helpful way. Later on, as Mukhtar grows more confident and begins to establish himself in the community by posting and having his posts recognized in these threads, therefore cementing his identity as a member of the community, he is able to branch out from the gear and equipment threads and enter a wider variety of discussions. In this way, the variety of topics available, and the ability of the group to focus on each topic individually and concurrently, creates an environment where newcomers can easily find a way to engage in legitimate participation with the practices of the community and begin to work their way inward (Lave & Wenger).

Finally, Grappling Forum user Phil had his own take on the affordances of asynchronous communication: “[the Grappling Forum] was convenient to me because I work behind a keyboard, so it was a penalty kill\(^2\) a lot of the time.” Phil characterizes himself as an efficient worker who would often finish tasks early and then use the time leftover between projects to engage with the forum community. What Phil is describing here is the way in which the asynchronous format allows users to engage in micro-participation, short intervals of participation in the community that fit into the down-time in an individual’s life. While the other members of the community may not be available at the exact moment that an individual has time to make a post, they will be able to see it and respond to it whenever they in turn have a bit of spare time. This allows for a state of persistent, though limited, awareness in which the user maintains a constant connection with the community even when they are not able to spend a significant amount of time on the forum in one sitting. This was also borne out in one of Korobkova’s interviews, as the subject described participating in the Wattpad online writing

\(^2\) A term from ice hockey, where teams that have had a player sent to the penalty box must focus on defense and time-wasting until the penalized player can return to the game.
community during their commute to and from school, stating further that she would often be too tired to participate in a meaningful way by the time she got home at the end of the day (Korobkova, 25). So, while Korobkova’s subject is often precluded from long stretches of participation by school and other obligations, she is able to fit micro-participation sessions into the gaps of her busy schedule. This ability to engage in micro-participation allows users an opportunity to participate in the practices of the community without having to set aside large tracts of time, making the community more accessible to members who operate within a demanding schedule.

Semi-Anonymous Community

Just as these online forum communities are divorced from the constraints of space and time, they are also a space where people can separate themselves from their “offline” personas. On most forums there is no requirement to establish your “real world” identity in any meaningful way, meaning that users are free to represent themselves however they might wish. Zhao establishes a scale between complete online anonymity, described as a place “where accountability is lacking, the masks people wear offline are often thrown away and their ‘true’ selves come out of hiding, along with the tabooed and other suppressed identities” (1819) and the fully nonymous offline communities where, as a response to various social pressures people often hide their “true self” behind those masks, which ultimately become their ‘‘real’ or known identities. In between these two extremes, Zhao makes the case that there are “nonymous online” communities, such as Facebook, which split the difference between the two. While they carry with them some of the social pressures of the offline nonymous community, in that any ill-will, scorn or embarrassment that an individual might incur in an online nonymous community can be

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3 The opposite of “anonymous” (Zhao).
carried over into their offline nonymous interactions, these communities also afford their users
some of the freedoms of self-representation that characterize the “online anonymous”
communities. These freedoms include profile customization, time to carefully craft responses,
exact control over visual representation, and so on.

I argue that there is a fourth class of community on this scale, the “semi-anonymous
online” community which is distinct from both the fully anonymous online community and the
onymous online community. Most web forums fall into this fourth category, which is
characterized by the named accounts that users create. In a truly anonymous online community,
such as the website known as “4chan,” users do not create a profile that follows them throughout
their posting career. Instead each post is generally tagged “anonymous” with a serial number that
other users can use to reply to it, but without any sort of identifying information that might carry
over from thread to thread and allow a user to establish a unique identity within the community.

So it seems that there is a middle ground between the completely anonymous world of 4chan and
the fully nonymous, linked to the real world, accounts of Facebook. I characterize this middle
ground as “Semi-Anonymous” because while it carries with it no mandatory connection to a
person’s “real life” identity (though people are free to establish that connection if they choose), it
does involve the creation of a username which will follow the user throughout their posting
career. In this way, forums of this type split the difference between nonymous and anonymous,
the risk of “real world” ramifications typical to communities like Facebook is gone, but there is
also the opportunity to develop a persona and lasting reputation within the community. Once the
community starts to recognize a username, and expect certain behaviors from it, that individual
cannot be considered completely anonymous any longer.
These semi-anonymous communities allow for identity construction work that cannot take place in a fully anonymous community, because the crux of identity construction lies in the recognition of that identity by members of a community (Zhao 1817). This sort of recognition is not readily available when there is no “persona” to recognize and attach these identity claims to. While a 4chan user might make identity claims in a post, as soon as they move to another thread (and away from the serial number that identifies that post) they lose any association with the identity claims made previously, and even if other members of the community wanted to recognize those claims they would not be able to. In contrast to this, in semi-anonymous communities like the Grappling Forum and the Soccer Forum, a user’s identity claims can be reliably attached to their online persona, and when members of the community recognize those claims the work of identity construction can be completed. In short, it is possible to “become known” in a semi-anonymous community in ways that are not possible in the fully anonymous community described by Zhao.

Despite this, there is still value to be found in the anonymous nature of semi-anonymous communities, as they allow for certain freedoms that are not present in nonymous communities. To begin with, the anonymous nature of these communities allows users to separate themselves from elements of their “offline” identity that might otherwise interfere with their pursuits. For example, a user is under no obligation to represent their gender, and so they can easily avoid the various preconceptions and stereotypes that travel hand in hand with gender identification. Taking this a step further, semi-anonymous communities also become a place where users can “try on” new characteristics or identities without risking their “real life” reputation. For someone interested in representing themselves as a different gender, these sorts of communities could provide a safe way to work with that identity. This is also an advantage for people who may have
niche interests that carry a social stigma in their offline community. The online forum can provide such individuals with a place to act out their identity pursuant to those interests among like-minded people who will accept and celebrate otherwise marginalized pursuits. Thus, the semi-anonymous online community can function as a sort of “dry dock” for identity construction, a place where the identity facet under construction can be removed from the chaos and judgment of everyday life and safely retooled, tested, and reinforced before being reintegrated into society at large with the confidence derived from community membership.

However, because these semi-anonymous online identities are not necessarily tied to the “offline” identity of the user, it is also possible for users to jettison an identity that isn’t working well and completely start over. One Grappling Forum user, Matt, described making use of this unique feature:

I am currently on my second account on [the Grappling Forum] (don’t tell the mods =D). My first account was I was 14, a student at the [Karate] dojo who was older than me told me to check it out. He was into MMA and would actually go on to compete in ammy\(^4\) fights in NJ. 14 Year old me would constantly bring up Kata\(^5\) and other Japanese philosophies. It did not end well. My second account was created as I was training in Sambo\(^6\) and Fedor was still at the top. He is definitely one of the major players to get me into MMA\(^7\). I went from lurker to poster as my MMA knowledge and interest grew.

In this paragraph Matt describes the formation of two separate identities using two distinct strategies. In the first account, which young Matt named “Death Stalker,” he took an aggressive approach, immediately challenging the norms of the community with concepts like the Kata that are not often well received in the Grappling Forum which caters to practitioners of martial arts styles that generally eschew the Kata in favor of partnered drills. In other words, Matt (as “Death Stalker”) was going into someone else’s house and immediately telling them how to arrange their

\(^{4}\) Amateur.
\(^{5}\) Choreographed performances of martial arts techniques.
\(^{6}\) A Russian grappling system.
\(^{7}\) “Mixed Martial Arts,” a sport that involves a lot of grappling.
furniture. While we don’t have the exact details of the forum’s response to this incursion, Matt does mention that he abandoned this account because of the negative response from the community.

However, due to the semi-anonymous nature of the Grappling Forum, an older wiser Matt was able to create a second identity and approach his integration into the community in a more cautious, respectful manner. The second time around Matt chose to represent himself as a Sambo practitioner, even though he was still heavily involved in Karate in his “offline” life. He also chose a more subdued username compared to the audacious “Death Stalker” and implying a more restrained individual. Similarly, his approach to posting had changed as well, with the second account engaging in a more gradual transition from initiate to expert as Matt’s “MMA interest and knowledge grew,” while “Death Stalker” positioned himself as an expert immediately despite his lack of knowledge of the subject matter at hand. In response to a follow up question, Matt elaborated on his motivation for creating the new account: “I don’t have any friends who watch MMA . . . so I turned to [the Grappling Forum] to join a community have dialogues and be up to date on all things MMA. It was necessary for me to create a new profile because of how juvenile my previous one was. . . . I feel that the new me much more open to new ideas, concepts, techniques, and more experienced.” The semi-anonymous nature of the online forum allowed Matt to rebuild his identity on the forum to better serve his goals as they shifted throughout his life, without having to bear the mantle of his previous account’s poor reception throughout. While creating his second account Matt was also making use of the selective representation dynamic discussed earlier, allowing him to focus on developing his identity as a grappler without being held back by the stigma that this particular community holds against his other interest, Karate, which he still practiced assiduously during this time. Contrary
to the popular expression, this sort of semi-anonymous platform does allow people a second chance to make a first impression.

Finally, the semi-anonymous format offers users a certain amount of freedom from the social pressures that might otherwise inform their actions. This freedom can manifest itself in positive ways, such as the freedom to develop niche identities without fear of retribution as discussed earlier, but it can also open the door for less productive behavior, as a quick look through the comments section of almost any Youtube video can attest. One of the manifestations of this freedom that appeared most often in the interviews performed for this study was described succinctly by Phil, from the Grappling Forum: “It’s always awkward to have the conversation with the newer/younger guy that just flat out stinks. You try to help them out but they usually get embarrassed once they find out they are the ‘stinky’ dude. The face to face separation eases that embarrassment.” In this quote, Phil is speaking from the perspective of an insider attempting to help a newcomer learn the mores and expectations of the group. The embarrassment that Phil references can get in the way of the transfer of that information and its ultimate adoption as a part of the regular practices of the newcomer. The semi-anonymous platform allows users in this situation to obtain access to the information that they need, in this case hygiene practices, and incorporate it into their practices and their developing identity as a member of the community of practice - without turning the spotlight of their local community’s attention on their ignorance in the process. In this way, an individual using the semi-anonymous platform is able to sidestep the social pressure (fear of embarrassment and the need to appear competent) that might make them reluctant to seek advice on sensitive subjects in person.

