Annamari Martinviita

ONLINE COMMUNITY AS EXPERIENCE AND DISCOURSE

A NEXUS ANALYTIC VIEW INTO UNDERSTANDINGS OF TOGETHERNESS ONLINE
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A nexus analytic view into understandings of togetherness online

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**Abstract**

This thesis studies online community as a discursive phenomenon and as an experience. The ethnographic approach employed in this study allows the open exploration of meanings and experiences associated with community by site members, designers and outside commentators in three online environments. Extensive participant observation is supplemented by interviews, surveys and analysis of the interaction surrounding the topic of community. Nexus analysis provides an understanding of social action as the intermingling of historical bodies, interaction orders and discourses embedded in the scene of action.

The thesis argues that the concept of community functions as a boundary object, taking different meanings in each context it is employed in. Community can be used to describe strong community experiences or lighter varieties of togetherness online; it can be a pragmatic term simply referring to the user base of a site; or it can incorporate many understandings related to the shared identities and shared practices in the social scene being referred to. The work thus provides a theoretical contribution to ongoing academic discussions related to defining online community, as well as a great deal of empirical knowledge on how experiences of togetherness are created online. Such knowledge may be used to inform future technology development and administrative practices that are sensitive to the many elements affecting social interaction in online spaces.

**Keywords:** internet research, mediated discourse analysis, nexus analysis, online community, online ethnography, online social interaction
Tiivistelmä


Asiasanat: internettutkimus, neksusanalyysi, verkkoehtotutkimus, verkkovuorovaikutus, verkkoyhteisö, verkkoyhteisöllisyys
To all my communities
Acknowledgements

The story of this PhD began in the spring of 1995, as public access to the Internet (as it was then spelled) first began to spread. In March of that year, Tornio City Library in Northern Finland set up its first customer PC with an internet connection. News of this innovation quickly reached my teenage ears, and, together with two friends, we took our first tentative steps into cyberspace. After some months of reading manuals and browsing haphazardly, attempting to find the excitement we vaguely sensed must be buried somewhere in that world of electronically mediated communication, we finally found our way onto the chat tool IRC and established our first real-time chat contact with someone exhilaratingly far away. Norway, in fact! After that first ephemeral interaction, we became the pest of the librarians, our school teachers and eventually our parents, whose duty it became to pay for the internet connections at home, to help us hoard those precious online minutes to maintain our quickly-growing international friend networks. These early online contacts shaped the course of my life to come. Therefore, my first acknowledgment must go to Tornio City Library and those many others who enabled our online obsession, and to the friends who joined me on those life-changing adventures.

These adventures eventually took me to the University of Surrey in England, and then to the University of Oulu, both institutions which I must thank for the explorations into various subjects they enabled. I must also thank my family and my parents for never questioning my desire to keep studying, and then studying some more. This desire eventually led to the beginning of the PhD project the results of which you see here. I am thankful to have grown up in a country which has provided me the freedom to choose my own educational path, and extensive support for staying on that path for as long as I have. In this final stretch of the journey, that support has been provided by the Anna Vuorio Fund and the Lecturer Aino Hoikkala Fund, both within the University of Oulu Scholarship Fund; the Emil Aaltonen Foundation; and the Faculty of Humanities at the University of Oulu, all grants for which I am extremely grateful.

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quests for knowledge stay on the right path, no matter how slippery it gets. Pentti has provided me with his own extensive expertise in the field of sociology, offering a pleasantly familiar, yet different viewpoint into the questions I discuss in this thesis. I thank both my supervisors for all their comments on my work, as well as all the editors and reviewers who have been involved in improving the articles that make part of this thesis. Most recently, an incredibly valuable commentary has been provided by the pre-examiners for this thesis, Marlene Larsen and Rodney Jones, both of whom I thank immensely for the expertise and insight they contributed.

Having said all this, none of this work would have been possible – or done with half as much happiness – without the time I have spent with all my communities outside work. First and foremost, Cassiopeia has filled my life with joy, friendship and incredible musical harmony since my undergraduate years. I expect no less from my postdoctoral years. Another mainstay in my life has been The Irish Festival of Oulu with its endless joyful fiddle-de-dee, and all the utterly unique experiences that has led to. These include a lot of Irish dancing with good friends in Irish Dance Oulu, and more recently, Finnish dancing with those same friends and many new ones in Koplaus. The icing on the cake has been the resumption of my childhood hobby of playing the violin. This I am incredibly lucky to do among a wonderfully colourful line-up of music lovers in the world’s biggest and friendliest pelimanni orchestra, Orivesi All Stars. I thank all these beautiful souls, and everyone else I have sung, danced and played with, for keeping my life filled with music and community.

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23 August 2017

Annamari Martinviita
List of original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications, which are referred to throughout the text by their Roman numerals:


III Martinviita, A. (manuscript). The many faces of online community: images and imaginings of togetherness on Imgur.

In the co-authored article manuscript (II), I held main responsibility for the work. I executed the data collection alone. My co-authors assisted in the data analysis and reporting of results.
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1 Introduction

“Words have meanings: some words, however, also have a ‘feel’. The word ‘community’ is one of them. It feels good: whatever the word ‘community’ may mean, it is good ‘to have a community’, ‘to be in a community’.”

Bauman (2001, p. 1)

It is perhaps not surprising that, as more people began to gain access to the internet, one of the first notions that academics put forth in talking about the internet was that of community. The internet was a new communication technology with a crucial difference to its predecessors: it allowed for asynchronous group interaction. As more people began to join online groups, increasingly from around the world, the potential for building new kinds of human connections was impossible to ignore. The familiar concept of community showed its versatility as a tool for discussing those connections in a meaningful way.

Beginning with the seminal work of Rheingold (1993), talk of “virtual communities” began to spread, and that conversation continues today. Academics have contended with many challenges involved in studying this topic, from disbelief that communities could be formed online, to confusion as to conducting research online. Internet users, on the other hand, have had to overcome doubts related to the validity and “realness” of relationships formed online, and suspicions as to the healthiness of spending time online instead of in “the real world”. This was the cultural context in which the roots of this study lay; in 2006, as I began collecting data for my master’s thesis, I felt I had experienced community on the diary writing website Open Diary. My desire to study the phenomenon arose from the confusion I felt regarding the possibility, even the validity of having such experiences online.

Today, the cultural context has changed, and the distinctions surrounding the ideas of “online” and “offline” are fading. We no longer “go online”; we are online. Even if we take breaks from handling our smartphones, tablets and computers, they go on handling our affairs in the background, around the clock – online. Messages are continuously delivered and received, and turning our attention to the latest events in our online arenas is no longer perceived as an action that is separate from our other social activities. By and large, we have ceased to think of online interaction as “virtual”.

However, we have not stopped talking about “community” online. We join and talk in online communities as part of everyday life. We use the term “online community” to describe all kinds of group interaction online. Marketers are keen to brand online forums as communities, and participants in online groups are keen to call their groups
communities. This study takes this desire for online community as its starting point, and attempts to find out what online community means to us today. What do people mean when they talk about community online – what is it about online interaction that evokes notions of community for participants? What is at the heart of community experiences online?

To gain access to community experiences, I take an ethnographic approach. Long-term participant observation forms the core of the data collection and allows for the drawing of the key lines that make up the whole picture. The focus is then made more specific according to the principles of nexus analysis: the key social actions that have been identified through participation are analysed in detail, supported by triangulated data. Interviews, surveys and casual interaction with study participants enrich my observations as a researcher and as a participant in the social action being studied. This approach allows for a rich description of the interaction that takes place, and an analysis of what makes that interaction occur in that way in that place, among those participants.

The analysis is performed through case studies of three different online environments. The diary-writing site Open Diary represents the starting point for this research, and provides a view into a strong community based on the affordances of diary-writing coupled with new technologies enabling empathetic feedback and support among members. Having first been launched in 1998, with few major changes to its design throughout its existence, the site provides an interesting comparison point for the other two case studies involving newer technologies as well as participants whose personal histories in online interaction are very different; while sharing one’s personal life and thoughts online had been revolutionary in 1998, those arriving on WiseSteps in 2012 and Imgur in 2015 had long lived in a world where interacting online was ordinary, no matter the topic.

Both the newer sites also provide a contrast to Open Diary in terms of the organisation of the interaction on the sites and the motivations for participating. WiseSteps was a service designed to support the study motivation of 16-to-18-year-old students in vocational education through a system of recording positive experiences and receiving feedback from support persons. A group of 69 students were registered to the system and obliged to participate by their school. Group interaction on the site was restricted to a chat feed which enabled the posting of short messages, “thumbs up” indicators and comments. Imgur, on the other hand, is an image-sharing website with a global membership of millions of monthly visitors. Interaction there is based on image posts, short comments and voting on images and comments. Participation is voluntary and motivated by a desire for entertainment and fun. In this sense, Imgur bears similarities with Open Diary, which also provided free access to a large international
member base. However, the long text-based entries seen on Open Diary provided very different affordances for interaction, and community-building, than the image posts and 140-character messages allowed on both WiseSteps and Imgur.

The carrying force throughout the study has been my deep fascination with the concept of online community and the feelings and meanings associated with it. I found nexus analysis as a research strategy to be uniquely suited to the task of studying community as a phenomenon, as it allowed me to begin with an open-ended exploration while aiming to find unifying elements that can be used to explain the phenomenon in a multi-faceted manner. The study also incorporates a literature review of research related to online community as it is understood in different academic disciplines. I connect the many viewpoints found in academic discussions to the ways in which participants use the community concept in the data to discuss the multitude of meanings “community” takes in online interaction today.

This approach allows me to consider online community from a viewpoint not previously employed in the related research. I combine a focus on experiences of community with a focus on the discourses that contribute to the use of the term “community” to describe online interaction in general. In analysing the social action at the heart of these experiences and descriptions, I am able to discuss online community as a real-life phenomenon grounded in the participants’ everyday activities and life experiences. Three research questions guide the study and emphasise this sensitivity to both the experiential and the discursive aspects of online community:

1. How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?
2. What are the technological and social affordances that enable community creation in these online settings?
3. What is the discursive function of the concept of community in the settings analysed?

It must be noted that this study is restricted to community as it is understood in the Western sphere, in primarily English-speaking environments and a cultural area that encompasses many nationalities but is governed by similar understandings of and desires for social interaction. In what follows, I first introduce the research focus and approach in detail, prior to moving on to a discussion of the existing research and the findings of the case studies, and the links between these.
2 Theoretical and methodological framework

At its most fundamental level, this study is interested in analysing the social construction of the human realities related to community experiences online. This analysis is performed via ethnographic case studies of three different online environments, using the principles of nexus analysis to guide the research process. In the following, I describe the principles guiding the data collection and analysis, including the research questions. The data collection process and the case study sites are then described in more detail, and the section ends with a review of previous research on online community.

2.1 Epistemological foundations

The ethnographic foundations of the study are most visible in the desire to gain a full, rounded understanding of the experience of participation in the social actions being studied, and the gaining of this understanding by the researcher immersing herself as extensively as possible in the social scene being studied, complemented by the understandings expressed by other participants, in interaction with each other and the researcher. This implies that those understandings are constructed in interaction with other human beings and the world, and that it is possible to treat that process of construction as an object of analysis and a source of conclusions that describe and explain, and therefore add to our understanding of, some element of the human experience.

One of the key contributions of nexus analysis here is its capacity to deal with the challenges of selecting focal points for data collection and interpreting data; issues which come to the fore when dealing with ethnographic data on subjective human experiences (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005; Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Nexus analysis is an innovative research approach in that it draws from multiple fields in the qualitative analysis of discourse and social action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004), and indeed from different strands of qualitative research (Flick, 2007) by incorporating the subjective viewpoint of the participant with an analysis of the making of social situations and using a variety of methods to analyse data. Its foremost contribution to the ethnographic study of human sociality is the introduction of a theoretical conceptualisation of social action as a product of histories, relationships and discourse structures. This conceptualisation allows the researcher to move from mere description of a social action to the analysis of its constituent factors, and crucially, to retain an understanding of the historicity of the
entire process (Blommaert & Huang, 2009); that is, not only the social action as it was prior to the beginning of the study, but as it is now, having been approached from an academic viewpoint. This is particularly relevant to the present study, as community is as much a theoretical concept with a long academic history as it is a term people use intuitively to describe their social actions online. Nexus analysis allows the researcher to move among the many dimensions to the social action being studied: the dimensions at play in the actions of the participants, and the dimensions at play in the researcher’s work of analysing those actions as a participant as well as an academic.

The role of language in this study is to function as a central tool in communicating the understandings and meanings related to community experiences online, and language is here approached via the concept of discourse as “meaningful symbolic behaviour” (Blommaert, 2005, p. 2). Any instance of language use is rich in nuances which link it to a social, cultural and historical landscape, making the language use meaningful in a specific way to individuals sharing similar experiences. An analysis of those links – the discourses created through many individuals understanding a thing in a similar way – provides a way into understanding how a concept such as community can function as a tool for individuals to explain and share their experiences with others, and as a tool for creating social action that is meant to be understood by others in a particular way.

2.2 Research focus and research questions

This study first took shape as a master’s thesis focusing on community experiences on the diary writing website Open Diary. Completed in 2008, this ethnographic exploration of the social scene on Open Diary introduced me to the complexities of online interaction, and the complexities of studying online interaction. That case study is here reproduced as one of the articles in this dissertation (article I), and the foundation on which the rest of this research project was built (articles II and III). The study was performed as an ethnography (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005), with autoethnographic elements (Ellis & Bochner, 2000), due to the extensive experience I had accumulated as an ordinary member of the site for several years prior to the beginning of the research project. It was of interest then to begin collecting other members’ stories of participation and to identify recurring patterns of interaction on the site, in order to build a coherent narrative of how community experiences on the site were created. Ethnography offered a
holistic approach to describing these recurring patterns and analysing the meanings that were associated with community on the site (Leeds-Hurwitz, 2005, p. 328).

After completion of the master’s thesis, I began to note the central role of discourses in sustaining and shaping the community concept online. The Open Diary case study had provided a view into a strong, cohesive community built on open and extensive sharing of highly personal information; however, the idea of community was being evoked extensively throughout the social web, in relation to many sites very different from Open Diary. It appeared that “online community” did not always refer to the kind of close and harmonious relationships seen on Open Diary. Often, the word “community” was used synonymously with “group”, simply to refer to group interaction online, an observation also made by others at the time (Chayko, 2008; Baym, 2010). This then became a central focus in developing the master’s thesis into a PhD research project. If “community” did not always refer to “sense of community”, it seemed necessary to perform a closer investigation of the continuing popularity of the term. I wished to study the potential additional meanings associated with “community” as opposed to “group” that might explain why the term continues to resonate with so many people in regard to so many different social situations.

In order to retrain the focus of the ethnographic inquiry onto the discourses surrounding the notion of community, nexus analysis was introduced as a research strategy for the new case studies that would complement the existing study on Open Diary. In practice, this meant continuing with the original ethnographic approach to collecting and analysing data while adding new conceptual tools to shift and refine the focus points of the study, which in turn uncovered new layers in the online community phenomenon. Here is where the study makes a significant new contribution to the growing body of ethnographic research of online interaction, including studies for instance on academic blogging networks (Dennen, 2009), a health-related website (Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005), MySpace (boyd, 2009) and YouTube (Rotman, Golbeck, & Preece, 2009). Where these studies all investigated the building of shared practices and shared experience, my addition of nexus analysis to the ethnographic framework allows a much closer focus on the discursive construction of those practices and experiences.

Figure 1 below illustrates how the research interest developed as the complexity of the online community phenomenon began to emerge. The nexus analytic approach is visible in this development and in the shaping of the research questions also displayed in figure 1. While research question 1 focuses on the experiential aspects of community, research question 3 turns to the discursive
function of the concept of community. Research question 2 seeks empirical observation of the technological and social affordances that produce these experiences and the actions through which the discourses find expression. Thus research question 2 assists in binding together the foci on experience and discourse.

Fig. 1. Development of the research interest and the research questions.

As stated, figure 1 displays the research questions that guided the analysis at the different stages of the study. It should be noted that these stages were very much overlapping, with several interests co-present at different times, but in general terms developing from an interest on the experiences of community to how community as a concept was much more complex and perhaps functioned as a “boundary object” (Star & Griesemer, 1989; Star, 2010), acting in many different roles at the same time (see section 2.6 for a full description of the function of boundary object theory in this study).

I return to discussing the research questions in the conclusion of this chapter. Next, the research approach is explained in more detail, followed by a description of the data collection process.

2.3 Research approach

Nexus analysis is a research strategy which allows for a holistic, multi-faceted view into moments of social action as they unfold in relation to their sociocultural and historical realities (Scollon & Scollon, 2004). Social actions are treated as inextricably linked to everything that came before, shaping those actions, and
everything that comes after, enabled by that action. Nexus analysis aims to unfold this historical process and allow the researcher to highlight the most salient elements that are shaping a particular social action of interest; to “keep alive our understanding of the layered simultaneity of human action” (Scollon, 2008, p. 236).

This approach to social action is based on a theoretical framework combining elements from several fields related to discourse analysis, ethnography and sociology. The theoretical arm of nexus analysis is also referred to as mediated discourse analysis, to highlight the central idea that all social action is mediated, by language and many other cultural tools available to participants in social action. In the following, the concept of mediated action, and the analytical tools of nexus analysis, are explained particularly in terms of their function in this study.

### 2.3.1 Mediated action

The mediated nature of social action is the central tenet of mediated discourse analysis (MDA), the theoretical basis on which nexus analysis is built (Scollon, 1998, 2001b). This focus on mediation builds on work by Chouliaraki and Fairclough (1999), Wertsch (1998) and others within the Neo-Vygotskian sociocultural research paradigm (Scollon, 2001b, pp. 8–14). Indeed, the central principles of MDA at the time of its development were familiar from “interactional sociolinguistics, critical discourse analysis, anthropological linguistics, sociocultural psychology, the sociology of language, new literacy and practice theory”; MDA was proposed as a unifying project that would engage work in all those areas and bring the focus particularly on to mediated action (Scollon, 2001b, p. 8). It was of interest to develop ways to establish the links between wide-ranging discourses and their related social actions, as opposed to the purely discourse-oriented approach of critical discourse analysis, and to widen the scope of discourse analysis to encompass the “context”, often forgotten in analyses of text only (Scollon, 2001a, p.1).

