Seeking Seclusion, Embracing Decline: A Qualitative Enquiry Into the Long-Term Development of a Private Online Community

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Abstract

This article analyzes the development of a message board–based online community between 2002 and 2016. It examines a private online community that actively secluded itself from online publics and has welcomed no new members in over a decade. Drawing on online participant observation, offline fieldwork, online and offline interviews, as well as archival research of 12 years of online interaction, the article provides an in-depth qualitative account of the “aging” of an online community that focuses on its internal dynamics and member narratives. A portrait of a community that survived years of apparent “decline,” it enquires into the durability of online socialities and cultures. Specifically, the article identifies three interlinked factors that shaped the long-term development of the community: (1) structural and cultural continuities, actively achieved through user and administrator efforts, established the online community as a coherent and recognizable social aggregation that persists over time; (2) forum members do not uniformly perceive decreasing levels of community interaction as negative but reframe it as an expression of in-group familiarity and side-effect of a consolidation process; and (3) interweaving of online and offline interaction is a primary source of familiarity among members and factor benefiting community longevity. As study of a message board tracing back to 2002, the article examines a remnant of an earlier online culture and speaks to increasing scholarly interests in online pasts. As a study of a closed forum, the article further contributes to an emerging body of research on private and secretive modes of online interaction.

Keywords

online community, online pasts, long-term development, qualitative methods, community sustainability

Introduction

Social media platforms position themselves as mediators of sociality and facilitators of community and communication. In line with this, researchers have described online sociality as open, inclusive, and creating new publics (Kozinets, 2010, p. 71; Song, 2010, p. 253). However, the group I focus on in this article, The Exile, an online community with a history of over 15 years, differs from this profile. The Exile is a private online community which first developed as a video game forum but has since shifted from an “interest-driven” to a “friendship-driven” space focused primarily on informal exchange (Ellison & boyd, 2013). Since its foundation in 2004, The Exile has never been publicly advertised. Forum contents are only visible to registered users, and registration requires an invitation by an in-group guarantor. No new members have joined since 2008. Having originally emerged out of a different forum, The Exile’s roots go back to 2002, which makes this message board–based online community older than now omnipresent social network sites (SNS) such as Facebook (2004) and Twitter (2006). While user participation has declined dramatically over the years and new posts have become rare, Exile members remain attached to the forum and continue to visit it frequently. This challenges dominant understandings of online community sustainability as defined by user activity (Malinen, 2015). The Exile’s development—the long-term survival of a closed group faced with continuous decline—thus poses a theoretical riddle that this article seeks to enquire into.

Online message boards, also known as forums, are “text-based exchanges [. . .] organized around particular shared
orientations or interests” (Kozinets, 2010, p. 85). Forums are usually separated into “boards” within which “threads” offer venues for (sub-)topical discussion. The roots of online forums go back to the bulletin boards of the 1970s and 1980s, which makes them one of the oldest surviving cultures of online togetherness (Baym, 2010, p. 18; Castells, 2010, p. 46). However, message board culture has declined since the turn of the millennium (Baym, 2010, p. 72), and SNS are now the most popular “many-to-many” online medium (Chambers, 2013, p. 145; Parks, 2011, p. 117). A primary difference between online communities and SNS is that where the former are centered around interests, the latter are built around people (boyd & Ellison, 2007). This change in popular Internet culture also led to a shift in academic focus. The heyday of online forums in the 1990s and early 2000s was accompanied by scholarly interest in “online” or “virtual” communities (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004). Today, scholars primarily direct their attention toward SNS (Gerrard, 2018; Kennedy, 2016; Papacharissi, 2011; Vicari, 2017). However, an increasing interest in “the web that was” (Brügger & Milligan, 2019; Brügger & Schroeder, 2017; RESAW, 2019) has led scholars to revisit earlier forms of online interaction such as mailing lists (Horbinski, 2018) or online communities (Milligan, 2017). In addition to public social media platforms, researchers increasingly also recognize a trend toward privacy in user habits and desires, and an adoption of secretive modes of online sociality (Black et al., 2016; Gerrard, 2017; Raynes-Goldie, 2010).

