Abstract

Scholars continue to debate the social functions of YouTube as an online platform; some pointing to emergence of community [21] while others describing it as an asocial extension of a television screen [7]. This paper argues for three types of participation online: passive, active and interactive. Focusing on one particular YouTube site, the authors engage in a multi-method exploration of the content of communication (using thematic analysis) as well as interaction patterns (emerging through a network analytic perspective). Results show that viewers are largely passively consuming the video content, with few participants actively engaging, and even fewer interacting with others. YouTube commenters are characterized as cyber-graffiti authors, broadcasting messages for the cyber-world at large. Implications for community and affiliation networks are discussed.

1. Introduction

In the fall of 2008, for the first time in my life I posted a video on YouTube that I wanted to use as a teaching resource. The clip, that showcases an edited scene from the show “Curb Your Enthusiasm” was an excellent example, I thought at the time, of “Casual Friday” and the effect that clothing and appearance can have on social interactions. Over the years, I watched the popularity of this posting grow; evidenced by its 80,000+ viewings and over 100 comments posted. My curiosity continued to grow with each automated e-mail that I received from YouTube informing me that yet another comment had been posted to my video. Who are these YouTube viewers talking to? Have I instigated an online community of otherwise disparate cyber-citizens?

-- Dr. Mirit Shoham

YouTube is an online social space facilitating video-sharing that allows viewers to passively consume content and/or dynamically interact with others [21]. Opportunities for social interaction manifest as evaluations (“like”) and comments [23] that provide feedback, express ideas or emotions, etc. And these opportunities for communication online can lead to increased interactions across time and space [27] making our social world smaller [25].

In fact, there is some contention over the social function that YouTube serves. Some scholars argue that channels on YouTube “promote interaction and communication by providing internal communication routes (e.g., comments and personal messages to subscribers)” [21: p. 326], while others counter that it “is not primarily designed for collaborative or collective participation” [1]. Perhaps the resolution to this debate is to meet in the middle: Rather than bifurcating audience reactions as either interactive or passive, a third option exists that characterizes an active audience member.

In the pages that follow, three types of online activity are explored: Passive, active, and interactive. By exploring the various ways in which individual users behave in an online space, using thematic analysis to explore the content of their communication and network analysis to explore the social context of such communication, users’ sociality (or lack thereof) illuminates the degree of community and affiliation actuated.

2. Literature Review

While YouTube provides social opportunities allowing audience members to engage with videos and other users online, such consumption is not restricted to a passive/interactive dichotomy. Individuals may actively engage with the site without necessarily interacting with other users. Burke, Kraut, and Marlow [2] suggest three forms of user activity in a social networking site (Facebook): Directed communication with others, passive consumption, and broadcasting. Directed communication (herein
referred to as interactive consumption) consists of targeting messages to specific others in the site, for example chatting, messaging, etc. in order to create and maintain relationships. Interactive participants are likely to perceive YouTube as an online community space. Passive consumption takes place when users read messages or updates online, but do not engage in social interaction. Passive YouTube users treat it more as a television than as an interactive, communicative site. Finally, broadcasting (herein referred to as active consumption) consists of untargeted messages being written for others’ consumption, but not directed at any specific alters.

While Facebook is an online space described as a social networking site, this tripartite taxonomy of behavior (passive, active, and interactive) illuminates less than social behaviors occurring and suggests that not all activity on such a site can be deemed as “social networking” at all. Moreover, in online contexts where users can be anonymous, geographically dispersed, and asynchronous in their interactions, how do we come to define “community” online? Scholars [10, 19, 24] for decades have identified social interaction as a necessary component of community. Therefore, when strangers cross paths on a YouTube site, and leave a trace of their visit in the form of a comment, how can we understand these communicative interactions? It becomes increasingly vital to monitor online behavior and observe activity in various platforms, rather than merely assume the sociality of potentially social spaces.