Mediated discourse analysis aims at deconstructing social action so that its historicity and situatedness become visible. In other words, in order to understand how a social action comes to take place the way it does, it is necessary to recognise the sociocultural load that each utterance and action by a human being bears. In terms derived from Bakhtin, every word we speak is “half someone else’s” (Bakhtin, 1981 in Jones & Norris, 2005, p. 5), and it is the work of mediated discourse analysis to identify the way in which other people, and other experiences, figure in each moment of situated action. This is done by identifying the cultural tools, or
mediational means, that the participants in an action use to accomplish the action (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 12).

The notion of cultural tools as used in MDA has its roots in the work of Vygotsky (1978) as discussed by Wertsch (e.g. 1993, 1998); while the meaning is essentially the same, Scollon and Scollon preferred to reorient the focus to the process of mediation by describing the semiotic resources used by social actors as mediational means (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 12). These semiotic resources and tools consist of anything that is used in social action to carry meaning. Language is naturally one of the primary tools that humanity possesses for communicating meaning and achieving action, but a closer focus on any social action reveals how objects, technologies, practices, identities, social institutions and communities are also used to take action – in addition to language and other semiotic systems (Jones & Norris, 2005, p. 5). Identifying how, and why, and when these different resources are used in a social action assists in understanding and describing why the social action comes to take place the way it does.

MDA also recognises the inherent fluidity of these resources: first, all resources have histories that shape what can and cannot be done with them, and as resources are employed, their meanings and affordances may change (Jones & Norris, 2005, p. 5). Thus a word comes with many definitions, depending on the understandings of the individuals present as the word is deployed, and its definitions can change depending on how it is deployed: new uses may be found, or new associations may be made in the experience of those present. Similarly, a physical tool may have its accustomed usages but new usages may be found or meanings associated with the tool as individuals employ it in social action.

In this approach, mediated actions are analysed through the practices through which they become realised. A mediational means takes its form from being appropriated within a practice (Scollon, 2001a, p. 7); for example, a wooden spoon functions as a very different mediational means when being used to serve food to a friend, than when being used to make a loud noise (together with cooking pots) by a toddler. This difference in function involves a process of resemiotisation (Iedema, 2001). Resemiotisation describes the changes in mode and usage that mediational means – the materials used to take social action – undergo as they are employed in different contexts, as in the case of the wooden spoon. This study discusses the resemiotisation processes involved in the building of online communities, as notions of community are turned into interactive tools such as a “like” button. The sites thus built are then further resemiotised into a tool – a mediational means – that can be used in interaction, e.g. to explain one’s online activities.
2.3.2 Nexus analysis: studying social action

As described above, the mediated nature of social action is a central tenet in mediated discourse analysis. Therefore, much of the focus of nexus analysis is on discovering the processes of mediation in the social action being analysed. These processes play into the way in which social action as a whole is defined in mediated discourse analysis, and by extension nexus analysis. The key contribution of this theoretical and methodological approach lies in this definition of social action.

In order to better grasp the complex, multi-layered reality of any social action, nexus analysis makes use of three central concepts that orient the focus in different ways. These viewpoints assist in bringing out the different elements at work in any action: the different mediational means and the ways in which those means are being deployed. The focus of the analysis is oriented to the histories of the persons, items and places involved in the action (historical body), to the relationships among all those involved in the action (interaction order), and to the discourses circulating throughout the action and its scene (discourses in place) (Scollon & Scollon, 2004).

These key concepts are highly interlinked and readily observable in any social action. The concept of historical body (Nishida, 1958) highlights the fact that all participants in a social action bring with them their previous experiences, learned practices and understandings of the world. It is a central tenet of the nexus analytic approach to highlight the historicity of social action, and the notion of historical body also extends to the items and places involved in a social action, showing that all things in the world have histories which affect what can be and is done with them. The historical view of social action extends to the future as well as the past, as the historical bodies of people and things are changed through action.

Added to this awareness of historical continuities is a focus on the interaction order (Goffman, 1983) among the participants; the relationships, power structures and mutual histories among them. Nexus analysis not only takes into account the immediate participants – the active parties to a conversation, for example – but also extends the view to more distant participants, whether those present but not participating actively, or others in the background who affect or have affected the social action in some way. Thus, nexus analysis extends the focus from a single moment of social action to its wider historical reality, but also its wider social reality.

Finally, the concept of discourses in place encapsulates the most abstract associations that play a part in shaping social action; the discourses that are associated with the physical elements in the scene of action, whether that be the various built structures or other individuals present with their physical bodies.
In terms of online interaction, the physicality of the experience is much reduced in comparison with face-to-face interaction, but here the concept of discourses in place works especially to highlight the discourses built into the technology enabling the interaction.

These central concepts and the elements of social action they highlight are closely linked with the processes of resemiotisation discussed in the previous section. In fact, the analysis of any social action will show that all these nuances, whether they be relationships, histories, previous associations or experiences, are constantly fluctuating and intermingling to create the mediational means we use to take action, and to shape the way in which those mediational means are appropriated and perhaps resemiotised for use in new contexts. The notion of “cycles of discourse” is proposed by Scollon and Scollon (2004) to allow for the tracing of various processes of appropriation and resemiotisation. Seen thusly, a social action functions at the intersection of many cycles of discourse, a scene from which many links emanate to past discourses and actions and anticipated future discourses and actions (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 14–15).

Nexus analysis approaches the study of all these elements and processes through a focus on practices. “Practice” in nexus analysis is narrowly defined as a “single, recognizable, repeatable action” (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 13). Scollon also speaks of practice as “an accumulation of mediated actions” to underline the fact that actions turn into practices through their becoming recognisable through repetition (Scollon, 2001a, p. 7). When practices in turn accumulate and become recognised as “going together” to produce some particular result, a “nexus of practice” is formed. Mediated discourse analysis here makes a distinction between a nexus of practice (Gee, 1999; Gee, Lankshear and Hull, 1996) and a “community of practice” (Lave and Wenger, 1991; Wenger, 1998), where a nexus of practice is conceived as a more loosely defined, recognisable but not entirely fixed or bounded social grouping (Scollon, 2001a, p. 8). A nexus of practice may develop into a community of practice when it becomes “explicitly recognised as a group”, and “explicit membership” in the group becomes the focus of attention (ibid., p. 9). The development of shared practices and their recognition as constituting a nexus of practice is also central to the building of online communities, as this study will show.

In the following section, the central principles outlined here are discussed in terms of their application to the study of online interaction.
2.3.3 Applying mediated discourse theory to online interaction

The central contribution of the approach described above is that it enables an analysis of online interaction as part of the entire social and material realities of the participants. The field of internet studies has long had to grapple with the popular notion of technologies as products of straightforward, even asocial engineering and scientific processes (Hine, 2009, p. 3) as well as with the notion of online sociality being divorced from our “offline” realities (Verschueren, 2006, p. 174). As a result, there is a demand for the development of methodological approaches that incorporate a richer viewpoint and problematise the often “common-sense” reasoning used in discussing concepts such as the internet and online interaction (Baym, 2010, p. 183; Hine, 2009, p. 5). Here, nexus analysis offers a solution in its very definition of social action: as all action is shaped by the histories, relationships and discourses circulating through each moment of action, there is no question of separating actions such as technology development or online interaction from the sociocultural landscapes they spring from.

The design and use of technologies, then, is here approached as follows. Although digital technology can be seen as the central mediating tool in online interaction – online interaction is defined as being “online” through the participants’ use of a variety of technological tools to communicate – the use of those tools is never divorced from the wider reality in the scope of which the participants take action. Participants make use of all the knowledge and experience they possess in addition to and outside of those technological tools. What is more, the tools themselves carry meaning, whether the meaning built into them by the designers and coders, or the many cultural meanings associated with them as users gain experience of how various technologies affect their lives. In other words, a nexus analytic viewpoint into online interaction implies an understanding of technology as both a tool for social action and a product of social action, and nexus analysis enables the study of online environments as complex communicative environments reaching far beyond what is displayed on the screen in terms of history but also the social realities at play.

The above rationale also applies to the terms used in the study of online community: “virtual community” as a term captured academic as well as popular imaginations in the 1990s (Verschueren, 2006, pp. 169–170; Parks, 2011, p. 106) but has since faced much criticism for the implied juxtaposition with “real” community. Many studies of online community have taken on the task of specifically proving that online interaction extends and enhances in-person contacts.
rather than replacing them or existing without any links to “real-life” relationships
(Gruzd, Wellman, & Takheyev, 2011, p. 2). As online interaction has become an
ordinary part of more people’s lives, “virtual community” as an idiom has also
fallen out of popular parlance and become replaced with the more neutral “online
community”. The increased ordinariness of online interaction accords with the
nexus analytic approach, which does not value any type of interaction, or any type
of mediation, above another type. As described above, nexus analysis sees all social
action as mediated, in accord with the anthropological principle here succinctly
stated by Horst and Miller (2012, p. 12):

In anthropology there is no such thing as pure human immediacy; interacting
face-to-face is just as culturally inflected as digitally mediated communication,
but as Goffman (1959, 1975) pointed out again and again, we fail to see the
framed nature of face-to-face interaction because these frames work so
effectively.

In the study of online interaction, nexus analysis also enables the discovery and
description of rich social scenes more complex than the technical tools on any given
website may appear to give rise to. Underneath any would-be online community
there is a nexus of practice that can be identified – a collection of practices that
have become associated with that particular place and which participants must learn
and employ in order to become recognised as members (Scollon 2001, p. 8). Here
the ethnographic roots of nexus analysis are visible: the aim is to move beyond
general description of the quantifiable elements of interaction and to study the
practices that develop as the same people interact in the same environment
repeatedly. In this way, very similar tools – discussion boards with message and
reply functions, for example – can produce very different social scenes depending
on where the discussion board is located (what surrounds it), who participates there,
what the topics of discussion are, and ultimately, what recognisable practices
develop if a large enough number of individuals participate in discussions for a
long enough period of time.

In summary, nexus analysis aims to bring to the fore the subjectivity of human
experience, and to work with that subjectivity rather than against it. In order to give
shape to the analysis, the key concepts of historical body, interaction order and
discourses in place allow for the viewing of this subjectivity and complexity from
different angles. Those different observations may be used to build as complete and
objective an image of the social action taking place as possible. These key
viewpoints, particularly as they are realised in this study, are described in figure 2.
The next section turns to describing the data collection process, showing how the principles described here were employed in practice to collect suitable data.

2.4 Data and methods

The previous sections have described the underlying principles and interests guiding the study. These can be summarised as a desire to understand the meanings and experiences attached to the concept of community, and an aim to study the social actions related to these meanings and experiences in a way which retains the linkages between the many different affecting elements; in short, to avoid reducing the richness of the social action related to community, while still finding commonalities and guiding principles to give shape and objectivity to the analysis.

In this section, I will proceed to describe the data collection process as it developed in relation to these principles and interests. First, a brief description of the three case study sites is provided.

2.4.1 Open Diary site description

Open Diary was a free diary-writing service in existence from 1998 to 2014 (article I). Members could create diaries, post dated entries and comment on other members’ diary entries. The site functionalities included automatically updated “favourites”
lists which alerted members to new entries by diarists marked as favourites, as well as a variety of ways to find new diaries to read based on age, location, interests, entries based on a “theme of the week”, “reader’s choice” entries and more. Diaries and diary entries could be extensively personalised through the use of colour, graphics, fonts and pictures as well as snippets of html code. The site provided flexible privacy settings which enabled members to adjust the privacy of their whole diaries or individual entries, ranging from completely private (visible only to the diary owner), “favourites only” (visible to chosen favourites), public within the site (visible to anyone registered and logged in) and public (visible without logging in). Even at the most public level, however, entries on the site were hidden from web search engines, which made a particular diary difficult to find unless the owner knowingly publicised its location. All in all, the members had strong tools at their disposal to manage the visibility of their texts, and as the case study shows, this contributed significantly to the sense of community created on the site.

The case study analyses and describes a strong community on the site, and therefore functions as a good foundation for the following two case studies. Open Diary was also one of the first diary-writing services created, and possibly the first website to allow user commenting on user content (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60; Richmond, 2009), which further increased the relevance of the site as a case study location.
Fig. 3. Open Diary front page in its final design, 2010 (www.opendiary.com).
2.4.2 WiseSteps site description

WiseSteps was an online service designed to support the wellbeing of selected member groups based on principles of positive psychology (article II). The service was developed by a private company and aimed at organisations providing a variety of educational or therapeutic services. In the version studied here, the service was customised for the use of 16-to-18-year-old students in vocational education, with the particular aim of supporting their study motivation. The central functionality consisted of prompts for weekly entries supplied by the system, aiming to encourage positive thinking and problem-solving around the topic of studying and finding one’s strengths, supported by comments from support persons selected by the student. These entries were only visible to the students and their support persons, but the site also included a page accessible by all the members, titled the “community” page. This communal page displayed some of the messages from the private areas of the site, anonymised, as well as a chat feed allowing for discussion of unrestricted topics, although headed with the question “What is great about today?”

The site was selected as a case study location because the site developers expressed an interest in developing a “community atmosphere” on the site, and it was possible to observe the site development in the design phase as well as the
active user period. The study therefore provided an opportunity to focus on the role of the design in shaping online interaction, particularly as the developers also functioned as administrators and moderators on the community chat feed, contributing to how the interaction proceeded in multiple ways. The site also provided a contrast to Open Diary in that it was only accessible to a small user group who had not chosen to become members but rather had been instructed to do so by their school.
Fig. 5. WiseSteps “community” page in October, 2011 (WiseSteps, 2011).
2.4.3 *Imgur site description*

Imgur is an entertainment website for sharing and commenting on images from across the web, with 150 million unique monthly visitors in 2014 (Perez, 2014; article III). The site aggregates the most popular images on the web as well as allowing members to upload their own images into the public galleries. The two galleries (“Most Viral” and “User Submitted”) supply a constantly updated stream of images which users can view, vote on and comment on with short, 140-character comments. The voting functionality is central to the site, with both images and comments being subject to a curation process based on user voting. Registered users may “upvote” and “downvote” all content and the content is then displayed according to its current vote ranking, with images moving higher or lower in the feed and comments displayed higher or lower in the commenting section below each image. The most highly ranked images are displayed on the site front page, and the most highly ranked comments are displayed directly before the image, thus making votes crucial in determining the visibility of content. This positions the site members as curators of the content shown on the site and produces trends for popular content. Visibility provides a strong incentive to produce content that others will like: votes make the difference in whether an image (and its comments) is seen by few, or whether it begins to gain enough popularity to reach the front page, where an image may gain over 1 million views (Imgur, 2016). Most significantly, the voting system results in a sense of competition and in the great deal of cultural knowledge required to successfully navigate the social world of the site (article III).

The site was chosen as the third case study location due to the ongoing conversation among the members on whether the site can be called a community or not, and the ongoing tendency for the site to be described as a “supportive, positive community” by outsiders (e.g. Constine, 2016). The seemingly fleeting nature of the interaction on the site (short comments, anonymous votes, minimal user profiles and no networking tools) coupled with the light-hearted, entertainment-oriented subject matter popular on the site appear to be in contradiction with the notion of community as it was portrayed in the earlier two case studies. The members themselves seemed aware of this contradiction, and the case study focused on uncovering the roots of the conflicting visions of community present on and around the site.
2.4.4 Collecting data on community experiences

As previously discussed, this study began as an ethnography, with nexus analysis introduced as the research interest developed. The motivation for choosing ethnography as the basic research approach at the beginning of the study came from the nature of the research interest at that stage (while the Open Diary case study was being performed): the aim was to study and understand experiences of community online, and it appeared self-evident that such an understanding could not be gained without some personal experience of participation on the sites being studied. The ethnographic approach is based on the same assumption: that the key to understanding human sociality is in observing the “implicit structures” of people’s lives, the things often not seen as important by individuals (Blommaert & Dong, 2010, p. 3). These are the details which cannot be reached by simply asking people, since most individuals are only aware of a small portion of the repertoire

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1 The thumbnails within the image gallery could not be reproduced here due to copyright issues.
of “cultural behaviours” they engage in (Hymes, 1975), but must be approached by other means. In this study, participant observation as well as analysis of the interaction occurring provided the key means of identifying these implicit structures and behaviours.

The addition of nexus analysis to the theoretical basis of the study involved, first and foremost, the application of a particular understanding of social action and of ways to study social action as described in 2.3. In addition to these theoretical contributions, nexus analysis also makes recommendations as to methods of data collection. In general terms, the process of a nexus analysis is recommended to involve engaging with the relevant scenes and actors, navigating the cycles of discourse involved in the central action(s) thus identified, and, through these activities and the knowledge gained thereby, changing the nexus of practice (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, pp. 8–10). In this study, these activities are often rather implied than taken as an explicit goal, due to the roots of the project in ethnography. Through the Open Diary case, I had already gained experience of conducting research in such online settings, and I shaped my activities in the latter two case studies accordingly. However, my participant observation activities always include entering into a “zone of identification” with key participants, that is, my aim is to find a place as “an accepted legitimate participant” within the scenes I have studied (ibid., p. 11). Other clear methodological influences from nexus analysis are my activities as a co-designer and change agent in the WiseSteps case, and the conducting of a “discourses survey” (ibid., pp. 156–157) to map the cycles of discourse in the Imgur case. These activities are described in more detail in what follows.

Open Diary

Beginning with the Open Diary study, participant observation formed the core of the data collection process, and other methods were implemented for the purposes of triangulation (Hammersley & Atkinson, 1995; Hine, 2000). While participant observation involved informal contact with other site members, a more systematic form of interaction was required in order to strengthen the presence of other viewpoints in the data. As it was possible to also conduct this part of the data collection using the interactive tools on the site, the choice was made to set up a “research diary” on the site. This diary functioned like all other diaries on the site, with diary entries and comments and an ability for members to be notified of new entries in the diary. Performing data collection through a diary enabled the site
members to take part in the study in the ordinary course of their activities on the site. Diarists responded to questions in comments on research diary entries, and in a small number of cases through longer entries in their own diaries. The topics discussed and questions asked in the research diary were shaped based on my experience of participation on the site combined with the theory of sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004), and further refined based on the results of a brief survey performed at the beginning of the data collection period. The following example questions reflect this theoretical basis as well as my acquired understanding of the site practices:

- “Does it matter to you how many notes you get?”
- “Do you feel like you’re a member of something here on OD?”
- “How do you feel about lurkers reading your diary?”
- “Do you always notice if someone hasn’t written for a while?”