While scholars show an increasing interest in the historical development of the Internet as socio-technical phenomenon, qualitative studies of online communities as online sociality remain dominated by ahistorical portrayals (Adams & Smith, 2008; Wilson & Peterson, 2002). With a few exceptions (de Almeida et al., 2018; Pearce, 2009), the study of the long-term development of online communities has largely been left to quantitative researchers. These studies have sought to measure the sustainability or putative “success” of online communities based on community activity (Malinen, 2015; Preece, 2001), identified variables that determine users’ willingness to contribute to online communities (Li, 2011), and discussed encouraging user engagement as a challenge for community providers (Kamboj & Rahman, 2017). Furthermore, they have theorized the long-term development of online communities as evolving according to life-cycle models and identified decline and ultimately, demise as eventual fate of online communities (Asatani et al., 2014; Buchem & König, 2011; Iriberrri & Leroy, 2009). There remains a lack of qualitative insights into the process in which forms of social media such as online communities rise and fall.

This study contributes to Internet research in two ways. First, this article provides an in-depth qualitative account of the long-term development of online communities. It investigates a remnant of an earlier online culture that has fallen out of popular and academic favor but still co-exists with contemporary forms of online sociality. Following a group that has stuck together since 2002, it offers insights into the “aging” of online communities difficult to achieve in studies of more recent forms of online sociality and explores possibilities of sustainability beyond activity. Second, this article advances understandings of private and secretive forms of online interaction. While a large share of Internet research focuses on public forms of online sociality, this article examines a private online community that actively closed itself off from online publics. The article contributes to an emerging body of literature examining an active retreat from public and performative online spaces of Facebook and Twitter (Black et al., 2016; Gerrard, 2017; Raynes-Goldie, 2010). It adds to discussions of hidden and secluded forms of online interaction, such as the dark web (Gehl, 2016), secret-telling apps (Clark-Gordon et al., 2017; Sharon & John, 2018), and other forms of anonymous or closed online media (Horbinski, 2018; Knuttila, 2011).

In the following, I will first review previous research on (online) communities and community continuance. I will then give a short overview of The Exile and its development. After introducing my methodological approach, I spend the remainder of this article identifying three key aspects that have shaped the long-term development of The Exile as an online community, the role of continuities in creating a coherent and persistent online social aggregation; the links between member familiarity, community activity, and longevity; and finally, the effect that intertwining online and offline interaction has had on the community.

**Literature Review**

**(Online) Communities**

While “community” is frequently invoked in academic and popular discourses, the term’s actual meaning is highly ambiguous (Cohen, 1985; Willson, 2006). Point of departure for many discussions of community has been the idea of “traditional community”: a small, spatially defined social aggregation organized through face-to-face communication, where membership is acquired through birth and boundaries between communities are clear-cut (Castells, 2010, p. 387). However, this notion of community has been severely criticized (Calhoun, 1980; Cohen, 1985). Scholars have questioned the adequacy of a concept assuming a proximity-based and clearly-bounded entity for understanding modern societies (Blackshaw, 2010). Contemporary communities offer increasing levels of choice and flexibility, and span across greater geographical areas than before (Willson, 2006, pp. 37–40). Instead of trying to define community, scholars thus started to ask how communities are constructed and maintained (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 64; Parks, 2011, p. 107). For example, Anderson (2006) discussed the importance of socio-technological developments in extending communities beyond the realm of face-to-face communication. Imagined
communities transcend local boundaries through integrative mediated practices (Willson, 2006, pp. 36–39). This liberation from spatial requirements is continued by online communities.

**Keeping People Together Online**

Online communities are usually based on shared interests instead of geographic proximity (Chambers, 2013, p. 145). Offering greater flexibility at the cost of stability, they have been portrayed as the epitome of postmodernity (Blackshaw, 2010; Willson, 2006, p. 216). Like “community,” the term “online community” can refer to a range of different social formations (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 57; Wilken, 2014, p. 14), which vary in purpose, employed online medium, and overlap with the actual world (Kozinets, 2010, pp. 35–36, 85–87). Scholars have sought to allude this conceptual ambiguity by identifying unifying characteristics of (online) communities, such as sense of space, interpersonal relationships, and shared identities, practices and resources (Baym, 2010, p. 75).

Feelings of belonging, similarity, and interdependence are at the heart of the community concept, and are frequently referred to as “sense of community” (SOC). Understood by McMillan and Chavis (1986) as consisting of the four interconnected elements of membership, influence, need fulfillment, and emotional connection, SOC is recognized as crucial for understanding individuals’ involvement with communities (Blanchard, 2007).

