Virtual gossip : how gossip regulates moral life in virtual worlds

<center>**Virtual Gossip:**
How Gossip Regulates Moral Life in Virtual Worlds</center>

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Abstract
This article explores to what extent the functions of interpersonal offline gossip can be mapped on to the virtual community of Second Life and its subsequent in-world and out-world interactions. A long-term hybrid ethnographic study was conducted that involved recurrent actual and virtual meetings with informants. The main objectives are, first, to look for similarities and to explain dissimilarities and, second, to gain some much-needed insight into how moral life is structured in social virtual communities and how important the role of gossip is. Results show overlaps between online and offline gossip concerning uses and functions. Gossip is important as a means for reputation management; as a cultural learning system; as a sanctioning system; and as entertainment. Just as in traditional offline communities, gossip is a central mechanism to regulate virtual moral life that stretches out to blogs, websites, and face-to-face meetings. Yet, technology amplifies the effects by creating new possibilities such as logging the evidence in order to spot cheaters. This way, in-world gossip becomes an inflated form of traditional gossip.

1. Introduction

Social interactions are "fundamentally shaped by moral concerns" (Hitlin & Vasey, 2010, p. 9). Moral frameworks and judgments structure the sociality of the cultures that one is part of. Developing and engaging in groups "shapes our reasoning and reactions, our judgments and embodied senses of 'proper' and 'taboo'" (Hitlin & Vaisey, 2010, p. 9). Gossip has an important share in delineating group boundaries (Gluckman, 1963) and maintaining social cohesion (Dunbar, 2006). Several mechanisms underlie the relationship between gossip and social cohesion (see e.g. Foster (2004) for a detailed discussion of the multiple functions of gossip), and passing on information about morally accepted behaviour plays a crucial role in this process (e.g. Piazza & Bering, 2008; Beersma & Van Kleef, 2011).

The core aim of this article is to study if and how gossip also regulates moral concerns in the social virtual world. The general research objective is to examine to what extent the functions and uses of everyday gossip are echoed in virtual settings. There is ample evidence that actual and virtual life overlap on several levels (see e.g. Miller & Slater, 2000; Orgad, 2005; 2006). Throughout the past decades, several studies showed that life in virtual communities is in many respects continuous with face-to-face settings (see e.g. Markham, 1998; Carter, 2005). Yet, to our surprise, except some notable exceptions (Cherny, 1999), few studies have researched gossip in social virtual worlds.

Second Life (Linden Lab, 2003), a three-dimensional user-created shared virtual space where avatars represent actual human beings, will serve as our fieldsite. Second Life is the largest and most popular social virtual world without predetermined objective that has gained wide public and academic attention. Numerous studies have focused on Second Life from various angles and disciplines but not on how gossip might strengthen virtual community life. On average, Second Life still has a million users per month and, depending on the time of day one logs in, there are between 30,000 and 50,000 people logged in simultaneously (Dwell on It, 2016, web). Linden Lab, Second Life's development company, empowers the so-called 'residents' by allowing them to design the world by building and selling virtual property. In addition, Second Life has an open ethical design: residents can impose their norms in the world, instead of merely applying the rules and norms that the developers

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programmed. Residents can implement their moral reasoning in relation to the virtual surroundings, which are open to the results of that moral reflection (Sicart, 2009, p. 214). Second Life's design stimulates social interaction and, in doing so, it facilitates possibilities to share gossip. For instance, there is a friendlist on which one can see who is on- or offline; one can offer friendship; and friends can be located. Linden Lab offers numerous ways to communicate, such as voice chat (speech), public chat, and private instant messaging (IM).

Contrary to game-oriented multi-user virtual worlds, residents are free to choose how to spend their time in-world (i.e. within the virtual surroundings of Second Life) and how to assign meaning to their virtual activities. In contrast to offline communities, residents can benefit from a great amount of freedom and autonomy. Many residents fulfil this freedom by establishing social relations (Boellstorff, 2008). They place intense emotional energies into this world while engaging with others in real-time. This raises compelling questions concerning morality: if residents are given 'total' freedom in a virtual environment, how is moral life regulated? What role does gossip have in this process?

The article starts with an overview of the general functions of gossip and their relevance to the establishment and maintenance of moral concerns in social life, then discusses studies that have investigated how gossip functions in social virtual worlds, and puts forward some further questions. A long-term hybrid ethnographic study (Jordan, 2009) with recurrent actual and virtual meetings was conducted with a core sample of twenty experienced Second Life residents. In addition to this core sample, there were 'virtual' informants that were met solely in-world.[i] This methodological choice is fully grounded upon the conceptual framework that rejects the view that social virtual worlds are walled-off spaces in which actual life cannot intrude (cf. infra). Virtual life spills over into actual life as well, for instance by prolonging virtual encounters to face-to-face meetings. Following Orgad (2006), recognition of the interplay or hybridization between the virtual and the actual on a conceptual level needs to be adequately addressed on a methodological level. Jordan (2009, p. 181, p. 183) elaborates on how hybridization forces researchers to rethink the conventional methods leading to "a new type of ethnography", that is, hybrid ethnography. Several researchers apply hybridization in their ethnography and hence literally move along with research participants in both virtual and actual spaces (e.g. Miller & Slater, 2000; Orgad, 2005).

Our research findings will show that the uses and functions of in-world gossip are similar to their role and purposes in traditional communities. Gossip is important, first, as a means for reputation management; second, as a cultural learning system; third, as a sanctioning system; and finally, as a form of entertainment to strengthen existing relations. Gossip has an important share in the regulation of virtual moral life. Yet, there are discontinuities, unattainable in offline communities. Technology amplifies the effects by creating new possibilities such as logging the evidence in order to spot cheaters and by increasing the amount of potential receivers. These results are discussed along with an agenda for future research.