2.1. Interactive consumption: YouTube as online community

Community is largely defined by members’ social interaction processes within a shared domain [10, 18] resulting in a sense of collectivity [11]. In an online context, virtual community describes any “group (or various subgroups) of people, brought together by a shared interest, using a virtual platform, to interact and create user-generated content that is accessible” to participants and guides normative practices [21: p. 320]. Typically, these relationships are cultivated over time in cyberspace, with public yet emotive discussions [19].

Rotman and Preece [21] ask, “How do users perceive the existence of community on YouTube?” by sampling video-blogs collected with the search terms “YouTube,” “community,” and “online.” Their findings suggest that users are almost unanimous in their sentiments that YouTube is in fact “a community that serves as a platform for communication and interaction rather than a broadcasting application” [p. 330]. Subjects reveal such sentiments as: “I like to call this a spider-web, because everyone interacts with each other, and everyone is a sender and a receiver. In this entire community there are smaller communities, smaller different topics and interests that they share with each other. So this is me, right here, and I interact with all these different groups... I participate in a community” (User-22) [p. 324].

Rotman and Preece [21] identify members of the YouTube “community” that describe it as an interactive tool. A Grounded Theory approach allowed the researchers to identity attributes of such a community online, namely: People, diversity, us and them, shared purpose, interaction, support (both emotional & practical), and culture (e.g., unique terms used, shared experiences).

One limitation of Rotman and Preece’s [21] study is that their design inadvertently led them to the answer they were seeking. Yes, users who post videos on YouTube tagged with the words “YouTube” and “community” and “online” feel that there is in fact a YouTube community online. Therefore their sample may not be reflecting the average YouTube user. In fact, many users of YouTube may take a passive approach to their consumption of videos online.

2.2. Passive consumption: YouTube as television

Gallardo-Camacho and Jorge-Alonso [7] contend that YouTube users largely engage with video content passively, treating the online space more like a television than a potentially interactive social networking site. In other words, opportunities for interaction may exist in the platform; however the average user does not utilize the communication functions available to them and merely watches videos on the site.

From a Uses and Gratifications perspective, Haridakis and Hanson [9] further suggest that users’ motivations for viewing videos on YouTube are comparable to their television-viewing counterparts. In particular, both YouTube and television audiences tend to seek out programming to satisfy entertainment needs; motivated by thrill seeking and information seeking drives.

Passive audience consumption has even been argued to be a critical form of online participation
Producers of videos posted on YouTube are primarily driven by hit rates and the potential for a video to go viral. The majority of viewers on YouTube are part of this passive audience – participating by purely viewing videos posted by peers.

2.3. Active consumption: YouTube as broadcast

Interestingly, active participation is addressed in a study by Thelwall, Sud, and Vis who find that the average density of interaction in YouTube commenting ranges from 0.075-0.546 across 95-995 comments; with the highest interaction density for religion-related videos/topics and the lowest interaction densities for music and comedy videos. These baseline statistics suggest various motivations by users, and various tendencies of active versus interactive consumption. Interactive users are contributing to this density by interacting with one another through their written communication. However, density scores tend to be low (the highest interaction density suggests that only about half of the comment authors are interacting with one another) illustrating the active participation of those who leave comments but do not address their comments to other users.

While the “Casual Friday” clip mentioned above has had over 80,000+ views, this study focuses on a relatively small subset of these viewers who more actively engage with the content and one another. Viewers post messages in response to the video, rendering their participation on the site more active than Gallardo-Camacho and Jorge-Alonso’s television analogy, and yet how may we begin to understand the purpose of such behavior? The multi-method approach employed herein attempts to resolve the degree to which this is in fact a “community” of actors with a focal affiliation interacting online.

An affiliation (or membership) network “arises when one set of actors is measured with respect to attendance at, or affiliation with, a set of events or activities. The first mode in an affiliation network is a set of actors, and the second is a set of events which affiliates the actors” [26: p. 40]. Affiliation traditionally intimates spatial proximity as the underlying mechanism of influence within a given group. That is, members are not necessarily interacting or observing one another within the social context (implying relational or positional proximity, respectively); and yet their mere presence at the same physical event suggests spatial proximity mechanisms uniting the group. The boundaries of spatial proximity mechanisms are challenged herein, since online spaces do not necessarily intimate physical closeness and visibility; what are the implications of online affiliation?