Adapting SOC to the online context, scholars have developed the concept of “sense of virtual community” (SOVC) (Blanchard & Markus, 2004; Koh & Kim, 2003). Building on an understanding of SOC as strengthening individuals’ commitment to communities, SOVC has been discussed as facilitating member engagement and retention (Mamonov et al., 2016). SOVC is thus seen as essential for online community sustainability (Mamonov et al., 2016), which is defined as depending on user activity (Malinen, 2015). Other factors that have been identified as contributing to the sustainability of online communities include perceived usefulness (Lin, 2007) and presence of leaders (Lee et al., 2019).

Researchers have put forward varying definitions of SOVC and its development (Blanchard, 2007; Tonteri et al., 2011). For example, Blanchard and Markus (2004) emphasize the role of online identities and trust while Mamonov et al. (2016) point toward the importance of a “sense of place.” Such differences in focus aside, most accounts of SOVC highlight the importance of shared emotional connections and feelings of membership (Tonteri et al., 2011). These depend on group boundaries and a shared history (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Their emergence can be explained through narrative practices within communities.

As a form of selective meaning-making, narratives provide an essential tool for identity construction (Smith, 2010). Emphasizing a common origin, history or enemy, (group) narratives are one of the main tools through which communities seek ontological security (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 155). Furthermore, narrative strategies such as reframing or omission provide a way of handling past negative experiences and constructing “repaired” accounts of a group’s history (Rosenthal, 1998; Smith, 2010). Accordingly, narratives are recognized in online community research as facilitating group cohesion and identification (Albrechtslund, 2010; Gao, 2007), and play an important role in community development.

Bonds between members are another factor that contributes to community continuity. Contrary to early doubts about the value of connections made online, studies have repeatedly shown that online interaction can be a cherished source of socio-emotional support and regularly leads to close friendships among participants (Baym, 2010, p. 82; Billett & Sawyer, 2019). As online communities develop and relationships among members become more intimate, participants often combine different communication channels (Chambers, 2013, p. 160) and move the relationship into the offline world (Di Gennaro & Dutton, 2007, p. 595). Offline interaction is seen as having largely positive effects on community development, such as strengthening users’ sense of community and belonging (Koh & Kim, 2003; Rosen et al., 2011) or contributing to community sustainability (Lin, 2007).

**The Exile**

The Exile is a forum-based online community that was created in 2004 and is still active at the time of writing (August 2019). The roots of the German-speaking online community go back to 2002, when future Exile members first met on the official forum of the role-playing video game Chym. While most users originally joined the corporate-run forum to ask game-related questions, many also flocked to the “off topic” (OT) board, where they engaged in a variety of online activities including small talk, community games, and discussions of social issues. The vibrant community organized its first “real life” (RL) meetup in 2003. While this meetup was held under the banner of the Chym forum, severe conflict in the official forum led to a split in the community in the following year. An increase in right-wing voices on the OT board and changes to the forum software led to a dispute between future Exile members and Chym community managers. Finally, the high-handed way community managers dealt with the disagreement and the “ban” of a core forum participant led a small group of members to create their own forum. Many of these founding members had already met offline during the RL meetup or small private meetings. After the initial exodus, The Exile gained new members through a targeted recruitment process. Exile members started to privately invite other Chym users who they saw as resourceful participants in the OT board’s political discussions. Preferring its intimate atmosphere and the lack of moderation, right-wing and “low quality” posts, most Exile members switched
permanently to the private forum. A second RL meetup in summer 2004, organized a few months after the inception of the private forum, established The Exile as an independent community. Due to the conflict with the official forum and the desire to create a safe space for the discussion of controversial topics, the administrator team disabled public access and user registration on The Exile: it became a private community, counting ca. 80 members from diverse occupational backgrounds at its peak. At the time of the forum’s creation, most members were aged between 20 and 45 years, though the community also included a few members in their teens or over 50.

Initially, interaction flourished behind the closed community gates. Thought-provoking posts by Vimes and Solitaire, the two co-founders of the forum, inspired engaged political and philosophical discussions. Their emphasis on the importance of questioning everyday assumptions facilitated the formation of a forum identity of The Exile as a place of critical intellectual exchange. While politics, philosophy, and video games emerged as the community’s core topics, the range of textual community interaction grew organically based on member interests. Next to in-depth discussions, text-based community games such as pen-and-paper role-playing games became another popular mainstay of the forum. Offline interaction also increased. Annual RL meetups became customary, and smaller groups of members started to meet monthly.