2. Literature Review

2.1 Definition and Motives to Gossip Offline and Online

Gossip is a human universal (Brown, 1991). Above all, gossip is complex, which is reflected in the debate on how to grasp it in a definition. While reviewing the most common disputable issues, Foster (2004, p. 83) summarized multiple definitions of gossip as follows: "in a context of congeniality, the exchange of personal information (positive or negative) in an evaluative way (positive or negative) about absent third parties". Foster (2004) carefully summarized many issues of what to include and exclude from gossip that researchers have debated about. We refer to his work for this detailed overview and only highlight two topics of discussion that are of specific relevance to study gossip in online environments. Firstly, there is debate about who to include as a subject of gossip. Some say that the people gossiped

about need to be restricted to members of one's social setting (Noon & Delbridge, 1993). Others (e.g. Ben-Ze'ev, 1994) have argued to include unknown people as well because, for instance, celebrities are technically 'unknown' people, or at least not part of one's social network, and are often gossiped about. Yet, even the inclusion of celebrities is not sufficient, as Ben-Ze'ev's (1994, p. 17) outlines: "[t]he objects of gossip fall into three major groups: (a) people in our immediate surroundings, (b) famous people, and (c) people whose intimate and personal lives are unique". As we will argue below, some gossip centres on the question 'what' has happened and for these forms of gossip the inclusion of complete strangers in the definition is highly relevant. The inclusion of talk about strangers is useful to study gossip in social virtual worlds, where people are put in a position in which it is easy to seek out contact with unknown others to build relations with them (Krotoski, Lyons, & Barnett, 2009).

Second, with regard to what is gossiped about, clearly not all talk about others is gossip. Gossip deals with discrepancies (Hannerz, 1967): a person behaves different from what most others do or a person behaves different from how (s)he usually behaves. To clarify with an example: in a society where most men do not wear skirts, a man wearing a skirt will be talked about. And if Lucy is known as a woman who never wears a skirt, she most probably will be gossiped about when she does wear one. Gossipers evaluate this information and thus adopt a moral framework. In this article, we follow Foster's (2004) definition and focus on the evaluative character of gossip about both known and unknown people.

Turning to the motives to gossip, the multiple functions are often summarized into: passing on information, group cohesion and protection, entertainment, and the manipulation of reputations (see Foster (2004) and Beersma & Van Kleef (2012) for an overview). Interestingly, the informative, entertainment, and social bonding uses appear to overlap with the uses listed in classical uses and gratifications research studying why people use media (see Rubin, 1983). This is of particular interest to study online, mediated gossip, as this form of gossip may then become 'informative' because of the perceived informative use of gossip and the medium by which it is transmitted. All uses of gossip have been widely studied in offline contexts and there is considerably less attention given to online environments. We first give an overview of past research, summarizing the main findings under these broadly defined uses of gossip.

2.1.1 Passing on Information

First of all, knowing what is appropriate to do or say and what is not is crucial information to become and remain an accepted group-member. Gossip is an informative and resourceful tool in getting acquainted with the, often hidden, social norms of a cultural group. In its informative use, gossip functions as a 'cultural learning' device to learn how to behave to become socially accepted (Saunders, 1999; Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004). Gossipers do not necessarily need to know the person being talked about; what this person has done and how others judge these actions takes a central position. This classifies under what De Backer and colleagues (2007) have labelled 'strategy learning gossip', being information about 'what' happened and what gossipers can learn from this. The informative function of gossip allows newcomers to get meaningful information out of gossip about how (not) to behave to become social accepted.

Gossip can also be informative in the sense of delivering information about specific others, what De Backer et al. (2007) labelled 'reputation gossip'. Especially knowing who is to be trusted (or not) is information widely shared via gossip (e.g. Burt & Knez, 1996). In online environments, this use of gossip has been reported in studies investigating celebrity gossip. For instance, people pass on information about celebrities via numerous tweets, often including gossip, on large scales (Van den Bulck, Claessens, & Bels, 2014). This online sharing of celebrity gossip also occurs on blogs, where people often engage in moral

discussions as well, highlighting the evaluative tone of gossip (Van den Bulck & Claessens, 2013).

2.1.2 Group Cohesion and Protection

This brings us to the second function of gossip, namely as a means to control and sanction others**.** People spend a substantial part of their life in the company of strangers. For cooperation, mechanisms of indirect reciprocity based on reputation information are crucial (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). If people have no direct access to reputation information about others with whom they interact, reputational information about targets is passed on by third parties through gossip (Dunbar, 2006). Gossip outlines the boundaries of a group and elicits a feeling of *us* against *them*, delineating who belongs to which group (Leaper & Holliday, 1995). Gossipers punish norm violators and, at the same time, send out a message to their receivers: norm violators will be talked about and may be ostracized. This may make audiences of gossip behave more cooperatively towards the gossiper(s). It has been shown that the mere anticipation that one will be gossiped about serves to promote altruistic behaviour (Piazza & Bering, 2008). It is the negative arousal elicited by freeriding behaviour that motivates people to share such gossip (Feinberg, Cheng, & Willer, 2012). But then again, sharing reputation gossip about the trustworthiness of others may be driven by a prosocial motive to warn audiences about potential danger (Feinberg, Willer, Stellar, & Keltner, 2012). It has even been shown that *not* sharing gossip about freeriders is perceived as less moral compared to sharing the news (Wilson et al., 2000). By sharing gossip, and especially when it concerns negative evaluative talk about a third party, people - even strangers - feel connected. In online communities, this is illustrated by the fact that audiences start to resemble close communities by sharing gossip about celebrities (e.g. Meyers, 2010).

2.1.3 Entertainment

Once some degree of intimacy is established, gossip may be used merely to entertain the gossipers. Especially "on occasions in which friendship relations already exist, and in which there are no pressing external needs or threats, entertainment is expected to be a major component of gossip" (Fine & Rosnow, 1978, p. 164). Explanations for why gossip is so entertaining are its cathartic function to relieve people from daily stress (Ben-Ze'ev, 1994) and the link with humour (Morreall, 1994). Also gossip about complete unknown others may be highly entertaining. In such cases, these stories will be told, shared, and laughed with, and, indirectly, entertaining gossip will maintain and strengthen social relations (Guerin & Miyazaki, 2006). Both in offline and online environments this use of gossip appears to be less studied.

The three overall functions we discussed can be grouped as other-regarding functions, which foster social cohesion. Yet, not all gossip fosters social cohesion.

2.1.4. To Manipulate Reputations

The manipulative use of gossip is a self-regarding strategy (Paine, 1967) fueled by competition. This can be, for instance, girls competing against each other (Hess & Hagen, 2006) or in the context of sexual competition (Buss & Dedden, 1990). Having a competitive personality can also be a driving force to use gossip to exert negative influence over others (Lyons & Hughes, 2015). This self-regarding use of gossip is established both by sharing negative and positive gossip. Spreading negative news about the reputations of others increases the status of the gossiper. Yet, praising others' reputations, which may generally be construed as 'good gossip', is a selfish tool to gain prestige (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). By gossiping 'good', gossipers bask in the glory of others. In general, people tend to talk positive

about friends and family, and negative about rivals and foes, both to increase their personal reputation (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). In online environments, this use of gossip translates into what has been called 'celebrity bashing' (Johansson, 2006).