As a minimal condition, all YouTube users (passive, interactive, and active alike) belong to an affiliation network since a unique event (a video) brings them together in a shared online space. However, what are the implications of this affiliation in terms of active and interactive participation in this online context?

In order to better understand the implications of this online affiliation network, thematic analysis is undertaken to illuminate what participants are communicating online and subsequently network analytic techniques are used to uncover the degree to which participants are actively (i.e., broadcasting) or interactively (communicating directly with peers) responding to an event: a YouTube clip featuring a short scene from a popular television show.

All printed material, including text, illustrations, and charts, must be kept within a print area of 6-1/2 inches (16.51 cm) wide by 8-7/8 inches (22.51 cm) high. Do not write or print anything outside the print area. All text must be in a two-column format. Columns are to be 3 inches (7.85 cm) wide, with a 5/16 inch (0.81 cm) space between them. Text must be fully justified.

This guideline provides the margins, placement, and print areas. If you hold it and your printed page up to the light, you can easily check your margins to see if your print area fits within the space allowed.

3. Method

The target event, uniting a diverse population of YouTube patrons, is a 110 second clip featuring an edited scene from the show Curb Your Enthusiasm. In this scene, a peripheral character visits a lawyer to make some significant changes to his will, yet when he encounters this lawyer wearing denim on a “Casual Friday,” he refuses to do business with this ill-dressed professional.

In order to ascertain whether the communication revolving around this posted clip has in fact resulted in community (with interactions across peers) or a space for broadcasting (an active form of participation that neglects the social opportunities of the online venue), this section details 1) background
descriptives of the target clip, 2) the qualitative approach taken to better understand what participants are saying, and 3) the quantitative/network analytic approach taken to delimiting who participants are largely communicating with.

3.1. Event descriptives

The comment data collected herein spans a 4-year time frame from September 27, 2008 when the video was first published up until May 14, 2012. Although there are four identical videos posted to YouTube, we decided to focus on the target video herein due to several reasons. First, we used NodeXL, a social network analysis software [22], to analyze related videos using a feature called 'import from YouTube video Network'. This process gave us all related videos of our target video. NodeXL suggested there were 17 related videos; however, our target video had the highest number of comments (n=128 comments) compared to the average of 29 comments across the 17 other videos. The target video also had the highest number of comments and ‘likes’. Like and Dislike are two features provided by YouTube to viewers to express their assessment and impression about a video. These findings gave us a good indication that our target video has sufficient information to carry further analysis.

A statistical feature provided by YouTube indicates that the target video has attracted viewers from 145 different countries; with most viewers from the U.S. (n=51857), followed by Canada (n=7660), and the UK (n=6315). More than two-thirds of the comments were posted by US patrons (67%), 13% from the UK, 7% from Canada, 3% from Australia, approximately 4% from both Sweden and Taiwan, and the remaining few comments came from Germany, Netherlands, France, Brazil, Finland, Portugal, Thailand, and Malaysia.

Moreover, metadata features of this video provide evidence that this video is rich in information. Gill, Arlitt, Li, and Mahanti [8] suggested that popular videos have high ratings when they have evaluations of at least 4 or more out of 5. Metadata results show that our target video has a high rating of 4.9/5 from 225 viewers who rated the video. Additionally, of the video’s 84,285 viewers, 185 viewers selected to designate this video to their favorite category. Metadata features of the video are summarized in Table 1.

### Table 1. Metadata features

<table>
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<th>ID</th>
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</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
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<td>miriti19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Date Added</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Category</td>
<td>Comedy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Video Length</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Views</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rating</td>
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<tr>
<td>Number of Ratings</td>
<td>225</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Number of Comments</td>
<td>128</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Favorited</td>
<td>185</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

3.2. Thematic analysis

Given the relatively high number of comments posted in response to the “Casual Friday” video clip, the first step in this empirical undertaking was to uncover what patrons were saying using a thematic analysis. Leeds and Hurwitz [12] explained that the key to understanding human behavior lies within “the context in which the behavior occurred” [p. 337]. Thus, this first step was essential in that active versus interactive participation may be qualitatively different in terms of the actual content of comments posted.