Due to technical problems, the forum had to migrate to a different server and forum software in 2007 and 2014. These migrations caused a digital reset of the community—members had to register new accounts and the archives of past community interaction had to be left behind. Over the years, the forum became smaller. While the major community topics remained unchanged, the number of boards, posts, and members decreased with both migrations. This process of decreasing community activity was quickened by the death of Vimes, whose wit, charm, and regular hosting of offline meetups had made him, in the words of Solitaire, the “heart” of the forum. After Vimes’ death in 2008, meetups became infrequent. No annual RL meetups were held for 6 years, even though smaller groups of members met occasionally during this time. Since 2014, offline interaction has become more frequent again and annual meetups have been re-established. However, overall levels of online and offline interaction are low compared to the forum’s early days. In-depth discussions, once a hallmark of the group, are now rare and members only contribute a handful of new posts every day. Nonetheless, having made the forum a part of their everyday lives throughout many years of online interaction, most remaining members continue to check the website daily. Several members reported visiting the forum several times a day, setting it as the start page of their browser or described it as their “digital home.” The following section describes my approach to studying this intimate online space.

Methodology

This study is based on online participant observation, short-term offline fieldwork, online and offline interviews, as well as archival research of 12 years of online interaction. Fieldnotes created through these methods were supplemented with selected member posts, adding up to 390 double-lined word pages which were then coded with NVivo.

Ethnographic Fieldwork

Anthropological fieldwork on the Internet has been discussed with terms such as online ethnography and netnography (Kozinets, 2010; Pearce, 2009). Like “traditional” fieldwork, online ethnographic methods draw on the researcher’s embodied experience as a participant observer to gain a comprehensive understanding of an (online) culture and accurately convey the meaning system and practices of its members (Hine, 2015, p. 19; Kozinets, 2010, p. 190).

I conducted online ethnographic fieldwork between April 2016 and September 2016. During this period, I checked The Exile several times a day and contributed a total of 481 posts. Having been an Exile member since the year of its inception, I entered the field as an insider. The benefits and challenges of insider research have been discussed extensively (Dwyer & Buckle, 2009), and significantly shaped my fieldwork. On the most fundamental level, my insider role made research possible, as access to the community—or even its discovery—are difficult for outsiders. Before starting my fieldwork, I discussed my research intentions with forum owner Solitaire, and subsequently created a thread with information about my research interest and research participant rights that was used to gain the informed consent of forum members. While my insider status facilitated a minimally invasive research approach, a knock-on effect of my fieldwork cannot be entirely excluded.

Participating in a weekend RL meetup of the group in North-West Germany in June 2016, I supplemented my online ethnographic research with short-term offline fieldwork. While very small with a number of only six participants, participants traveled between 170 and 420 kilometers for the meetup.

Interviews

Interviews, a staple of ethnographic fieldwork (Boellstorff et al., 2012; Hine, 2015), facilitated insights into participants’ perspectives on the forum and the reasons for their continued community membership. I interviewed a total of 14 participants in 17 interviews. Five interviews were conducted offline during the aforementioned meetup. With the exception of the interview with forum administrator Solitaire for which I employed a semi-structured approach to get a detailed understanding of the inception and maintenance of the forum, offline interviews were conducted as unstructured
interviews (DeWalt & DeWalt, 2002, p. 122). In addition, I conducted semi-structured online interviews with 12 members. Online interviews (Boellstorff, 2012, p. 92) were conducted using the private messaging function of the forum. They thus followed the logic of regular community interaction but were clearly identified as part of my research through an added disclaimer.

Archival Research

Web archives provide a rich data source for Internet research (Brügger & Schroeder, 2017). Researchers have recommended the analysis of archived online interaction as a supplement for online ethnography that allows familiarization with a community and insights into changes over time (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 120; Hine, 2015, p. 137). While the archives of the preceding Chym forum are no longer available, The Exile’s archives reach back to the foundation of the private forum in 2004 and comprised 177,541 posts at the time of research (2016). Archival research was conducted board by board and facilitated the identification of changes and consistencies in the community’s development. At the same time, reading through the forum in a digitally altered and sometimes distorted form facilitated a process of defamiliarization, which helped me manage my insider role in the community.