In sum, the uses of gossip to inform, entertain, create intimacy, and manipulate others and relations have been documented in offline and online environments. However, the focus on gossip in online environments has received limited attention; in order to fill this gap, we aim to study gossip in a specific online context, namely social virtual worlds.

2.2 Gossip in Social Virtual Worlds

Gossip in social virtual worlds has received scant attention up to this point. Stoup (2008) and Long (2012) published about social norms and gossip in Second Life but did not empirically investigate it. To the best of our knowledge, only Cherny (1999) empirically studied online gossip during her ethnographic fieldwork in the text-based virtual world ElseMOO. Overall, her findings reveal a close link between gossip and shared moral understandings. Gossip serves as a decisive factor for in-world community life to establish norms: "[I]ndividuals gossip to check their understandings of the moral climate with other individuals who are expected to share the same understandings of correct behavior" (Cherny, 1999, p. 287). This use fits the abovementioned informative use of gossip. Yet, do the other uses appear in social virtual worlds as well? And how may they be used? These are research questions we further address in this study.

Cherny's (1999) research has, however, pinpointed some challenges that we may face while conducting research on gossip in this specific environment. She reports that gossip works best in tight knit communities where members have persistent identities and that "[o]nline communities without persistent identities (or in which it is difficult to establish known identities that have reputations) will have less gossip, and probably no moral climate for discussion" (Cherny, 1999, p. 287). This confronts us with the challenge that we may hardly find any use of gossip at all. Then again, as De Backer et al. (2007) highlighted: gossip about unknowns remains relevant to acquire if information can be obtained about how to behave or whom to trust. Moreover, if residents of virtual communities have the possibility to create a guest character or an alternative avatar unrecognizable for others, they can more easily eavesdrop (see also Cherny, 1999, p. 287), which may be fertile ground for gossip. However, the use of guest characters or alternative avatars may imply that a lot of gossip remains hidden for the researcher. In offline contexts as well, gossip most often occurs behind the back of others. Foster (2004) has even argued that the absence of the person gossiped about is a requirement to classify a conversation as gossip or not. Although others (e.g. Dunbar, 2006) have disagreed with this restriction, and research among children has shown that gossip does occur in the presence of the person gossiped about (Fine, 1977), it is important to keep in mind that most gossip takes place behind the back of the target. Moreover, gossip will also occur behind the back of many others. That is because it occurs only among people who trust each other (Bergmann, 1993). Consequently, gossip is very hard to study and researchers must be well aware of that, knowing that what they can capture might only be a tip of the iceberg. Waddington & Michelson (2007) argued that any analysis of gossip requires micro and macro levels and imaginative approaches. For instance, using methods that allow to contrast and compare what can be seen and heard by observing and interviewing people. In her own empirical work, Waddington (2005) has made use of interviews and observational data, which will also be methods in this study.

Finally, by studying interactions in social virtual worlds, we focus on the interplay of the virtual and the actual, which brings about some interesting issues we discuss in the next section.

2.3 Acknowledging Hybridization: The Interplay of the Virtual and the Actual

The first-generation theorists mapped the virtual-actual relation in terms of an ontological dualism, hereby emphasizing how the virtual is fundamentally divorced from the actual (see e.g. Tomas, 1991). At the end of the 1990s, the dichotomy was gradually disproven by empirical studies, which showed that participants did not treat online experiences in a dualistic way (see e.g. Markham, 1998). This turn in conceptual thought severely weakened the belief in virtuality's transformational powers, assuming that the virtual is a realm where existing forms of identity and community significantly alter. Contrary to the 1990s, in which virtual communities were still treated as extraordinary (see e.g. Sardar, 1995), the present-day view treats them in a more nuanced and everyday perspective, hereby emphasizing that life in virtual communities is in many respects continuous with face-to-face settings.

Scholars in general now address the hybridization between virtuality and actuality (Haythornthwaite & Kendall, 2010, p. 1083). Hybridization means that virtual and actual forms of social, moral, and cultural life mutually influence each other. Although virtual activities and interactions do not physically occur in the actual world, they are interacting with it. Hybridization affects the way people make sense of their virtual identities: they do not start their in-world lives from a 'blank slate', as they are always rooted in autobiographical, social, moral, and cultural contexts. Cherny (1999, p. 82) found that most residents stayed close to their actual identities and genders and "were not role-playing or attempting to disguise their identities". Heider (2009, p. 134), who conducted three-year participant observation in Second Life, found that residents "treated the place very much as an actual, not a virtual, place". Overall, ethnographic studies (see e.g. Carter, 2005; Boellstorff, 2008; Heider, 2009) have provided evidence that in-world community life is close to actual community life, also in terms of social cohesion and strength of social ties. Several ethnographers have observed the importance of in-world friendship (see e.g. Cherny, 1999; Krotoski, Lyons, & Barnett, 2009). In addition, in-world experiences might be important for actual personal development (Boellstorff, 2008); in doing so, virtual life affects actual life as well.

Although the aforementioned studies differ in objectives, they converge at a common finding, namely that the influence of computer-mediated virtuality does not seem to be so strong (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004, p. 6). Nevertheless, virtual space is potentially a space of "altered contingencies", "where things can be other" (Young & Whitty, 2012, p. 7): new creations can arise that do not pre-exist in the actual world and that can only be realized in virtual space. This might lead to discontinuities between the virtual and the actual that cannot be disregarded. Due to technological features that, amongst other things, make possible gender swapping, the virtual self can disclose (and hide) parts of his or her identity that would be impossible in actual contexts.

Since ethnographic studies (cf. supra) already showed that actual social frameworks have an important share in the regulation of everyday in-world sociality, it can be expected that gossip will be as common in both (virtual and actual) contexts and that it will be used to delineate group boundaries, to entertain, and to control and sanction others. Gossip is expected to have an important share in the structuring and maintaining of in-world moral life and to have a regulating function because of social cohesion and strengths of social ties. It is also expected that residents may even create alternative avatars (alts) to eavesdrop and acquire gossip information, because the technology makes these practices easy.

