

Copyright is owned by the Author of the thesis. Permission is given for a copy to be downloaded by an individual for the purpose of research and private study only. The thesis may not be reproduced elsewhere without the permission of the Author.

**Depression, the Internet, and Ethnography:  
A Study of Online Support Forums and the Methodology  
Used.**

A thesis presented in partial fulfilment of the requirements for a  
Master of Arts Degree in Social Anthropology at Massey  
University, Albany Campus.

Michael Andrew Hawkey

2005

## Abstract

Depression is one of the more common forms of mental illness experienced by people around the world. It is an illness which affects both men and women alike and does not target specific ages or nationalities. Depression is also an illness many suffer in solitude, often unable to pinpoint what exactly is wrong, rather identifying it as a “darkness” or sense of “numbness”.

As we move into an age of growing technological changes, the Internet has become host to many forms of communities. These communities can be both modified versions of their offline original or whole new communities that did not exist to any great degree before the introduction of the internet. One such new form of online community are those designed for the support of peoples with depression and other mood disorders.

Because of this growth in online communities and anthropology’s tradition of researching and understanding different groups of people, it is only appropriate that, as a discipline, it also moves online alongside these new communities. To do this, traditional field methods need to be reassessed and new potential problems and ethical dilemmas resolved.

As online depression communities and internet ethnography are both relatively new fields of study, this thesis will examine the elements of both the online depression communities being studied, and the methods used in researching them.

The reason I chose to research this topic is because, although depression as a subject has been covered many times before, and online community research is growing, there have been few studies undertaken on the two combined. In undertaking such research, this study will be of use for both academia and the public mental health sector. Academically, it provides us with an additional study venturing into online

research and how to apply our tools within it. For the mental health sector, it provides an account as to how and why people with mental health issues deal with their problems, or at least begin to deal with them. This is important, as in the mental health sector many people with a mental illness may not reach out for help until in dire need. With the growth of online communities people may join earlier in their suffering and this knowledge could be of use for departments of mental health.

## Acknowledgements

First and foremost, I wish to thank all my participants who have helped throughout the different stages of my study. The provision of their opinions, experiences and emotions has been the basis of much of my study. Our discussions have also assisted me to step back and assess my own life and experiences- something I am grateful for. The next round of thanks goes out to my supervisors - Dr. Graeme MacRae, and Dr. Kathryn Rountree. I am much indebted for the help and support you have both given me both throughout this research and my previous years at university. I am particularly grateful this year for the support, and encouragement, especially when I was experiencing anxiety about gaining enough participants for the study.

Thanks also are due to Dr. Eleanor Rimoldi, who although not one of my listed supervisors has provided me with many interesting and thought provoking discussions throughout the course of my research.

I would also like to thank the other graduate students who have provided thoughtful input into my subject area. Thanks to my close friend Brook, who has been valuable as a sounding board to bounce ideas off, and generous in her time to look over my writing, raising questions and comments. And finally, my parents, who accommodated me during my research, easing substantially the financial burden with which a student is faced.

## Table of Contents

<b>Title page</b>	i
<b>Abstract</b>	ii
<b>Acknowledgements</b>	iv
<b>Table of Contents</b>	v
<b>List of Figures</b>	vii
<b>Glossary of Terms and Acronyms</b>	viii
<b>Chapters</b>	
<b>1 Depression</b>	1
<b>A historical overview</b>	2
<b>Participant experiences and definitions</b>	6
<b>Medical definitions</b>	12
<b>Treatments</b>	16
<b>Summary</b>	20
<b>2 Aims, Methodology and Internet Ethnography</b>	22
<b>Aims</b>	23
<b>Methodology: Grounded theory</b>	24
<b>Positioning in the field</b>	25
<b>Place</b>	25
<b>Time</b>	29
<b>Live History</b>	30
<b>Ethical Issues</b>	32
<b>Entering the field</b>	40
<b>Summary</b>	49