However, this sense of freedom can also lead to problems related to the lack of accountability that comes with the ability to control the level of connection between the user’s
online account and their “real world” persona. The same separation that makes it easier to talk about difficult subjects, also makes it easier to get away with antisocial behavior. As Mukhtar put it, “It is easier to be jerk online if nobody knows who you are,” and we might add that it is more tempting to be a jerk if you have a large audience, and the egalitarian nature of most forums’ posting regulations ensures that the jerk’s posts will enjoy equal time and prominence of position to those of more constructive members. Beyond the jerks and the trolls, semi-anonymous platforms also raise questions of credibility, as it can be difficult to verify the credentials of someone who is known only as a username with no connection to their outside, or “real life” persona. This means that while it may be easier to solicit advice on difficult subjects using a semi-anonymous platform, it can also be more difficult to ascertain the value of any advice received.

The administrators of the Soccer Forum have developed a system that helps to alleviate these two problems, by creating a registration “gate” designed to weed out users who lack at least a basic interest in and understanding of the forum’s primary topic. Upon registration, users are asked to complete a three question quiz. Two of the questions are related to the rules of the forum and are intended to ensure that new users understand the behavior that is expected of them. The third question is phrased as “what is the most famous shirt number at [the club]?” and can thus be used as an indicator of whether the prospective member has a genuine interest in this particular soccer club, or at least can show the dedication required to research the answer. In this way the administrators can at least partially alleviate the hazards of a semi-anonymous format by encouraging new members to develop a legitimate interest in the topic at hand, and an understanding of the behavior expected from community members. Trevor, a Soccer Forum user, draws a contrast between this sort of “gated” community and the perception of the internet at
large: “I think there's an underlying feeling that ‘the internet is full of lies.’ Of course, it is, but on a registration required forum there are very few fools who slip through the net.” While the system is obviously not a perfect guarantee that every user will engage in productive behavior, it does provide what Trevor describes as “an early test of how involved they are going to be” which can help weed out some of the trouble-makers that can come along with a semi-anonymous format.

Interest Specific

The Soccer Forum’s “shirt number” gating question is also a manifestation of one of the main strengths of the online forum format when it comes to identity development. This question works as a gating feature, ensuring that new users have a basic knowledge of the club that is the forum’s focus, which helps in turn to create an interest-driven community. This “interest specific” structure provides some advantages to users as they work to develop their identities as practitioners in the field of that interest. Liam, a Soccer Forum user, described one of the main advantages of the interest specific community: “Following a path of academia, I'm really surrounded by people I know find how much I care about football totally bizarre and a bit silly, it's nice to be able to sit anywhere - including many hours in the Scott Polar Research Institute while I should've been writing a thesis - and share that passion.” What Liam gets out of the forum here is a tacitly guaranteed acceptance of subject matter related to his interest. This is particularly advantageous for individuals who find it difficult to engage with a specific interest in their local region. Liam is able to use the Soccer Forum to engage in the practices related to his identity as a passionate soccer fan without the risk of derision by participating in an online community that is safely shielded from the judgment of his colleagues. On this forum he can find

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8 Soccer is known as “football” in England.
a sense of belonging that is not available in his typical day-to-day interactions offline. Additionally, if he were bringing soccer fandom practices to an “off topic” forum, where the community is not built around that specific interest, Liam would face a similar risk of rejection to that posed by his academic colleagues. Thus, the interest specific community provides users with the emotional security that stems from a sense that their pursuit of that interest will be well received.

Describing his time in Chile, Liam mentioned that he “couldn't really talk much about English football with anyone - them being more interested in Chilean football.” While the Chilean community does not represent the same sort of threat of judgment that he found in the English academic community, it is clear that Liam did not have access to individuals who shared his specific interests. When Liam states that “going on the forum puts me back into the geordie\(^9\) crowd. Being 'around' people who care, reminds me why I care” we can see that he is using the forum, and specifically its interest-specific structure, as a way to guarantee his access to specialized resources that are critical to the maintenance of his identity as a fan. Being reminded “why he cares” represents a key moment of validation for Liam’s identity as a dedicated fan of the team. This validation is crucial to the maintenance of such an identity and Liam locates it clearly in the act of participation within the Soccer Forum community. During his time abroad, the Soccer Forum played an important role in providing Liam with access to English football specialists even while he was physically cut off from the local community, which in turn allowed him to participate in the activities necessary to maintain his identity as a dedicated fan.

\(^9\) A nickname for people from Liam’s hometown in northeast England.
Guaranteed shared interests also facilitate community building, and the integration of new members. In our interview, Phil described his participation in a forum built around another specific interest, drag racing:

People shared advice on setups/how to go faster/trouble shooting/hook up on parts etc. Track get together, drinking at bars, car meets. Eventually it changes from just the shared interest to having sub forums such as sports (2 time Fantasy football champ here), Guns and Ammo (we do live in Texas) etc. 10 years later, very few of us still race, but several of us still log in and it’s mainly an off topic board in the main forum with a few racers still around.

Through the timeline established here we can see that the initial community building work was focused around the shared interest, and the contribution of each member towards the community’s shared goal of becoming better drag racers. However, as time passed and the community grew stronger, the scope of the relationships formed in that community increased in depth as well. While the community eventually drifted away from the focus on drag racing, we can see that the shared interest served as the foundation upon which the community was initially constructed, and helped to create a lasting sense of community membership even as the interests of the group shifted with the passage of time. Phil described a process where “The shared interest is the start, but the camaraderie in person is what drives the close knit community,” showing us that the interest specific forum can serve as a sort of launch pad for community membership. New community members are “vetted” in a way by the declaration of their involvement in the shared interest, which paves the way for developing closer interpersonal ties within the community that may then transcend the initial shared interest in scope and duration.

Stigma

Despite the nearly ubiquitous nature of online communities, in some circles there remains an element of stigma attached to online communities and the resources that can be found in
them. Trevor, a Soccer Forum user describes how this stigma impacts his interaction with online and offline communities: “I've told a few forum stories over the years but always refer to ‘one of my mates...’ and don't usually let on that it's come from an internet forum. I still feel that phrase carries a stigma that instantly discredits you, which I hate.” There are two important things here. First, Trevor clearly finds value in “real life” for some of the resources, in this case amusing anecdotes, that he has accessed on the forum. Second, he clearly believes that the value of those resources will be diminished if their online origin is revealed to his audience. When asked to elaborate on this sense of stigma, Trevor explains that he believes there is “an underlying feeling that the internet is full of lies” and it is this feeling along with a common perception that online forums are “frequented by geeks and nerds who sit in their bedrooms all day” that leads to the stigmatized view of online forums as lacking credibility. What is also interesting about this is that Trevor has developed a strategy to sidestep this stigma, by deliberately misrepresenting the resources that he deploys from such forums as originating from some “offline” source, and thus intrinsically more credible in the eyes of his audience. This sort of “translation” work that Trevor must perform in order to utilize these materials represents one of the significant obstacles both in encouraging people to look to online forums for resources and support, and in the individual’s eventual use of those resources.

Written Communication

Finally, it is worth noting that communication on forums is almost exclusively restricted to the written word. Beyond the ubiquitous smattering of image macros, emoticons and Youtube clips, the bulk of interpersonal communication in these communities is done by writing. This means that as individuals pursue their interests, whatever those may be, by posting and developing identities and relationships on these forums, they will also be developing writing
skills in parallel. There is interesting potential here because forum posting is an activity where the focus is on something else entirely from writing, here the work of composition is simply an unavoidable background feature - a necessity of the medium. This means that writing practices can be developed without an individual expressly devoting their time to “writing practice,” thus sidestepping the odious reputation enjoyed by such school-like activities. There are two key elements at work here that differentiate the practice of writing on forums from more traditionally “academic” settings: Internal motivation, and purpose driven activity.

While it is hardly a startling revelation that students can reach higher levels of learning when they are internally motivated by a genuine interest in the material (Korobkova, 15), the intriguing thing about online forums is that they provide an opportunity to appeal to almost any interest. This means that while prospective learners may have no interest in learning “writing” (or even an aversion to the idea), there will almost certainly be an online forum available that caters to something they are interested in - and the only way to interact on that forum will be through writing. This positions online forums so that they offer an opportunity for individuals to develop writing skills through the pursuit of a genuine interest. The learner in this situation can also benefit from what could be characterized as a feedback loop that stems from the interest driven nature of forum posting. Matt described this phenomenon in his interview:

“Understanding the language of the grappling community created a cycle for me; the more I learned, the more I understood, which wanted me to learn more.” This becomes even more significant when we consider that this process, the pursuit of the interest, the penetration to deeper understanding, and the renewed interest that results from that understanding, all take place in the context of written communication. This is an example of how the interest driven
feedback loop can be leveraged to encourage the development of writing skills due to the unique characteristics of the online forum.