The research was developed in accordance with established ethics guidelines for Internet research (Markham & Buchanan, 2012). Recognizing the importance of privacy for the community, several measures were taken to protect this. For example, forum and participant names have been changed and the paper does not reproduce any verbatim online content that would allow identification of the field site.

The Long-Term Development of Private Online Communities

The Exile exhibits several characteristics typical of online communities (Baym, 2010). Referring to each other as “Exiles,” members have a clear sense of group identity. Members engage with each other through close and complex social relations, as is evident from regular expressions of affinity in member posts and the existence of different subgroups in the forum. Furthermore, communal engagement in online activities such as discussions, games, and creative projects are signs of a shared community practice. At the same time, the decidedly closed and private nature of the forum diverges from common portrayals of online communities as open and inclusive (Kozinets, 2010, p. 71; Song, 2010, p. 253), and echoes instead self-segregating and secrecy-oriented online practices (Horbinski, 2018). Compared to large, anonymous, and inclusive public online communities that feature in many prior studies, The Exile is best described as a private online community, defined by its small scale, closed nature, and high degrees of member familiarity. I will now identify three different aspects that influenced the long-term development of the community—continuity, familiarity, and interweaving of online and offline interaction. First, multidimensional continuities were of core importance for making the forum a lasting “digital home.” Second, members embraced decreasing activity by reframing it as result of a familiarization process. Third, the longevity of The Exile is directly linked to its vivid history of offline engagement.

Continuity

The concept of continuity allows the identification of an online community as a consistent entity over time. In the case of The Exile, many forum structures and customs have only seen nominal changes over the years. The development of the forum was shaped by three key continuities. First is continuity of membership. Almost all active members at the time of research in 2016 have been with the forum since 2004 and were active in the Chym forum before that. Keeping the same username (and sometimes the same profile picture) throughout all community migrations, members have developed and maintained recognizable online identities over time. No new users joined after 2008. While members are familiar with each other to different degrees, all members have at least a basic understanding of each other’s identity and offline lives. This is significant as member identifiability is recognized as a factor benefiting the development of SOVC (Blanchard & Markus, 2004).

Structural continuity is the second aspect that contributes to members’ experience of a community as a coherent historical entity. Like the Chym forum before it, all three iterations of The Exile have been classic discussion boards, and little to no software additions have been made to the digital body of the forum over the years. After each of the technological resets the migrations forced on the forum in 2007 and 2014, the “new” incarnation of the forum was modeled after earlier iterations. The Exile’s “message board” format has remained unchanged over the years, giving the community a consistent technological basis. Furthermore, large parts of the forum’s internal architecture have stayed the same since The Exile’s inception. While smaller boards were phased out, reducing the total number of boards with each migration, core boards such as the OT, politics, philosophy, and games boards have been retained throughout. Structural continuity has contributed to members’ experience of the forum as a recognizable place throughout the years, increasing users’ “sense of place”—a recognized antecedent of SOVC (Mamonov et al., 2016). While there were minor renovations, the basic structure of the forum has remained unchanged, making it, in the words of several members, a lasting “digital home.”

On the micro-level of community interaction, structural continuity is upheld through cultural continuity. After each migration, members set out to restore their familiar digital
Certain threads, such as the “photo gallery” or “the last movie you saw” were recreated in each forum. In some cases, the opening post includes a link to the precursor thread on the previous forum. Threads such as these have been persistent institutions of the forum culture; the roots of some of them even reaching back to the Chym forum.

User efforts and administrative decisions can work toward establishing long-living online communities as consistent and coherent digital societies with a recognizable membership body, technical structure, and culture. In the case of the Exile, these underlying continuities have established the forum as a highly familiar virtual space for its members: they know all its inhabitants, and all its nooks and crannies.