<b>3 Sites and Participants</b>	<b>50</b>
<b>Site Overview</b>	<b>51</b>
<b>Community Laws</b>	<b>57</b>
<b>My Sites and Participants</b>	<b>58</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>65</b>
<b>4 Online Forums for Depression</b>	<b>67</b>
<b>Why do People Use the Forums?</b>	<b>68</b>
<b>Friendships and Social Networks</b>	<b>70</b>
<b>Life Without the Forum?</b>	<b>72</b>
<b>Disadvantages of the Forums</b>	<b>73</b>
<b>Online/ Offline Relationship</b>	<b>77</b>
<b>Are They Real Communities?</b>	<b>79</b>
<b>Culture?</b>	<b>81</b>
<b>Time Spent Online</b>	<b>84</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>85</b>
<b>5 Language and the Internet</b>	<b>87</b>
<b>Forms of Speech</b>	<b>89</b>
<b>The Internets Family Tree</b>	<b>92</b>
<b>Online Linguistics</b>	<b>95</b>
<b>Summary</b>	<b>104</b>
<b>6 Conclusion</b>	<b>106</b>
<b>Appendices</b>	
<b>Appendix One: Information sheet</b>	<b>115</b>
<b>Appendix Two: Participants consent form</b>	<b>117</b>
<b>Appendix Three: Interview schedule</b>	<b>118</b>

**Bibliography****Bibliography** **119****Chapter Image Description and Bibliography** **123****Figures****Figure 1. The cycle of depression** **16****Figure 2. Interrelated circle of cognitive therapy** **19**

## Glossary of Terms and Acronyms

Avatar: In online circumstances, an avatar is a picture used on forums to individualise oneself and identify others by visually.

Bump: A term used when one moves their post up in the list on forums.

Caps: Shortened term for caps lock on a keyboard. Often used in context to tell someone to turn off caps lock as it indicates shouting online.

Cookies: Small information files held by websites on ones computer.

Cutting: The literal action of cutting oneself as a form of relief/escape from pain.

Dead site: An internet site which still exists on search engines, but no longer is in operation.

Emoticons: Icon emotion images used to express emotion.

Flame war: An online argument/ heated discussion.

Forum: An online website where people can have discussions.

Hits: The number of times a website has been viewed.

IP (Internet Protocol): The protocol used to route a data packet from its source to its destination.

LOL: Internet acronym meaning laughing out loud, or lots of laughs.

Lurker: Someone who looks through forums without identifying themselves.

Moderator: Someone who ensures forums operate smoothly.

PM: Private message system used on forums.

Post: To write a message on a forum.

Signature: In an online context, an identifying statement/image at the bottom of ones post.

Spam: An online term for unwanted advertising.

Text Chat: A form of internet language which mixes both phonics and numerals into normal text to produce a faster form of typing/communicating online.

## Chapter One

### Depression



(Cybersluagh.com)

## **Depression**

In New Zealand approximately one in five people suffer from depression at some stage in their life ([headspace.org](http://headspace.org)). Furthermore, more than one in four American adults experience mental illnesses each year (Bellenir, 2000:201). This chapter will examine depression, its history, how it is defined, the medical treatments used, and how depressed people themselves define it. To do this I will provide an historical overview of mental illness. This will give us an indication of the progression it has taken through the ages. I will then offer a definition of depression, that I believe resonates well with the point of views of people who actually live with the illness. This is an important aspect of defining depression, as I am actually using the thoughts and feelings my participants have shared with me throughout the research period. Subsequently, we will look at the medical definitions and symptoms of depression and how depression is treated within the medical world.

### **A historical overview**

Historically, depression and mental illnesses have been around in one form or another for as long as records have been collected. What has changed over time are the perceptions of depression and the way it has been defined. In many traditional cultures mental illness is seen to afflict a person for several main reasons:

- 1) They had lost a vital substance from their body- their soul.
  - 2) They had a foreign substance introduced into their body, such as an evil spirit.
  - 3) They had violated a taboo and were being punished.
  - 4) They were victims of witchcraft
- (Cockerham, 2004:5)

What is interesting to note here is that, although in traditional cultures it has often been the job of the shaman to fix the spiritual problem, the problem itself may have social dimensions and causes attributed to it. An example of this play between traditional and contemporary definitions and treatments can be seen in Spiro's work

on Burmese supernaturalism. In one case he discusses Kou Nyunt, a man in his early twenties who was returning home from a day in the fields (1967:165). Whilst urinating near a pillar that housed the coconut<sup>1</sup> he suddenly collapsed and passed out. As the tree was home to the coconut he had angered a spirit and was diagnosed as having been possessed. After making proper offering procedures set out by the shaman/traditional doctor he was alright for a few weeks, until he again became possessed, fell into a trance, ran around the village for an hour and eventually collapsed. When he awoke he had severe stomach cramps and a month later again fell into a trance. After offerings were once more made to appease the possessor, he had no further problems.