Conducting thematic analysis provided us with a constructive analytic lens, allowing us to understand the lived experiences of the comment-posters letting themes naturally emerge [13]. Thus, we clustered data that “relate[d] to each other in such a way that they seem to belong to a category” [p. 215]. The second author collected and coded the YouTube comments posted up until May 14, 2012, reading the comments several times until initial themes began to emerge. The data (comments left in response to the video posted) was then coded into thematic categories. Moving back and forth between the categories and also consulting the first and third authors about the emergent themes fortified the coding validity. This process resulted in twelve categories, which were then collapsed into five unique, exhaustive, and mutually exclusive thematic categories. These categories include: Relational reference, emotional reactions, repeating the show script, professional norm reference, and personal experience (detailed in section 4.1).

Next, we increased reliability [5] by using more than one coder to help code the comments into thematic categories. To ensure that the emergent themes were operational, we conducted a training session to test and code the data. Two coders were trained and assigned 128 comments to code, coding each sentence as unit of analysis (resulting in 200 coded sentences) rather than the entire comment.
Thus, three coders (the second author and two hired coders) ensured that reliable interpretations of the data were used; as evidenced by Chronbach Alpha’s inter-coder reliability score of 0.83 suggesting adequate agreement of interpretation. The three coders largely agreed on the five primary themes that emerged from the data, and erroneous comments such as “This comment has been flagged as spam” were coded in a category termed miscellaneous. Four of the comments were coded into this miscellaneous category, while the remaining 124 comments were coded into one of the 5 thematic categories.

Fitch [6] proposes “Data and analysis should include consideration of inferences and interpretations, as well as concrete phenomena” [p. 36]. Our inter-coder reliability suggests that these interpretations are more generalized than exclusive. Using the five emergent themes to guide our analysis and findings, we used manual method of analysis to keep in close contact with our data [13]. This process further helped us guide our interpretation of the comments posted on the YouTube video. Lindlof and Taylor [13] explained that it is essential to “dispel doubts about the reality of (our) finding(s)” [p. 241]. Thus, we used multiple coders on this research project, which helped us increase the reliability and therefore the validity of our claims.

Once we had a holistic understanding of what participants were communicating through their comments, we then moved on to network analytic techniques that would illuminate who patrons were engaged with, and the degree of active versus interactive participation in this online space.

3.3. Communication network analysis

The network analytic component of this study, examining the social interactions of commenters in the online space, consists of a population of 106 unique participants. These participants represent our unit of analysis. In Social Network Analytic terms, they are referred to as ‘vertices,’ ‘nodes’ or ‘actors’. Wasserman and Faust [26] asserted that actors can be people, subgroups, organizations, or collectives/aggregates like communities and nation-states. These actors (viewers) are affiliated by a common event (the target video). When actors commented on the video, we considered that an 'edge' or a 'tie', and we considered this to be a directed tie. This is because relations here are directed from viewer to the video. YouTube allows participants to not only comment on videos, but to comment on other participants’ comments as well. This allowed us to also analyze how people communicated to one another through these directed comments.

If an actor (A) replies to a comment left by a second actor (B), we considered this as a directed relation from actor (A) to actor (B). If (B) replied back to (A) we also consider this to be a direct relation from (B) to (A). This allowed us to create a matrix of the entire network (including all participants who left a comment in response to the video) and identify subgroups or clusters. The network was then analyzed in an attempt to decipher the degree to which participants were interacting with one another in their commenting behaviors: Does this constitute an online community from a network structure perspective?