Because the individual is driven to participate in the online forum community by a genuine interest in the material, the writing that enables that participation is, necessarily, purpose-driven. Rather than writing in the abstract, such as for “practice” or to complete an assignment, in pursuing their interest on a forum individuals have a “real world” purpose driving them both to write regularly, and to improve that writing quickly so that they can better attain their goals. Matt noted in his interview: “I have found that the best way to make a point and be taken seriously in an argument/discussion [on the forum] is to make your side well known through coherent sentences with adult vocabulary free of extraneous language. Writing for me has become much more natural and streamlined as a result.” Here we can see that Matt is describing the development of his writing skills as they relate to a specific objective, indicating that the writing he does on the forum originates from genuine exigency. He also points to specific strategies that he has developed to accomplish his goals more effectively, which shows us that the same purpose that drives him to write also drives him to constantly improve his practices. Finally, we also see an indication in the last sentence of that quote that this process has helped Matt develop an idea of himself as an effective writer, particularly as he refers to his writing as “natural” which indicates a level of comfort and confidence with the practice. Matt contrasts this “real world” approach to writing with his academic experience: “professors tend to give writing assignments based on content length, something I have been accustomed to since middle school. I became really good at using superfluous words and phrases to extend the length without extending the meaning.” This gives us a counterexample where, in Matt’s experience, the lack of a genuine need that relates to the individual’s goals results in a less productive
learning experience. Ultimately, Matt claims “talking on the forum has made me a more poignant writer which actually helped me with arguing my points in my graduate work,” which shows us that he has been able to take the identity as a competent writer that he developed posting on the forums, along with the skills that he developed in that process, and transfer them over to other arenas of his life including his academic pursuits. This is an example of the same online-to-offline identity and skill transfer that we will see later in relation to the topics of particular forum communities. However, Matt’s experience also provides a key example of the way in which participation in an online forum community can help individuals develop their identity and skills as writers, even when the subject matter of the forum (in Matt’s case, grappling) appears completely unrelated.
CHAPTER V

FINDINGS 2: ACCESS TO IDENTITY RESOURCES:

Identity Resources and Inbound Identity Trajectories

Nasir and Cooks’s concept of identity resources gives us an excellent framework with which to analyze the contribution that online forum participation can provide to the process of constructing a practice-linked identity on an inbound trajectory. In “Becoming a Hurdler” Nasir and Cooks lay out three main categories of “Identity Resources,” ideational, material, and relational, as well as the difference between identities that are on peripheral and inbound trajectories. An individual whose identity is on a peripheral trajectory will maintain an orbit around the fringes of the community of practice, without penetrating into the deeper levels of involvement in the practice and the community. By contrast, those with identities on an inbound trajectory will be consistently driving inwards toward the more advanced levels of participation, taking on greater responsibility and more challenging tasks they move towards the inner circles of the community of practice. Nasir and Cooks propose that in order to construct an identity with an inbound trajectory, individuals require access to ideational, material and relational identity resources. Ideational resources refer to ways of being, opportunities to see oneself as a contributing member of the practice, and ideas about how one fits into the community of practice. Material resources refer to the materials through which participation in the practice is accomplished, which could include physical tools, the space in which the practice occurs and so on. Relational resources refer to relationships built between the individual and other members of the community of practice, and the validation or acceptance gained through those relationships.
In order to develop an inbound identity trajectory, access to all three of these resources in some form is required.

Online forums can provide a supplementary source for many of these identity resources. While one would hope that these resources would also be made available to the individual in their local community of practice, this is not always the case and online forums can serve to fill some of the gaps that may appear in the local provision of identity resources. In addition to this, the identity resources that an individual accesses on an online forum can provide them with what could be described as a head start, allowing them to enter their local community of practice pre-equipped with some of the tools they need to carve out their niche in that community. Finally, in extreme circumstances, online forums can act as a substitute for the local community of practice, where there is no adequate community available in the individual’s area. The individual can instead turn to online forums to provide them with some of the crucial components of community membership and identity resources that they would otherwise procure from a local community of practice, allowing them to enter the practice despite the limitations of their geographical location. This section will examine some of the ways in which the individuals interviewed for this study were able to access identity resources through their participation in online forums, how that process interacted with their experience in their local communities of practice (if available), and the subsequent impact on their identity trajectories.

Ideational Resources

Ideational resources provide individuals with an opportunity to develop an idea of their role in the practice and how they fit into the community at large, a sense of themselves as a member of that practice, and an understanding of what is valued or held to be good by the community (Nasir and Cooks, 47). Online forums provide abundant opportunities for individuals
to avail themselves of ideational resources of various types, providing users an opportunity to supplement the resources they have access to in their local community, as well as to enter that community pre-equipped with some of the ideas that they will need to develop their identity and role in that community. This “pre-loading” of ideational resources can ease the individual’s entry into the local community of practice, allowing them to be seen, and to see themselves, as a capable member of the group much earlier in their participation.

In his interview, Grappling Forum user Mukhtar credited his time on the forum with helping him learn that things like “knowing not to can opener\textsuperscript{10} your classmates, crank every submission\textsuperscript{11} you think you have, crush people smaller than you, etc. certainly make you a better person to train with. That is really my ultimate goal. Knowing these things earlier made it easier for other people to take me seriously.” Here we can see that Mukhtar’s time on the forum helped him to understand some of the norms of the grappling community, particularly those based around the safety of the participants, and that in doing so he was able to develop a sense of himself as a good training partner. Mukhtar also makes it clear that by interacting with other users on the forum and reviewing previous “advice for beginners” threads he has been exposed to, and subsequently adopted, some of the values of the community. In particular, the idea that a member of this community should constantly strive to be a better training partner, which implies putting the good of the team ahead of personal gain and is therefore key to developing an idea of his role and responsibilities as a contributor to the group. Finally, Mukhtar also gives us a description of the reaction of the community to his uptake of these ideational resources, with their choice to “take him seriously” reflecting the community’s validation of the identity he is constructing for himself as a “good training partner” in response to the values put forth in the

\textsuperscript{10}A hold that can damage the neck, illegal in many competitions.

\textsuperscript{11}A catch all term for the chokes and joint-locks common to many grappling systems.
threads he read or participated in. This idea of how he fits in to the grappling community, as a good training partner who is aware of the safety precautions and puts the team ahead of himself, is key to Mukhtar’s development of an inbound identity trajectory as he enters the local community of practice.

Interestingly, Mukhtar also stated that “it seems like there are always posts about which techniques you shouldn’t use on classmates, washing belt debates\(^\text{12}\), or something else to learn from. Therefore, I didn’t need to ask anything in person.” In this statement we can see the efficacy of the Grappling Forum as a place to “learn the ropes” of the practice, such as the illegal or discouraged techniques mentioned before. However, there is also an interesting opportunity for Mukhtar to establish what Nasir and Cooks would describe as his “place in the practice” by establishing his position on the belt washing issue. It may seem silly, but the debate over whether or not to wash one’s belt is a common topic of dispute in many martial arts communities, and developing your opinion on that issue can be an important part of positioning yourself in the community. When I followed up with Mukhtar, who is also a Karate practitioner, he described the forum’s role in his approach to that process:

I am and am not a belt washer. I wash my BJJ\(^\text{13}\) belts since BJJ is really close contact with others. I have never washed any of my karate belts since there is much less close contact with others. Things like staph infections and ringworm\(^\text{14}\) are never heard of in karate generally speaking. . . . I was not aware of what kinds of nasty items lived on the mats since I was very new to BJJ. Once I read about it I made my decision. It was helpful to have read about the belt washing before there were any conversations in my classes. I already had made up my mind and was able to explain to classmates why they should wash their belts too.

\(^\text{12}\) An almost philosophical debate common in martial arts, some hold a superstition that washing your belt is bad luck or will “wash away your skills” while others prefer to err on the side of hygiene.
\(^\text{13}\) “Brazilian Jiujitsu.”
\(^\text{14}\) Skin infections such as staph, ringworm, and impetigo are a constant concern for grapplers.
Here, the Grappling Forum allowed Mukhtar an opportunity to develop his ideas in relation to this larger debate in a low-stakes environment so that, when called upon in person, he was able to clearly represent his views on the matter and thus position himself as an informed and active member of the community. The reasoning behind his decision to wash his belt also provided Mukhtar with a way to directly contribute to the betterment of his local community of practice, by sharing information about the infections that an unwashed belt can spread. In doing this, Mukhtar may have saved some of his training partners an awkward trip to the pharmacy, and he certainly further developed his identity as a member of the community who acts in accordance with its values and provides a meaningful contribution to its practice.

In addition to becoming a belt-washer, Mukhtar described picking up another practice as well: “I remember seeing someone post a link to a google doc that had someone’s training all logged. I started doing this myself. I keep track of the date, type of class (gi, no gi, seminar), and I write down the techniques covered in that class. I think this is something that has helped me with my bjj.” This is a prime example of the way that access to mentors can support the identity building process. Mukhtar was afforded access to veteran practitioners who provided him with strategies or “ways of being” that helped to solidify his idea of himself as a grappler. From this interaction, Mukhtar not only picked up a useful bit of “best practices” advice for getting better at Jiujitsu, he was also able to use this resource to help define his relationship to the practice, positioning himself as someone who takes the practice seriously and devotes significant amounts of extra time to it outside of the usual training regime. As such, the practice of journaling functions both as a way of being and as a way of seeing oneself as a serious grappler.

In a different interview, Phil described a similar dynamic to Mukhtar’s when discussing his first few years on the forum: “Honestly the first 1-2 years [on the Grappling Forum] just
helped me to understand the history of the sport, what the “unwritten” rules were for gyms, hygiene (which surprisingly is not well known enough with guys to this day), and the competition studs.” Part of what we see here is nearly identical to Mukhtar’s experience, particularly the “unwritten rules” and hygiene practices that Phil picks up from the forum. However, Phil’s description also adds a few things that Mukhtar did not mention, such as developing an idea of the history of the sport and the famous athletes in it. These are both things that will help Phil to define his “relationship to and place in the practice” as described by Nasir and Cooks. An understanding of the sport’s history helps to provide a contextual background for Phil as he begins to shape his identity as a grappler, and allows him to develop an idea of how he might fit into that history himself. Brazilian Jiujitsu itself only dates back to around 1925 so many practitioners are able to, and take great pride in, precisely tracing their lineage back to the system’s founders. Knowledge of this history and one’s exact place in it ties the practitioner more tightly to the larger BJJ community and can be a key component in the development of their identity. As Phil continues his response by writing that: “we had Buchecha come in for a seminar last month. . . . He’s arguably the Kevin Durant15 of BJJ right now and I had 5 different White-Blue belts ask me…” is he good?” we can see that the knowledge he picks up about the famous athletes in the sport allows him to position himself as a knowledgeable practitioner during interactions with other members of the practice. Thus, the knowledge he has gained of history and current events in the world of BJJ both contribute to Phil’s ability to see himself, and be seen by others, as a legitimate practitioner within the community.