From a western perspective this story may be interpreted in other ways. Before the man's first collapse he had been engaged to a woman, who shortly before the wedding had eloped with another man. The stress, shock and humiliation were believed to be the cause of his first and subsequent collapses. The stomach cramps were brought on by Kou's extreme distress at the whole situation. Once time had passed, it is believed he had come to terms with what had happened and moved on with his life, hence no subsequent collapses or attacks.

What I have shown here is a cross-cultural examination of a particular set of events. One side utilises a scientific and psychological explanation of why things occurred, and the other works from a more traditional spiritual/religious mindset. Both perspectives viewed the situation as a form of mental illness, but from vastly different perspectives. In traditional explanations, the mental illness was caused by supernaturals, but the western explanations diagnose the mental illness as caused by conflict (Spiro, 1967: 173).

---

<sup>1</sup> A coconut is used in ritual ceremonies in many areas of Southeast Asia. This may be for the ashes of a dead family member, or the umbilical cord of a baby. Often the spirit of the house is associated with the coconut.

In Greek times, definitions of mental illness began to turn from the spiritual towards a scientific view as to why mental illnesses occur. ‘Hippocrates is believed to have introduced a radical change in the concept of madness by insisting that diseases of the mind were no different from other diseases. In other words, mental illness was not the result of divine, sacred or supernatural influences. Instead, mental illness was due to natural causes that affected the mind (Cockerham, 2004:6). At this time, depression was known as melancholia, or a prolonged fear and sadness (Balzer, 2005: 41). Hippocrates saw the problem as being related to the balance of the humours in the body and that when imbalances occur; all forms of sickness, both physical and mental were liable to occur. In the case of depression; ‘If it [black bile] be determined upwards to the stomach and diaphragm, it forms melancholy...’ (Aretaeus cited in Blazer, 2005:41). In many ways, what Hippocrates theorised is similar to aspects of modern medical thought, apart from his differing understanding of the human anatomy.

As the Middle Ages approached, the shift was again made back towards explaining mental illness through supernatural forces. In this period, melancholy, as in traditional cultures, could be caused by spirit intervention: ‘The body was “visited” by a malignant spirit, often secondary to being abandoned by the supreme being for sinful behaviour’ (Blazer, 2005:44). This definition of mental illness was primarily due to the growth and power of the Roman Catholic Church and its definitions of what norms were, according to the Bible. As a result, the common treatment at the time for mental illness was exorcism to rid the body of the evil inside. Exorcism was influenced by the understandings of the New Testament, as a form of curing those suffering from ‘bizarre and irrational thinking’ for which the devil was essentially responsible (Cockerham, 2004:11).

During the late Middle Ages and early Renaissance period, aside from the use of exorcism, there were few ways of helping those afflicted by mental illnesses. Often, if individuals were considered harmless and non-threatening, they were mostly viewed as being fools or adopted as the ‘village idiot’. Others, who may either have been more dangerous, or perhaps from well known families, were kept in their homes ‘...sometimes in chains; and still others were driven out of their homes and forced to wander over the countryside...’ (Cockerham, 2004: 13).

Late in this period also saw the introduction of what was, for a long time to become a permanent solution to the treatment of those suffering from mental illnesses- institutions. Institutions were a means of segregating those who did not conform to society’s norms away from the general public- ‘out of sight, out of mind’.

These institutions, in one form or another, have functioned to this day (although in a more assisting way towards the patient now) and have been of great medical assistance to psychologists and doctors as a means of researching the mentally ill. However, the later part of last century saw the closing down of many institutions and a gradual movement towards incorporating those with mental illnesses back into society. Many countries, including New Zealand, have invested considerable resources into ‘normalising’ mental illnesses. By normalising they have sought to raise general understandings that many people are afflicted by mental illness at one stage or another, but that they are no different from everyone else, and with correct treatment can live “normal” lives. For example, one way this is achieved in New Zealand is through media awareness programs set out by the Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand. One of their advertisements paints a picture of happy, “normal” people who then reveal they have suffered a mental illness. Another, as part of the [outoftheblue.org.nz](http://outoftheblue.org.nz) website, shares with viewers typical feelings that occur

when someone suffers depression and then displays a link to their site for further information and support links.