3. Research Design

3.1 Hybrid Ethnographic Study: Design, Core Sample, and Procedure

A hybrid ethnographic study was conducted that involved recurrent meetings in virtual and actual settings over a period of one year with a core sample of twenty experienced residents. In addition to this core sample, there were a number of 'virtual' informants that were solely met in-world (cf. supra, see also Endnote). The study of virtual gossip was part of a larger study on the grounds and meanings of moral values and practices in Second Life; in this

context, gossip was one aspect that was studied as a mechanism to regulate virtual moral life. Specific attention was given to spontaneous gossip throughout participant observation and formal and informal interviews, both in-world and face-to-face. In addition, the semi-structured topic list also included specific questions in order to stimulate reflexivity, such as 'in your experience, do residents gossip a lot in-world?', 'what do residents gossip about?', 'have you experienced unfavourable gossip about yourself?'.

As mentioned before, the choice for hybridization is fully grounded upon the theoretical claim that the virtual and the actual stand in a hybrid relation. Only in the combination of virtual and actual encounters and observations we can understand how and when corporeal life and Second Life coincide and where they differ. Giving systematic attention to hybridization strengthens our study, as it shows how informants also gossip *about* Second Life *outside* Second Life and how they give meaning to it. To strengthen in-world ties and relations, residents move between mediated and non-mediated spaces. Concerning our core sample description, all informants maintained contact with others on blogs, forums, Skype, Facebook, among others. Four informants motivated in-world friends to join them in other virtual worlds and/or games. Only one of our twenty informants never met virtual friends face-to-face, because they all lived abroad. All other research participants shifted virtual friendship to actual contexts and eight of them had an actual love relationship with someone they met (and fell in love with) in Second Life.

The study relied heavily on recurrent ethnographic interviewing 'in' and 'out' Second Life, both formal, with a semi-structured topic list and prearranged time and place, and informal interviews in Second Life, arising on the spur of the moment. The hybrid ethnographic study deviates from a classical ethnography because of this emphasis on interviews.

3.1.1 Procedure: Research Phases and Core Sample

In the *first* stage of our research we gained access to Second Life; learned how to become and navigate an avatar; and made our first contacts. These first visits were short and goal-oriented with no significant investment. Our encounters with informants took place in an explorative pilot study by means of two formal and face-to-face offline focus groups with ten avid residents, recruited through an online call on forums and blogs, and four in-depth interviews with informants that we found via focus group participants who served as gatekeepers.

It was only in the *second* stage of our empirical research that the above-discussed insights concerning the virtual-actual interrelation were essential, when we brought together our two 'sites', i.e. actual face-to-face meetings and virtual Second Life encounters. The majority of the above research participants (13 out of 14) were also involved in this stage, in which we conducted a one-year hybrid ethnography with extensive recurrent virtual and actual meetings with twenty residents. Research participants from the pilot study were incorporated for three reasons: *first*, we met them in a (previous) research context, in which they already knew the author who carried out the research (i.e. the principal investigator of this study) as a researcher; *second*, their profiles were still relevant concerning the empirical objectives; *third*, incorporating them added thoroughness and context as there already were preliminary data of them. In addition, new research participants complemented the study: they were recruited in-world and the first formal interviews took place in Second Life before moving to a face-to-face setting. Other informants served as key informants to find further access into the fieldsite and to establish trust and rapport relations with new insiders. In addition to this core sample, there were also informants that were solely met online. During this one year, virtual and actual meetings intermingled: there were intense in-world contacts, by means of participant observation and formal and informal interviews, and face-to-face contacts by means of formal interviews. This triangulation of research methods allowed us to contrast and compare what was seen and heard by observing and interviewing people; in addition, the insider perspective of the principal researcher in Second Life was important to establish

trust and rapport. After the data was collected and analyzed, member validation was included to enhance the quality and validity of the data: general research findings were discussed face-to-face, on Skype, and in-world with informants.

The core sample consisted of eleven men and nine women, born between 1943 and 1985 (see Appendix A for overview). They logged in for the first time in Second Life between 2005 and 2008. As hybridization allows the circulation of meanings and identities in diffuse time-space, two transitions were included to grasp this circulation at its core: from virtual to actual and from actual to virtual. To the best of our knowledge, this is the first ethnographic study on virtuality that included both shifts. This way, a set of rich data and thick descriptions of our informants were attained. Literally moving with them added the required context and in-depth understanding in the relationship between their virtual experiences and actual lives and how both configured each other.

All informants participated deliberately in this study and were informed about the researcher and research context. They consented to logging the data in-world for analysis purposes, except when they stated that it was 'off the record'. The study also included Skype interviews; these conversations were only stored for analysis after their consent. During the face-to-face meetings all informants signed an informed consent; they also consented to a digital audio recording. The data attained from Skype and face-to-face interviews were transcribed ad verbatim. To guarantee anonymity, all names are pseudonyms. To avoid conflicts, sensitive and/or identifying information is left out.

The total body of data contained thousands of pages of raw data. To give an indication of the length and quantity (in words) of interview data: the shortest individual, face-to-face audio-recorded formal interview (introductory and closing chat not included) was 85 minutes. Its ad verbatim transcription contained 12,604 words. The longest individual, face-to-face audio-recorded formal interview (introductory and closing chat not included) was 200 minutes; the transcription contained 25,210 words. A one-to-one formal chat interview of 135 minutes contained 5,241 words; typing is, of course, more time demanding than talking.

3.1.2 Ethnography and the Researcher's Position

Participant observation was an important technique in-world, to gain a clearer understanding in research participants while having direct and first-hand contact with them. It was also a technique during the face-to-face meetings – every meeting took several hours – even though these meetings always had a planned character. At their actual home setting, the place of the computer in the house was observed (where participants logged in on Second Life). Some also gave a spontaneous tour of their house and showed pictures. In a couple of instances, the principal investigator of this study also met their partners. The principal investigator's personal growth from newbie (newcomer's perspective) to an integrated resident underpins this study. This way, she learned the customs and language, not only in terms of jargon but also the technological and cultural language.

A central aspect of this hybrid ethnographic study was to take time to establish trust and rapport with participants and to learn the language of the culture being studied. Although more intimate issues were mostly touched upon during face-to-face conversations, the trust relation that existed both in virtual and actual contexts shaped the participants' openness. As mentioned earlier, residents are given various possibilities to gossip in Second Life, including many covert options such as instant messaging (IM). These private messages are not shared and hence generally remain hidden for the researcher, unless insight into these hidden conversations can be gained by means of interviewing people about this type of behaviour. A trust relationship between the researcher and participants is hence crucial.