15 A famous Basketball star.
Phil went on to describe how after that initial 1-2 year period he stepped up the intensity of his training, began to compete more, and achieved a higher rank in the discipline, after which he noticed a change in both his approach to grappling and his use of the forum:

At that point (I’m an analyst) I started to become the technical guy that knew why things worked as overarching concepts of the move and why a move works as body mechanics. . .2 ½ to 3 years in is where I saw that [the Grappling Forum] and discussing things was helping me trouble shoot specific things. I also would try to reply in threads where I felt I had knowledge and tried to get involved in the technique threads when able if the question hadn’t been explained by more knowledgeable guys.

It is clear that by this point Phil had developed a very clear idea of what sort of grappler he is and how that relates to other aspects of his overall identity as a person. What is interesting about this is the way that his use of the forum is able to continue to support the development of his identity even at this advanced stage. We can see in this description that as Phil’s identity and practices change, his use of the forum can change to suit and support this new direction. As he develops this new identity as a technical, analytical trouble-shooter, he is able to use his participation on the Grappling Forum to reinforce and validate that identity. The “technique threads” that Phil refers to offer him a key opportunity to display this new aspect of his grappling identity, and to have it validated by other members of the community.

In addition to this, both Mukhtar and Phil reference developing the idea of themselves as someone with a responsibility to help newer members of the community along. When asked about giving advice on the forum, Mukhtar stated that he believes “if you can help someone else newer than you that it is your obligation to do so. The only reason I know a lot of what I do is because others that were more experienced were willing to take the time to help me. Now I know a little bit more so I have to do the same to others.” Phil also shared a similar sentiment on this topic: “I do feel responsible because I know what it’s like to struggle and be new and not have that feedback. A few small tips at key points really open your eyes/mind and help you progress
at a much faster rate. If I hadn’t had my ‘big bro’ when I was a blue belt I would probably be 12-18 months behind in my progression.” Both of these responses show us that through their participation on the Grappling Forum both Phil and Mukhtar were able to develop an understanding of what it means to be a legitimately participating member of the grappling community, particularly the idea that old-timers are expected to help newcomers advance. This shows up in each participant’s use of words like “obligation” and “responsibility” to characterize the motivation that they felt to help newer members, indicating that they have internalized this particular value of the community. This represents another example of the way in which both users had access to ideational resources regarding the values of the community and their ability to uphold those values. Additionally, the question threads started by newer forum users provide opportunities for Phil and Mukhtar to put these values into practice, thus solidifying their ideas of themselves as someone who participates meaningfully in the grappling community.

The use of forum-based ideational resources to direct or inform shifts in identity and practice over time also appeared in interviews with Albert and Matt, also Grappling Forum users. In response to a question about when he felt like a real BJJ practitioner, Matt wrote: “My ‘AH HA’ moment that made me confident in my grappling knowledge is when I was able to read articles and posts on [the Grappling Forum] without needing to look anything up. I guess it could be like reading a newspaper in a foreign language. I can finally understand!” In this instance, the forum affords Matt the opportunity to measure, very clearly, what we might call his “grappling literacy.” The written format of the forum as a medium allows for Matt to measure the development of his grappling literacy by his ability to write, read and understand posts when it might otherwise be measured by murkier standards like how well he keeps people from strangling him at practice. While he may or may not be seeing a marked improvement in his
ability to avoid being strangled when participating with his local community of practice, he could certainly recognize an improvement in his ability to “speak the language” on the forum over time. In this way, Matt’s participation on the forum affords him an additional opportunity to complete actions (such as reading posts and articles) that solidify his perception of himself as a competent member of the community. Because of this, the forum played a key role in Matt’s transition from perceiving himself as a newcomer to feeling like a competent member of the community.

Finally, when I asked Albert (another Grappling Forum user) whether his participation on the Grappling Forum had influenced or interacted with his grappling practice, he replied that “participating in discussions [on the forum] has forced me to refine my thinking regarding the purpose of my practice and how I approach BJJ as a lifelong activity.” This description indicates that participation on the forum has offered Albert some of the resources (in this case, access to ongoing conversations about the purpose or goals of the practice) necessary to further refine his identity in, and relationship to, his practice. When asked to elaborate on this refining process, Albert referenced a long-standing debate in the BJJ community about the proper focus for the art, and how he found his place in that discussion:

I had never really thought much about the value of various approaches to BJJ until I started posting here and seeing debates between self-defense traditionalists, MMA nostalgists . . . and sport guys. Earlier in my practice I had trained to help my Judo, and then just because I enjoyed it but without any particular goal in mind or any way of guiding what sort of game I wanted to develop. What I perceived to be the inane arguments of the self-defense and MMA guys as well as the clearly superior technical skill of the sport guys led me to believe that sport was the best way to practice if you wanted to achieve the highest level of BJJ skill. . . . At this point I believe that competition is necessary to achieve a high level in BJJ, and that sport BJJ is the best venue to test BJJ skill.

One of the interesting things about this is that Albert clearly had access to a wide variety of ideational resources, such as ways to frame one’s participation in the practice as “playing a
sport” or “practicing self-defense,” from diverse sources with which he could develop an idea of how his own BJJ practice could fit into the field overall and the world at large. This also reveals a key advantage provided by the forum experience, that one’s access to ideational resources is not limited by the ideology of their local community, which might lean more heavily towards one side or the other in debates of this sort. The wide range of perspectives offered by the Grappling Forum community allowed Albert to weigh each angle of this debate, and guide the evolution of his identity as a BJJ practitioner (as he moves away from the idea of practicing BJJ to help his Judo) in the direction that will be most helpful to him in accomplishing his specific goals. In Albert’s description of this process, we see both the emerging need to define himself in relation to his practice, and the diverse forum-based ideational resources that he was able to draw upon in order to complete that transformation in an advantageous manner. This is an excellent example of an individual developing an identity in order to achieve a specific purpose (gaining a high level of skill in BJJ) by leveraging the strengths of online forums.

Material Resources

Though it may seem counterintuitive, participation on internet forums can facilitate an individual’s access to material resources as well. One example of this possibility appears in Phil’s interview, where he writes “People pointed out the Blue Belt DVD by Roy Dean and that was a great help for me at 6-8 months in.” The DVD in question acts as a material resource in that it is an “artifact that supports one’s sense of connection to the practice” (Nasir and Cooks, 47). In this case, the DVD supports Phil’s sense of connection to the practice by giving him clear directions on how to achieve his specific goals in the practice (moving from white belt to blue belt, in this case). This both reinforces Phil’s sense of how he fits into the practice by engaging
with him in that position, and also validates his aspirations and future goals by giving him some of the materials necessary to achieve them.

A similar dynamic emerged in the interview with Trevor from the Soccer Forum, who mentioned that he “swapped World Cup stickers\(^\text{16}\) with fellow posters through the post\(^\text{17}\), it was essentially one big swap shop.” The stickers Trevor refers to are a significant auxiliary activity in the world of soccer fandom. During each World Cup, fans try to complete their collections before the end of the tournament by buying and trading stickers to fill out their books. On the Soccer Forum, during the 2014 World Cup there was a thread dedicated solely to this practice of sticker trading and collection, and it served as a hub for the sort of trades that Trevor described. In this way, participation on the forum facilitates the users’ access to one of the key material resources of soccer fandom, allowing users to trade with a wider variety of people than would be available in their local community. Similar to the DVD that Phil mentioned, this expansion of trading opportunities supports users in their effort to accomplish a specific goal related to their practice.

Mukhtar also provided an example of a way in which the Grappling Forum facilitated his access to, and effective use of, material resources. As described in the previous chapter, Mukhtar spent a lot of his time on the equipment section of the forum early in his posting career. Mukhtar described this in his interview, writing that: “There was lots of crossover [between the forum and offline practice] for me since I took others advice on gear purchases. I got recommendations on mouth guards, head gear, knee pads, groin protection, etc.” This crossover supported Mukhtar in both acquiring the proper equipment for the practice, and also developing an idea of what to use

\(^{16}\) For every world cup, the Italian company Panini releases sticker books and packs of collectible stickers featuring each of the players involved.

\(^{17}\) I.e. through the mail.

68
and how to use it competently. In addition to serving as a safe place to begin his integration into the community, the gear-related threads on the forum also provided Mukhtar with key assistance in the proper selection and use of equipment related to the practice of grappling. This gave Mukhtar something of a head start in the crucial process of acclimating to the material components of the sport, allowing him to represent himself as a legitimate participant in the practice that much sooner.

For Matt, the Grappling Forum played an important role in mediating and informing his use of the vast amounts material resources available in the form of Youtube videos. While Phil was directed straight to a DVD tailored to his interests, Matt accomplished a similar goal by using the forum to determine which videos would be most helpful to him, and which he would be better off ignoring. Matt wrote: “I looked towards this forum as a filter. Youtube is an ocean of information, and I was looking for a glass of water. The forum was filled with more intelligible debate than what was in the Youtube comments. Almost like customer reviews on Amazon, [the Grappling Forum] helped me shape myself into a better grappler based on their shared experiences and conversation.” While the forum is not directly providing Matt with material resources in this example, it does help to steer him towards those materials which would be most useful to him. Similar to the way that the DVD offered to Phil was tailored to his specific needs and position in the practice, Matt was able to use the ongoing discussions and reviews available on the forum to determine which of the many videos offered on Youtube would be most useful in his own practice.