Familiarity

Quantitative studies have evaluated the success of online communities based on member activity (Malinen, 2015; Preece, 2001) and have identified “decline” as fate of unsuccessful online communities (Asatani et al., 2014; Buchem & König, 2011; Iriberri & Leroy, 2009; Mamonov et al., 2016). When comparing the current Exile to its early days, symptoms of such decline are evident. For example, the number of posts in the first Exile forum (2004–2007) was almost twice as high as the number of posts in the second and third Exile forums taken together (2007–2014, 2014–2019). The number of members also decreased significantly over the community’s migrations (Table 1). While some members left due to personal conflict with other group members, most presumably disappeared as their bond with the group was not strong enough to motivate them to re-register on a new website.¹

Symptoms of decline are also apparent when comparing the nature and content of forum interaction over the years. For example, descriptions of the forum as a place of learning were central to most participants’ narratives about the community, and intellectually stimulating discussions were a major factor facilitating active user engagement in the early years of the forum. Once the pride of the forum, these political and philosophical debates lost much of their in-depth nature after 2009. Since 2011, most new contributions in the politics board have been made in the “brief political commentary” thread, which is reactivated with each new issue. Today, in-depth analysis has given way to brief expressions of sentiment. Similarly, making up 28% of all posts, online pen-and-paper role-playing games were once among the most popular community activities in the first Exile forum, but disappeared in its later manifestations. While members originally turned to The Exile as a place of intellectual exchange and entertainment, the forum lost these functions in its later years. Members themselves were acutely aware of these changes:

While in 2004 and 2005 the forum was so active that you’d come across new threads every few minutes, later it became less fulfilling. (Interview with Drisarek, July 2016)

In fact, members noticed signs of decline as early as 2005, only 1 year after the foundation of The Exile:

What’s going on with the forum recently? Has everybody gone from winter dormancy straight into springtime lethargy? Is there nothing left on the forum that interests you anymore? Has The Exile become boring? (Post by Vimes, May 2005)

Accordingly, decline is not a reliable sign of an online community’s imminent demise, but a potentially permanent factor in its development. Like human bodies, online communities may survive decades of decline.

Moreover, subsuming decreasing community activity as “decline,” a term with exclusively negative connotations, may be misleading. While a few Exile members bemoaned the dwindling community activity and pointed out that it had caused them to spend more time on other websites, most remaining participants embraced decreasing activity as a process of consolidation. In both interviews and forum posts, the dominant community narrative reframed symptoms of decline as expressions of increasing familiarity. Looking back on over a decade of online and offline interaction, members held they had “said each other everything” and could anticipate each other’s opinions in discussions. This familiarity impacted members’ motivation to invest time in in-depth debates, which are now seen as predictable.

Originally, the forum was a place of passionate discussion. Now, there is something like an “elderly couple”-syndrome. You know how others will react, and discussions have lost their sexiness. Among the members that remain, there is a greater intimacy. (Interview with Solitaire, June 2016)

Employing references to intimacy and comparisons to long-term relationships, members created a favorable portrait of The Exile’s development. Positive re-evaluation of decreasing community activity was a common pattern in member

Table 1. Community Development in Posts and Membership Numbers.

|                  | First forum       | Second forum      | Third forum       |
|------------------|-------------------|-------------------|-------------------|
| Duration of activity | April 2004–April 2007 | May 2007–June 2014 | June 2014–present |
| Total posts      | 111,569           | 57,191            | 14,013            |
| Members          | ca. 80             | 52                | 23                |

Note. All data as of 10 August 2019.
narratives of the forum. For example, some participants explained a decrease in overall contributions by saying that offline relationships meant that members no longer felt the need to “project a certain image of themselves” through online posts. In fact, for some members, The Exile’s intimate atmosphere rendered writing posts—primary form of forum interaction—largely unnecessary:

> The forum is like a virtual home. You don’t have to write posts every time you log in anymore. You open the forum in your browser and see familiar names at the bottom of the page [indicating who else is online]. It’s like entering the common room of a shared flat. Your flatmate is sitting there watching TV, you go in, say hello, sit down, and that’s it. (Interview with Cho, June 2016)

While quantitative studies tend to view decreasing levels of community interaction negatively, Exile members do not uniformly evaluate the relative inactivity of the forum as an unwelcome fate. Instead, by reframing it as an expression of greater familiarity, forum lethargy is integrated into community narratives and gains acceptance.

This familiarity has two consequences. First, by engaging in a narrative of familiarity, participants became complicit in the dwindling community activity. Reframing decreasing community interaction as an expression of a benign familiarization process, members have absolved themselves from the duty to prevent the “decline” of their digital home. Familiarity provides members with a noble excuse not to invest time in writing posts. Furthermore, the value members place on the intimate atmosphere of the forum also precludes revitalization projects. Since first noting a downward trend in community interaction, participants repeatedly discussed recruiting new members as a potential remedy. However, suggestions to “open” the forum were rejected by members who preferred the community’s private format. Members chose the intimacy of a closed community over the potential revitalization an influx of new members might have meant. In recent years, members have started to oppose outright any notion of opening the forum, as they fear that allowing “strangers” into the community would disturb the intimate forum atmosphere. Accordingly, familiarity is not just a positive way of depicting decreasing community activity, but also a direct cause of it.