3.2 Data Analysis

The body of data consisted of face-to-face interviews, in-world informal and formal interviews, Skype interviews, and participant observation. All data were analysed within the sociological tradition, which looks upon text "as a window into human experience" (Ryan & Russell Bernard, 2000, p. 769). Two analyses were carried out: first, a broad multi-level analysis that addressed the research questions of the larger study on moral values and practices in Second Life. Second, a profound analysis concerning the specific study on gossip was conducted (cf. infra, this section). In line with the conceptual assumptions concerning hybridization, all data were analysed on the same level, that is, they are treated as equally valuable, since the belief that online gathered data are somehow 'inferior' to offline data is rejected.

The first analysis, which concerned the larger study on virtual moral values and practices, was carried out in three phases, based on the analysis levels elaborated by Boellstorff et al. (2012). The *first phase* involved reducing text into codes. All data were sorted, systematized digitally, and printed in order to read them carefully while searching for patterns by marking and highlighting words and phrases (pen on paper). The first step thus involved preliminarily labelling and tagging the data. In the next stage, the data was analysed digitally in standard word processing and spreadsheet programmes to keep the overview. In this process, codes were assigned to the text.

The *second phase* consisted of an in-depth search for deeper themes in the codes. In doing so, the data was recoded thematically and patterns were looked for between the codes to identify and generate core and deeper themes (Ryan & Russell Bernard, 2000, p. 781).

The *third phase* involved the move from "themes to narratives to arguments" (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 174). This is a crucial phase, as it engages the development of arguments that are linked with larger conceptual frameworks and with the study's objectives (Boellstorff et al., 2012, p. 174, p. 175).

The second analysis was carried out specifically about gossip as a means to structure virtual moral life. This analysis also followed the three phases, as explained above: we returned to the data, in which we assigned codes, specifically on gossip (phase 1). A coding scheme (see Appendix B) was developed that was particularly attentive to, first, etic codes, based on gossip's uses and functions, derived from substantive academic literature on gossip. Second, the coding scheme also consisted of emic codes, emerging from the fieldsite and the informants' narratives, such the practice of logging and disclosing evidence (e.g. screenshots, chatlogs). Then, we looked for patterns and emerging themes (phase 2); finally, we linked the themes with academic literature on gossip, to embed them in broader frameworks (phase 3).

In order to be open about which findings (cf. infra) are coming from which data sources, we mention the data sources throughout the next section on findings. The sources are illustrated in the following way:

Data source	Abbreviation
Textual (chat) formal interviews in Second Life	tfi
Textual (chat) informal interviews in Second Life	tii
Face-to-face spoken formal interviews	fi
Spoken formal interviews through Skype	si
Participant observation in Second Life	po

4. Findings

In Second Life, residents mostly gossiped in a private context, behind the back of others, generally through instant message (IM)[tii, tfi, fi, po]. On private sims (abbreviation of 'simulator', a district of virtual land), they often switched from IM to public chat[fi, po]; yet, some became more careful about this practice, after they found out that sim owners could read the chat

texts[(fi)]. In general, informants avoided to gossip through public chat on public sims, when they could not envisage who else could read the conversation[(fi)]. This also explains why they did not like to have conversations through voice chat, as they could not foresee that others might hear them and, in addition, the connection was also often of poor quality[(tfi, fi, po)].

In what follows, the research findings are discussed in the following order: first, gossip as strategy learning gossip, in order to delineate group boundaries and norms (4.1); second, gossip as a means to control and sanction others (as part of reputation gossip) (4.2); third, gossip to manipulate reputations (as part of reputation gossip), as a self-regarding strategy (cf. supra); and finally, gossip as entertainment, to indirectly reinforce existing bonds.

4.1 Strategy Learning Gossip

Entering the world for the first time went together with feelings of amazement and fascination but also bewilderment; informants recalled how becoming familiarized with Second Life demanded a steep learning curve[(tfi, si, fi)]. Spending time with others, talking with them, and observing them was an important aspect of becoming socialized[(tfi, fi)]. In-world gossip was important for newbies to gain an insider position and to become familiar with the established norms[(tfi, fi, po)].

When informants morally disapproved of someone (e.g. overly sexual behaviour), they distanced themselves from this behaviour by openly condemning it[(po)]. By paying attention to such gossip about other newbies (and perhaps themselves), newcomers could learn how to navigate the virtual space and its norms about appropriate behaviour without remaining an outsider[(tfi, fi, po)]. That is, if they wish to be accepted as an in-group member, they can either opt to find out by personal experience what is acceptable and what is not or they can vicariously learn by means of gossip how to behave successfully.

The informative use of gossip became of special interest when it came to behaviours, specific to Second Life. For example, a *poseball* was a scripted object that animated the avatar. If one wanted to dance, for instance, one had to click on a poseball in order to make one's avatar dance. Being a programmed action, residents appeared to be very judgmental about which poseballs others activated[(tii, po, fi)]. For instance, one could choose from a number of dances in a club and some informants were judgmental about others choosing overly sexy dances[(tii, po, fi)]. Your choice for a particular poseball thus communicated something about you, especially if you picked out those portraying obscene behaviour, and gossip was used to judge actions, i.e. conforming or not conforming to existing group norms[(po)].

Sexually appropriate behaviour appeared to be a recurring theme in gossip conversations. For instance, informants were negative about forms of role-play such as BDSM[(tii, tfi, po, fi)]. The fiftyish Miranda stated that women had to fight so hard to have equal rights and she subsequently did not understand submissive women obeying to their Masters[(tfi, fi)]. Others referred to freaks, creeps, and weirdoes, or people who desperately sought attention by faking their own death or by marrying their own avatar[(tii, tfi, po, fi, si)]. Another judgmental attitude that frequently returned was the disapproval of pregnant avatars[(tii, tfi, po, fi, si)].

> "And then they also become pregnant with a huge tummy and then the child is born and then there is another avatar that plays the child, yes, I think I think it is idiot, I think that… These people are very unhappy in real life. I think these people act like this because Second Life is a refuge to find the happiness they lack in real life" (Clementine)[(si)].

Some informants also criticized child avatars, explicitly linking them to paedophilia, and forbade them to be part of their group[(tii, tfi, po, fi, si)]. As Diane said: "Child avatars do not belong here"[(tii)]. In her view, it was 'not natural' to have them in Second Life.

Finally, other examples focused on how avatars looked. In Second Life, looks undeniably affected how people were treated[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. For instance, informants were disdainful about overly sexy avatars that looked like "prostitutes" or "Barbie"[tii, tfi, po, fi, si].

> "If you see an avatar that appears to have walked out of a stereotypical Barbie film, then you already know what this person's in-world intensions are" (Jake)[fi].