My entries in the research diary elicited extensive and active commenting among those who came in contact with the diary. To gain readers, I sent personal invitations to members, and the diary was also public, which made new entries visible on the front page and other listings on the site. In total, 122 site members responded to questions or took active part in the discussions, either through the initial survey or the research diary. Finally, content analysis was performed on 30 diary entries to identify recurrent practices. Thus the data collection process provided three different viewpoints into the social action on the site, as illustrated by figure 7.

![Fig. 7. Types of data collected in the Open Diary case.](image)
When data collection for the WiseSteps case began in 2010, the site was still in the process of redesign and customisation in anticipation of deployment at a vocational college in the autumn of 2011. As previously mentioned, the initial motivation to study WiseSteps came from the developers’ interest in creating a community on the site, discovered in an email message from the developers seeking translation help from language students at the University of Oulu. At this time, nexus analysis was also being introduced to the methodological and theoretical toolkit of the study, making the discovery of the WiseSteps project felicitous for several reasons. While the Open Diary case had focused on the sense of community already present on the site, WiseSteps provided an opportunity to focus on the creation of a community, not only through observing the implementation of the site, but through involvement in the design phase prior to implementation. As nexus analysis particularly stresses the role of the researcher as an active participant in the social action being studied as well as an agent of change, this was an opportunity to put into practice this new element in the research approach. In practice, this meant the application of knowledge gained through the Open Diary study in meetings and discussions with the developers, resulting in refinements in the final design of the site as well as in the approach the developers took in their role as administrators and moderators on the site. The data collection process for the WiseSteps case therefore consisted of two phases, as described in figure 8.
Figure 8 also summarises the data collection methods used in each phase of the study. As the system was due to be implemented at a vocational college, it was necessary and relevant to also enter into a zone of identification with the school, and prior to implementation, data collection occurred through interviews, discussions and email exchanges with the developers and a school representative. These contacts continued throughout the study, but once the system was put in place at the school, the focus of the data collection turned to observing the interaction that developed on the site. Initially, the aim had been to proceed in a manner similar to the Open Diary case, through active participation in the interaction supplemented by other forms of data collection. However, it was decided by the developers and the school that the students should not see the researcher interacting on the “community” page, due to fears that this might inhibit their interaction; as the objective of the site was to encourage the students to share positive experiences, the presence of an unfamiliar contributor in the chat feed was seen as a potential source of discomfort. This meant that my participation on the site was limited to the private section, where weekly prompts directed members to describe positive experiences and accomplishments (their “steps” to a more positive outlook). I used this functionality a small number of times but did not continue with its use throughout the study due to the low level of interaction it involved. The posted
“steps” in the private section were visible only to the user and their support persons, and while they were automatically reposted on the community page in anonymised form (see figure 5) and therefore contributed to the interaction on the community page to some extent, commenting in this part of the page was almost non-existent. The vast majority of the group interaction on the site was concentrated on the chat feed, and there my role as a researcher was reduced to an observer rather than a full participant.

These restrictions to participation on the community page posed an additional challenge in that I could not interact directly with the students through the site itself. The students knew of my presence through having completed a survey at the beginning of their membership on the site, which included my questions along with questions by the developers related to their positive psychology aims. The students had also been told about my work during meetings with the developers at the start of the period. However, it is questionable whether my limited interaction with the students qualified as “accepted legitimate participation” in terms of the chat feed (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 11); certainly it did not meet the standards I had developed for participation during the Open Diary case.

The original data collection plan also included interviews with the students, which may have supplemented the observations made on the community page, but this plan also did not succeed: although the students were contacted on three separate occasions via email to those who had submitted their email address in the first survey, and via direct messages on the site to randomly selected members, no one volunteered to be interviewed. The developers had similar challenges in engaging the students, with only 30 students responding to the second survey conducted at the end of the students’ participation period, while all the students, 69 in total, had responded to the first survey. While this was a finding in itself, suggesting that the students were not engaged enough with the site to wish to discuss their experiences of participation there, it also meant that it was not possible for the study to discuss the member experience to any significant extent. This further directed the focus of the study, resulting in a discussion of how the development and administration of the site shaped the practices that developed on the site, and what understandings of “community” came across at the different levels of the whole project.
The experience gained from the Open Diary and WiseSteps cases was very significant in planning the data collection process for the final case study on Imgur. The interest in the latter had been to discover why the concept of community was so meaningful to participants in an environment based on the consumption of images for entertainment along with brief, largely anonymous commentary focused on wit and humour. The previous case studies had showed that “community” as a term was used often in relation to online interaction, but it did not always denote a strong sense of community as had been observed on Open Diary. Early observation on Imgur during the engaging phase of the study suggested that this phenomenon was particularly strong on the site and in the discourses surrounding the site. At the same time, the vast visitor numbers on the site suggested that the experience of participation must vary significantly. It became of interest then to execute the data collection in a manner that would capture as much of the experience of participation as possible, but focus primarily on the meanings associated with community, and how those meanings developed in relation to the shared practices that site members engaged in. At this stage, the concept of “boundary object” was introduced to the study as a tool for handling the many meanings and usages observed for the term “community” (see section 2.6 for a fuller definition and discussion on the concept).

As a result, participation observation was retained as the foundation of the data collection process on Imgur, but here the focus turned more directly to the discourses surrounding the community concept on and around the site. Participant observation allowed the identification of key practices shaping the experience of participation on Imgur, and the community discourses circulating through these practices were then analysed through a discourses survey (Scollon & Scollon, 2004, p. 156). This involved collecting three types of data: outside news items and media reports discussing Imgur, on-site texts written by the Imgur developers (such as help texts and a site blog discussing new features, site events and other Imgur-related news), and site contents in the form of images and comments that refer to “community” in some way. At the same time, I began to enter into a zone of identification with some of the key participants through direct contact with the development team and a journalist who had written a recent analysis of the social scene on the site. This data collection process provided three different perspectives into the meaning of the term community: that of outside commentators, site developers and site members. It should be noted that the lines between insider/outsider here are blurry; for example, many who write about Imgur on
online news media are likely to have extensive experience of using Imgur. However, it is the position which the writers assume in discussing the topic that was of interest here. The main aim of the discourses survey was to gather instances of “community” being discussed (or merely mentioned) in relation to Imgur in a variety of settings, to enable analysis of the meanings attached to the term.

Finally, to supplement the participant observation data and the discourses survey, I engaged with the site members through a small-scale unstructured survey among the members. It should be noted that I had had sporadic contact with members prior to this phase through my own participation on the site (a small numbers of image posts, comments and votes), to fulfil my aim of legitimate and accepted participation. However, the majority of my exploration of community-related content on the site did not involve contact with the members involved, mainly due to the extensive amounts of such content, and the site culture: in a scene focused on humour and fast-paced entertainment, queries as to the meaning of posts made weeks or months ago did not seem fitting. In order to draw boundaries on my data collection, I deemed it more efficient to test my observations in a manner that clearly deviated from the everyday activities of the site, with the assumption that this would be better received by the members.

The main aim of the survey, was to ensure that the observations made through other means were correct, and no significant detail of how the social scene functions was misunderstood or left unexamined. The survey themes and questions were tested first through interviews with six randomly selected members, and the survey was then created and circulated through a discussion forum section on the site titled “Imgur Community” and through direct invitations to randomly selected recently active members. In total, 49 members responded to the survey. As some of the survey respondents themselves observed, posting the survey invitation on the Imgur Community section resulted in responses from the more “community-oriented” Imgur members, but this did not pose a problem for the study, as the aim of the survey was to gain more observations on the meaning of community in general. Figure 9 summarises the whole data collection process for the Imgur case:
Fig. 9. Elements and aims of data collection on Imgur.

**2.4.5 Summary of data collection process**

As the above discussion of the case studies has shown, the data collection aims and methods evolved organically throughout the study as observations were made and new case study environments identified. Each case study began with some observation of community activity: in the case of Open Diary, this was a personal experience of a sense of community on the site, while in the case of WiseSteps, the site was advertised to language students as a “web community” while the design was still in process. Finally, I was introduced to the community arguments on Imgur through observing such an argument among friends. These observations contributed to how the data collection process was shaped in each case study, and each study also built on previous findings. The research questions guided the data collection throughout the study, but were also refined as the study progressed. As discussed in section 2.1, the research questions were very much overlapping and variously present in each case study. Figure 10 below reiterates the aims of the study in terms of the focus of each case study.
Fig. 10. The study aims in relation to the three case studies.

As figure 10 shows, the Open Diary case focused mainly on how sense of community can develop in an online environment. The WiseSteps and Imgur case studies then went on to study in more detail the many kinds of shared practices which may develop in online environments, and how the design and functionality of a site contributes to community experiences and impressions (with the WiseSteps case providing particular access to the design process itself). The concept of boundary object (see section 2.6) was introduced in the later stages of the study to illustrate the many meanings and usages of the community term. This idea became particularly relevant in the WiseSteps and Imgur cases (which represent much more recent solutions for platforms for online interaction), suggesting that the idea of an online community has proliferated and gained new meanings with the spread of online interaction into the realm of the everyday and ordinary.

Next, the ethical considerations necessary in online research are discussed and previous research on online community introduced, prior to turning to the findings of each case study.
2.4.6 The ethics of online research

Performing academic research in online social environments presents new ethical challenges that are often beyond the scope of old recommendations and best practices (Vitak, Shilton, & Ashktorab, 2016). As new technological developments shape new ways of being social online, new ways of working ethically in those social scenes must also be shaped. Indeed, most recent statements on the ethics of online research tend to agree that ethical considerations online are always context-bound (Vitak et al., 2016; Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Sveningsson Elm (2008) recommends a case-by-case review of the needs of each social space, and Convery and Cox (2012) advocate “a situated approach grounded in the specifics of the online community, the methodology and the research question(s)” (p. 1). The key concerns particular to this study are the transparency of the research activity (Vitak et al., 2016, p. 950), changing definitions and expectations of privacy (Markham & Buchanan 2012, p. 6), as well as searchability and identifiability online and how these relate to the protection of the identity of study participants (Vitak et al., 2016, p. 950–951).

Transparency was the first ethical concern considered in relation to this study, due to the nature of the Open Diary case study. I had extensive experience of participating in the community as an ordinary member prior to beginning the research project, which meant that attempting to perform any part of the research in secret would have constituted dishonesty towards my fellow diarists. Rather, as I already possessed good relations with many other members, it was natural to make the research process as transparent as possible to the participants. This was done by creating the research diary as described above, to centralise the data collection activities and discussion of finding in one place, easily accessible by all site members in the course of their ordinary activities on the site. Through the research diary I was able to explicitly describe my aims as well as identify myself in my interactions as a researcher, as any entries or comments I posted through the research diary would be linked to the research diary, rather than my own personal diary. In further consideration of transparency (as well as respect for privacy), permission was sought for any direct use of participant comments or diary texts.

The natural way in which these issues were resolved in the Open Diary case study, due to my experience as a member of the community, shaped my approach in the other case studies. As the interest was to study community, any attempt at neutral observation from an outsider position seemed inappropriate. Rather, I deemed that the case study environments should be approached from the inside,
and the environments should be treated as communities, and the interaction within
them as community interaction. Based on the Open Diary study, I conceived of
community interaction as respectful towards other members and meaningful in a
way particular to that community. Therefore, in the early stages of the study, it
seemed self-evident that all my activities as a researcher in the project as a whole
should be transparent in the ways described above: through self-identification as a
researcher as openly as the technical set-up of each environment would allow;
through open discussion of the data collection and analysis wherever possible; and
through gaining individual permission for the use of any content or comments made
by study participants.

As the study progressed, however, Sveningsson Elm’s (2008) advice for case-
by-case consideration became increasingly pertinent. In the case of WiseSteps, the
developers’ and the school’s wishes prevented active participation in the chat feed
that was the main focus of the study. Although the students were alerted to the fact
that a researcher was working on the site to collect data, and I approached the
students through other direct means (e.g. through survey invitations), in the course
of their participation on the chat feed there were no indications or reminders that a
research process was ongoing, nor was there any opportunity to discuss findings
with the students. Thus, it was necessary to rely on the fact that the students were
made aware of the research project at least at the beginning and end of their time
on the site, and discussion of findings was limited to the developers (and to some
extent the school representative). The students also knew that only the interaction
in the “public” part of the site was accessible to the researcher, and the contents on
their private pages remained private. Permission to perform the research was given
by the site developers and the school, and they assumed the responsibility for
informing all the students of the study, in accordance with their desire to limit the
visibility of the researcher in the project, lest it inhibit the students’ interaction on
the site.

On Imgur, the features of the social and technological environment were again
quite different from the earlier case studies. First, it became evident that the
research process would never reach or become visible for any significant proportion
of the member base, with 150 million unique visitors on the site each month. At the
same time, the level of anonymity on the site was much higher than in the previous
cases: members were only identified through their (unlimitedly changeable)
usernames, user profiles were brief and largely produced automatically, and the
topics and style of interaction were general and largely impersonal – with the
marked exception of stories shared openly of people’s personal lives (often relating
to troubles in one’s life). These latter provided a contrast, also noted by the members themselves, to the other types of content on the site, which contributed to the ethical considerations made in conducting the study.

While participant observation took in all manner of detail as in the other cases, and care was taken to openly identify as a researcher to the extent that this was possible, the focus of the study turned to the more impersonal variety of topics on the site, in order to better explore the question of how such impersonal, anonymous interaction could invoke notions of community among participants. As the style of interaction as well as the members’ general attitude towards their participation (analysed through the survey as well as discussions on the site) showed, the site members clearly aimed for these interactions to be public. Additionally, since they generally contained no identifying information whatsoever, it was deemed acceptable to use such interactions in the analysis, and even in examples involving direct quotations, without requesting permission from each user involved. This approach was also recommended by experience of contacting users for permissions related to the use of images they had posted, or for interview and survey invitations, and the minimal number of responses thus gained (permission to use images and direct responses was never denied). It should also be noted that many of the interactions more closely studied were not recent enough to involve users who were still active on the site.

It was necessary, then, in each of the cases to consider how public the interactions were deemed to be, and here the members’ expectations were used as a guideline, rather than accessibility (Markham & Buchanan 2012, p. 6). On Open Diary, much of the content was in fact openly accessible to outsiders, but as the study shows, this was not how the members experienced their writing; rather, they perceived a more limited audience for even their public texts, largely consisting of other site members (article 1). On WiseSteps, the period of participation was limited to 10 months, and the users were told clearly who had access to which interactions, including the fact that the entire website was only accessible by the user group currently assigned to it. Therefore, the most “public” of the interactions on the site – those on the chat feed – were only visible to the other students in the programme, the administrators, the teachers and the students’ chosen contact persons. In stark contrast, the interactions on Imgur were all visible to anyone with an internet connection, and the site setup, including its privacy policy, was such that this was clear to anyone posting content into the interactive gallery. This led to the conclusion that some contents posted on Imgur could be used without direct permission from the user, as discussed above.
The final key consideration for ethical data collection in this study was the identifiability and searchability of online contents. In the cases where direct quotations were used in reporting the research, the first layer of protection for the individuals involved was anonymisation through the changing or obscuring of usernames. However, in quoting online texts it is also necessary to consider whether it is possible to link a verbatim quotation back to the individual who posted it through a web search, making it more difficult to protect the identity of study participants (Vitak et al., 2016, p. 946). In the case of WiseSteps, this did not pose a problem as the site was not publicly visible or searchable online. In the case of Open Diary, although much of the content on the site was publicly readable, it was not accessible to search engines and therefore verbatim quotations could not be linked back to their owners. In fact, these considerations only produced a significant challenge on Imgur, where an online search of a quotation will lead back to the page where it was originally posted. Here, again, verbatim quotations were deemed acceptable due to the highly public nature of the interaction on the site and the members’ knowledge and expectation of publicity for their writings.

All in all, the central ethical guidelines that applied to all cases throughout the study were an aim towards openness and transparency to the extent that each environment allowed. In practice, this involved the seeking of informed consent through description of the research process and its aims in site profile texts and in any direct interaction with participants. Where verbatim quotations and screen captures were used in reporting the research, consideration was given to protecting the identity of the individuals involved. All data collection activities throughout the study aimed to respect and replicate the practices that had developed on each site, in other words, to create as little disturbance in the everyday activities of the sites as possible, and to enable study participation as part of the ordinary activity on each site.

Next, the previous research on online community is outlined to further explain the approach this study takes to the topic.

2.5 Previous research on online community

Community research has struggled with a problem of definition since long before the arrival of the internet (see e.g. Day, 2006; Cavanagh, 2007 for discussions related to online community and the history of the term). However, when people began to engage in online interaction the community concept gained new traction and new meanings. The utopian overtones that had long accompanied the concept
took on new levels when academics and others envisaged new networks among people, abounding with altruism and mutual aid and bringing on radical social transformation (Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Lampel & Bhalla, 2007). Then, as the concept of community caught hold as the key metaphor for describing online interaction (Parks, 2011, p. 106), a new problem of overuse arose: when marketers, developers, media representatives increasingly began to describe any site that enabled group interaction as an “online community” (Baym, 2010), the previously evocative metaphor began to lose its meaning and face criticism, particularly as an academic concept (Postill, 2008; Fernback, 2007).

Eventually, online community research began to develop to the point where it is now a multidisciplinary effort, approached from many angles using many tools by researchers from different backgrounds. Methodological issues now come to the forefront: online community research has tended to take a snapshot view of sites of study, describing how online communities are at a single point in their development, with researchers lacking tools to connect those snapshots to the wider reality around them (Iriberri & Leroy, 2009; Malinen, 2015). The focus has been on the functionalities of different environments and the social interaction and psychological experiences those give rise to; less attention has been paid to the social, cultural and historical contexts that affect participation in online communities (Malinen, 2015).