At the same time, familiarity also had a positive effect on the sustainability of the community. Decade-long interaction has given rise to strong affectionate feelings that take the form of a sense of belonging (to the community) and affection (toward individual members). Familiarity, in other words, translates into attachment. Over the course of the forum’s history, members have made regular efforts to meet, even though some of them live hundreds of kilometers apart. In interviews, participants regularly portrayed maintaining friendships with other members as the main purpose of The Exile, and participants regularly announce private news (e.g., marriage) or share stories from their everyday lives on the forum. While such socially oriented online behavior has been common since The Exile’s establishment, in the light of stagnating topical interaction, it now makes up for most of the remaining community activity. Still, more than actual interaction, what keeps the forum alive is members’ resolve to uphold the community it symbolizes. Years of online interaction have made the forum a fixed part in members’ everyday lives. For the remaining participants, community membership has become a habit; visible in the fact that many members continue to check the forum daily, even though new posts are rare. While stagnating online interaction has turned the forum into a shadow of its former self, the underlying relationships between members are considered to have deepened over the years. Members’ attachment to the forum and a shared narrative of its personal importance translates into a will to maintain the community—or the refusal to acknowledge its effective inactivity. Familiarity can thus play a contradictory role in the development of online communities: while it may discourage persistent lively online interaction, the accompanying emergence of close social ties can facilitate community sustainability.

In the last section, I will turn to community members’ continuous interweaving of online and offline interaction as an important source of familiarity and factor facilitating community longevity.

**Interweaving Online and Offline Interaction**

The blurring of online and offline worlds, a trend discussed by several Internet researchers (Hine, 2015; Horbinski, 2018), has been of fundamental importance to The Exile’s development. The establishment of The Exile was preceded by offline interaction during the Chym forum’s RL meetup in 2003 and several smaller private meetings. Living in relative proximity to each other, Vimes, Solitaire, and a few other members started to organize regular RL pen-and-paper sessions from 2003 onward. These weekend meetings facilitated the development of close friendships among participants and led to the foundation of intimate sub-groups in the community. The interwoven nature of online and offline interaction also shaped the development of the community in other ways. Members regularly invited people from their offline lives, such as friends or partners, to join the forum. Other members were already friends “in real life” before joining the Chym/Exile forums. For them, the digital space of the forum was an additional venue in which to develop their offline friendships while integrating it with the social bonds between members of the online community. This process of integration both strengthened the dyadic friendships and substantiated relationships in the nascent online community by creating overlaps between online and offline worlds. Along with offline meetups, recruitment of new members from a circle of acquaintances instead of wider online publics added to participants’ experience of the forum as an intimate space.
Interweaving online and offline interaction provided a bonding experience for members. In the forum’s early years, sending each other books or CDs via post was common user behavior. After receiving a gift, the recipient would then mention it on the forum (e.g., by posting a book review) and express their gratitude. Similar to the trust-generating behavior observed by Blanchard and Markus (2004, p. 74), this public demonstration of offline ties enabled even members who did not engage in RL interaction to think of the forum as a community of friends who related to each other in online and offline contexts. As discussed by Baym (2010, p. 5), even active members of online communities often subscribe to social norms that privilege “real world” interaction as more “valid” than online interaction. Offline exchange thus offers participants a way of enacting relationships that they experience as transcending the status of “mere” online friendships.

Communities are “only kept alive as long as their individual members deem them important” (Blackshaw, 2010, p. 15). Increasing the significance members ascribed to the forum, offline interaction—or the memory of it—has been a key reason for the survival of The Exile. Almost all remaining members have participated in offline interaction, and several interviewees speculated that they might not have stayed with the community until now if it was not for the time spent together offline. Another member suggested that his weakening ties with the community were the result of relative geographical isolation, which made frequent offline interaction difficult. Participants’ diverging degrees of offline engagement also separate the community into different groups. In interviews, the members who most actively engaged in offline interaction referred to themselves (and were referred to by others) as the “core” of the community. Applying the same logic, Bach, a member who never participated in offline activities and drew a strict line between his online and offline lives, described himself as an outsider in the community.