4.2 Control and Sanction

The use of gossip as a means for social control to structure and preserve community life was observed in Second Life as well. Residents were wary of unreliable others; they, for instance, sent out alarm calls towards each other about *copybots*, programmed scripts that could illegitimately duplicate in-world creations[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. When copybots were spotted, residents warned each other about the potential danger of falling victim of them[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. Even though the creations in Second Life were not tangible, Second Life was considered meaningful to our informants and they did not want to put at stake what they already invested in-world. Residents acted 'proactively' by means of gossip. It was common to ask a shared friend about someone's reputation[tii, tfi, fi, si]. Respondents often talked about others to learn more about their reputation and to find out if they were trustable to cooperate with[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]; this was especially important for informants who ran an in-world business. Although Second Life could be entered at no financial cost, many activities demanded an entrance fee. Linden dollars are Second Life's own currency; residents could exchange Linden dollars for actual currencies and vice versa. One could thus earn actual profit by starting a business, for instance by selling self-created virtual objects and items, such as furniture and clothes. One could also earn money by working in-world; for instance, by opening an in-world business such as a clothing shop, by prolonging one's actual business into a virtual branch, or by working as a deejay at in-world parties. For instance, the fiftyish Miranda owned a dance club. It was not uncommon that she asked other residents, for instance when a new deejay started to work for her, the following questions: does she or he show up on time? Is she or he nice to work with?[po, tfi, tii, fi]

Moreover, informants revealed that they made use of technological tools to increase the degree of social control by means of gossip[tfi, fi]. They used tools to eavesdrop, including the creation and use of alts. It also happened that they asked someone to spy for them[tfi, fi]. In addition, they made screenshots when they witnessed inappropriate or conflicting situations[tfi, fi]. The technology furthermore allowed them to store the evidence, such as chatlogs[tfi, tii, fi]. Information about potential cheaters was further shared via out-world means, such as Second Life-related blogs, to warn people about untrustworthy residents[po, tfi, fi]. The sixtyish club owner Peter had an inventive warning system with other venue owners: they always put the name of the last griefer (i.e. someone who deliberately disturbs the in-world experience of others) in their profiles[tfi, fi].

Along with a system of social control, residents reported a strong use of sanctioning actions towards cheaters[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. When someone hurt Ryan's feelings, he asked powerful friends - in this case, owners of several popular sims - to ban this particular person from their sims[tfi]. This way, Ryan used his network and power to restrict the harm-doer's freedom in-world. Others would also ask for the help of influential friends (i.e. power elite), not (only) to ostracize the target but to punish and damage a wrongdoer's reputation[tfi, fi]. In general, when someone severely transgressed moral boundaries, there was increased communication: the deceived person informed others, often close friends, about what had happened with the intention to damage the cheater's reputation, and in extreme cases the request to banish this person from the group[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. The cheater was pilloried, not only in-world but also on blogs and forums[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. Residents thus also made use of out-world systems to restrict or punish immoral behaviour. Compared to actual life, it was easier for deceived persons to

start a campaign against the cheater[fi, si]. If there were proofs, such as screenshots or chatlogs, they were distributed[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. Other sim owners could see the cheater's name and preventively ban this avatar from their places. Or, in the case of minor forms of cheating behaviour, residents would accumulate their evidence until they had a big enough case to ostracize a person. As Anne reported: "I have stored different forms of evidence… If this person would ever argue something different… Then I show the evidence"[fi]. Residents also used this technique to verify information:

> "I started to store chatlogs of a particular person because he told me a story and to someone else he told a completely different story. And then people came to me to ask if it was true that… and then I said "wait, just a moment" and I copied everything via IM" (Sophie)[fi].

4.3 Manipulation of Reputations

Residents used the power of gossip to manipulate reputations of any kind. Residents who were in-world because of technological and business motivations were particularly negative about the so-called 'fashionistas'[po], who were active out of fashion interests and who often blogged about in-world fashion and events. Informants found that fashionistas exaggerated with their sense of drama, for instance by falsely accusing in-world fashion designers of plagiarism[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. These creative and business people could also be disdainful towards residents (generally unknown others) who were in-world mainly out of social reasons[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. Some informants explicitly opposed them: in doing so, the social type was sometimes referred to as 'the average resident'[tfi, tii, po, fi]. A few informants distanced themselves openly from these 'average' residents by referring to themselves as 'outliners' by which they were essentially saying, 'I am not like them'[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. This 'average' resident was described to be in-world for social reasons and to spend a lot of money on clothing[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. In addition, 'average' residents were blamed to take Second Life too seriously and hence to have lost their sense of reality[tii, tfi, po, fi, si]. Clementine, who used to run some popular shops in-world, could not comprehend the emotional attachment of the 'average' resident and she often called them 'pathetic'[tfi, tii, si].

> "Women buy clothes for hundreds of dollars, they buy a mansion with everything in it, then they show you the house, the kitchen is decorated, the bathroom, et cetera" (Clementine)[tfi].

In contrast, Clementine talked about her own group of friends in terms of 'normal people', 'friends to have fun with', and 'people who do not die in-world out of love sorrow'[tfi, tii, si].
It also occurred that false rumours were spread, also about research informants. Miranda frequently wanted to leave Second Life because of this; she related the rumours to the fact that people were keen on damaging her and her club's reputation out of jealousy[tfi, tii, po, fi].
Group notices were sometimes sent out to set the records straight with regard to false rumours[po]. For instance, there were rumours that some people were not welcome anymore on a particular sim; a notice was subsequently sent out to all group members to assure that everyone was welcome and that the rumours were false[po]. Another example is the twentyish Rebecca who was a known resident because of her popular blog. When Rebecca was accused of being a man (and thus falsely accused of lying about her gender) by another resident, she felt powerless and hurt, and subsequently wrote an extensive blog post to defend herself and to rebut the false accusations[si, fi]. It also occurred that reputation damage moved out-world to in-world. The fortyish Sophie spent a lot of time in Second Life to escape her unhappy marriage. She eventually fell in love with another resident and shifted this

relationship to an actual one. She divorced and subsequently married the man she met in-world. Her ex-partner was jealous and he obviously knew that she spent a lot of time in Second Life. He created an account to manipulate her reputation by means of unfavourable gossiping[(fi)].

4.4 Entertainment

Finally, gossip driven by mere entertainment motives also occurred in Second Life. In virtual clubs, where residents gathered to have a good time together while a deejay was playing songs, the public chatlist generally was filled with 'social talk'[(po)]. Residents talked about friends, about who got together, who separated, who was on holidays, and so on.
In virtual worlds, it is easy to talk with someone in public chat or IM and gossip about this person *at the same time* in IM. One can chat with different persons in different IMs at the same moment. Sophie and a female friend reported to play with men just for fun and gossiped about them in IM.