In order to better understand whether communicative behaviors that took place in this online space were directed/interactive or nondirected/active forms of consumption, a software program for Social Network Analysis (NodeXL Version 1.0.1.210) was used to further understand the network structure in terms of nodal degree, density, and clusters. *Nodal indegree* is defined as “the number of lines received by one actor from other actors” [4: p. 56]. *Nodal outdegree*, conversely, is defined as “the number of lines sent by an actor to others” [4: p. 56]. Density measures the degree of connectivity amongst nodes, while clusters highlight subgroups that form within the network structure. These descriptive network statistics allow us to detect otherwise invisible network structures, and illuminate the degree to which the communication occurring herein can be defined as community, affiliation, etc. One way to envision the social interaction that this YouTube video has instigated is to remove it (the event) from the affiliation network and explore the connectivity and interaction that remains.

Network analytic measures reporting on the network as a whole include the artifact (the video) as a central node to explore viewers’ responses to and the formation of a social network revolving around a brief posted clip. In contrast, Figure 2 helps the reader visualize the social interactions transpiring by juxtaposing the entire affiliation network (of participants and the video) with the social network delineating interpersonal communication (with participants only). Although largely displaying the number of social isolates involved, Figure 2 allows us to visualize subgroups that emerge in the social structure.
4. Findings

This study intends to explore the utility of capturing an affiliation network online; and questioning the degree of participation required to delineate communication in such online spaces as community or social affiliation. In this section, we outline the qualitative (communication content) and quantitative (sociometric interactions) dynamics emerging in response to a “Casual Friday” clip posted on YouTube.

4.1. Thematic analysis: Discussion content

The five categories used to code the data allow us to examine the content of communication in response to the posted YouTube clip. First, a simple tally of coded comments provides a sense of what individuals are communicating about and with what frequency. Below is a detailed explanation of each category, the number of times it characterized a comment post, and some examples of actual content posted.

4.1.1. Relational reference (n=57). The majority of comments posted fell under the category of relational content. Relational references took two forms: they were either in reference to characters on the show or they were relational in nature as directed responses to other commenters.

A couple excerpts that exemplify the relational references made to the show characters are, “He never did have a seat.” Here, ‘he’ is the character in the show and this comment is relating to the character’s experience in the clip. Another participant says, “I’m a new fan to this show, and I plan on watching all the seasons.” Here the participant explains his/her enthusiasm for watching the show. In both examples, some degree of emotional closeness is articulated demonstrating a patron’s relational proximity to the show or its characters.

4.1.2. Emotional reactions (n=25). When comments moved beyond relational closeness and expressed any emotional reaction, they were coded in this second category. For example, one participant says, “LOL, you look like a f@*#ing cowboy.” Here the participant is expressing joy by announcing that he/she is laughing out loud (“LOL”) and then repeating part of the show script. Another participant explains, “Agree, you dress correctly for business and business is done. Dress like you have just got out of bed then don’t expect business.”

4.1.3. Repeating the show script (n=24). The third most prominent comment type was simple repetition of scripted lines from the featured scene. There were several instances where the participants repeated the show script followed by an emotional reaction. For example, one participant writes: “If you come back on Monday or Tuesday. Lol,” repeating the show script word-for-word and then adding an emotional response. Another participant says, “You’re J.R. Joel Reynolds, right? You belong in Dallas, not L.A.”

4.1.4. Professional norm reference (n=22). The fourth type of comment identified was a direct reference to the content of the clip. Because the featured scene dealt with “Casual Friday” in the workplace, commenters posted messages detailing their professional lives and experiences with appropriate attire at work. For instance a participant explains, “Old man is right. Anything customer-facing requires professional attire, whether it’s internally or out in the field.” Here the participant agrees with the character of the show (who refuses to do business with the less-than-professionally dressed lawyer) by reflecting on the importance of professional attire when dealing with customers. In another instance a participant explains, “Agree, you dress correctly for business and business is done. Dress like you have just got out of bed then don’t expect business.”

4.1.5. Personal experience (n=18). In moving beyond general references to professionalism in the workplace, a second category of comments surfaced that dealt with personal reactions to ‘Casual Friday.’ Here, participants reflect on their own experiences with attire in the workplace and verbalize their reactions in terms of evaluating its utility. One participant, for example, reveals: “I personally like casual Friday.” Another participant similarly suggests: “They started doing this crap at my bank. I want my bank teller in a suit and tie, not plain clothes. Its completely unprofessional and I don’t like it.” Here participants express an affective reaction to the content of the featured clip.