In line with the findings of previous scholarship (Koh & Kim, 2003; Lin, 2007; Rosen et al., 2011), offline interaction exerted significant influence on the emergence of community ties and feelings of belonging in development of The Exile. Interweaving online and offline interaction allowed strong bonds to develop and to be maintained for more than a decade, giving rise to mutual feelings of familiarity and contributing to community longevity.

Conclusion

In the above, I identified three interlinked factors that shaped the development of The Exile. First, I discussed the role of continuities in establishing online communities as coherent and recognizable social aggregations that persist over time. In The Exile, continuity of membership, structural continuity, and cultural continuity have created a familiar digital home for members over the course of more than 15 years. These continuities are not merely a by-product of The Exile’s continued existence but have been achieved through administrative and technological decisions by the forum owner and continuous efforts by forum members. Second, I engaged with assumptions that see “decline” as the fate of “unsuccessful” communities (e.g., Asatani et al., 2014). I demonstrated that community members do not uniformly perceive decreasing levels of community interaction as negative but reframe it as an expression of in-group familiarity and side-effect of a consolidation process. “Familiarity” has made decreasing levels of forum interaction an accepted part of the community narrative, and simultaneously, facilitated the stagnation of the forum. Finally, I identified the interweaving of online and offline interaction as a source of familiarity among members and factor benefiting community longevity. Frequent offline interaction facilitated the development of lasting bonds and promoted feelings of familiarity among members that allowed the community to embrace decline instead of being disbanded by it. Contributing to the sustainability of the community, these processes resemble factors that have been identified as contributing to the development of SOVC, such as maintaining a sense of place (Mamonov et al., 2016), crafting identities and building trust (Blanchard & Markus, 2004), and engaging in offline interaction (Rosen et al., 2011).

This article advanced understandings of online sociality in multiple ways. As a study of a private online community, the research contributed to a growing body of scholarly discussions of private and secretive modes of online interaction (e.g., Gehl, 2016; Gerrard, 2017; Sharon & John, 2018). Exile members have repeatedly chosen a “closed” forum format, even though this precluded a revitalization of the community. Like previous studies of private online socialities, this active segregation points toward strong desires for a retreat from public and performative online spaces among some groups of Internet users. While the study is limited by its focus on a single community, such an approach was necessary to enquire into a closed online community.

The study further offered an ethnographic account of the long-term development of an online community that diverges decisively from prior quantitative perspectives (Asatani et al., 2014; Buchem & König, 2011; Iriberry & Leroy, 2009). Examining the importance of continuities in the long-term development of the forum, it has shown that online communities are not necessarily transient social aggregations (Wilken, 2014, pp. 36–37), but potentially durable socio-technological formations that ward off the dangers of social decay through continuous maintenance and reproduction (Latour, 2007, pp. 66–70). Rather than a life-cycle model, this study has proposed a nuanced account of the “aging” of an online community as one potential pattern of their long-term development. Aging is characterized by a quantitative and qualitative decline in user activity as well as a lack of reinvigorating processes that could facilitate new forms of participation (e.g., introduction of new members, topics, or technological format). However, such a decrease in activity does not necessarily imply the imminent demise of the community, but can be made part of a viable group narrative. Studies of the long-term development of online communities
thus should not be limited to measurements of group activity but must consider the meaning members ascribe to it.

A study of a message board tracing back to 2002, this article enquired into a remnant of an earlier online culture and feeds into an increasing interest in “the web that was” (RESAW, 2019). While the rise of SNS caused message boards to lose popularity, they did not simply disappear but continue to exist alongside newer forms of online sociality. As the both the web and its users develop “online pasts” (e.g., Brügger & Milligan, 2019), understanding the change of online cultures and media gains importance as a research field. How do online cultures endure and adapt—or fail to do so? How do older forms of online togetherness address inactivity or socio-technological change? How do online communities migrate to new platforms? Tackling such questions involves not just identifying disruptions between different online eras, but also tracing lasting connections between older forms of online sociality and their current manifestations. Private online retreats like The Exile are well-suited for such enquiry as they can conserve earlier online cultures. Researchers should study these fading online cultures while they still survive instead of leaving their stories to be told post-mortem by future Internet archeologists.

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Note

1. A limitation of the current study is that interviews were only conducted with remaining members who are likely to feel the strongest community attachment.

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