This study identifies three main strands of online community research, reviewed in the following in order to paint a picture of the many ways in which community is conceived of in research. The fields and approaches related to the phenomenon/phenomena referred to as online community are now so wide-ranging that it is not possible to cover in detail the many ways in which community is spoken of; rather, this review aims to highlight the central aspects of the three strands that can be identified in the literature, in terms of their significance to the lay understandings of community analysed in this study. These three categories can be described as follows:

− work considering community at the macro level, as a form of social organisation that may or may not be changing and/or still relevant to how people interact today;
− work employing community as a pragmatic term more or less, a shorthand referring to particular groupings of people and particular forms of social interaction, to enable and illustrate processes of developing technological, organisational and business solutions; and
work considering community at the micro level, in terms of individual experiences (and the generalisations that can be made based thereon) and the psychological and emotional process involved in those experiences.

2.5.1 Community as a form of social organisation

Perhaps the most widely quoted definition of online community was created by Howard Rheingold in 1993, just as the internet began to become publicly available, when he described virtual communities as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on […] public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). His use of the community metaphor to describe online interactions has been credited as the source of the entire online community discourse, that is, the way we conceive of and describe the way people come together online (Parks, 2011, p. 106).

At the time of Rheingold’s seminal opening gambit on online community, the community concept already possessed a long history as a key term in the social sciences (Day, 2006; Cavanagh, 2007). Central as the term was, and continues to be in the work of social scientists, “community” has seemingly always caused problems of definition, as most studies on the meaning of community today tend to observe (see e.g. Chayko, 2014; Day, 2006; Cavanagh, 2007). A famous study by George Hillery in 1955 identified 94 commonly used definitions of community (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 102), and online community theorists have frequently engaged in providing their own syntheses of the many meanings attached to the concept. Most recently, Chayko refers to a large number of studies spanning the period from Tönnies’ seminal publication in 1887 (Tönnies, 2002) to Baym (2010) and Parks (2011) to identify the key components of community in sociological thinking:

Communities are constituted of, and provide for their members, regular, patterned, personalized interactions and social engagement; shared identity, culture, information, purpose, and fate; and feelings of togetherness and belonging, all of which help individuals feel meaningfully connected. (Chayko, 2014, p. 978)

Since the late 19th century, a central element in the community conversation has been the discourse on lost community: Tönnies (1887/2002) and Wirth (1938) argued that the earlier, traditional close-knit communities were being lost due to urban and industrial developments. This yearning for an older, more meaningful
form of community characterises the community discourse to this day (Parks, 2011; Chayko, 2014; Wellman & Gulia, 1999; Fernback, 2007; Jones, 1995; see also Bauman, 2000, p. 92 and Bauman, 2001). Ideas of idyllic villages and imagined lifestyles of old can even become associated with the building of new residential areas today (Luoma, Kinnula, Kuure, Halkola, & Riekki, 2016). Community is always in danger of being lost or already gone, perhaps to be rekindled through new solutions, whether architectural, social or technological. Most currently, the blame for lost community has been ascribed to communication technologies such as the telephone (Fischer, 1992) and, naturally, the internet (Turkle, 2012), as these take time away from the face-to-face contact thought to be crucial to true community. Others have offered up online community as the solution that will in fact reconnect people and bring them back to the warm embrace of community (Wellman & Gulia, 1999).

In all these community discussions, whether they are aiming to define community or to offer it up as a solution to society’s ills, the meanings associated with the term are the same. Community, online or otherwise, is associated with overwhelmingly positive meanings such as warmth, support, belonging and close personal ties (Chayko, 2008, p. 7). Not only does this make community “an intuitively appropriate metaphor” for people to use in describing their positive experiences of online interaction (Chayko, 2008, p. 7), but technology developers and marketers have also embraced the term’s positive connotations (Baym, 2010, p. 74), and online social sites today abound with mentions of community, connected with notions of sharing, connecting and friendship (Parks, 2011, p. 106).

While the positive aspects of community tend to be emphasised, many have turned their attention to the negative effects of living or participating in a community. Somewhat famously, the Law of Jante (Sandemose, 1936) describes the stifling tendencies of Scandinavian communities where individuality may pose a threat to the common good. Indeed, community involves a balancing act between asserting one’s individuality and finding security in conformity (Bauman, 2000, 2001), which must always result in some loss of freedom. However, according to the theory of sense of community, a successful community involves a two-way influence between the community and its members: a member may also exert influence over the community, reducing the effects of loss of freedom through conformity (McMillan & Chavis, 1986, pp. 11–12).

Elsewhere, the proliferation of the community term, the difficulty of defining it, and its nostalgic, even utopian overtones have subjected the concept to extensive criticism as an academic term. For instance, Fernback (2007) and Postill (2008)
both criticize the overuse of the community term in academic work, saying the concept has become diluted and idealized to the point that it has little use as an analytical concept, and also has no bearing on the reality of most group interaction online. Fernback (2007) finds that the metaphor of “community” as evoked online actually tends to imply “convenient togetherness without real responsibility” (p. 63) and suggests a symbolic interactionist approach free of the baggage of the community term, allowing for an analysis of the ever-evolving meanings attached to the term as people find new ways to enact it (p. 33). Similarly, Postill (2008) points to the risk of glossing over the variety of experiences and activities involved in so-called “community” activities, advocating “a fine-grained analysis of emergent forms of resident sociality”, unhindered by the “overly general” notions of community and network (p. 414).

At the same time, many academics have in fact engaged in the work of reinterpreting the concept of community to make space for the realities of contemporary everyday (often technologically mediated) life without completely delinking the concept from its history of connotations. This work tends to focus on mobility and always-on connectivity as the new affordances that distinguish online community from pre-internet community, attempting to theorise and describe how these new aspects to social connectivity change the way people relate to one another. Recently, Hampton (2016) has introduced the concept of persistent-pervasive community as a hybrid of preindustrial and urban-industrial community structures, resulting in a “metamodern” social organisation that combines the constraints and opportunities of premodern community structure with the affordances of mobility of late modernity. He also argues that there is more variety in how people exchange information and support than recent studies allow and recognise, stating that the study of community is “the study of variation in context, communication, and technology” (p. 104).

This conceptualisation is not dissimilar to Chayko’s idea of “portable communities” (2008), which also highlights the mobility and ubiquity of today’s social connections. More recently, Chayko has argued that the online and the offline have become fully integrated in modern social life, and that digital communication technologies inspire and strengthen social connectedness beyond the online/offline division (Chayko, 2014, p. 977). In other words, connecting with others online has become a mundane activity, and connections between individuals tend to stretch flexibly across the offline and the online, with easy and ubiquitous access to online social tools when face-to-face meetings are not possible or relevant. Digital communication technologies also tend to make the connections among individuals
more visible (Chua, Madej, & Wellman, 2011, p. 101), as well as providing entirely new methods of building intimacy through sharing, such as in the case of the ephemeral social media platform Snapchat (Kofoed & Larsen, 2016).

In response to these changes in the nature of social connectedness, Wellman has proposed a focus on “networked individualism” to allow for exploration of the ways in which individuals create meaningful and fruitful connections to a variety of other individuals, groups and communities, aided by always-on, mobile technologies (Wellman, Boase, & Chen, 2002; Chua et al., 2011; Gruzd et al., 2011; Rainie & Wellman, 2012). Often, Wellman and others also refer to the concept of “imagined community” (originally used to analyse the spread of nationalism by Anderson, 1983), which recasts community as a “mental conceptualization” of the people and meanings involved in a social scene (Gruzd, Jacobson, Wellman, & Mai, 2016, p. 1187–1188). This viewpoint is useful when dealing with wide-ranging networks of connections, such as seen on Twitter (Gruzd et al., 2011).

All of these conceptualisations focus on community at the macro level, analysing how people connect to each other on a large scale across time and place and suggesting different ways to describe and label such connections. However, the clear majority of research related to online communities does not take such a wide view of the concept, nor is community seen as a concept requiring criticism or extensive defining work. This strand of community research is introduced next.

2.5.2 Community as a pragmatic term

The majority of the research related to online communities uses the term community in an unspecific way, simply to refer to groupings of people or sites that enable group interaction. Much of this research is focused on the technological and design aspects of developing solutions for online group interaction or on the various potentials involved in developing such sites, whether for financial gain or improved interaction within social organisations related to work, education, free time activities or various forms of social support (see Malinen, 2015 and Iriberri & Leroy, 2009 for reviews). In such studies the focus is rarely on actual community experiences, even when understood in their colloquial sense of togetherness, commitment and a sense of belonging, but rather on the simple function of bringing many people together to interact around some shared topic.

Iriberri and Leroy’s review introduces the various definitions for online community that have been proposed in different academic fields, ranging from sociology and social psychology to management studies and the field of
information systems (2009, p. 3). However, the review is limited to studies which focus on the design process, building strategies and empirical findings that relate to online community success (2009, p. 3), with the aim of giving online community designers the knowledge they need “to introduce success factors and design choices in an integrated and orderly way” (2009, p. 2). The review discovers a variety of ways to define and measure community success in different fields. These are classed into quantitative metrics, which include community “size, participation, contributions, and relationship development (extent of contact between members)”, while the most common qualitative metrics are “member satisfaction and quality of members’ relationships” (2009, p. 10). The review thus highlights the fact that different academic disciplines define online community success factors (and by extension, the benefits of participation) in different ways, as is also suggested here. While the fields of psychology and sociology focus on community as an experience (see section 2.4.3) and as a form of social organisation (section 2.4.1), management studies tend to focus on customer loyalty and organisational knowledge, and computer science and information systems on technology development and design (2009, pp. 15–16).

In her more recent review of studies on online community participation, Malinen (2015) identifies five main strands of research, with studies focusing on how participation is affected by the participants’ individual characteristics, the social influence among them, or the technology in use; or taking an organisational perspective or a business perspective into studying the benefits and potentials of online social interaction. The majority of the reviewed studies take an industry-centric perspective, where users function as tools for financial value creation through creative content production, and any community feelings that arise may even be an unwanted side effect, distracting users from the main purpose of the site (Malinen, 2015, p. 235). In other words, most of the reviewed studies discussing “online community” are in fact not referring to community in the sense identified in the previous section, but are simply discussing various forms of online group interaction, labelled as community for ease of reference. Malinen concludes:

> In the majority of the studies, ‘online community’ is used as a general term to describe software that allows people to interact and share content in the same online environment, while the existence of community feelings or behaviors remains unexplored. (2015, p. 236)

Some studies go as far as to specifically express their understanding of communities and community experiences as two separate phenomena, allowing for
communities to exist without members necessarily experiencing a sense of community (variously defined). For example, Fugelstad et al. (2012) study a movie rating community and state that those members more involved in the community were more likely to develop a sense of community. Kosonen (2008) describes community as an organisational form involving a shared interest and repeated interaction within certain boundaries, which may in the course of time result in the development of community-like feelings for some members. However, more often the two ideas of community environment and community experience are conflated, or at least not expressly separated, resulting in “online community” meaning very little other than group interaction online. From this perspective, it is not surprising that criticism of the concept has arisen, as previously described: the meaning of community is truly diluted when used in this manner. However, research into the individual experiences of the participants in the studies Malinen reviews might produce a very different result: regardless of how designers, administrators and interested academics label the participants and their acts of participation, other studies have shown that individuals are capable of finding a sense of community in a variety of environments (Rotman et al., 2009), and when those participants use the term community to describe their experience, the concept is likely to be laden with rich meaning (derived from their history of participation, as seen in the case studies here) not present in the descriptions of the developers.

The surveys discussed above provide a valuable illustration of the splintering of the community concept into many facets of meaning, which has given birth to the different strands of research discussed here. The final strand to be reviewed focuses on the psychological and emotional aspects of the community experience.

### 2.5.3 Community as an experience

Howard Rheingold’s seminal statement highlights “sufficient human feeling” as a cornerstone of online community (1993, p. 5). It is this human feeling that a significant portion of online community research has focused on since then, attempting to define and analyse the emotional and psychological experience of community. Indeed, many researchers have taken issue with the kind of studies identified in the previous section, putting forth the notion that a community cannot exist without a sense of community, a particular emotional experience that participants have, and that group interaction on an online site does not always produce an experience of community (e.g. Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004; de
Koster & Houtman, 2008). This section discusses the elements of the online community experience that have been identified by researchers.

Section 2.4.1 introduced a summary of the central themes in community definitions (whether online or otherwise) as “regular, patterned, personalized interactions and social engagement; shared identity, culture, information, purpose, and fate; and feelings of togetherness and belonging, all of which help individuals feel meaningfully connected” (Chayko, 2014, p. 978). Another survey of community definitions identifies five recurrent themes in the literature: the ability to engage in collective action; that the group think of itself as a community; that the members identify with the community; ritualized sharing of information; and attachment to one another and to the community (Parks, 2011, pp. 108–109). Thus community definitions tend to consider the type and nature of the interaction, the shared practices and other elements of a shared identity, and the feelings associated with the interaction.

These elements are also present in the most widely applied theoretical framework for studying community online, namely the theory of *sense of virtual community* (SOVC) first introduced by Blanchard and Markus (2002, 2004). The concept has been widely used in online community research (e.g. Blanchard, 2004; Rotman et al., 2009; Gruzd et al., 2011; Welbourne, Blanchard, & Wadsworth, 2013) and has also inspired work to refine it further (Tonteri, Kosonen, Ellonen, & Tarkiainen, 2011; Gibbs, Kim, & Ki, 2016; Rotman & Wu, 2014). SOVC combines the concepts of the seminal theory of *sense of community* (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) with the concept of *virtual settlement* (Jones 1997) in an effort to distinguish online communities from mere online groups and to provide a comprehensive theory for the identification and study of community experiences online.

According to the theory of SOVC, a virtual settlement functions as the underlying structure of any online community and requires interactivity, a variety of communicators, sustained membership and a common-public-place for interaction among members (Jones, 1997), thus speaking to the interaction element identified in the surveys above. Shared practices, identities and feelings are correspondingly addressed by the description of the psychological sense of community, which consists of four elements:

- membership: a feeling of belonging and relating to other members of the community;
- influence: a feeling of influencing and being influenced by the community;
integration and fulfilment of needs: a feeling that one’s needs will be met through membership in the community; and

shared emotional connection: feelings of shared experiences, history and time together (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

The theory has given rise to many applications and elaborations, particularly efforts to develop quantitative measures (Chavis, Lee, & Acosta, 2008; Peterson, Speer, & McMillan, 2008). In terms of online community, case studies have been performed using variations of the original theory and its elaborations on a German website for the elderly (Abfalter, Zaglia, & Mueller, 2012), on CouchSurfing (Rosen, Lafontaine, & Hendrickson, 2011) and on game modding forums (Poor, 2013), finding that sense of community does exist online and plays a significant role in motivating participation. The studies identified above have applied the theory in the form defined by Blanchard and Markus to analyse whether community exists and how it develops, for instance, on a popular cooking blog (Blanchard, 2004), on YouTube (Rotman et al., 2009), on online groups for dealing with infertility (Welbourne, Blanchard, & Wadsworth, 2013), on a Finnish newspaper forum (Tonteri et al., 2011) and on Twitter (Gruzd et al., 2011). The theory of SOVC is also applied in the Open Diary case in this study in order to identify the underpinnings of the community experience there. The theory is not directly applied in the WiseSteps and Imgur case studies, but continues to inform the understanding of community experiences that is reflected in those case studies and the rest of the analysis. “Experience” is also used here to refer to the phenomenon in more general terms, and where the community label is applied by participants.

2.6 Conclusion: my contribution

As shown above, previous research on online community has largely focused on analysing the effect of digital communication technologies on community, on identifying the technological and administrative practices that create or support online communities or groups, and on exploring and defining the psychological experience of community online. This study contributes to each of those areas of study by employing a discourse-oriented focus not previously employed in the field. This focus on discourses and practices allows for an exploration of the effect of technological development on understandings and experiences of community. Through this exploration, the study also highlights what other studies have so far not discussed: the function of the community concept as a discursive tool bringing
together a variety of viewpoints on online social interaction, as well as a tool for participants to make sense of and explain their participation, and for developers to conceptualise new solutions for online interaction.

The research questions first introduced in section 1.1 aim, first of all, to arrive at an understanding of what “community” means to key participants (whether site members or developers):

1. How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?
2. What are the technological and social affordances that enable community creation in these online settings?

These questions reflect the focus on discourses, technologies and practices as means for taking social action, in this case as means for creating and expressing experiences of community. The role of technological affordances – the actions enabled by the technology – is highlighted as particularly relevant in shaping online interaction, but never divorced from their inherent sociality. This implies that the technology and the social are always locked in a state of mutual interpretation; while technology shapes interaction, interaction also shapes technology as it is used in situ for the purposes arising in that social setting. Nexus analysis is used to uncover and articulate the processes and dynamics that create the social realities that exist on the case study sites. Finally, a particular meaning for “community” arises through the interaction that develops in each setting. An analysis of this process, and the meanings of community that arise, leads to the final part of the study which is characterised by the following research question:

3. What is the discursive function of the concept of community in the settings analysed?

I use the term “discursive function” here to refer to the use of the community concept as a tool to illustrate, explain, shape and motivate participation in online social interaction, where that usage is understood and explained through the role of discourse in human interaction. “Online community” thus becomes a complex object that can be understood and used in many ways.

Here, I introduce the concept of “boundary object” as a heuristic tool to illustrate the different meanings and functions of the community concept in referring to the same social environment. According to the developers of the concept, a boundary object exists between social worlds in a vague form, retaining potential for many usages. At times, the object is made more specific through its
use by local groups, but both these vague and specific forms remain accessible and recognisable (Star & Griesemer, 1989). This study shows that the concept of community is very loosely defined in common parlance, but gains more specific meaning in local use. In cooperative situations both the specific (“this particular community and its features”) and the general (“online communities”) are used.