> "If people entered and talked to us, my friend and I pretended to be a lesbian couple. And then we chatted privately and giggled as two teenage girls, like "have you seen him?" That kind of stuff. We did not laugh with them in public but secretly"[(fi)].

She and her friend accompanied one another in order to make fun of men without the intention of harming these men's reputations.

5. Discussion

Similar to actual life, and in line with Cherny's (1999) findings (cf. supra), most gossip was shared in private contexts. Overall, our findings reveal that, just as in actual communities, virtual gossip is important as a means for reputation management, a cultural learning system, a sanctioning system, and for entertainment purposes. In many of these cases the function of gossip was twofold: it not only informs the audience about how to behave, but also controls and sanctions the person gossiped about. Social virtual worlds can impose problems of trust because of the freedom and anonymity. By informing others about group norms and by outlining group boundaries, gossip maintains cohesion by mapping out who is *trustworthy* or not and by *punishing*, or at the extreme *ostracizing*, those who violate in-world norms.
First, the results on strategy learning gossip learn us, in accordance with offline studies on gossip as an informative cultural learning device (Baumeister, Zhang, & Vohs, 2004), that they were of special interest for newcomers who want to be socially accepted. By sharing time with more experienced others, newbies can learn a lot about accepted behaviour and existing norms and values. The fact that a great deal of gossip was about sexual relations overlaps with findings from the offline world as well, where gossip about sex or romance appears to be a very common topic (De Backer & Fisher, 2012). Also, physical appearance – reflected in the findings by gossip on avatars' looks - is a popular theme in gossip conversations (De Backer & Fisher, 2012).
Cherny (1999, p. 287) already revealed that gossip was a decisive factor for in-world community life to establish norms about correct behaviour. Both in actual (see e.g. Gluckman 1963; 1968) and virtual communities, gossip outlines group boundaries when discussing (in)appropriate behaviours. Themes of 'us against them' also appear in Second Life, as, for instance, the judgmental gossip on child avatars shows. The research findings reveal that gossip created social stratification in-world: residents were classified as experienced versus inexperienced; powerful versus powerless; older generations versus new generations; technically skilled residents versus 'social' residents; the weak versus the strong; in-group versus out-group; and so on. This illustrates the group boundary function that Gluckman

(1963; 1968) attributed to gossip: only those who are part of the group truly understand what the gossip is about. In Second Life, only experienced residents understand gossip about other in-world members, as a result of their immersion and investment. Yet, gossip also functions to inform newcomers about how to behave if they want to become members of a community.

Second, in Second Life as well, gossip functioned as a social control device to set out norms and rules, to punish those who do not follow these norms, and to warn the community about cheaters. It has been argued that gossip emerged and evolved as a mechanism that solves issues of living in larger social groups (Dunbar, 2006). If residents wanted to work together with an unknown other, it was common to ask a shared friend about this person's trustworthiness. In academic literature, this use of gossip has been considered a necessary prerequisite to enable cooperation in contexts were strangers meet and need to cooperate (Nowak & Sigmund, 2005). Asking another resident about someone's reliability is not only to safeguard oneself from being exploited but also a means to warn others. It has been suggested that gossip may be used to vicariously learn from the actions and misfortunes of others, and to use gossip as a kind of alarm call system (De Backer & Gurven, 2006); these results confirm this assumption for gossip in virtual communities as well.

Residents would go to extremes to use gossip in order to spot and punish cheaters. Amongst other things, informants logged chatlogs and even eavesdropped with alts. Gossip often deals with issues of trustworthiness because people need to rely on what others have witnessed (De Backer, 2012). Getting information first-hand, where people eye-witness the facts, secures the truthfulness of information. This eye-witness effect may also appear in the case of mediated gossip, where people observe what is gossiped about in surrounding pictures; tabloids often boost their credibility by adding pictures to their stories (De Backer, 2012). In Second Life, this technique was employed as well. Residents took screenshots to have evidence for their information. The 'I witnessed this' feeling is transgressed to other residents with visual evidence. A difference between gossip observed in Second Life and how gossip functions in everyday life is that technology appears to amplify the effects by creating new possibilities. For instance, one could manage rumours by sending information to one's complete friendlist or to all members of the groups that one was part of. There is ample evidence that technology has amplified the effects of classical bullying in the case of cyberbullying (Campbell, 2005; Kowalski et al., 2014) and we see a similar trend emerging here.

Third, reputations were manipulated in Second Life in order to show that one's own reputation is better than the other's. In doing so, in-world gossip mirrors actual life gossip by sharing good news about in-group members and bad news about out-group members (McAndrew, Bell, & Garcia, 2007). Although this use includes positive talk as well, residents appeared to focus more on the 'dark side' of gossip. Perhaps the use of negative gossip may be more prevalent in the online context, but this may also be due to the fact that our residents focused more on the negative, compared to the positive, in their reports, which in general clouds our way of thinking (see negativity bias, e.g. Rozin & Royzman, 2001).

When gossip contains untruthful information, it may become a severe burden for the one gossiped about. Another difference between virtual and actual gossip lies in the impact of false rumours: Miranda considered leaving Second Life because of untrue gossip that was told about her. In Second Life, one always had the option to leave. The consequences of negative gossip are harder to avoid and ignore in actual life; this, however, does not mean that the impact of in-world false rumours could not be psychologically harmful. Several authors have pointed at the real impact of psychological harm in a virtual setting (see e.g. Huff, Johnson, & Miller, 2003).

Concerning the manipulation of reputations, the findings reveal potential stronger effects compared to offline gossip, which is another difference between actual and virtual gossip, because of the wider audiences that can be reached online, especially when out-world media, such as blogs, are being used as well. It is easier to control and manage gossip by

informing the community through various ways, such as distributing screenshots and chatlogs, or sending out group notices.

Finally, gossip was also shared in terms of fun and entertainment to strengthen existing relations. The gossip between Sophie and her friend is a clear example of a case where a friendship already existed and gossip is used to entertain this relation (Fine & Rosnow, 1978). In doing so, gossipers exchange information to map and adjust their social world (Barkow, 1992). It is important to point out that, in this use of gossip, there is no intention to harm others, warn others, or praise others and indirectly gain personal status. Gossip merely functions to kill time, have a laugh, and indirectly reinforce existing bonds. Another interesting difference between gossip in Second Life and in actual life, is that one can talk with a person and, simultaneously, gossip *about* this person, as the example of Sophie and her friend illustrates. The design allowed residents to discuss someone's behaviour in private chat while observing this person on a sim; IM facilitates opportunities to talk behind someone's back.