One benefit of this system is that as Matt’s needs and position in the practice change over time, his use of the “reviews” on the forum can shift as well, ensuring that he always has a source of material resources appropriate to his skill level and goals. While Phil’s “Blue Belt”
DVD will outgrow its usefulness over time, his and Matt’s ability to use the forum to direct them towards appropriate resources will remain constant throughout their progression. Furthermore, because of the intimate nature of the forum community, which Phil describes as “a family,” users can get advice not just on which videos are good, but on which videos would be good for them. Other users who are familiar both with the videos in question and the specific position and needs of the person asking can direct them straight to materials that are appropriate for their own personal skill level and goals, like the “Blue Belt” DVD was for Phil as a white belt making a push for the next rank. Where a stranger might tell a more experienced Phil that “the Blue Belt DVD is great,” a member of this sort of tightly knit community might tell him that it’s a good DVD but that he won’t get much out of it as an experienced practitioner.

Finally, this understanding of an individual’s training background and goals can help other users to offer suggestions for “next steps” in the individual’s progression, helping them to set the goals that will direct their growth. When Matt writes that “Almost like customer reviews on Amazon, [the Grappling Forum] helped me shape myself into a better grappler based on their shared experiences and conversation,” it also implies that the shared experiences of other grapplers can help him to direct his own growth in profitable ways. Just as Coach J in Nasir and Cooks’s study pushed certain athletes towards different events based on his evaluation of their skillset, by mediating their access to material resources, so too can the elders in the Grappling Forum community help to guide Matt’s progression onto an inbound identity trajectory by directing him toward material resources that are appropriate to his individual abilities.

Knowledge Artifacts as a Material Resource

Looking back at Nasir and Cooks’s description of material resources as “the physical environment, its organization and [how] the artifacts in it support one’s sense of connection to
the practice” (47) it seems clear that, in soccer fandom, the games themselves must make up one of the key material resources available. While the Soccer Forum featured in this study has strict rules against facilitating access to video coverage of the games themselves (as this would violate copyright law), it does provide users with access to a wide variety of written descriptions of the games, the players involved, key moments of play, strategies used, and so on. I argue that these pieces of written information constitute similar “artifacts” to the visual representations of the games themselves. These pieces of information are taken up and used in much the same way as the artifacts that Nasir and Cooks describe in their study of the track and field team. Where the track athlete must take up and use special track shoes to engage in the practices of their community, so too must the soccer fan take up and use specialized pieces of information about teams, players, statistics and so on to engage in the practices (namely, debate and discussion) of their own community. Because of this similarity, it makes more sense to expand the definition proposed by Nasir and Cooks slightly, rather than create a separate category for these sorts of artifacts, when in fact they function in much the same was as material resources in this context. If we think of material resources as the materials required for the individual to engage in the activities of the practice, thus solidifying their identity as a participatory member of the community, then these sorts of “knowledge artifacts” fit the mold quite well.

With this perspective in mind, we can return to Trevor’s interview to see how his access to these resources can affect his practice and help him to define his role in the community. Trevor described a specific example of this sort of “knowledge artifact” when asked to describe something he learned or picked up from his experience on the Soccer Forum: “I used to think Scott Parker was great, but then somebody pointed out the amount of pirouettes\(^\text{18}\) he does and it

\(^{18}\) A technique where the player guards the ball and turns in a tight circle, perhaps to buy time.
slows down our attacking moves. The next game I couldn’t help but notice it - how had I been so blind before?” In this case, Trevor is afforded easier access to a key piece of information about a player on his favorite team. While this is something that Trevor may have noticed on his own in time, his experience on the forum facilitates his access through the constant trading of pieces of information like this. In this way, the forum becomes a kind of “warehouse” for many of the various knowledge artifacts that act as material resources in soccer fandom. Once given access to this piece of knowledge, Trevor is able to integrate it into his participation in the practice during the next game by using it as a lens through which to analyze the proceedings.

In this fashion, the piece of information about Scott Parker’s play style functions very similarly to some of the material resources described by Nasir and Cooks. Just as the track shoes are an artifact that mediates an athlete’s participation in the practice of track and field, so too does Trevor’s knowledge artifact about Scott Parker’s pirouettes mediate his participation in the practice of soccer fandom. In this particular example it works as an indicator of insider status in the community. Knowledge of this aspect of Scott Parker’s game, and its detrimental impact on the performance of his team, is taken up by members of the soccer fandom community as a sort of venue for participation. The Soccer Forum would have had a thread dedicated to analyzing Scott Parker’s play during his time at their club, and discussion of the ins and outs of the pirouette would be one of the ways to enter into that venue for participation. Similarly, when I googled “Scott Parker Pirouettes” to see what Trevor was talking about (engaging in some identity building of my own along the way) one of the top results was an archived thread from another forum based around a team that Parker played for later in his career. The thread was titled “Scott Parker Pirouette Bingo” and featured forum users making wagers and predictions about how many times Parker would use the infamous technique in an upcoming game. The sort
of information that Trevor references in his description of the Scott Parker pirouette can act as a
gating feature between different levels of participation in the community, with those who don’t
know what a pirouette is or who haven’t noticed Scott Parker’s proclivity for its use, barred from
participation in aspects of the practice that draw on that knowledge. Thus, Trevor’s access to this
sort of information on the forum affords him new ways to participate in the practice, and in that
way in impacts how closely he can relate himself to the field as a whole and develop an identity
as a legitimate participant on an inbound trajectory. An athlete without the proper shoes and a
fan who does not know what he’s looking at are similarly adrift in respect to their chosen
practices.

Trevor’s use of this resource goes beyond his interpretation of events on game-day, and
also plays a crucial role in his interaction with other members of the fan community between
games. When I asked him a follow up question about whether he ever uses these pieces of
information in conversation with other fans, Trevor replied: “All the time! It's allowed me to
have an opinion, or at least some sort of background, to all sorts of weird and wonderful players
and teams. . . . I'm always careful not to express someone else's opinion as my own though,
instead I'll phrase it as a question - ‘do you not think Parker slows our attacks down?’ Otherwise
I'd be changing my opinion every other day, and sometimes I just like to start the debate.” From
this example we can see that Trevor is able to use these knowledge artifacts to deepen his
personal understanding of the sport which helps to solidify his connection to, and place in, the
practice of soccer fandom. In addition to this, it is also interesting to notice the way that Trevor
describes himself as using these pieces of information to guide or facilitate his interaction with
other fans. First, it gives him something to talk about, again acting as a resource that supports his
participation in the practice. More intriguing than that, however, is the way that Trevor leverages
his access to this information to craft a specific role for himself in the interaction of the community. By framing his factoid about Scott Parker’s pirouettes as a question and describing himself as “someone who starts the debate” Trevor has clearly carved out a niche for himself in the larger community of practice. In this action we see some of the interplay that is possible between different types of identity resources, as Trevor’s use of material resources helps him to develop an idea of how he fits into the practice and the community as a whole, thus supporting his uptake of ideational resources related to that self-conception. This use of material resources also facilitates the process of developing relationships within the community, by giving Trevor something that he “brings to the table” during group discussions.

We can see a similar process at work in Liam’s description of his own experience as well. Liam mentioned that, while spending time in Chile and China, the forum became his main source for news and information about the team. As a specific example, Liam wrote: “I think it has informed me on player performances . . . It's particularly true though of some of the youngsters, such as Adam Campbell, that people know well on the forum - I'm certainly much more aware of him because people have been talking about him on the forum for years.” This sheds some light on the way in which a forum community can supplement a user’s access to material resources, albeit second-hand, when their primary source for those resources is inaccessible. This supplementary source allowed Liam to maintain his feeling that he is an “informed fan” despite his lack of access to the games themselves. Information about up-and-coming players is one of the key ways that sports fans position themselves and knowledgeable participants in their practice. While Liam is definitely not able to watch youth or reserve games, he is able to use the forum to collect the information that comes out of those games from the fans in the local area of the team who can keep up with them. This in turn allows Liam, in interactions with other fans, to
position himself as a legitimate fan of the club who knows about the goings-on of the team and the youth prospects that may be coming up through the ranks. This hearkens back to Nasir and Cooks’s description of material resources as “how the athletes came to use the artifacts in an expert way and how they moved through the space with expertise and ownership” (48) in that it represents an example of an individual using the artifacts available to position himself as someone who “owns the space” and can navigate it in an expert manner.

Relational Resources

The socially focused structure of online forums makes them an excellent tool for providing access to relational resources. Relational resources depend on the individual forming distinct relationships with members of the practice into which they are integrating, and the ability to interact with hundreds of individuals who share an interest in that practice on an online forum provides an excellent opportunity to form those relationships. Access to relational resources was a common theme throughout interviews with individuals from both of the forums discussed in this study, and proved to be a key part of the benefits that they gained through their participation on the forums. These relational resources are key to the construction of a practice-linked identity because they allow the individual to have that developing identity recognized and validated by established members of the practice. This validation allows the individual to consolidate the new identity as legitimate and focus on expanding it in the specific direction, or towards the specific specialties, that relate to their individual goals. In short, access to relational resources acts as a key gating feature in the identity development process, without recognition from established members of the community a new identity cannot be validated, and thus will not be able to maintain an inbound trajectory.
This validation is also crucial to the process of maintaining an already established practice-linked identity, and online forums can provide access to the resources necessary for that maintenance when individuals would otherwise be cut off from them. For example, Liam mentioned in his interview that while he was attending university in Cambridge, not really a soccer town despite being in England, he “spent most the year with no one to really talk much about football with, and certainly no [fans of his team] to talk properly about [his team].” This may not seem like a serious problem at first, but Liam goes on to explain the importance of these sorts of interactions to the practice of sports fandom: “Being 'around' people who care, reminds me why I care . . . I honestly don't imagine it would be possible to stay really invested in the team if all I had was watching streams\(^{19}\) on my own, surrounded by disinterested people.” This response is interesting because it frames the relationships with other fans as central to the experience and practice of “being a fan” of any particular team or sport. Liam describes a scenario where, if he were cut off from that interaction, his interest in (and identity related to) supporting the team would wither and die out. Without the validation from other members of the community that the practice, and his own contribution to it, is important Liam would lose interest in participating and “football fandom” would cease to be an important part of his life or identity.