Furthermore, the concept of boundary object is particularly suited to a nexus analytic approach, as it also has action in its essence: “An object is something people […] act toward and with. Its materiality derives from action, not from a sense of prefabricated stuff or ‘thing’-ness” (Star, 2010, p. 603). Therefore, a view into community as a boundary object again adds nuance to the study findings, by allowing an analysis of “community” in terms of action as well as meaning. Not only is “community” used to describe and explain action; the study finds that “community” in use also tends to produce and shape action. In nexus analytic terms, this is a process of resemiotisation, and “community” becomes a mediational means serving many purposes other than the description of social groupings. The concept of boundary object becomes central in the study because it can be used to encompass and illustrate all the purposes that community serves and all the modes in which it appears in the social scenes studied.
3 Findings

The individual case studies included in this thesis have already been described to some extent: section 2.3 gives a basic description of all the sites, and section 2.3.4 explains how the data collection proceeded in each case. I now turn to describing the findings of the three cases. The findings of each case study are first discussed individually and connected to the research questions. A synthesis of the findings then identifies common threads running through each study, and highlights connections to the key theoretical viewpoints explained in the previous section.

3.1 Open Diary

The Open Diary case study (article I) provided the inspiration and foundation for this study, as first discussed in 2.1. The original study was completed in 2006–2008, prior to the beginning of this PhD project, and prior to the development of the research questions here discussed. Rather, those research questions were shaped based on the findings of the Open Diary case, which had described a cohesive online community that supported a strong sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) among members. This led me to wish to study how such community experiences might develop in other online settings (RQ1), focusing particularly on the social and technological affordances that enable community creation online (RQ2). Furthermore, the Open Diary case had given me experience of conducting ethnographic research online, an experience which encouraged me to continue with similar working methods in this wider study.

This first case study was built on the premise of extensive participant experience which had suggested the existence of a strong community on Open Diary. The site had first opened in 1998, gained success early on, and developed a highly dedicated user base through the years (article I). However, when I found the site in the mid-2000s, the idea of online community still seemed strange; extensive interaction with friends and strangers online was not yet an ordinary part of many people’s lives. As a result, when I decided to begin researching the topic, I had a strong interest in discovering how community experiences are defined and described in academic research, and whether the feelings of togetherness I had experienced on Open Diary could in fact be called “community”; in short, whether “online community” could actually be said to exist.

A survey of the literature on online community showed that the topic had already been studied extensively. As shown in section 2.4, “community” has been
and is referred to in many ways in the literature, and in studies focusing on the experience of community online, the theory of sense of community (SOC) (McMillan & Chavis, 1986) has been used widely. In fact, Blanchard and Markus (2002) had recently introduced their theory of virtual community (SOVC), combining the work of McMillan and Chavis (1986) with the concept of virtual settlements (Jones, 1997) to better suit the theory to the study of online interaction (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004) (see section 2.4.3 for a more detailed description of the theory). What is more, Blanchard (2004) had applied the new theory in a study of an online blog site, to assess whether the site inspired true feelings of community in its participants. This theory, then, seemed highly suitable for the study of possible community experiences on Open Diary.

In applying the theory of SOVC to the ethnographic data accumulated, I first noted that a virtual settlement could be seen to exist on the site, based on the interactive structures available to site members and the longevity and variety of their interactions with each other (article I, p. 676). The analysis then focused on the elements of SOC identified by McMillan and Chavis (1986): feelings of membership, influence, integration and fulfilment of needs, and shared emotional connection. The study showed that sense of community on Open Diary was based on a culture of support, truth-telling and trust among members, shared values and effective needs-fulfilment, reciprocal relationships, and a sense of privacy supported by technological as well as social practices (article I). The following three excerpts from the data illustrate the members’ experiences:

1) I’m fresh to this site, but already I have been able to release demons that not even years of therapy could help me with. This is a place where you can be completely honest and completely unknown. You could be reading your next door neighbor, and you’d never know it.

2) My readers tell me I inspire and teach them things, or make them laugh, which they say is a very welcome thing too. I have some friends here who have influenced me a lot, by inspiring me or giving me new ideas of things to do, ways to do things, etc. And just having this community in general has had a BIG impact on my life! It brings me added joy. It puts me in touch with people.

3) It’s this amazing place where you can open up yourself and your life completely, the most awesome thing is that you will find other people some who have the same interests as you and others who can just relate to what you’re going through at the time. You travel with them through their lives as well, you feel
their pain, share their joys you support each other, learn from each other, comfort each other.

The harmonious co-existence of a variety of political opinions, religious beliefs and personal lifestyles was enabled by a culture of respect towards others’ personal spaces. The diary was seen as a place where the owner had full and sole power, and complete freedom to choose what to share and how. This was enabled by the site’s flexible privacy settings, and a shared understanding of appropriate conduct which was effectively enforced by the members themselves.

4) [Question: have you ever received a “hate note”? ] Of course. In any large group there are bound to be a few members that love to create drama. I just shove it aside, delete the note, and move on. If they lack such intelligence to assault me in my personal domain, they don’t even deserve to be acknowledged with a response from me.

5) OD: A place where you lay out your most personal thoughts/feelings/reports for the potential critique of others … a place where you discover that most humans are the sort who will respond positively to authentic vulnerability with reinforcement offered even to those who are honest in reporting social actions of which we generally disapprove in theory …

6) It’s possible to be completely anonymous. You can choose not to have comments, you can choose completely private entries or to make it available to only selected people. It’s that choice which makes OD so special.

Many of these technological and social practices could be seen to stem from the personal pen-and-paper diary as a familiar object to those who had arrived at Open Diary between 1998 and 2006. The site had first been designed at a time when online diaries were a new phenomenon to most, and very much seen as a version of the traditional diary that allowed reading access to strangers (article I, p. 673; McNeill, 2003). Despite vast changes in how the rest of the web was seen and used between 1998 and 2014 when the site finally closed, the site design never changed significantly, and the practices of mutual respect, support, truth-telling and privacy protection remained vibrant on Open Diary even as people were learning entirely new ways to share their lives elsewhere on the web (article I, p. 673, pp. 680–681).

It is perhaps paradoxical that Open Diary has been identified as the first social media site (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60), due to the reciprocal interaction among users it enabled through the commenting function (Richmond, 2009;
Seminario, 1998), yet in its later years the interaction the participants engaged in was markedly different from what most ordinary users of social media were accustomed to (article I, pp. 680–681).

7) I don’t often find myself describing it to people who don’t participate here. The sense of community is too strong to want to share it with those who don’t get it.

8) OD was the first site I’ve ever written at. I guess it’s a comfort thing. I tried LJ [LiveJournal] (I think I may still have an account over there...), and MySpace just plain sucks. I love my diary, and I wouldn’t trade it for anything.

The following figure summarises the findings of the Open Diary case:

**RQ 1: How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?**

- On Open Diary, a community developed based on the practices and values related to pen-and-paper diaries combined with new technological tools which enabled the sharing of diaries in an emotionally secure setting.
- This sense of community was expressed and strengthened through the practices of mutual respect, support, truth-telling and privacy protection that developed in this setting.

**RQ 2: What are the technological and social affordances that enable community creation in these online settings?**

- Community creation on Open Diary was aided by the site structure, which enabled extensive interaction and relationship-building among members.
- A sense of community was further supported by the site privacy settings which enabled a sense of seclusion, anonymity and privacy.
- The social practices of respect and support towards other members, as well as the site privacy tools, were influenced by the practices associated with pen-and-paper diaries.

Fig. 11. A summary of the Open Diary case contribution to the research questions.
Figure 11 provides a summary of how the case contributes to research questions 1 and 2. Research question 3 refers to the meanings associated with the concept of community and its discursive function. Overt usage of the community title did also occur on Open Diary: the site front page described it as an “online diary community” from at least January 1999 (WayBackMachine), and members also occasionally referred to the site as a community. However, the usage or meaning of the term was not the focal point of the study. Rather, the use of the theory of SOVC allowed for a view into how the experience of community arose through the interaction that the members engaged in. The other studies then focused more on the articulation of that experience (or similar experiences) and what purpose the concept of community serves in the study environments, as first discussed in section 2.1. Those results are discussed next.

3.2 WiseSteps

Where the Open Diary study discussed an established community with a long history, the WiseSteps case offers an opportunity to examine the design and implementation of community-oriented technology among a new member base (article II). Here, the nexus analytic concepts and principles discussed in section 2.2 were also applied for the first time. As discussed, the central interest at this stage of the study was the appearance of community in a variety of situations and contexts, not only those where experiences of community were easy to identify. In this case, the developers used the community term to describe the WiseSteps service while it was still in development. They also expressed a wish to “inspire a community feeling” among the future participants. The study then focused on observing the meanings linked to these usages of the community term, as they unfolded throughout the design and implementation of the service and the subsequent ten-month period of site membership for the students.

The WiseSteps case also deviated from the Open Diary case in allowing a view into the development process while the site was still being designed. As one of the basic principles of nexus analysis is the full participation of the researcher in the social action being studied, I was able to share with the developers the knowledge I had gained from the Open Diary study, as well as my personal experience of online interaction. Although they had already gained crucial experience from the previous deployment of the WiseSteps system, my experience proved a valuable counterpoint to the largely therapy-related professional expertise of the developers. The originators of the WiseSteps idea were two professionals in the field of
psychotherapy, named “the developers” throughout this study, as they were in full charge of designing the social and therapeutic processes within WiseSteps, with a technical team responsible for the technological realisation of those processes.

During the planning period, taking place from November 2009 to September 2011, I met with the developers eight times and shared with them my experience of community-building on Open Diary, as well as my experience of testing WiseSteps in its earlier format. I made several recommendations for the redesign based on related research findings:

- Status-building tools should be implemented to encourage positive behaviour (Lampel & Bhalla, 2007)
- Users should be given more opportunities to give each other feedback (Ling et al., 2005; Halavais, 2009)
- Young users should be given tools that allow them to “appear cool” (boyd, 2006)
- Potential gender differences in communication styles should be accommodated without giving space for undesirable behaviour: status-building was again found to be important, especially for males (Guiller & Durndell, 2007)
- Users need to be able to trust the service so they feel safe enough to open up; the service should be streamlined and easy to use, and there should not be unexpected changes (boyd, 2010)
- The site should enable communication to flow easily from one subpage to another, with design focusing on the communication space rather than the communication place (Healey, White, Eshghi, Reeves, & Light, 2007)

Changes to the site were then implemented as follows (see figure 5 on p. 33 for the resulting community page design):

- The site was streamlined to enable more efficient communication, and some features that were not useful were taken away
- Visible user profiles were introduced to increase accountability, and to enable relationship-building and status-building through personalised avatars
- Mini-games were developed and implemented in a point-collecting system, with top scores displayed on the community page
- Commenting on messages in the community page chat feed was enabled (previously, only a “thumbs-up” function had been available)

These changes aimed at improving the efficiency of the site in general, and making participation more desirable for the students through the addition of entertaining
and status-building elements such as games and personalised avatars. Previously, the developers had hesitated to allow more interaction on the community page, fearing that it would encourage problem behaviour. Similarly, they had suspected that the ability to change avatars and nicknames would allow users to impersonate others. In the interest of encouraging participation and building community, they now chose to increase the affordances for interaction on the community page, and engage in active moderation in case of misbehaviour among the participants.

During the planning phase, it had become clear that the developers associated “community” with positive meanings, a typical phenomenon discussed in section 2.4.1. Although community-building had not been a central aim for the project, the developers expressed a wish to create a community “atmosphere” on the site in order to motivate participation. They also spoke of WiseSteps as a “community service” (direct translation from the Finnish yhteisöpalvelu) and had named the shared access area of the site “the community page” (Finnish yhteisösivu), employing a pragmatic use of the term, as discussed in section 2.4.2. And indeed, this page was the only space on the site where all members could interact, and therefore it was likely to become the centre of any community that would develop on the site. The title “community page” also served to evoke any implicit associations participants may have had with the term. In practice, each member on the site had access to a private space and this shared space on the community page. This was also the case for me as I conducted the research, and therefore the community page became the focal point of the study in both the design and implementation phases.

As the service was opened for the 69 students in September 2011, the role of one of the developers arose as highly influential in the interaction that occurred in the chat feed. She was given the pseudonym Paula in the article that discusses the case (article II). Paula took on the role of an active moderator and discussant in the chat feed, encouraging the students to focus on positivity and steering the conversation towards the stated function of the chat feed. This relationship between Paula and the students then became a central focus in the study, both in terms of their expectations for the site and their experience of digital technologies and online interaction.

The developers themselves felt the difference between themselves and the students in terms of familiarity with online sociality and new technologies in general, ascribing this difference to age and the much-quoted idea of digital natives and immigrants (Prensky, 2001). To fully explore these differences, the concept of digital visitors and residents was introduced (White & Le Cornu, 2011), as it offers
a more realistic and nuanced take on the concept of digital natives and immigrants. Digital visitors use a particular online tool for a particular purpose, avoiding leaving traces of their identity online, while digital residents live part of their lives online, approaching the web as a place to express one’s persona and to form relationships. These descriptions form a continuum along which individuals may be placed differently in different life contexts (White & Le Cornu, 2011). We found that Paula acted on the site as a digital visitor, using WiseSteps for a very particular purpose, staying in her role as a moderator and (therapeutic) support person. In contrast, the students tended to resist the planned function of WiseSteps, preferring to spread their social activities from elsewhere in their lifeworlds onto the WiseSteps chat feed, treating it as just another space to interact with peers and build identity (article II, p. 76).

The analysis proceeded by identifying the key practices that developed on the community page and analysing these in relation to the nexus analytic concepts of historical body, interaction order and discourses in place. Observation of the interaction on the chat feed showed two very distinct styles of interaction occurring: that of Paula’s and the students’. While Paula aimed to support the original aims of the site through positive interaction and encouragement towards the students, the students could be seen to bring in their own life worlds outside of the site through various references to youth (online) culture, school life and their friendships within and outside the site. Overall, Paula and the students brought very different historical bodies to the social scene on WiseSteps: in Paula’s actions, the roles of therapy professional and digital visitor intersected, while the students largely acted as digital residents participating on WiseSteps out of obligation. The following excerpts from the chat feed illustrate some aspects of the historical bodies of the participants, with the student members preferring to post messages regarding other areas of their life, focusing on entertainment and fun, while Paula maintains an encouraging tone, steering the conversation towards success at school wherever possible. Note that the data excerpts are translated from Finnish, aiming to preserve meaning and typographic form. Nonsense words have not been translated and messages that were originally in English are bolded. Usernames are also changed, but styled similarly to the originals. The chat feed is headed by the prompt “what is great about today?”
9) chatting with friends

10) lunch

11) did well in my exam:-)

12) spedo

spbudrös sbörös :DDD
10.11.2011 10:18:14

Too Cool
Spudma Spädme

Too Cool
Spedebear

Paula
Sounds like fun ;) would be even better if I could understand!

13) spedo

Let’s talk about games and show paula how much gaming young people do, and what games.
14.2.2012 08:36:20

spedo
I spent 110h during two weeks on summer holidays :)

Paula
Well, I’ve often thought that if you could take the drive and enthusiasm you feel for a game and apply it to studying, you’d achieve amazing things!

Blah
I’ve been playing just one game for 214 days, newfags don’t know which game!
14) Spurdidos Speedy

_Guys guys! summer holidays soon, HOW ARE YOU FEELING?
11.5.2012 07:15:13_

Spurdidos Speedy

_how my friends teme and mane have their birthdays today tell them happy birthday :)_

Jouni

_TEME’S AND MANE’S SWEET SEVENTEEN TONIGHT!!!! :-)_

jonnez

_they sound like fun guys hehe!!_

Not even serious

_Gratz_

Paula

_happy birthday to your friends :)_

The exchanges shown here also display aspects of the interaction order among the participants. While Paula and the students were the only visible participants on the chat feed, the students were aware that their teachers, support persons and myself as a researcher also had access to the community page and might see what they posted there. This awareness is perhaps visible in the desire to spend little time discussing “what is great about today” (excerpts 9–11 show direct responses to the prompt, posted sporadically) and more time deviating from the requirements and displaying knowledge these authority figures had little access to (article II, p. 74). Excerpt 12 provides an example of the most common topic of interaction on the chat feed: internet memes and other references to online culture. In the excerpt, the students play with words related to the “Spurdo Spärde/pedobear” meme and Paula expresses her incomprehension. Posts of this kind begin to increase soon after the opening of the service and continue throughout the 10 months the students spend on WiseSteps. They emerge as a method for the students to build barriers to understanding: the messages are visible for all but only those on the inside (anyone heavily engaged in online interaction) may access the meaning. This allows the students to shape the activity on WiseSteps to better accord with their own preferences (article II, p. 76). On the other hand, the students also appear to want to initiate Paula into their lifeworlds, as seen in excerpt 13, and the students do also
occasionally post messages that respond to the chat feed prompt “what is great about today?” Paula also attempts to build bridges across the divide in understanding by regularly commenting in a friendly way even when she does not understand, and allowing such content to remain on the feed rather than deleting it in her role as moderator.