When looking at the historical view of mental illness, it can be hard to see where depression fits into the equation. Labelled as the ‘common cold’ of mental illness (Madsen, 1998:1), depression can sometimes be viewed as less harmful to everyday life than other mental illnesses. Depending on the type of depression, as outlined later in this study, sufferers could have survived through most stages of history relatively unharmed (or without treatment). Traditional and Greek cultures may have had some forms of treatment for depression, but when we move to the period of the Middle Ages, it is unlikely that exorcism would have been used, unless the person suffered from major depression, in which case, they could not have been helped with the exorcism (if indeed anyone with mental illnesses ever was). It is highly unlikely you would become a town fool, or shackled up at home either. As institutions became incorporated into society, again, depression sufferers, unless facing severe depression, would have again escaped this form of treatment. As the common cold of mental illness, depression can often go undiagnosed, or ignored, as it does not necessarily appear to be unusual when ‘looking’ on the surface.

### **Participant experiences and definitions**

I will now examine what it actually feels like to have depression, based on literature and statements of my participants (who are introduced in chapter three). The DSM-IV-TR diagnostic criteria manual (American Psychiatric Association, 2000) tells us that depression consists of a depressed mood, lack of interest and diminished ability to think clearly. While all of these symptoms outlined in the psychological texts are correct, they do not indicate the depth of emotion experienced by the sufferer. Without this sense of feeling, or lack thereof, the true impact of depression

on an individual cannot be truly understood. Because of this lack of ‘sense,’ my participant Dione made the following comment when discussing depression and those who have not suffered it<sup>2</sup>:

‘If ur [you are] not depressed or have not lived with depression, than u [you] cannot know how a depressed individual feels!’ (Dione, pm conversation).

No two people suffer from depression in exactly the same way, and medicines all affect our bodies differently (Barrow, 1985:3). Due to these factors, for someone who suffers depression, the simplistic definitions of what constitutes depression are not always adequate. Dione’s statement builds on the idea that defining depression and actually suffering from it are two different things. What is seen to constitute ‘depression,’ or a down mood may differ considerably between sufferers and non-sufferers. A common ‘feeling’ many participants described to me was the concept of a void:

‘...depression is so much more than a mere “emotional” issue. Its mental, physical, spiritual, you name it! I can remember going through days without feeling any emotion, No joy, no desires, no purpose, nothing...its like having your body living on earth without you actually being there’ (Aeneas, email discussion).

‘I can no longer live as I am, I would like to try and get my life back...feel like I’m living a dream half the time and just going through the motions. Sometimes wonder if I’m going to spend the rest of my life in a fog and never wake up’ (Phedra, pm discussion).

Living with depression means never being completely satisfied, no matter how ‘good’ others perceive your life to be:

‘So how do we compare another’s suffering, we can’t! But what is plain is that whatever we have we could have 100% healthy family, a million in the bank, a person whos love was guaranteed never to run out, the support of the whole world, and we would still not completely hold down a job, go to the shops, or like ourselves... (Ophelia, email discussion).

---

<sup>2</sup> In Chapter Two we will examine my main aims and methods, primarily, examined with the use of participants experiences. Chapter Three will introduce the participants in full.

What many depressed individuals on the forums I studied<sup>3</sup> and several of my participants struggled with when dealing with depression and the wider community is a limited or flawed understanding of the feelings associated with depression, and what it is like for someone who actually suffers from it. ‘Often they don’t even know why they are depressed. They only know that they have lost their joy in living and are finding it increasingly difficult to function at all, let alone function well’ (Barrow, 1985:3). Because of this state of not knowing what is wrong, or why you feel like you do, it becomes hard to explain to friends or associates why you are as you are. If no adequate reason is given, in time even the most sensitive and patient people appear to pop out the statement that if you don’t know what it is then you should just ‘get over it’. Perhaps for a healthy mind, unaffected by depression this would be possible, but when suffering depression getting over it is not so easy. Ophelia summed up this discussion with a small piece of writing she had written to a friend with a different mental illness:

For anyone who is under the opinion.  
You just have to get on with it!  
Just get up and get on!  
Then I have news for you, you have never been in a state of nothingness.  
The state of mind that takes you so far away from where you are,  
That you have no idea of where you start and end and were reality stops and starts.