Liam’s access to relational resources on the forum allows him to maintain his identity by constantly reaffirming his place in the overall fan community through engaging in the practices of that community: “Arguing, complaining about the regime\(^{20}\), the ref, whatever, all that's a big part of football and the forum allows me to still experience that - with Geordies, people I've got shared history and love with.” Here we can see that Liam is able to maintain his identity and

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\(^{19}\) Pirated feeds of live games available on the internet, generally unreliable and of low image quality.

\(^{20}\) The owner and the manager of the club are subjected to intense and constant scrutiny.
place in the community by keeping up with the ongoing evolution of the practice, and staying “linked in” to the cultural or interpersonal facets of being a soccer fan. By engaging in these sorts of discussions Liam is able to develop and maintain relationships among the community of practice, and also define his own role in that community through the positions he takes up on the various topics of conversation. This shows both the importance of relationships to the practice of soccer fandom, and the way in which those relationships can support an individual’s access to ideational resources as well. For more detail on how this interaction works, we can look at Liam’s account of his participation, from China, in a protest against the team’s manager that was organized on the forum:

A great example of the connection the site facilitates is the new protest section. Discussing and helping fund Pardew\textsuperscript{21} Out banners for the end of last season was great for making me feel I could have a voice at the match, that I thought I’d lost. I was also one of the people included in the Chronicle’s\textsuperscript{22} ‘Pardew Out’ messages from around the world. I was on page 3 of my local paper holding a poster saying ‘LIAM IN GUIYANG, CHINA WANTS PARDEW OUT’, this was a very real manifestation of the connection the forum facilitates between a geordie-in-exile and the city/club.

This brief anecdote provides a concrete example of the way in which Liam’s access to relational resources on the forum allow him to continue his participation in the day to day activities of the community of practice when otherwise he would not be able to. By maintaining his relationships with other supporters, Liam is able to stay abreast of the current goings-on at the club and maintain his “insider” status in the community. Furthermore, when Liam mentions that it allowed him to “feel I could have a voice at the match, that I thought I’d lost” it shows us that he has been able to maintain his identity as an involved supporter of the club, a person whose actions are relevant in determining the ongoing direction of the community and the practice as a whole. Finally, as Liam appears in the newspaper and on the forum holding his “Pardew Out”

\textsuperscript{21} Alan Pardew is the club’s manager, a divisive figure among the fans.
\textsuperscript{22} A local newspaper that ran a three page piece showing fans from around the world holding these signs.
sign, it gives him an opportunity to have that identity as an involved supporter recognized and validated by the community at large.

Another example of relational resources on the soccer forum is the access to mentors that Joe described in his interview. Joe is an American fan who got into soccer and the club the Soccer Forum is built around later in life. One of the idiosyncrasies of the Soccer Forum is the use of what Liam described as the “geordie dialect” in many posts, referring to the written representation of both the dialectical peculiarities of north-eastern English and also the heavy accent for which the region is famous. Joe has a humorous inclination that shines through in his description of trying to understand the dialect and accent early in his posting career: “Man, I didn't have the slightest idea what was happening at the start. ‘Howay’? What the f***?! ‘Wor’? What, m********r? Speak English! There was a massive learning curve in the early months.” Fortunately for Joe, the forum also afforded him access to relational resources, in the form of mentors, who were able to help him adapt to the language of the Soccer Forum community, and the larger community of north-eastern English people. Joe describes this process by writing: “I had to just flat out ask what things meant. ‘Like’, alone was like AP English. Fortunately everyone was really accommodating and the abuse was minimal.” There are two things of interest here, first, we can see that Joe was able to use his access to relationships with people “in the know” to help him navigate this early challenge to his integration into the community. Second, Joe’s use of the word “abuse” in this sentence reflects the common English connotation of verbal or written abuse, rather than the more physical connotation common to America. Joe also elaborated on another example of his uptake of the Geordie language: “I have

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23 Geordie for “go on” and used for numerous different purposes.
24 An example of the written accent, this represents the northeastern British pronunciation of “our”
25 Geordie English uses the word “like” as filler, but usually at the end of sentences rather than the middle.
to admit...I say Howay. I mutter it! If something goes wrong, I'll mutter a soft ‘Howay man’ in my best (terrible) Geordie accent.” These are signs of Joe’s acclimation to the language of the community over time, and the way in which his constant communication with members of that community has helped him to develop an aspect of his identity, reflected here in his speech and writing, which helps him fit into the group and participate meaningfully.

Ethan and the Inbound Identity Trajectory

Ethan is a member of the Soccer Forum and a fan of the team the forum is built around but he was born in West London, far from the Northumbrian home of his favorite team, and still lives there to this day with his wife and children. Ethan’s story can offer us a holistic view of the way in which the different identity resources available on the Soccer Forum interact, and how it is possible to leverage them to assist in the transition from a peripheral identity trajectory to an inbound trajectory. Ethan first describes his experience as an out of town fan without access to relational resources as a rather unfulfilling experience: “I used to travel up a few times a season, either driving or on the train, and aside from popping in to see my Gran I'd barely say two words to anyone for the duration of my trip. It was quite boring but I did it as I loved watching the team.” This is a classic example of an individual with a peripheral identity trajectory. He is participating in the practice, but always on a fringe level without really deepening his participation or expanding his role in the community. Instead, he remains on the outside looking in, and his identity as a supporter of the team reflects that, as we can see in his response to a follow up question: “I did definitely feel like an outsider, a visitor to someone else's city if you like.” Which makes it clear that Ethan’s self-perception was that of someone who did not really belong in the practice, and that he did not feel meaningfully connected to the community. The use of the word “outsider” is particularly telling, as it distinctly implies a social position outside
the trust and recognition of the community. There is no clearer way to describe someone on a
peripheral identity trajectory than as being continually kept outside the inner circles of the
community of practice.

Fortunately for Ethan, this changed as he began to develop relationships on the Soccer Forum. By following this process, we can develop an idea of the impact that access to these
relational resources had on Ethan’s experience as a fan, his access to other resources, and his
identity trajectory. Ethan signed up on the Soccer Forum after trying out a few other websites
without success, and upon joining the community he says that he was “instantly drawn to the
‘Online Football’ section. They had previously organized the Red vs Blues matches between
themselves but wanted to play matches against other teams. Paul and Steve were the main
people sorting it out.” This Online Football sub-section of the forum afforded Ethan an
opportunity to deepen his practice and also start to define his role in the community. As he
describes his first experience playing a soccer game with the other forum members, we can begin
to see Ethan’s identity taking on an inbound trajectory: “The guys were sound. I met a load of
forum regulars, Paul, Steve . . . and loads more. The football was awful, we got beat but it was a
great day. After that I went to the game on my own and then went home on my own as usual. But
it felt much better having spoke to people.” While Ethan’s literal description of his experience at
the stadium has not changed, he still sits alone, his interpretation of the meaning of the event has
begun to shift and it would seem that his feeling of himself as “an outsider” has begun to change.
Also, it is important to note that Ethan’s use of the football field and his opportunity to
participate in the game itself are material resources to which he gains access by developing his
relationship with Paul and Steve. This is the beginning of the interplay and mutual support that

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26 A sub-section of the forum that facilitates in-person soccer games between members.
27 Two of the senior members in the forum community.
we will see between the different types of identity resources as we follow Ethan’s story. Also, when Ethan describes the other forum members that he met that day as “sound” we can infer that they were welcoming and kind, and his positive experience playing with them even in a loss tells us that they must have been accepting of his presence and participation on the field, validating his identity as a legitimate member of the community.

At this point in the interview, Ethan gave a detailed description of his growing acceptance in the community:

From there I just got to know the guys really well. We did an inter-forum match at SJP in May 2010 which really helped me get to know the guys. The game was great (my team lost) but I got the MOM\textsuperscript{28} award for my team. There was a brilliant night out after, many bars were visited, much alcohol was consumed and everyone had an awesome time. I crashed at Dan’s house, the sort of thing these guys do for people all the time, and from there on I was just one of the lads.

This seems to be the pivotal moment in Ethan’s transition from a peripheral identity trajectory to an inbound trajectory. Once again, his description of a “great” game coming in a loss indicates that he had positive interactions with the other players, and in awarding him the MOM award the other members of the community have shown a legitimate appreciation for what Ethan brings to the practice. Furthermore, Ethan’s description of the night on the town indicates that he has penetrated to a deeper level of participation in the practice, and been granted access to more of the activities that make up that participation. Finally, in “crashing at Dan’s house” we (and Ethan himself) can see that other members of the community have placed considerable trust in him, indicative of their acceptance of Ethan into the inner circle of the group.

Ethan’s anecdote also provides another excellent representation of the interplay that is possible between the different categories of identity resources. In accessing and developing relational resources, Ethan opens up his access to more the material resources of the practice, in

\textsuperscript{28} “Man of the Match,” similar to the “Most Valuable Player” awards given in American sports.
that he gains access to the soccer field itself, the “much alcohol” that was consumed, and so on. This access to material resources in turn engendered his access to ideational resources, particularly in the form of his “Man of the Match” award which gave him a clear way to define his place in, and his contribution to, the group as a whole. Finally, this process comes full circle, because as Ethan takes up these new material and ideational resources it serves to deepen his relationships with other members of the group, as evidenced by his acceptance into Dan’s home at the end of a night spent “accessing material resources” together at the local pub. Ethan’s description of his integration into this group provides an example of what we might consider an ideal scenario for the development of an inbound identity trajectory, where all three types of identity resources are readily available and arranged in such a way that the adoption of each supports deeper access to the others.