The conflict in expectations between the students and the developers is also visible in the discourses embedded in the site. The design of the site itself has a central function in disseminating the aims of the project and guiding the interaction that takes place. The tools provided on the site enable interaction but restrict it to certain forms. Overall, the design suggests usages and participation styles in line with the positive aims of the site, and these are further strengthened by Paula’s interactions with the students. However, the students’ own actions and stances towards the service imbue the community page with alternative meanings. The students approach the site as part of their school activities, with 71% of the students using WiseSteps at school rather than at home (article II, p. 74). The students also associate the site very strongly with online interaction in general, as discussed above. The messages related to online phenomena become embedded into the site, at times supplanting the original aims. The students also gain power over the visual outlook of the page through their usernames and personalised avatars. Figure 12 displays some user avatars, illustrating the other lifeworlds students bring into their interaction on WiseSteps (article II, p. 76):

![User avatars on WiseSteps](image)

**Fig. 12. User avatars on WiseSteps**

Overall, the analysis highlighted the emergence of two different “languages” on the site, with the aims and experiences of the developers and the students often in conflict. At the same time, Paula was shown to handle this conflict in a productive manner, encouraging the students to continue participating and directing the conversation to positive experiences wherever possible. These administrative practices arose as highly meaningful in delivering the original aims of the project, while the design of the technology made a relatively small contribution to directing
the interaction. Nexus analysis here enabled the close study of the many elements influencing the interaction that took place. The final data excerpt below comes from the end of the students’ WiseSteps period, and shows the deliberate nature of the students’ nonobservance of the site aims:

15) Spurdidos Speedy

Dear jonnes on the Wisestep community page. It is time to say goodbye to this Spurdo site as the school year comes to a close. Let us remember that despite the summer holidays, remember to keep the Spärde going and troll actively throughout the summer. In this memorial speech I would like to thank Paula for enabling this great experience on this site! It has been great Spurdoing on this site together with our jonnes, let me name especially our most active people! Not even serious, jonnez, Jouni, Leoturd and other jonnes I don’t have the energy to list. It has been great to spend this academic year buzzing with you on this site! Even though we never got Admin rights even after all the begging/whining. It has still been great to be with you here and at least I got a few good laughs from it as well! :D:D:D::D SO TO END THIS SPEECH KEEP ON TROLLIN:D:D:D:D::D:D::DD and Paula, for god’s sake make these chat boxes bigger! :D:D:D

28.5.2012 08:20:58

The aim of this case study was to study the meanings associated with community in the WiseSteps context, and to observe the actions related to those meanings. At the starting point of the project, community appeared on WiseSteps as a pragmatic term (as a name for the shared space on the site) as well as a concept associated with positive activity and increased participation. As the students entered the service and new practices began to develop, “community” and its associated meanings appeared to play an insignificant role. However, the final excerpt above is revealing: feelings of togetherness and membership can be sensed in the use of “we”, “our”, “together”, and the many references to shared experiences and forged relationships among the students and with Paula.

Thus the key contribution of this case study in terms of community was to confirm that it is practices that create community, not technological structures or names. For Blanchard and Markus, a central aim in the development of the theory of sense of virtual community (SOVC) was to show exactly this: creating a platform for group interaction may result in a virtual settlement, but the development of a community depends on the actions of the users (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). On
WiseSteps, the requirements for a virtual settlement (Jones, 1997) were fulfilled: many people engaged in (reasonably) sustained interaction over an extensive period time together in one place. It is more difficult to distinguish whether the other elements of SOVC – feelings of membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs, and a shared emotional connection – were present on WiseSteps. This is due not least to the limitations in access for data collection described in section 2.4.4. At the same time, the site did not appear to engage many enough students on a deep enough level to create community, at least in the manner seen on Open Diary. The students were unwilling to talk about their experiences on the site, and their participation was also obligatory rather than borne from any personal interest or need.

However, the speech produced by Spurdidos Speedy in the last excerpt displays elements that are at least suggestive of the emotions described by SOVC. In addition to feelings of membership, the excerpt suggests that the students have felt able to influence the site, they have become integrated into the social action in their idiosyncratic manner, and they may even have formed some shared emotional connection to the community page on WiseSteps. Without further access to the experiences of the students, it is impossible to perform a more extensive analysis on SOVC. Nevertheless, the development of shared practices shown in this study suggests at least the possibility that some community-like feelings may have developed on WiseSteps – perhaps more so if the students’ participation had not ended after 10 months on the site. It should also be noted that only 11 of the 69 students posted regularly on the chat feed, with others engaging only sporadically. It is likely that the experience of community (or otherwise) will have been different for different user groups, an observation the next case study will also discuss. At the same time, others have noted that the limited amount or nature of interaction is not a deterrent to community-building; according to studies on variously limited communication environments by Maloney-Krichmar and Preece (2005) and Rotman et al. (2009), “community grows where rapport is created, however limited and dispersed this rapport is” (2009, p. 48).
Fig. 13. A summary of the WiseSteps case contribution to the research questions.

RQ 1: How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?

- On WiseSteps, obligatory participation and the limited nature of the interaction hindered the creation of a strong community experience.
- However, emerging practices among the key participant groups contributed to the development of a sense of togetherness and shared experience, suggesting that a sense of community may have developed.

RQ 2: What are the technological and social affordances that enable community creation in these online settings?

- The technological design of the site enabled group interaction and identity-building through usernames and personalised avatar images.
- The students’ shared experience of online sociality and school life contributed to creating a sense of togetherness on WiseSteps.
- The moderator’s consistent administration practices enabled the development of new shared practices, unique to the WiseSteps environment.

RQ 3b: What meanings are associated with community in the case study environments?

- On WiseSteps, “community” is used as a pragmatic term to refer to shared space on the site.
- The developers wish to introduce a community atmosphere on the site to encourage participation and positive interaction.

RQ 3: What is the discursive function of the concept of community in the settings analysed?

- On WiseSteps, “community” is used as a tool to guide the interaction on the “community page”, through the participants’ implicit associations with the term.
In conclusion, the contribution of this case to the research questions is summarised in figure 13. In addition to research questions 1 and 2, this case study also provided some answers to question 3B, on the meanings associated with community in the WiseSteps environment, from which the contribution to question 3 was extrapolated. Next, the findings of the final case study are introduced.

### 3.3 Imgur

The final case study included in this project provides a contrast to the other cases in several aspects. In contrast to the pre-selected user group interacting on WiseSteps, the image sharing website Imgur is freely accessible and attracts a user base of millions from multiple countries (article III). While Open Diary also had a large international membership and free access, the interaction format was based on long text-based entries and extensive relationship-building, as opposed to the image-based format and fleeting contacts among users on Imgur. Finally, perhaps the most pertinent feature differentiating Imgur from the other sites in this study is the members’ preoccupation with the question of community. The members actively discuss community on Imgur, with arguments for and against, as illustrated by the following data excerpts:

16) *I love the sense of community and the fact that I can identify with like-minded people. They also share my funny, weird, obnoxious sense of humor :D* [survey response]

17) *Calling Imgur a community is stretching the definition of “community”. I feel bad for those who order imgur t-shirts and necklaces etc.* [image comment]

18) *I love this community. :)* [image comment]

The aim of the case study was to discover the origins of these conflicting views and to describe the meanings attached to the concept of community by key groups associated with the site: the site developers, outside commentators and the members themselves. Through this analysis the study also aimed to illustrate any community-related experiences that arose. The following presents the findings of the study, which are discussed in more detail in article III.

As previously discussed in section 2.2.3, nexus analysis here allowed for a closer focus on the discourses affecting the participants’ understandings of community, as well as an understanding of the complexity of influences affecting
social action. Most significantly for the current case, nexus analysis led me to realise that “community” can also be used as a tool, and not merely a signifier (see section 2.2.1 for a more detailed discussion). As I began to analyse the interactions of the key groups introduced above, the idea of discourse as action (Jones & Norris, 2005) led me to observe not only that “community” on Imgur is associated with many meanings, but that many of the community-related discourses on Imgur in fact serve purposes other than those identified in the study thus far. The use of the term on Imgur may, depending on the situation, function as a tool for identity-building, for making sense of participation, and for exerting rules of behaviour that help build and maintain shared practices. In other words, the idea of community becomes resemiotised into mediational means used in producing further social action.

The analysis began by mapping the key influences giving rise to these usages of the community term: the site developers’ aims and expectations, outsider understandings of the site, the site members’ experiences of online interaction in general as well as on Imgur, and the relationship of Imgur with other major entertainment sites, particularly Reddit. The developers (all staff involved in creating and maintaining Imgur and its related operations) possess a great deal of power to shape the interaction that takes place, but also to influence the discourses surrounding the site, and the namings of the social scene on the site, as seen in these excerpts:

19) “When anything goes out on Imgur, the community has already had their hands in that.” Imgur Community Director Sarah Schaaf in an interview on 22 Sept 2015 (Perez, 2014)

20) “[...] Imgur is where you’re going to be entertained and be with a community.” Imgur Sales Director Kat Fernandez in an interview on 19 Aug 2015 (Smith, 2015)

21) “It’s an incredible community [...] Users are building meaningful relationships with people they might not ever see and are finding people that they have more in common with than anyone at work or school.” Lars Dalgaard from venture capital firm Andreessen Horowitz, which invested $40 million in Imgur in April 2014 (Bertoni, 2015).

These examples show that the site developers and investors conceive of Imgur as a community, and perhaps also have an interest in promoting the community appellation for the site, even where site members disagree, as seen in excerpt 17. A
conflict is visible here between possible marketing interests (a typical usage for the community term as discussed in section 2.4.1) and the members’ own experiences of participation on the site. Nevertheless, the title of community is frequently applied to Imgur by outside commentators, such as journalists, as seen in excerpt 22 below.

22) “The humble Reddit image dump [Imgur] has grown into a massive community in its own right.” Journalist Ryan Broderick (2013)

Not infrequently, the term community is here also used in the pragmatic sense already explored to some degree in the WiseSteps case (section 3.2). Imgur also includes a forum section titled “Imgur Community”, and a key staff member works under the title “Community Director”. Thus, “community” on Imgur often refers to the entirety of the people interacting on the site, rather than describing any particular sense of togetherness among them, as seen in excerpt 23, and perhaps also visible in excerpt 19 above.

23) Say hello to the Imgur community [image title]

As excerpt 22 suggests, the relationship between Imgur and the news aggregation and web content rating site Reddit is particularly significant in shaping how Imgur is viewed by outsiders and insiders alike. This is due to the history of the two sites: Imgur was first created by a Reddit user as an image hosting service for Reddit. The service was opened in 2009 and soon began to develop, first with the addition of galleries that could be viewed directly on Imgur, and then with commenting functionality that allowed for commenting on images on Imgur itself, not only when they were posted on Reddit. As Imgur began to grow, it began to attract users who came to the site directly rather than via Reddit. While the links between the two sites still remain strong (Chaykowski, 2016), Imgur has grown to develop a distinct identity (Broderic, 2013). The study revealed two types of participants on Imgur: those who visit both Reddit and Imgur and those who participate on Imgur with little or no experience of Reddit. Those with a longer history on Reddit often question the status of Imgur as a community in its own right, usually focusing on the origins of Imgur as a tool for Reddit:

24) Sorry to break the news. Imgur is not a community. It’s just a place for Reddit to post pics, and has comments. Now stop upvoting everything [image comment on a post titled “A Guide to the Imgur Community”]
25) *Imgur thinks their shit doesn’t stink and is always calling out reddit and 4chan and youtube, when they are just as fucked up and awful* [image comment]

As excerpt 25 illustrates, a sense of competition motivates comparisons towards Reddit as well as other major entertainment sites. In fact, a process of “othering” (Akkerman & Bakker, 2011) is visible here, as Imgur members strive to build an identity distinct from other, often very similar, sites. It should also be noted that while the community discussions illustrated here occurred regularly during the period of observation, due to the fast-moving pace of the site, most discussions are likely to reach only a small proportion of site visitors. A deeper analysis of the origins of the community idea on Imgur shows that it is more often related to particular practices that members consider to be unique to Imgur, helping to build a shared identity for those who participate regularly. While many image posts reference such practices, their function is particularly well illustrated in the survey answers:

26) *It has a clear delineation between inside/outside – by that I mean there are numerous inside jokes, references, and traditions which only people who are ‘part of’ the Imgur community will understand and it’s that clear delineation which creates the community.* [survey answer]

27) *While really big and there’s not much of recognising other users, it has its own inside jokes and understandings. Imgurians keep together in a weird way. Like I know I could always count on a imgurian for stuff, which is weird.* [survey answer]

These responses refer to “traditions” and “understandings” which can only be gained through extensive participation. This observation arose as a key to understanding the community experiences many participants refer to, even when others dispute the existence of community on the site and even consider such community feelings to be somehow pitiable, as seen in excerpt 17. Extensive participation on the site is in fact required to succeed according to the system set up on the site. All contents posted by members are subjected to a voting system which dictates the visibility of both images and comments. Users are therefore rewarded for posting appropriate content through visibility as well as an overall points score that provides users with badges and awards. However, the definition of appropriate content, i.e. content likely to gain many upvotes, is highly volatile. What may capture the imagination of users currently browsing the site may induce
no response from another set of users at another time. Popular topics are highly affected by trends on the internet in general, while there are also Imgur-specific trends based on particular storylines, topics, visuals, catchphrases et cetera. Figure 14 illustrates the highly intertextual nature of Imgur posts:

![Imgur Post](https://imgur.com/gallery/3hKU1zF)

Fig. 14. A typical image post on Imgur (see https://imgur.com/gallery/3hKU1zF for the unedited view).

2 The image contained in the image post could not be reproduced here due to copyright issues.
Content such as seen in figure 14 requires extensive knowledge of various cultural scenes to fully understand. The image itself incorporates several images referring to popular topics and practices on Imgur, while combining the Beatles song “The Yellow Submarine” and its lyrics and related graphics with the idea of the “user submitted” section of Imgur as a place to live. The comments further extend the reference by engaging in a popular practice of posting subsequent lines of song lyrics as responses to a previous user, with words changed to fit the context. The full sense of this comment thread can only be accessible to those familiar with the practice, and even more knowledge is required to create the comments in a manner that fits the familiar practice. Thus within the 150 million unique monthly visitors there is a core group of registered users who are active in creating content – images and comments – using knowledge which can only be gained through extensive experience of interaction on Imgur and the social web in general. I argue that it is this experience which leads many members to talk of community: “community” here serves the purpose of making sense of such extensive participation, and of explaining the investment of time and effort required to become a successful participant. Although most members state they come to the site for fun and entertainment, excerpt 1 shows that community is often added as a further explanation, related to the expectation that others on the site will understand and appreciate the same references and ways of acting.

The above finding relates to the phenomenon the site members call “the Imgur hive mind” – a collectivity that possesses no individual thoughts or views. The members have two related usages for the term: first, it is often used to comment on content propagating the idea of a unique Imgur community. Such interactions receive enthusiastic support from some, and “hive mind” dismissals from others. The second usage refers to the forming of splits in opinion, often seen on the site in relation to various topics of discussion: the members are thought to suppress their individual identities in their desire to fit in with others on the site, which results in different posts producing enthusiastic agreement on diametrically opposed views, e.g. on political topics. Mikal, Rice, Kent and Uchino (2015; 2014) also identified this phenomenon on Imgur, suggesting that site members may self-censor or shape their views according to the prevalent tone of a post and their awareness of the social rules on the site, with the voting structure also playing a key role, with unpopular opinions receiving down votes and therefore becoming less visible. This phenomenon, combined with the vast amount of content and users on the site, can produce very different readings depending on what content each individual happens to view.
While the voting system contributes to creating trends and practices on Imgur, it also gives members a significant sense of power and ownership over the site and its contents. The members in fact function as curators of the content, guiding through votes which images and comments will become the most visible for the many others who only browse Imgur and do not engage in creating content. The site developers also maintain close contact with the members, involving them in any design choices made, as shown in excerpt 19. Thus the understandings and practices of the members and developers alike become resemiotised and embedded into the site design, further directing the interaction. At the same time, members gain a sense of agency, as they become more than mere users; they make a significant contribution to how the site is displayed to others through every interaction.

Fig. 15. Meanings and usages associated with the community term on Imgur.
Figures 15 and 16 summarise the variety of meanings and influences associated with community on Imgur. A central criticism aimed at the idea of community on Imgur relates to the lack of relationships among members, as illustrated by the following excerpt:

28) Yeah I don’t get the whole community thing. I’ve shared a few comments but that’s it. I haven’t had a conversation ever [image comment].

For those who do equate Imgur with community, as seen in excerpts 16, 18, 26 and 27, relationships do not arise as a central factor. Rather, community is associated with identity-building, a sense of spending time with like-minded people, and a sense of knowing how to act appropriately on the site, as discussed above. Here, the concept of imagined community (Anderson, 1983) becomes particularly relevant. It highlights the fact that community is not always based on close contact among known individuals, but rather community is a “mental conceptualisation” of the people and meanings involved in a social scene (Gruzd et al., 2016, pp. 1187–1188).

In the end, however, the usages observed in the study are so manifold that the concept of boundary object arises as the most appropriate explicating tool, capturing the many facets of the community phenomenon on Imgur (article III; Martinviita, 2016b, p. 347). As illustrated by the discussion here, the data excerpts and the summary provided by figures 15 and 16, a number of different meanings
were associated with the term, and while all these meanings were understood by all involved, often conflict arose as to their application on Imgur. This shows that the members’ experiences of the social scene on Imgur vary greatly, depending on their backgrounds and previous experiences, particularly those related to online interaction. All the meanings associated with community have to do with togetherness, but not all members attest to a sense of togetherness, rather associating Imgur with entertainment and fleeting humorous banter. However, the prevalence of the community term in discussions on Imgur suggests that it functions as a useful boundary object for the different purposes outlined here. What is more, community serves to motivate participation through all of the describing work it does in these different contexts. As such, community becomes a mediational means for creating further action: for other people to respond to claims, or to modify their behaviour to better suit the social scene, or to create another image post that may gain enough votes to be displayed on the site front page. In short, to connect with like-minded others, even if that connection is fleeting and partially or wholly imagined.

Finally, figures 17 and 18 summarise the findings of this case study in terms of the research questions.
RQ 1: How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?

- On Imgur, successful participation requires extensive knowledge and immersion in the trends and practices popular on the site. An imagined community is created for some members based on a sense of shared identity, shared interests and shared ideals.
- The site culture of “niceness” also promotes a sense of trust, which enables the sharing of personal stories and collective action to support others.
- The expression of community experiences is supported by widespread use of the term community to describe Imgur by members, outside commentators and site developers alike.

RQ 2: What are the technological and social affordances that enable community creation in these online settings?

- The site’s entertainment purpose and voting system produce competition among members to provide content that most others will like, motivating extensive participation and creating trends and practices which lead to a sense of shared identity.
- The culture of niceness promotes positive interaction among members.
- The light-hearted nature of most interaction on the site invites participation based on personal disposition and preference, promoting a sense of belonging among other like-minded individuals.

Fig. 17. A summary of the Imgur case contributions to the research questions.
As figures 17 and 18 show, the central contribution of the Imgur case was its response to research question 3, related to the discursive function of the concept of community. Here, questions 1 and 2 on community experiences and their technological and social affordances provided the foundation for a discussion on community as a boundary object enabling and performing many discursive
functions. Next, the final section of the Findings chapter synthesises the findings of all the case studies.