The pictures within your vision have no depth.  
The pictures of what surrounds you become nothing.  
The fact that anything outside your body has no context.

Anyone who seems to think that this is an illness,  
That you can shrug off later.  
Something you can put off until tomorrow or deal with after work.  
Then you are so far away from the demanding illness that I have shared my life with for 38 years.

As you may control your mind with in your daily life, I do not!  
My subconscious has grown larger than my conscious.

---

<sup>3</sup> Forums discussed in Chapter Two and throughout the rest of the research.

It's possible that your conscious is what you have access to and also its direction.

My conscious is very small and has also become almost dissolved.

My subconscious has grown.

The problem with that is that the subconscious has no way of dealing with reactions without the conscious.

This is something that demands you're full attention, it takes it, and it takes your voice, your will, and your body.

Where it takes it I am not rightly sure.

But the subconscious insistence of control is never lost.

Its presence is felt but that is all.

The nothingness is a void with no mind.

Its compaction of a thought process which is out of control and basically living above its own ability?

A greed for ownership, a hunger for space.

A subconscious that has swamped my brain to almost extinction.

So No! This is not something you just kick aside and get on with.

And this is far from something "that you get up and get on with".

The fact that the action to get up at all is processes by a conscious mind.

Makes any sense like the above, a straight forward insult to the situation that is place in front of me.

So if you can "get up and get on" then you have no idea how lucky you are.  
(Ophelia, email attachment, 2005).

As her above work shows, often when suffering from moderate to heavy cases of depression, doing simply anything can be a difficult task. Whether the actual cause of the depression is known or not, it's not as easy as 'simply getting over it'.

Another aspect of depression Ophelia's writing brings to light is the use of written word to express the emotions of suffering depression. Poetry has often been used in this way to bring emotion into the written language; depression is no exception to this.

In 1621 Robert Burton used poetry to try and express depression:

When I go musing all alone  
Thinking of diverse things fore-known,  
When I build castles in the air,  
Void of sorrow and void of fear,  
Pleasing my self with phantasms sweet,  
Methinks the time runs very fleet.  
All my joys to this are folly,

Naught so sweet as melancholy...  
 I'll change my state with any wretch,  
 Thou canst from gaol or dunghill fetch.  
 My pains past cure, another Hell,  
 I may not in this torment dwell,  
 Now desperate I hate my life,  
 Lend me a halter or a knife.  
 All my griefs to this are jolly,  
 Naught to damn'd as melancholy.  
 (Burton, cited in Blazer, 2005: 19)

Burton's writing tells the story of living with depression, and through his poetry describes it better than the majority of medical practitioners of the time.

Several of my participants also used poetry and other art forms as an expression of the world they lived in. Alethea was one of the more expressive of my participants in this way and gave me several poems she wrote to help others gain an understanding of living with depression:

Empty Inside.  
 Smiling happily, joking around,  
 Look at me here playing the clown,  
 Laughing and chatting, life spinning round,  
 But inside I'm slipping and falling down.

Behind my mask, I do not smile,  
 Come over and sit with me a while  
 You could never imagine just how much I hide,  
 I'm sad and I'm lonely, empty inside.

Alethea's first poem exemplifies that although prevalent enough to be labelled the common cold of mental illness, 'depression is a hidden epidemic with often fatal outcomes...mild mood complaints may hide extreme despair' (Gilbert (1992), cited in Madsen, 1998:1). Whilst her poem shows her outward interactions as being happy and 'normal', inside the mask is removed and happiness does not exist.

I'm Sorry.

Laying on my bed, curled up in a ball  
 My back to the world, my face to the wall

Tears running down my face, I am in disgrace  
Failed my friends, failed my family, failed all.

I'm sorry mum, I'm sorry dad  
I didn't mean to be so bad  
I've had enough, I'm tired now  
I've failed you all...I don't know how  
I can't help but to be me, I hardly have a choice  
I wish I could make people listen, to make them hear me  
Screaming

Outside I am happy and calm, this is the face of the storm  
Inside I am sick, full of thoughts, yet I have no opinions to voice.

Tyred now, ready for eternal sleep  
What have I done, gotten myself into??  
Cuts travelling my body, many of them deep  
Cold, exhausted, sick...stumped in a heap.