The impact of this transition to an inbound identity trajectory becomes clear when Ethan describes his current match-day experience at the stadium: “I'd say my experience has definitely changed for the better. I always enjoyed going but it was a very solitary experience. Now I know there are at least 30 people I could ring or message when I am up there and have pre and post match drinks with. I could also arrange to go to games and sit with people I consider my friends. So yeah, a far superior experience and it is all down to [the forum].” This is a clear departure from Ethan’s earlier description of going to games alone and “not saying two words to anyone” and it is representative of the deeper connection that Ethan feels between himself, and his identity as a supporter of the team, and the community of practice as a whole.

While Ethan may always have described himself as a fan of the team, his access to the identity resources provided by the forum community has given him a way to enact that identity in meaningful ways and to have it recognized and validated by other members of the community.
This has in turn allowed Ethan to adopt new roles and responsibilities within the community as we can see when he relates another anecdote:

Just look at Jung’s trip over here. That was a crazy few days. I met up with Dan in London to go to the Chelsea game and as we were walking in to Stamford Bridge a random Korean guy ran up to us and asked us where the away fans went in. We instantly both asked if he was Jung, which of course he was, and we had a great night (the result certainly helped) and then a few days later we all met up again in Bar Loco next to [our team’s stadium] for the Manchester City game to introduce Jung to a load of other forum legends.

This gives us a clear example of the results of Ethan’s inbound identity trajectory, as his role in the community of practice has changed from the outsider circling the periphery, to the insider helping others to integrate into the community. It is also important to note here that it was Jung’s previous access to and use of the relational resources on the Soccer Forum that allowed him to be put on this sort of “integration fast track” by Dan and Ethan when they met by chance in London. He was immediately recognized and folded into the group because of the relationship that already existed between him and the other two men, a relationship developed exclusively through interactions on the forum due to the geographical distance between the interested parties.

Ethan’s experience has provided us with an excellent example of how the relationships and identity resources available on internet forums can help facilitate the process of developing an inbound practice-linked identity, and it seems appropriate to end this section with his own parting comments: “I’d say the forum has certainly helped me feel closer to the club, and that is magnified by my relationships with people who live in the city. I do feel more at home there than I used to . . . I’d move my family to [the city] if I could, safe in the knowledge that I already know a whole group of sound lads I could go out with. The wife may not like it so much.”

29 A forum regular who lives in South Korea.
30 Chelsea Football Club’s home stadium.
31 Their team won 2-0.
response truly reflects the depth of Ethan’s transformation, he has gone from feeling like a complete outsider to being so at home that he would consider moving his family 300 miles to the northeast in order to be closer to the community in question. He just needs to get his wife to start posting on the forum first.
CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSION:

The results of this study indicate that the affordances of the online forum medium can offer users unique opportunities to access, build, or distribute identity resources. Online forums are particularly effective in helping individuals to bypass several gating features present in “offline” communities, such as those based on physical appearance, qualities of speech, or the risk of embarrassment. Forums can also allow users to access identity resources related to their practice when they would otherwise be cut off from them by geographical distances or temporal restrictions, with the technical features of this medium affording users the opportunity to communicate freely with other members of the community across large distances and at times that are convenient to them. Furthermore, online forum communities offer users a way to supplement their access to identity resources when the access available in their local community of practice is insufficient. This supplementary access allows individuals a recourse in scenarios similar to the situation that some of the athletes observed in Nasir and Cooks’s study faced, where Coach J was deliberately offering or withholding access to identity resources based on his evaluation of their potential. The online forum offers users in that situation an alternative mode of access to identity resources, so that they are not entirely dependent on the goodwill of local gatekeepers like Coach J. One of the key conclusions that we must draw from the results of this study is that the identity resources described by Nasir and Cooks are distributed across numerous different spaces and contexts, and that an individual’s access to identity resources is not solely mediated by the conditions within their local community of practice. Because of this, we must expand our consideration of identity resources to include numerous contexts and mediums, such
as print or film, in order to develop a holistic understanding of the resources available to individuals as they enter a new practice, and how they can be most profitably used.

This study also complicates the idea proposed by Nasir and Cooks that “. . . different people can be offered different identities” (51) within a community of practice, particularly by showing that individuals may be able to access the resources required to construct a wider range of possible identities than is offered within the local community of practice by engaging with online communities or other outside sources. The question for future research then becomes whether there are barriers in place that can hinder the acceptance of these “outside resources” within the local community of practice. Keeping with Nasir and Cooks’s example of the track and field team, we must consider the possibility that a figure like Coach J might resist an athlete’s attempt to bring outside resources to bear in constructing their track and field related identity. If, for whatever reason, the Coach J figure has decided to restrict an individual athlete’s access to identity resources, it seems likely that they might take it as an affront to their authority if the athlete began utilizing outside sources to gain access to those resources. One question this raises is whether an identity constructed using resources from outside sources would need to be validated by an authority figure like Coach J in order to be effective, or whether the confidence and sense of self related to such an identity could carry over and have the same positive impact on the athlete’s performance as an officially sanctioned identity - without the coach’s blessing. If it is in fact within the coach’s ability to devalue identities formed with outside resources, or the outside resources themselves, it would remain to determine exactly how, and perhaps why, the coach might do so. Trevor’s interview showed us one possible source of this sort of devaluation in the stigma that he felt was attached to online sources of information. This concept of internet-based information or resources as unreliable could be used to devalue the identity construction
work done in online spaces or using those resources. Future research directed towards
discovering the extent and impact of this sort of bias could provide some clarification on this
issue, particularly when combined with an examination of the potentially contentious
relationship between “offline” authority figures and internet-based identity resources.

In addition to complicating our ideas about where identity resources are available, the
results of this study also force us to consider other roles that identity resources might play. In
Liam’s case we saw a situation where an individual was accessing identity resources not to
develop an identity or even to achieve an inbound identity trajectory, but instead to maintain a
pre-existing identity that was already established as a full participant in the practice. This brings
up the question of exactly what resources are required in order to maintain an identity as a full
participant within a particular practice, and whether the lack of access to those resources could
result in an individual developing an identity on an “outbound” trajectory that takes them farther
and farther away from any meaningful engagement with the key activities of the practice. If this
sort of outbound trajectory is possible, which seems likely, then defining the role that identity
resources play in maintaining an “insider” identity once the inbound trajectory has run its course
could be crucial in further developing our understanding of the relationship between identity and
participation in a community of practice. Consideration possible outbound identity trajectories
also brings up the idea that individuals might intentionally pursue an outbound identity
trajectory, in the case of “short timer” inmates in a prison for example. Inmates who are
expecting to be released in the near future may find it beneficial to begin to disengage from their
usual communities of practice within the prison as they prepare for their return to civilian life.
The “short timer” dynamic would carry with it an entirely new perspective on the use of identity
resources where an individual might be actively trying to dismantle an identity, such as that of a
prisoner, and thus be discarding or resisting the use of resources related to that identity in the hopes of developing an outbound trajectory rather than maintaining their “insider” status.

Crucially, the results of this study also indicate that the benefits of identity construction work completed online can in fact transfer across to be used in offline spaces. Furthermore, the reverse is true as well, and we must begin to consider transfer as bidirectional, with both online and offline spaces providing crucial input to the identity construction process. In the case study of Mukhtar, we have seen that important elements of his identity as a grappler were developed through interactions on the Grappling Forum. It is through those interactions that Mukhtar was able to develop his understanding of the norms and values of the community and, in doing so, begin to internalize the practices of the community and construct an idea of himself as a legitimate participant in the practice as a whole. This idea of his relation to, and place within, the practice of grappling then helped to facilitate Mukhtar’s integration into the local “offline” community of practice. Because Mukhtar was able to develop an idea of himself as someone who routinely acts out the norms and values of the practice of grappling on the Grappling Forum, he entered the local community of practice pre-equipped with many of the “ways of being” that newcomers must develop as part of the process of integrating into the community. Another thing that Mukhtar’s interview shows us is that he was able to cede his executive function to the aspect of his identity as a grappler in respect to matters appropriate to the context of grappling, both online and in person. Mukhtar’s case, among others, provides key support for the idea that this cession of the executive to intentionally constructed aspects of one’s identity is both possible and effective as a means of guiding personal development.

The examples of individuals transferring identities, and their embedded ways of being, developed through online practices into specifically targeted offline communities leads us to the
further conclusion that forum use is purposeful. The people interviewed in this study were seeking out and engaging with particular forums based on specific goals related to the pursuit of their chosen practice. Furthermore, their participation on these forums was often characterized by those interviewed as a legitimate part of their practice as a whole. Thus we must regard forum use in these cases as an action undertaken with specific intentions related to each individual’s personal goals within their practice, as well as an integral part of their participation in that practice itself. This intentionality, and the close connection drawn by users between the forums and their practice as a whole, means that in the future we must consider online forum-use not simply as recreation or idle socialization but as an opportunity to engage in legitimate and meaningful participation in the practices with which the forum communities are concerned. In short, we must begin to consider forum use as intentional, purposeful, and meaningful in our future research on the use of online mediums.