3.4 Synthesis

In the previous three sections, the individual case study findings were presented in relation to their contribution to the research questions. Here, I synthesise the findings and begin offering some conclusions in terms of the research questions set out at the beginning of the study. The development of the research focus, first discussed in section 2.1, also becomes visible here, as each research question is discussed in turn. Figure 19 sets out the combined findings related to research question 1: How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?
Open Diary

- On Open Diary, a community developed based on the practices and values related to pen-and-paper diaries combined with new technological tools which enabled the sharing of diaries in an emotionally secure setting.
- This sense of community was expressed and strengthened through the practices of mutual respect, support, truth-telling and privacy protection that developed in this setting.

WiseSteps

- On WiseSteps, obligatory participation and the limited nature of the interaction hindered the creation of a strong community experience.
- However, emerging practices among the key participant groups contributed to the development of a sense of togetherness and shared experience, suggesting that a sense of community may have developed.

Imgur

- On Imgur, successful participation requires extensive knowledge and immersion in the trends and practices popular on the site. An imagined community is created for some members based on a sense of shared identity, shared interests and shared ideals.
- The site culture of “niceness” also promotes a sense of trust, which enables the sharing of personal stories and collective action to support others.
- The expression of community experiences is supported by wide-spread use of the term community to describe Imgur by members, outside commentators and site developers alike.

Fig. 19. Synthesis of findings related to research question 1: How are community experiences created and expressed in different online settings?

As discussed in section 2.1, the aim of the Open Diary case study had been to investigate the creation of community experiences on the site. This aim carried through the other case studies, although it was no longer the main focus on WiseSteps and Imgur. As figure 19 demonstrates, each of the studies provided insight into community creation. On Open Diary, the phenomenon was studied through the theory of sense of virtual community (Blanchard & Markus, 2002, 2004). The later studies no longer specifically referred to this theory, due to their
developing focus, but Blanchard and Markus’s 5-prong definition (see section 2.4.3) continued to inform the analysis.

In practice, this meant comparison of the social scenes on WiseSteps and Imgur with that on Open Diary. As figure 19 shows, WiseSteps did not evoke strong community reactions comparable to Open Diary. On the diary site, the diary medium itself created strong bonds between members, whereas WiseSteps members were not motivated to share their thoughts and feelings extensively. On Imgur, some sharing occurred but the majority of the interaction was lighthearted and impersonal. However, on Imgur the concept of imagined community arose as an explicating term; the community experiences that some members reported depended on an imagined connection to similar others rather than any extensive relationship-building among members such as had been seen on Open Diary. Some elements of such an imagined community could perhaps have been observed on WiseSteps, too, had the members engaged in more active interaction, and had there been an opportunity to interview the participants regarding their views on the site. But it must be noted that a contributing factor on Imgur was also the widespread usage of the term community to describe Imgur, supporting the notion of a community even in the absence of established contact with other members. On WiseSteps, the members were linked to each other through their studies, but there were no strong identifying structures surrounding the site, giving their participation a context and a name easy to appropriate.

The combination of the findings in figure 19 shows that each of the case studies highlighted the role of shared practices in developing and maintaining community. Even on WiseSteps, where community feelings could not easily be identified, new practices began to develop. It was these emerging practices that began to solidify the social scene into something unique and identifiable for the members, a scene separated from others. On Imgur, shared practices were long-established as well as continuously in development, and a newcomer was required to possess a great deal of knowledge to navigate the social scene there. On Open Diary, the earliest participants had been involved in creating entirely new practices in the context of the internet of the late 1990s, and these practices continued to foster community and maintain the uniqueness of the site throughout its existence.

In fact, such practices always contribute to separating insiders – those who know what is appropriate and understand the meanings and context – from outsiders – those who may not understand everything that takes place in the unfamiliar context. These boundaries around a social scene and its members are a central part of the theory of sense of virtual community, as they contribute to the
essential feeling of membership (McMillan and Chavis 1986, p. 9). These boundaries, and a sense of membership, are also included in the nexus analytic understanding of the “community of practice” (see section 2.3.2), which is formed when a nexus of practice becomes recognisable and membership in the nexus of practice comes to be self-consciously produced and discussed. Therefore, each of the case studies can be described as a nexus of practice – built upon repeatable actions that members recognise as belonging together – and certainly Open Diary and Imgur also constituted communities of practice for their members, who were very aware of the distinct identity of those sites and of their membership on those sites. On WiseSteps, some evidence could also be seen of the formation of a community of practice recognised by the students. All in all, an examination of these sites as communities of practice offers many parallels with their examination as online communities, according to the understandings and usages of the latter term by the participants. I offer this observation here to further highlight the importance of shared practices, and their recognition by the members, in building the community experiences and understandings of community discussed here.

More material for the above discussion is provided by research question 2, which identifies the technological and social affordances that enable community creation in these settings – as far as community can be said to exist in each case. Figure 20 combines the findings related to research question 2.
The affordances identified include effective tools for interaction, shared practices, privacy protection through technological as well as social means, consistent administration, a respectful and supportive atmosphere, the presence of like-minded individuals, and some manner of entertainment motivating participation. While it is not possible based on this review alone (nor is it an aim of this study) to state that these affordances are present in all successful online communities, they...
certainly provide some guidelines for what a successful community is likely to require. As discussed in section 2.4, many definitions of community (composed of similar items) have been formulated previously. As an example, this combined list of community affordances can be compared to a list of community components by Preece (2000):

Table 1. Comparison of community definition by Preece (2000) with community affordances discovered in the study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Preece (2000, p. 10)</th>
<th>This study</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>People, who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating</td>
<td>The presence of like-minded individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A shared purpose, such as an interest, need, information exchange, or service that provide a reason for the community</td>
<td>The presence of like-minded individuals</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Policies, in the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws that guide people’s interactions</td>
<td>Consistent administration</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Computer systems, to support, and mediate social interaction and facilitate a sense of togetherness</td>
<td>Effective tools for interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Privacy protection</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Respectful and supportive atmosphere</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This comparison shows that the focus on affordances demanded by research question 2 does not suffice to capture all aspects of the community phenomenon. The definition by Preece was selected because it focuses on similar aspects; a comparison to the theory of sense of virtual community would not yield many results here, as the list of affordances provides very little information on the emotional experience of participating in an online community. I wish to highlight this fact in order to underline the highly complex functioning of the community term when approached from a holistic viewpoint as this study does. The two research questions discussed thus far provide insights into the community experience and some of the requirements for creating such an experience; the final research questions turn to the role of discourse in upholding community as a tool for naming and explaining social interaction in online environments, which is yet to be discovered through questions 1 and 2.

Research question 3 has two sub-questions which focus on the meanings associated with community in different contexts. Question 3a focuses on meanings
in popular and academic usage, and these are discussed in the literature review provided in section 2.5. Question 3b turns to meanings found in the case study environments, and these are summarised in the following figure. This aspect of the study was not included in the data collection and analysis for Open Diary, therefore only the latter two cases are included here.

**Fig. 21. Synthesis of findings related to research question 3b: What meanings are associated with community in the case study environments?**

In the WiseSteps case, usage of the community term was largely limited to the developers. They used community in titling the shared space on the site, and spoke of a desire to introduce a community atmosphere when interviewed. This perhaps reflects the Finnish terminology where “community” and “sense of community” both have single-word terms in regular use: *yhteisö* and *yhteisöllisyys*. Thus in Finnish discussions communities are easy to differentiate from experiences of community, which perhaps further promote the use of “community” (i.e. “yhteisö”) to refer to any website that enables group interaction. However, as discussed in section 2.4, this differentiation is also prevalent in English-language discussions, and much of the research on community and communities either takes sense of
community for granted, or does not consider it relevant at all. In the WiseSteps example, both the experience and the pragmatic usage were visible.

On Imgur, developers as well as investors and outside commentators frequently used community to describe the site. In contrast to WiseSteps, Imgur members also made extensive use of the community term, but there were also dissenting voices aimed at misuse of the term. The data indicated that the developers and other interested parties may have been motivated to emphasise and even romanticise the existence of a unified community on the site, while the experiences of members were much more diverse and complex. While some members described the community in similar terms to those used by the developers, others disputed the validity of the term when applied to Imgur, or only used the term in its pragmatic sense. Indeed, this pragmatic usage was observed among all parties.

Where deeper meanings were associated with the term, these accorded well with those seen in previous research (see section 2.4), including the theory of sense of community (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). The following table displays the key elements of the theory and the meanings seen on WiseSteps and Imgur side by side. Even such a brief comparison demonstrates that, for some participants at least, participation was associated with an experience of community alike to that described by McMillan and Chavis.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Sense of community (McMillan &amp; Chavis, 1986)</th>
<th>Meanings associated with community on WiseSteps and Imgur</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>- membership: a feeling of belonging and relating to other members of the community</td>
<td>- motivates participation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- influence: a feeling of influencing and being influenced by the community</td>
<td>- sense of togetherness</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- integration and fulfilment of needs: a feeling that one’s needs will be met through membership in the community</td>
<td>- separation between insiders and outsiders</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>- shared emotional connection: feelings of shared experiences, history and time together</td>
<td>- relationships and recognising fellow members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- positive interaction</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- trust among members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>- shared ideas and understandings</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All in all, the findings here show that community evoked similarly positive associations as those reported in previous research, although sometimes these associations were limited to the views and expectations of developers and not confirmed by all site members. Next, we turn to the main question characterising
the final part of the study, which discusses the discursive function of the concept of community.

**WiseSteps**

- On WiseSteps, “community” is used as a tool to guide the interaction on the “community page”, through the participants’ implicit associations with the term.

**Imgur**

- Members use community to make sense of their participation, to build identity and to refer to shared practices, ideas and understandings.
- Identity-building relates to members’ personal identities as well as the identity of Imgur as a unique site among other major entertainment sites.
- Developers and investors utilise community to promote the positive aspects of the social scene on Imgur, although not all members agree with these descriptions.
- Community is also used as a pragmatic term to refer to the user base or the social scene as a whole.

Fig. 22. Synthesis of findings related to research question 3: What is the discursive function of the concept of community in the settings analysed?

Again, this aspect of the study was only present in the WiseSteps and Imgur cases. On WiseSteps, “community” appeared but infrequently in the interaction within the site, and as such, any function that the term may have served on the site was largely implicit. A desire for a community atmosphere evinced by the developers guided their actions in the design and administration of the site to some degree. This was visible in the titling of the shared space as the “community page” and the desire to promote active interaction on the community page. As most of the interaction on the community page focused on the chat feed, and the chat feed was not directly linked with the central “steps” activity members engaged in on their private pages, the community page could be said to constitute a separate or additional activity that the developers wished the members to partake in. Thus, from the point of view of function, community was at least implicated in the developers’ actions to motivate a more casual kind of interaction on the chat feed, which they hoped would also increase activity in other parts of the site.
However, most of the function-related data in this study was derived from the Imgur case. There, as was illustrated in section 3.3, community served many purposes and was associated with many meanings. These are again summarised above, as well as in figure 16 in section 3.3. These functions are manifold enough that the term community can be said to function as a boundary object on Imgur, implying different meanings in different contexts and gaining its meaning only in connection to each context (Star & Griesemer, 1989; article III). Describing community as a boundary object allows for the concurrent existence of many definitions and many uses for the term; it also allows for the observation that community can perhaps never be fully defined objectively, divorced from the context in which it appears. This observation of the context-bound meaning of community is one of the central findings of this study and will be discussed further in the next chapter.

All in all, the findings synthesised here show that a holistic view of online community, incorporating a focus on both the discourses and the experiences related to community, reveals multiple interrelated facets of the phenomenon. The synthesis also shows that online community, far from being “virtual” or lacking in significance, is a very real phenomenon that not only evokes a multitude of meanings in the minds of individuals, but also implies tremendous amounts of social interaction that has a real and often positive presence in the participants’ everyday lives. In what follows, I move to discussing these findings in terms of the theoretical framework and previous research introduced in section 2.
4 Discussion

Beyond the first rush to prove that online communities in fact exist, research in the field has turned to describing various aspects of the online community phenomenon, as shown in the review in section 2.4. While Wellman et al. (2002) called for focused studies “understanding how people use the internet to find community” (p. 162), criticism has been aimed at the “compartmentalised” nature of scholarship of digital cultures (Kohnen, 2011, para. 10) and the “snapshot views” that studies of online communities tend to produce, failing to account for the dynamic nature of online communities (Iriberri, 2009, p. 11:25). In this study, I have approached the challenge of studying these complex, ever-changing social scenes by engaging in long-term participant observation and by focusing on the discourses surrounding community in addition to studying experiences of community. What this approach has shown is that experiences may vary extensively, but the discourses related to community on different sites vary far less (as discussed in the previous section).

What is more, the three case studies here have shown that while community does not appear everywhere, a drive for community seems to do so. Whereas the social and technological affordances present on OpenDiary supported strong community experiences, the scenes on WiseSteps and Imgur proved more challenging. Nevertheless, in both of the latter cases, shared practices unique to those sites were created, participants referred to themselves as “we”, and, particularly in the case of Imgur, “community” functioned both as a tool for and topic of discussion. A process of building shared understandings is visible in all the case studies. In fact, at the very heart of all the social action studied here is the basic human need to belong (Ellonen, Kosonen, & Henttonen, 2010, p. 1822), to share narratives of who we are (Huhtala, 2014, p. 31), and simply to render our lives and the social contexts we move in meaningful through discourse (Blommaert, 2005, p. 4). “Meaning and existential security” is what Lagerkvist’s “exister” desires as an inhabitant of the digital ecology (Lagerkvist, 2016), and the participants in the case environments studied here appear to be no different. Indeed, other studies have found that users will work around inadequate communication tools to find ways to interact and build emotional affinity (Rotman et al., 2009, p. 48; Maloney-Krichmar & Preece, 2005). The findings of this study show similar evidence.

What then seems to be at the core of community-building online is a process of sense-making: making sense of the world for oneself, and making sense of one’s thoughts for others. Of course, individuals are constantly engaging in these sense-making processes as they navigate their social worlds, but what turns a successful
sense-making process among individuals into a community is the drawing of boundaries and creation of identities as we have seen in all the case studies here. The identification of a place with clear boundaries and set practices as “this particular place” or “this particular group of people” is what creates a community of practice according to its definition in mediated discourse analysis (Scollon, 2001a, p. 9; see also section 2.3.2 of this thesis). It is not enough to have a place where a particular set of practices is regularly repeated; the community of practice is created when it gains some level of self-consciousness, when it becomes identified and identifiable to its members as well as outsiders (ibid). This process is visible in each of the case studies, but to fully understand how community experiences are created in these environments, it is necessary to understand the sense-making that is part of the process of developing and learning the practices that make each site identifiable. The Imgur case study in particular focuses on analysing this sense-making, but the same principles apply to all the cases: learning the basic tools of each site and participating in the prescribed way – posting a text update or an image – is the beginning of becoming a member of a group (in nexus analysis, a nexus of practice). Community begins to form when an individual becomes engaged in making sense of other people’s contributions, of the site as a whole, and of the deeper identifying structures present in the practices on the site and the histories, both personal and shared, entangled in those practices. And that sense-making is what enables contributions that also make sense to other members in the manner they are accustomed to within that shared space. In other words, the group member becomes a member of the discourse community created – and at the same time, finds a name for the community and an identity as a member of that community. Here, the discourses circulating through the scene have a key role, as seen in this study. Community identification is a group exercise, borne from engaging in shared practices and sharing individual experiences of togetherness and identification.

In the following sections, these findings are placed in the larger context of prior research on online community as previously reviewed. I also discuss the role of nexus analysis in producing these findings, and the challenges involved therein. These discussions lead to the conclusion of the study.

4.1 Contribution to previous research

In the review of previous research provided in section 2.4, studies on community were divided into three categories according to their viewpoint: community as a
form of social organisation (section 2.4.1), community as a pragmatic term (section 2.4.2), and community as an experience (section 2.4.3). I will now discuss each of these categories in turn, examining the contribution of this study to the multiple conversations ongoing in online community research.

### 4.1.1 Community as a form of social organisation

In section 2.4.1, I described the drive to define community, which has characterised community research to this day, particularly within sociology. In discussing the findings related to research question 2 on the social and technological affordances involved in community creation (section 3.4), I observed that the combined list of affordances found in each case bore a marked similarity to online community definitions such as that offered by Preece (2000, p. 10). However, all the findings combined suggest that such overarching definitions may serve a different purpose than that employed in this study: here, community appears as a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989) serving many purposes and taking many meanings in different contexts. In this guise, community does not bend easily to the work of listing defining elements which apply to all usages of the term.

At the same time, this study does provide other findings which are generalisable, such as the discussion above about sense-making as a basic process at the heart of online community experiences. In addition, the study joins others in showing that the discourse on “lost community”, also discussed in section 2.4.1, is misguided; community is not lost, but it may be changing, and it does not accord with the pastoralist visions of happy villagers that still influence some community discussions (Gruzd et al., 2016, p. 1187; Luoma, Kinnula, Kuure, Halkola, & Riekki, 2016, pp. 10–14). Indeed, the descriptions of community experiences provided in this study tend to be much more nuanced, showing that community experiences are individual and comprised of many fluctuating elements. On the other hand, the distinctly positive interpretations of community present in most discussions of the phenomenon were also observed in all the case studies here. Based on the study findings, it appears that most people hold a clear and highly positive idea of community, employed in conversations and entangled in experiences of togetherness which may or may not conform with academic definitions of the phenomenon.

Thus the study shows that “community” continues to bear many meanings and serve important functions in people’s everyday lives, even if academic definitions are thought by some to be obsolete, even obscuring the actual reality of how people
form connections today (Postill, 2008; Fernback, 2007). In this instance, fresh work offering new interpretations of community as a form of social organisation also provides the most ground for discussing the findings of this study. For example, Hampton (2016) introduces the notion of “persistent-pervasive community”, suggesting that it is not the increased connectivity enabled by technological development that creates potential for significant change in human social interaction, but rather the persistent and pervasive nature of the sharing that takes place on social media. He is referring to the persistence of social ties, but this study suggests that it is also the persistence of the interaction, and the marks it leaves in the form of previously posted content online, that is ground-breaking. What persistence enables is the creation of a community image for a new member, even prior to any interaction with others on a site. This predisposes them to interpret future interactions as community, or strengthening an already existing community experience through witnessing similar experiences by others, persistently displayed. This “recording” of community experience is perhaps the “killer implication” that Feenberg and Bakardjieva (2004) once rejected for online community as a new form of social organisation: it has the power to significantly amplify feelings of connection to an imagined multitude of similar others, without any requirement for interaction or establishment of actual networks of contact.