I'm ill mummy, I'm sorry mummy  
Please make me better  
Hold me until all is well.  
Until this monster has gone away.

I'm ill dad; I don't try to be bad  
I don't deliberately defy you  
With your harsh words and cutting tone  
Your voice sinks into a drone

I'm sorry friend, you try so hard  
I could never find time to praise you enough  
You always try to make me smile  
For you my friend, I'm sure I can, even if just for a while.

My concentration wandering  
My mood is starting to swing  
I guess I'll live, I'll be ok  
For tomorrow is another day.

Alethea's second poem provides insight into the feelings of depression, and how as a depressed individual one interacts with others close to them. Being depressed, yet unable to express these feelings to others or do what you feel is expected of you may leave you with a sense of uselessness.

## **Medical definitions**

I will now discuss how depression is defined medically and outline typical types of depression. The main ‘bible’ for diagnosing depression and all other forms of mental illnesses in the medical world is the DSM-IV-TR issued by the American Psychiatric Association (2000). In diagnosing a major depressive episode, the DSM outlines nine main points:

- 1) Depressed mood most of the day, nearly everyday, as indicated by either subjective report...or observation made by others...
- 2) Markedly diminished interest or pleasure in all, or almost all activities most of the day, or nearly every day...
- 3) Significant weight loss when not dieting or weight gain...or decrease or increase in appetite nearly every day...
- 4) Insomnia or hypersomnia nearly every day.
- 5) Psychomotor agitation or retardation nearly everyday...
- 6) Fatigue or loss of energy nearly every day.
- 7) Feelings of worthlessness or excessive or inappropriate guilt...
- 8) Diminished ability to think or concentrate, or indecisiveness, nearly every day...
- 9) Recurrent thoughts of death, recurrent suicidal ideation without a specific plan, or a suicide attempt or a specific plan for committing suicide.

(American Psychiatric Association, 2000:168)

To be diagnosed as having a major depressive episode, the subject in question must have at least five of the nine common traits of depression for a period of two weeks or more. Of these five traits, one of them must be either number 1 or 2 on the list. The list is also only applicable when not dealing with either substance abuse or bereavement, which both have their own criteria additional to the list above as other factors are involved. Major depression can affect virtually anyone, but typically begins between the ages of 15 to 30. Women are generally more often diagnosed and report symptoms of major depressive symptoms than men (Madsen, 1998:4). One reason Madsen suggests for this is because of our socialisation from birth. In general, girls are brought up developing attributes that can be associated with depression, for example dependency, nurturing, passivity and helplessness. It could also be said that

the attributes they develop lead to a greater ability to acknowledge and express emotion than men. Boys on the other hand have more typically masculine attributes like independence and activity, reinforced in upbringing (1998:27). Another potential reason is that rather than admitting depression, males turn to alcohol abuse (1998:28). The higher degree of women suffering depression is also ironically similar to traditional notions of illness and mental disorder in the case of spirit possession where Lewis states: 'The prime targets for the unwelcome attentions of...spirits are women, and particularly married women' (1989:67). If one does not suffer from five of the symptoms, or perhaps lacks one of the first two, then it is not considered a major depressive episode, and may be one of the following below.

The second type of depression is Dysthymic Disorder. Often referred to as 'chronic depression', Dysthymic Disorder occurs when the subject has a persistent depressed mood for two or more years and at least two other of the following symptoms:

- 1) Poor appetite or overeating
  - 2) Insomnia or hypersomnia
  - 3) Low energy or fatigue
  - 4) Low self-esteem
  - 5) Poor concentration or difficulty making decisions
  - 6) Feelings of hopelessness
- (American Psychiatric Association, 2000: 176-177)

Often 'people with chronic depression suffer from low energy, a general negativity, and a sense of dissatisfaction and hopelessness' ([mixednuts.net](http://mixednuts.net)), but not suicidal thoughts or the debilitating effects of physically being unable to do anything that may occur with a major depressive episode. Dysthymic Disorder, however, can develop into a major depressive episode as it already has many of the required symptoms, and a negative impulse that influences more symptoms to occur. It is also possible, whilst suffering from Dysthymic Disorder to suffer Major Depressive Disorder at the same time: 'In addition, after the initial two years (1 year in children or adolescents) of

Dysthymic Disorder, there may be superimposed episodes of Major Depressive Disorder, in which case both diagnoses may be given when the criteria are met for a Major Depressive Episode' (American Psychiatric Association, 2000: 177).