The intentionality of forum use also opens the door for further considerations of ways in which participation in online forum communities could be put to academic purposes. It could be productive in the future to examine the efficacy of a curriculum in which students are encouraged to engage with online forums parallel to their work in the class. The specific nature of most forums’ subject matter means that individual communities could be identified which are concerned with practices that are related to the learning goals of a particular class. Of course such an examination with have to include consideration of the potential pitfalls involved in directing students to participate on public forums. The potential presence of trolls, predators, and other malcontents would need to be assessed and the risks that they might present carefully evaluated. One of the key questions raised by the emergence of the internet in general, and the study of forums especially, is how to determine credibility or authority within such a free and
“semi-anonymous” community. If, as we have seen in the results of this study, users can modify their outward presentation as they see fit, create multiple accounts to serve different purposes and are generally not tied down to any concrete identifying information, how then can one determine which users are honest, credible, and safe to engage with, and which are not? Certain users may communicate false information with good intentions, simply being mistaken in their own knowledge. Other users may intentionally distribute false information for their own purposes, while still others may distribute valuable information under an appearance that does not imply credibility. The task of sorting out valid and credible sources of information within the online forum medium is made quite difficult by the very same structures of the medium that make it so useful in other ways. It is reasonable to surmise that experienced users of the online forum medium may have developed methods or strategies for determining credibility in information and other users, and future research into the details of those processes and how they came to be could be of great use in determining whether there is a legitimate academic role for the online forum medium in the future. Furthermore, it would need to be established exactly what sort of learning goals could be facilitated by forum use. This study presents a strong argument for forum use as a way to expedite the development of practice linked identities on inbound trajectories, certainly a key component of the learning process, but it remains to be seen what other goals could be profitably pursued within these online forum communities.

In addition to targeting specific subjects focused on by particular forum communities, forum use could be leveraged in the teaching of composition as well. The interview with Matt presented in this study provides anecdotal support for the idea that the intentionality of forum use makes it an effective context to practice writing in response to genuine exigency and in response to the legitimate interests of students. Whether this is a dynamic that could be brought into the
academic institution without losing the aforementioned exigency and legitimacy of interest is a question that will have to be addressed by future research. However, Matt’s story implies that the potential for forums as a context within which to practice writing skills is a subject that is worth considering in detail. The benefits of a context within which students could engage in practical, purpose driven writing in pursuit of their own legitimate interests are clear, but it remains to be seen whether forum use could be brought into the structure of a class safely and without altering those properties. One way to approach determining the efficacy of forum use in teaching composition could be to analyze the genres common to online forums and look for overlap between the generic conventions of forums and those of genres common to composition classrooms. One could then make a preliminary determination of how much or little the practices involved in online forum use might coincide with the practices that make up composition classes. Whether or not the intention is to determine the efficacy of leveraging online forums for composition classes, a study of the genres involved in forum posting could prove to be a fruitful topic for further research. Drawing from Carolyn Miller’s ideas in her work on blogs and the genres enacted within that format, we can surmise that there is a close relationship between the online forum medium and the genres enacted with that medium. In addition to this, there are cultural considerations to consider that vary from forum to forum and would also have an impact on the genres that typify each space. The intersection of the medium and the local culture on each forum, and how they interact to determine the genres commonly enacted by each community, could be an intriguing topic for future research. Such research could also further develop our understanding of the affordances of the online forum structure and how they might be leveraged for academic purposes, as well as the influence and characteristics of individual forum cultures and their impact on the genre and participation conventions of their communities.
WORKS CITED
WORKS CITED


Miller, Carolyn, and Dawn Shepherd. "Questions for Genre Theory from the Blogosphere."


### NUFC

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Football</strong></th>
<th>Anything and everything related to Newcastle United. Discussion of other teams is also welcome.</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Protests</strong></td>
<td>For the discussion and organisation of protests led by the members of [redacted].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Tickets and Travel</strong></td>
<td>All ticketing issues, including sales, exchanges, travel, accommodation, food, drink and stadium guides. NO TOUTING! Any touts will be banned and their details will be sent to NUFC.</td>
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</table>

Moderators: [redacted]

### General

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Chat</strong></th>
<th>Our football-free zone for all of your everyday conversation and serious discussion needs.</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Games</strong></td>
<td>Share your current gaming experiences and indulge in the hype of upcoming releases.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Help</strong></td>
<td>Need help with something? Stick it in here and one of our forum members will assist you.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Moderator: [redacted]

### Other

| **The Rules** | The laws of the [redacted] land and the posting guidelines that go along with them. |

(Figure 1: Sub-Forums. Usernames and the forum’s name have been obscured by the author.)
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Thread Name</th>
<th>Username</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Threads within the Football sub-forum.</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Usernames have been obscured by the author.</td>
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<tr>
<td>World Cup 2018 awarded to Russia; World Cup 2022 awarded to Qatar</td>
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<tr>
<td>Still Not Worthy Of A Thread</td>
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<tr>
<td>The MLS Thread: Fight &amp; Win</td>
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<tr>
<td>The Reserves and Academy Thread - Live v Stoke City on SS2 @ 6:45pm (13/11)</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Other Clubs’ New Kits: 2015-16</td>
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<td>Gaël Bigirimana</td>
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<td>SackPardew.com</td>
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<td>Sunderland</td>
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<td>Facundo ‘unused sub’ Ferreyra</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ayoze Pérez is better than you</td>
<td></td>
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<tr>
<td>Sammy Ameobi</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

(Figure 2: Threads within the Football sub-forum. Usernames have been obscured by the author.)
(Figure 3: The Grappling Forum's search function provides a variety of useful features.)
APPENDIX B
Grappling Forum Introductory Post

Hey everyone, I don't know if anyone will remember me, I used to be a Mod on this forum about 10 years ago. I can't believe it’s been that long, but I guess there might still be some posters here from that bygone era. Anyway, in the time since I last posted here I got my BJJ brown belt (yay!) and have been working on my master's degree.

I'm writing my master's thesis now, it is about internet communities and the relationship between someone's online identity and their offline identity. As a 13 year Jiu jitsu practitioner I would also love to sneak some BJJ into my thesis, so this seems like a perfect opportunity. I am looking for people who would be willing to participate in a short, informal interview about their activity on [the Grappling Forum], and how it relates to their life offline. For example, whether or not the things you do on [the Grappling Forum], such as discussing techniques, have an impact on your grappling career "offline." To protect your privacy, the forum will not be named in my thesis, and pseudonyms will be used for all participants.

If you would be willing to participate in an interview, please let me know by sending me a PM or e-mailing me at madmarkul @ gmail.com and I will be forever grateful!

In the meantime, I'd love to use this thread to have an informal discussion about what you get out of your time on this forum... How does it add to or support or work alongside your pursuit of grappling excellence? Does anyone have a story of using something they learned on this forum "in real life"? On the flip side, as a veteran grappler and forum user, do you find it rewarding to help the newer users on this forum? Basically what I’d like to know is: How does your time on [the Grappling Forum] interact with your "offline" life as a grappler? Thanks for your time guys, and it's good to be back!

99
Soccer Forum Introductory Post

Hi all, so I've noticed over the last few years that this forum occupies an interesting place in my life as a whole. It seems to allow me to connect with the club, and the idea of being a [fan of this club] in ways that otherwise would not be possible for someone living in rural California. With the difficulty of watching live matches (though the new NBC deal helps a lot) and the complete absence of a local fan community, I rely almost exclusively on this forum to connect with the club and the larger [club] supporters' community.

In my other life I am a graduate student at CSU Chico, and I'm in the process of writing my Master's Thesis about online communities and the role that those communities play in peoples' lives as a whole, and [the Soccer Forum] seems like a perfect place to gather some data. This is not a "please do my homework for me" post, I am just hoping to use this thread to have an informal conversation about this forum, its role in your life, and how it connects to your identity as a football fan or a [club] supporter.

I am also looking for people to participate in short informal interviews about this subject that I can use in my thesis. For privacy purposes, this forum will not be identified, and pseudonyms will be used for all participants. If you are open to being interviewed, please either PM me or send me an email at madmarkul @ gmail.com and I will be eternally grateful!

Until then, I guess my basic question for the forum is this: How does this forum impact your experience as a [club] supporter? Thanks in advance for your time.
Informed Consent Form

My name is Mark Smith and I am a graduate student in the English Department at California State University, Chico.

I would like you to allow me to use your data in the research I am conducting on the construction of identity in online communities. The objective of this study is to trace the connections between an individual’s identity (or how they see themselves) and the way that they learn a skill, such as knitting or surfing. This research is primarily interested in seeing how people interact in online communities, and how they form identities through those interactions. The interview questions will mainly be about your participation in an online community, and how that impacts (or does not impact) your offline life in the “real world.”

If you agree, I will analyze the transcript of our interview as well as your survey results in order to develop a clear idea of how an individual’s identity construction processes and online community membership interact.

All of the information that I obtain from interview sessions, my field notes, and your survey responses will be kept confidential. I will store the interview transcripts, survey responses, and any notes about them at my secure residence. I will use a pseudonym to identify your interview transcript, survey responses, and any notes about them. I will keep your name and its pseudonym in a separate locked location.

After this research is completed, I may save my notes for use in future research by myself or others. However, the same confidentiality guarantees given here will apply to future storage and use of the materials.
This study presents no substantial risks to you or the other subjects, both elements (the interview and the survey) are entirely optional and you may elect to discontinue your participation in the study at any time without penalty.

There is no substantial benefit to you from this research but I hope that your participation will eventually help teachers by increasing our understanding of identity construction and community membership.

Your participation in this research is voluntary. You are free to refuse to permit me to keep the record of your participation. Whether or not you permit me to use it, your data will be kept confidential.

There is no penalty for withdrawing from this study at any time for any reason, nor is there any penalty for refusing to participate.

If you have any questions about the research, you may e-mail me at msmith129@mail.csuchio.edu. You may keep the other copy of this form for future reference. If you have any questions about your rights or treatment as a participant in this research project, please contact the California State University, Chico, Human Subjects Research Committee (HRSC) via Marsha Osborne at 530-898-5413.