This observation is also in line with work employing Anderson’s concept of imagined community (1983), showing that online the communities and individuals’ connections to them are often imagined as much as they are composed of actual ties to or contact with identifiable others. Studies such as that of Rotman et al. (2009) discussed above, and the Imgur study here, show that a feeling of membership in a greater whole is often created even where the number of relationships with recognised others is small or even non-existent. Here, the persistence of social ties and displayed interactions may again contribute; it is easier to imagine a connection to others where trails of such connections are recorded and constantly displayed in one’s immediate environment. Thus Hampton’s theory creates a curious counterpoint to Bauman’s (2000, 2001) theorising on the fleetingness, changeability and liquidity of sociality in late modernity, as Hampton himself notes (Hampton, 2016, p. 118). Bauman’s and Hampton’s thoughts are not incompatible, however; the idea of persistent-pervasive community serves to illustrate how Bauman’s liquid, throw-away, overlapping community engagements can be achieved. The “light cloak” donned for identification in each community (Bauman, 2000, p. 169) is constantly re-coloured and kept up-to-date, fashionable even, by the interactions occurring with and within each social circle. These interactions are
maintained in the background and occasionally foregrounded according to the functioning principles of mobile technology. Bauman contrasts these “light cloaks”, easy to change into as we move through our social lives daily, with the “iron cages” associated with old ideas of community (ibid.). According to Bauman, identities fluctuate and are never complete (Jallinoja, 1995, p. 46). It is social interaction that is central to organising humans into groups; it is social interaction that must be studied to understand where the liquidity of human sociality forms into (temporarily) stable, recognisable wholes.

In nexus analysis, the concepts of nexus of practice and community of practice are used to analyse just this formative process and its fluctuation. As discussed in section 3.4, each of the sites studied here constitutes a nexus of practice in that they all produce sets of practices that members learn as they begin navigating the sites, and it is those practices that members understand as constituting what it is to participate on the sites. Indeed, the sites probably all also form communities of practice through the identification processes discussed above and in many parts of this thesis. That is, the participants begin to recognise the nexus of practice as stable and recognisable also for outsiders; as a place with its own identity, with boundaries which distinguish it from other similar places. They also begin to recognise their membership in those places as a distinguishable identity of its own, and an object which can be used as a mediational means within other social actions, as discussed e.g. in section 3.3 and summarised in figure 16. However, it is the fluctuation in this identifiability which produces conflicts as seen particularly in the Imgur case and discussed in general in the academic research which continues to question the applicability of the community term to online interaction. I suggest that in many cases, the terms “nexus of practice” and “community of practice” as defined by Scollon (2001a, pp. 8–9) might in fact be more appropriate in the close analysis of social groupings online. Here, “online community” remains the central defining term due to its application by the participants in the social scenes being studied. And as this study shows, the current usage of the community term does encapsulate many understandings and purposes outside of the organisational viewpoint discussed here.

4.1.2 Community as a pragmatic term

In section 2.4.2, I discussed the prevalence of research which discusses online community, often from a technical or business perspective, without defining the term in any robust manner. Instead, any site which enables group interaction can be
titled a community, and research related to the development of such “community”
technologies and administrative practices does not tend to consider the experiences
arising from participation in the social scenes thus created.

This usage of the community term to refer to group interaction online has been
previously noted (e.g. Baym, 2010), and such usage was also observed in all the
case studies here. “Community” is a useful concept to refer to recognisable sites
where a number of people congregate around some shared topic or activity. As such,
the meaning is not dissimilar to the definition of community of practice (Wenger,
1998; Scollon, 2001a, p. 9), also discussed in section 3.4. What is more, this study
cannot show that the studied participants’ usage of the community term is ever
divorced from their own experience of participation. In other words, even where
the usage is pragmatic, when a member of a website uses the community term to
refer to the user base, according to nexus analytic thinking that usage must always
be affected by their own histories and those of others observed associating the term
with the site. Therefore, the experience of community is never far, even when a
pragmatic usage is employed.

However, in all of the case studies the community title is also, even
predominantly, bestowed on the sites by the developers and other outside
commentators. In all the three cases, the websites themselves display the
community title in one or more locations, and the term is used e.g. in “help” texts
and marketing materials. As discussed in section 3.4, the term is very commonly
used in discussing online interaction in general, a usage which is likely to also
influence that of the individuals involved in the creation of tools for such interaction.
Again, it is impossible to claim that the developers and commentators in question
use the term divorced from their awareness of the social scenes actually present on
the sites. WiseSteps is somewhat of an exception here, in that the community term
was used before the site was actually opened. However, in this case, the term was
expressly associated with the positive interaction and increased participation
associated with experiences of community. Nevertheless, even here a
predominantly pragmatic usage was observed alongside the usages referring to the
experience of participation and the relationships formed among members. Further
study would be required to fully analyse the role of experience in these apparently
pragmatic usages of the community term to describe sites of online interaction.
4.1.3 Community as an experience

Section 2.4.3 surveyed research focusing on the psychological and emotional experience of community, and on how such experiences arise online. Here, I noted that community definitions in general tend to consider the type and nature of the interaction, the shared practices and other elements of a shared identity, and the feelings associated with the interaction. These elements are also present in the theory of sense of virtual community (SOVC) (Blanchard & Markus 2002, 2004), which is extensively applied in online community research and also in this study. As noted previously, the theory was used to analyse community creation on Open Diary, and served to inform my community understanding in the latter two case studies, while they focused more predominantly on the role of discourse in expressions and understandings of community.

The central findings of the study in this respect were related to the social and technological affordances supporting community experiences to the extent that they could be observed in each case study. These affordances were summarised as follows: “effective tools for interaction, shared practices, privacy protection through technological as well as social means, consistent administration, a respectful and supportive atmosphere, the presence of like-minded individuals, and some manner of entertainment motivating participation” (section 3.4). As also discussed at the beginning of this section, the development of shared practices unique to each site was central in encouraging the association of “community” with the social scenes in question. Further, the community observed by participants was in some cases (particularly on Imgur) imagined rather than built on actual ties to recognised others on the site.

In methodological terms, this study provides some evidence that theories such as the psychological theory of sense of community and its derivative theory of sense of virtual community can also be usefully applied in qualitative studies, as compared to the quantitative approaches they are combined with in most previous studies. The Open Diary case in particular provides rich detail of the social interaction giving birth to community experiences as defined by the theory of SOVC, detail which complements the quantitatively-based findings from previous studies. Conversely, a quantitative study on the appearance of SOVC on Imgur, similar to that performed by Blanchard (2004) in connection to developing the theory, would likely provide a fruitful complement to the findings presented in this study.
Finally, I return to the discussion begun in the introduction to this chapter. Whether considering community as an experience or as a form of social organisation, or even as a synonym for group interaction in a shared space on a shared topic, this study consistently finds evidence of a desire to connect and find some manner of affinity with others. At the lowest level, this affinity may consist of identification as a member of the same site as anonymous others, while at the highest, affinity may equal a strong sense of community and close relationships with fellow members. On the other hand, another central element witnessed in each of the case studies is the desire for agency on the part of users, and the importance of a sense of agency in encouraging active participation on and closer identification with the sites. In all the cases, members were able to influence the structure and contents of the sites in various ways, the most common being contact with developers who took user remarks and requests into consideration in making changes to the technology design and administrative practices.

Bakan (1966) proposed “agency” and “communion” as the two fundamental elements of how humans approach the social world. While many other elements are also at play as shown, this study finds that expressions of agency combined with the desire to connect with others are at the heart of the community experiences analysed, whether nascent (as seen on WiseSteps), imagined (as seen on Imgur) or fully formed (as seen on Open Diary). Thus I can conclude that the community experience as it appears here is a combination of acts of agency, identity-building and sense-making, all based on the basic human desire to connect, to understand and be understood. Lagerkvist’s description of the “exister” resonates with this finding and suggests future directions for the study of how humans connect online:

>This article posits the “exister” as the principal subject in media studies and inhabitant of the digital ecology – a stumbling, hurting, and relational human being, who navigates within limits and among interruptions through the torrents of our digital existence, in search for meaning and existential security. (Lagerkvist, 2016, p. 1)

4.2 The contribution of nexus analysis

As first discussed in section 2.1, this study takes two viewpoints on the community phenomenon, moving between analysis of the community experience and taking a discourse-oriented focus into how community as a concept functions. This multifaceted approach is enabled by nexus analysis, which in itself defines social
action as a complex construct that requires analysis from multiple viewpoints to be fully understood. The understanding of social action as composed of *interaction orders, historical bodies and discourses in place* (defined in section 2.3.2) has guided my sense-making processes throughout the study. While the study began as an ethnography, the addition of nexus analytic thinking has greatly assisted in focusing the analysis on the elements that shape the function and meaning of the concept of community, as well as the social actions tied to the concept in the environments studied here.

Blommaert and Huang (2009) discuss similar benefits to applying nexus analysis, which they describe as “sophisticated ethnography” (p. 268). They highlight in particular the nexus analytic understanding of space as “agentive and non-neutral” (ibid.). In this study, the role of space as one of the shaping elements in social action has been especially relevant, allowing an analysis of the technological structures, and the design processes involved therein, as key constituents in community experiences and understandings. Indeed, the general discourses related to community online are linked to very particular kinds of technological structures; the pragmatic usage of “online community” usually refers to a site enabling group interaction (content sharing and commenting) in some type of bounded environment, accessible via one address and possibly involving user registration or another manner of identifying participants. This connection is not incidental; Chayko (2008) has found that “portable” technologies inspire strong user involvement and that people often quickly develop strong feelings “about the experience of inhabiting the social spaces” they have entered (p. 10). In a later discussion, she connects this finding with earlier studies suggesting that communication technology “tends to give those who use it a very strong ‘sense of place’” (Meyrowitz, 1985; Polson, 2015; as cited by Chayko, 2014, p. 979). This study has also shown that participants in these environments tend to identify them as unique social scenes and develop strong bonds with them, and research question 2 in particular produced findings on the technological and social affordances shaping the interaction within those scenes, discussed in section 3.4.

The nexus analytic understanding of social action as mediated is particularly visible in the discussion of community as a boundary object serving many purposes. The study shows that, in many instances, “community” becomes resemiotised into a mediational means serving many purposes other than the description of social groupings. “Community” describes and explains action, but it also produces and shapes action. Here, a risk can also be identified. As discussed above, the general discourses on online community tend to be linked to particular kinds of
technological structures. While at the time when Open Diary was first created (1998) and the first academic works on online community were published (e.g. Rheingold, 1993; Jones, 1995), the idea of community online was still ground-breaking. It was also filled with potential: any new technology in the field was likely to be truly innovative in terms of methods of interaction that were being enabled for the first time, such as the commenting feature introduced on Open Diary (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010, p. 60; Richmond, 2009). However, as the studies of WiseSteps and Imgur show, “community” in recent years has come to be associated with familiar images of sites such as those studied here. This poses the risk of over-simplification of the concept through the process of technologisation of the practices thought to be involved in creating community (Scollon 2001a; Scollon 2001b; Jones & Hafner, 2012, p. 12). As the term “online community” comes to be associated with the social sites that are currently popular, in addition to the pragmatic use discussed in section 4.1.2., developers and marketers risk losing sight of the finer detail that in fact produces community in these locations, and may produce community in many other types of technological set-ups. Indeed, this may result in the death of the concept of online community, if not of the phenomenon: if any site of group interaction with the latest fashionable technological bells and whistles is called an online community, the affinity that people create and experience in many kinds of settings may perhaps need to find a new name. Certainly, developers would do well to take the social aspects of community-building as their starting point, and continue finding new ways to allow individuals to interact and form groups in a manner that feels truthful, safe and meaningful.

The multi-layered approach taken in this study has also involved some challenges. The inclusion of three very different social scenes, studied through long-term participant observation, has involved questions of data coverage and access. As discussed in sections 3.2 and 3.3, the WiseSteps case involved limitations as to direct contact with the participants, whereas the Imgur case could not reach even a small minority of all the site members when approached with these methods. In these cases, the focus on discourses was particularly fruitful, as those aspects could more easily be captured without extensive contact with members. It must also be noted that this study has focused on those individuals who did participate on some level in the case study environments, and others like them. However, research has shown that individual responses and attitudes to online interaction vary; not everyone is interested in forming relationships online (Tufekci, 2010 in Chayko, 2014). Another central methodological challenge in the study of online interaction is the (artificial) separation of online and offline realities,
discussed by e.g. Hine (2015, p. 37), Cavanagh (2007, pp. 106–108) and Orgad (2009, p. 48). This study was able to somewhat bypass this issue, as it takes as a starting point the experiences as described and expressed by participants, and the discourses and practices that shape those experiences, which are present in their social worlds irrespective of the form of mediation.
5 Conclusion

This study portrays community as a multi-faceted phenomenon and a boundary object (Star & Griesemer, 1989), taking its meaning and function from each context it appears in. The participants in the social scenes studied – members, developers and others involved – associated community with a variety of meanings and employed the term to serve a variety of functions. At the same time, all those involved recognised community in each of the guises it was presented in; in other words, community functioned usefully as a boundary object, helping to explain and illustrate social scenes and experiences of participation in those social scenes.

In the end, the concept of community also functioned as a boundary object for this study. I did not approach community only as an experience or only as a term requiring definition, but discovered multiple usages and definitions for the term in academic research as well as the social scenes I studied, avoiding compartmentalisation and “snapshot” views into the phenomenon. Thus, the main contribution of this study is to demonstrate the richness and complexity of the community phenomenon, and to provide new starting points for academics as well as technology developers and administrators. For all those interested in what community means today, I recommend an approach that understands the manner in which the term is used, which as can be seen here is changeable and rarely deliberate.

Indeed, the thinking behind the concept of boundary objects includes a warning against the kind of standardising work that is often aimed at these objects, as people try to control their fluctuating nature (Star, 2010, p. 613). For a boundary object, this spells death. In the case of the community concept, the drive has long been to define it once and for all, but such definitions threaten to greatly reduce the action-orientedness and the materiality of the concept. This can perhaps best be seen with the pragmatic usage of the term in “online community” to mean any site which enables group interaction; and it could be argued that it is likely developers and marketing experts who have promoted the use of the term in this respect. The term has in many cases become technologised to represent our current ideas of how group interaction can be set up online, while true experiences of community have far less to do with the technological tools enabling the interaction than with the interaction itself.

Similarly, developers tend to aim to streamline the experience of participation as they learn more about the practices that members develop. If this streamlining is not done with a great deal of sensitivity and understanding of where the
community-building really occurs within the site, the changes made may be detrimental to the existence of the community by taking away some of the work that members have to do in order to produce their membership. In the worst case, the standardisation of community experiences may reduce the colour, uniqueness and, therefore, the viability of a potential community. Any changes to the interactive structures of an online community site must take into consideration the multiple elements which affect the interaction, and any effort to develop new technologies with a view to community-building must begin from sociality, not from existing forms of technological structures.

The study has shown that when individuals interact online, they bring all their histories and experiences into the interaction. These histories affect not only how they approach others, but how they view the technological structures provided, and how they understand and interpret the content posted. In other words, while the technology design certainly matters a great deal, so do the backgrounds of the individuals engaging with the technology. A third crucial element is the discourse environment: the discourses built into the site and circulating around and through the site. Through this process, new practices may begin to develop that are quite removed from the aims and understandings of the developers and administrators. Therefore, it is crucial that those wishing to create new online environments, whether for learning, information-seeking, social support or entertainment, are able and willing to see what is really going on in the interaction. The meaningful contact is in the details, and a good administrator understands how and why that meaning is created.

The research approach employed here enabled the identification and description of the above details in the three case environments. Nexus analysis here proved especially compatible with online ethnography based on long-term participation in the environments being studied. Participant observation allowed me to identify the key practices giving shape to the unique social scenes on each site, and the central concepts of nexus analysis gave me a more nuanced understanding of the elements affecting the social action I was witnessing. Understanding the central role of all participants – including those more removed from the action, such as developers and outside commentators – resulted in what I consider a more realistic description of the work that the community concept was doing in these locations. At the same time, this research approach gave space for the description of experiences, as in the case of the Open Diary study, and allowed for the linking of those observations to the discourse-focused findings from the WiseSteps and Imgur studies.

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Although the depiction of community-related experiences provided by this study is rich, the results are limited to the online sphere only. The findings here focus on online community, and any comparison with or application to strictly offline spheres must remain the work of future studies. Neither does this study offer any very specific guidelines for future development and administration of community environments; rather, I have chosen to focus on rich description of three very different environments, hoping that this will provide inspiration for those developing new social environments online. At the same time, this application of the nexus analytic mindset to ethnographic data collected online could usefully be developed into more light-weight tools for understanding and developing online environments.

Finally, I must return to the main contribution of this study: the understanding that community can only really be understood in the context it is found in, whatever the concept may be doing there. Not only that, but community can be found in the most surprising of places, given a definition based on the realities of participants rather than any strict theoretical conceptions. This study lends weight to the idea that community is a basic human drive, and new technological developments are likely to provide endless permutations of the aspects of human togetherness we associate with community. Thus, any overarching definition of the concept, however generally true, is likely to obscure the detail that truly serves to explain it: the shades of meaning and experience that are the grains of change and development in how humans connect.
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List of original publications

This thesis is based on the following publications, which are referred to throughout the text by their Roman numerals:

I  Martinviita, A. (2016). Online community and the personal diary: Writing to connect at Open Diary. Computers in Human Behavior, 63, 672–682. https://doi.org/10.1016/j.chb.2016.05.089


III Martinviita, A. (manuscript). The many faces of online community: images and imaginings of togetherness on Imgur.

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ONLINE COMMUNITY AS EXPERIENCE AND DISCOURSE
A NEXUS ANALYTIC VIEW INTO UNDERSTANDINGS OF TOGETHERNESS ONLINE