Overall, our findings reveal that Second Life allows social cohesion and long-term interactions and friendships. To regulate in-world moral life, gossip is an important mechanism to create social control and group cohesion, and to restrain harm-doers. Both Stoup (2008, p. 324, p. 331) and Long (2012, web) are reluctant with regard to the strength of the use and impact of negative gossip in Second Life. In doing so, they depart from the fact that residents can always create an alt and start again, and that residents generally do not care a lot about their in-world reputations. In contrast to these statements, which are not based on empirical data, our informants valued their contacts and reputation and hence they did not want to put at stake what they had already invested in-world. Several examples, such as Rebecca's blog post, show that false claims did have emotional effects. Also, we do not deny that gossip is not always effective, for instance as a boundary mechanism; griefers, for instance, can always escape sanctioning by creating new avatars. Yet, many informants spontaneously remarked not to experience many negative things in-world. Our research findings also reveal that there was a lot of social control.

The most significant dissimilarities between virtual and actual gossip can be attributed to technological possibilities. Second Life's design allowed residents to gossip about the person with whom one simultaneously had a conversation or was observing on a sim. Furthermore, as they were aware of virtuality's potential deceptive character, residents constructed several mechanisms to control and regulate the moral climate, in order to spot and punish cheaters. The technologically mediated context provided tools to enforce social control: informants for instance took alts to eavesdrop in order to attain more information about a person's trustworthiness. Also, logged evidence was distributed, both in- and out-world (e.g. on blogs). The fact that one can leave the world if one falls victim of negative gossip points at another difference: in contrast to actual life, one's membership in a social virtual world is temporary. Contrary to traditional communities, Second Life is owned and governed by a corporation; the day Linden Lab decides to take offline Second Life, all residents will have to abandon the place. Virtual worlds and communities thus always have a more ephemeral character.

Because we applied a triangulation of methods, we were able to explore the different uses and functions of gossip through observation of behaviour and reflection upon behaviour throughout interviews. A number of issues are impossible to observe, such as spying with an alt. Yet, because of informants' openness, shaped by a trust relation between the researcher and the research participants, the practices of logging evidence and social control through spying became a returning theme throughout their narratives. Also, the combination of virtual and face-to-face data gathering reveals how the virtual and actual lives of the informants were entwined; for instance, in face-to-face conversations they also gossiped about Second Life and avatars. Informants experienced virtual and actual practices as part of one lived reality. We do, however, acknowledge that we might only have caught the tip of the iceberg, because gossip generally takes place behind the back of others and because Second Life's design creates ample opportunities to gossip in IM.

6. Conclusion

This article sought to explore to what extent the functions of interpersonal offline gossip can be mapped on to the virtual community and its subsequent in-world and out-world interactions. Our findings reveal that, first, gossip delineates group boundaries and norms; second, it has an important share in controlling and sanctioning others; third, it serves to manipulate reputations; and finally, its entertainment function indirectly reinforces social bonds. Just as in traditional communities, gossip is a crucial mechanism to regulate virtual moral life that stretches out to blogs, websites, and face-to-face meetings. Yet, an important difference is that technology amplifies the effects by creating new technological possibilities such as logging the evidence, making screenshots, and by increasing the amount of potential audiences, both in- and out-world. As a result, in-world gossip becomes an inflated form of traditional gossip.

There are limitations to the current study that need to be acknowledged and which open possibilities for future research. First, our small sample does not allow any generalizations. Our findings clearly show that the different uses of gossip are present in virtual communities; it thus may be worthwhile to set up a large-scale quantitative study about gossip's different uses and functions in virtual communities. Second, the specific focus on Second Life makes it difficult to extrapolate the research findings to other virtual worlds that have a different objective, scope, and design. However, the findings might offer fruitful ground for studying gossip in multi-user games such as MMORPGs, which share similarities with social virtual worlds, for example with regard to investment of personal resources and socialization processes.

This is the first study that profoundly addressed gossip in the social virtual world, in order to give some much-needed attention to gossip as a mechanism to regulate virtual moral life. In doing so, the study gave systematic attention to hybridization and recursive virtual-actual transitions. Overall, methodological literature and future research should devote more attention to the formation of new frameworks and methodologies that address the following and meeting of informants throughout these different contexts, exactly to deepen and expand research contexts.

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APPENDIX A

Gender	Male (*n*=11)	Female (*n*=9)
Age*	20 (*n*=2)	20 (*n*=1)
	30 (*n*=2)	30 (*n*=0)
	40 (*n*=4)	30 (*n*=1)
	50 (*n*=0)	50 (*n*=6)
	60 (*n*=3)	60 (*n*=1)
Education	Primary school (*n*=0)	Primary school (*n*=1)
	Secondary school (*n*=5)	Secondary school (*n*=5)
	College (*n*=6)	College (*n*=1)
	University (*n*=0)	University (*n*=2)
Job	Unemployed (*n*=0)	Unemployed (*n*=4)
	Full-time employed (*n*=8)	Full-time employed (*n*=3)
	Retired (*n*=3)	Retired (*n*=2)
Marital status	Widow (but new partner) (*n*=0)	Widow (but new partner) (*n*=2)
	Married (*n*=5)	Married (*n*=3)
	Divorced (*n*=0)	Divorced (*n*=1)
	Divorced(but new partner)(*n*=1)	Divorced (but new partner) (*n*=1)
	Cohabitating (*n*=1)	Cohabitating (*n*=1)
	Partner, not cohabitating (*n*=1)	Partner, not cohabitating (*n*=1)
	Single (*n*=3)	Single (*n*=0)
First login-in	2005 (*n*=2)	2005 (*n*=0)
	2006 (*n*=1)	2006 (*n*=3)
	2007 (*n*=6)	2007 (*n*=5)
	2008 (*n*=2)	2008 (*n*=1)
Profile	Social (*n*=6)	Social (*n*=5)
	Creative/technological (*n*=5)	Creative/technological (*n*=3)
	Business (*n*=0)	Business (*n*=1)

*during time of study

ENDNOTE:

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[i] The data of five informants have been incorporated; however, during in-world participant observation many more residents were observed and talked to. These quick interactions gave important additional contextual and insider information, but these five informants were questioned in-depth about their experiences.