4.2. Communication network: Discussion (inter)activity

The target video brought viewers into a common space online where a small network was formed (see Figure1). This event included 84,285 participants that came across this video and viewed it. However,
these viewers ranged in terms of their degree of participation on the site: The majority passively viewed the film (as they would a show on television), yet a small minority of viewers spent more time on the site communicating and offering feedback.

Of the total viewers, 222 viewers 'liked' and 3 'disliked' the video. Since, there was no way to know whether those 225 who either 'liked' or 'disliked' the video were also those who left comments on the video and/or interacted with other viewers, we did not code these actions. These participants engaged with video content actively by expressing an evaluation, however the analysis herein focuses on participants commenting on the video (and leaving a physical trace of social interaction).

There were a total of 128 comments posted by 106 participants (nodes), leaving 123 unique edges in the affiliation network. This suggests that 84,179 (or 99.87%) of participants were entirely passive, meaning they watched the video and left no other trace in the network. The 106 participants that commented on the featured clip were classified into active or interactive users according to Burke, Kraut, and Marlow’s [2] typology. Active users characterized participants that left comments on the site for a generalized other, while interactive users left specific comments directed at other users.

Just over three-fourths of the commenters (77%) were active users: 82 of the 106 participants leaving comments on the site expressed themselves to a generalized other. Their interactive counterparts also left comments, but these were directed communications specifically geared towards other users. Of the 106 network members, only 24 users (23%) were interactive in their participation, involved in dyadic or group-level conversations.

If we remove the target video from the sociogram, we can more accurately see the lack of social interaction across participants. The majority of participants become isolates, as seen in Figure 2. Figure 2 demonstrates that actors characterized as active users become social isolates when the event is removed from the affiliation network. The interactive users become foregrounded here, as the subgroups that they have created come to the surface.

Users engaged in interactive consumption have directed messages targeting other users, thus creating subgroups of conversation. These interactive users formed seven subgroups, or cliques, ranging in size from 2-7 participants. The average density across these 7 subgroups in the network is 0.38 (suggesting 38% connectivity amongst commenters).

We can see in Table 2 that subgroup 1 (a subset graph from the entire network of Figure 1) is the most interactive group. It was observed that a person who posts a directed reply to an actor is more likely to come back and reply again. This dynamic makes the group more interactive and over the course of time other actors join the group. Thus, 24 patrons, of the over 84,000 that visited the site and viewed the video clip, participated in a socially-driven, interactive conversation with others. The content of these conversations were not significantly different than the more asocial conversations observed.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>SubGroup</th>
<th>Vertices</th>
<th>Total Edges</th>
<th>Graph Density</th>
<th>Conversation Topics</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup1</td>
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<td>0.262</td>
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</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup2</td>
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<td>2</td>
<td>0.333</td>
<td>Informational, Relational</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subgroup3</td>
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<td>1</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>Personal</td>
</tr>
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<td>Subgroup4</td>
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<td>4</td>
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<tr>
<td>Subgroup7</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>0.500</td>
<td>Emotional</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Furthermore, the density measure (0.01) in this network suggests that only 1% of all potential communication is actualized. The low density rate of this network falls short of even the lowest end of the range uncovered by Thelwall, Sud, and Vis’s [23] exploration of YouTube interaction: Of all the sites investigated, density rates were at least .075 (or 7.5%). Actors in this network are highly disconnected from one another; especially given the average expected range [23]. In fact, they are only connected through the target event, the YouTube clip featured.
5. Discussion

In order to unravel the findings herein, we now return to our initial definitions of community. As discussed previously, community tends to suggest social interaction in a shared domain [18]; a YouTube community would rely on individuals coming together over a shared interest using a virtual platform, interacting normatively and creating culture [21]. Clearly thousands of cybercitizens are drawn to the online platform (the site hosting the video clip) with a shared interest in the television show ‘Curb Your Enthusiasm.’ Our thematic analysis suggests normative behavior in terms of comment content; users tend to express themselves in very similar ways (whether they are focusing on the characters of the show, their own personal experiences, repeating lines from the scene, etc.). There do seem to be culturally prescribed ways of expressing “likes” or “dislikes” of the video, and the types of comments posted.
However, sociometric data brings into question the degree of interactivity on the site, a necessary component of community. Our findings suggest that while few users commenting do choose to comment on the video, the majority do so in a broadcasting fashion as opposed to sending directed messages to one another. Therefore, participation on the site is largely passive, with few users participating actively, and even fewer interacting with others.

Cohen [3] has conceptually moved away from structural approaches to community in favor of a more experiential framework exploring meanings, symbols, and identity. He would suggest that sociometric patterns do not illuminate community, but rather “people construct community symbolically” as a “resource and repository of meaning” which shapes their identity [p. 118]. While it is beyond the scope of this study to investigate users’ feelings and perceptions of meaning and identity in response to their participation on this site, even Cohen’s [3] more abstracted notion of community is not likely describing the “Casual Friday” site. Because users are typically only visiting the site one time, viewing the clip, and potentially writing a comment before they move on, we cannot assume that this transitory site serves as a repository of meaning to its participants.

The least abstracted definition of community, offered by Van Dijk [24] seems to serve as the best fit in this context: he describes virtual communities as “places” of common interest. Clearly users passively, actively, or interactively engaging with this site all share an interest in a television show. Can we assume, therefore, that any affiliation network is a community?

Figure 2 illustrated the minimal interaction present once the target event was removed from the network. Two general findings may be inferred. First, being active in a social system delineated as an affiliation network is not effective alone. This is especially true in an online context where spatial proximity [20] is not associating actors. Because they lack any relational proximity to one another, when the communicative event disappears the notion of being active is no longer relevant as illustrated by the isolated nodes in Figure 2. Thus, an online affiliation network is nothing more than a crowded street where passersby may come across graffiti broadcasted in the “shared domain.”

Second, social realities should be understood by engaging in an interactive sense, which is entirely lacking in this study. The consumers of the “Casual Friday” clip are largely passive viewers, and the lack of social interaction suggests that we cannot call this an online community. Communities underscore interaction such that if a communicative event in the social system becomes no longer relevant, there will still be historical continuity of the effect of that event. Interactivity results in the production and reproduction of subgroups/clusters, organizations of social order.

6. Conclusion

The primary limitation of this study is its reliance on one YouTube video post. Clearly online spaces vary in terms of their social composition, degree of interaction, depth and temporality of relationship building, etc. Although the “Casual Friday” YouTube page dynamics cannot be generalized ubiquitously to other sites, it does embody features of typical YouTube activity. For example, because YouTube patrons watch videos on the site, they are unlikely to revisit sites and engage in social interactions with fellow users over time. Also, YouTube patrons can be active on the site in very asocial ways – posting messages to unspecified others, broadcasting their opinions and experiences to anyone willing to read them. Therefore, while this one particular site may lack generalizability in some sense, its prototypicality renders it a viable context to explore online behavior.

Also, the benefit of focusing on one video post was that researchers were able to engage in a quasi-ethnographic expose providing a deep investigation of the content of communication (using qualitative Thematic analysis) as well as the social interactions present (using quantitative network analytic techniques).

While the Internet, and YouTube specifically, provides many opportunities for social interaction [21, 23], users continue to deviate from the deterministic assumption that such tools will necessarily lead to certain social outcomes. Instead, tools online will continue to be used to fulfill the needs of users, whether they be passive, active, or interactive.

Future research must continue to explore our ever-changing world online, where users can participate and engage with material in numerous ways. Empirical research must probe into new motivations, behaviors, methods of self-expression, etc. Moreover, as users continue to engage with online tools and platforms, research must continue to question the
utility of transferring traditionally offline constructs (such as community and affiliation) to a newly evolving online space.

References