Atypical Depression, despite its name, is the most common form of depression to occur. Subjects suffer shorter, but more frequent episodes of depression, which if undiagnosed, may occur throughout their lives. Generally, these people also suffer from Passive aggression or Obsessive compulsive behaviour (mixed nuts.net). Some typical symptoms of atypical depression are overeating, oversleeping, sadness and feelings of rejection. One of the common symptoms, over eating, offers a temporary resolution to the problem as extra carbohydrates raise the serotonin levels in the brain and bring on a feeling of satisfaction or relief (Desmaisons, 1998:41).

The final main type of depression found in both males and females is Seasonal Affective Disorder (SAD). 'SAD is a type of "winter depression" that effects millions of people worldwide. SAD affects sufferers in the winter months of any year' (trapped minds.org). Sometimes referred to as the winter blues, SAD is usually one of the less debilitating forms of depression and likely to cause a general sense of discomfort or 'downness', but not a serious episode.

Two forms of depression found only in females are Postpartum Depression and Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder. Postpartum Depression occurs among some women after childbirth, when hormonal and physical changes occur. Adding to the responsibility of looking after a new life in the world, this can sometimes cause serious depressive episodes, more serious than the transient blues that many new mothers get. Premenstrual Dysphoric Disorder (PMDD) is estimated to occur in 3-8% of women (mixednuts.net). Although Premenstrual syndrome (Pms) is often referred to in moods associated with women, Pmdd is a more serious form that can be severe

enough to noticeably interfere with usual activities. Pmdd occurs during the last week of the luteal phase and lasts for one to two weeks typically each cycle (APA, 2000:178).

When depression reaches extreme levels and either help has not been sought, or medicines have proved fruitless, sometimes sufferers take their desperation to a higher level. Suicide for some appears to be the only means of escaping the day to day blackness which is depression. Of all western countries, New Zealand has one of the highest rates of suicide with the sixth highest in all OECD countries in 2002 (mentalhealth.org). Although many factors contribute towards causes of suicide, not simply depression, it is a factor. Statistically, women generally are suicide attempters while men are suicide completers; There were 3.2 male suicides to every female suicide per 100,000 population in 2002 (mentalhealth.org). One theory of this suggests that the act of attempting suicide is akin to actually completing it for women, whereas men, who are less likely to report depressive symptoms, take it the whole way (Madsen, 1998:5).

This finding of extreme despair is not uncommon to depression and often part of the illness causes people to withdraw from society and normal patterns of life. Unfortunately this withdrawal is part of the cycle of depression as shown by Martell & Addis (2001):

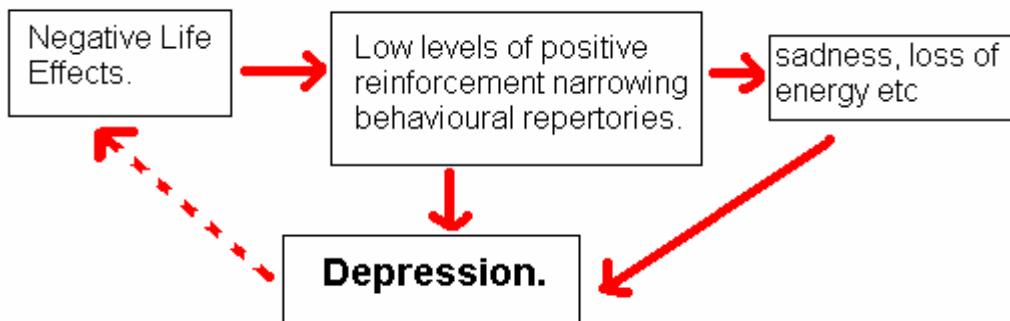


Figure 1(2001:74)

As the above chart shows, negative life effects can result in low levels of positive reinforcement and in turn sadness. These factors can then lead to the onset of depression. Once a person is suffering depression they tend to limit social activities developing ‘...a pattern of avoidance, trying to escape from feelings or situations’ (Martell & Addis, 2001:75). This pattern of avoidance, in order to avoid negative life events keeps one in a downward spiral cycling through the chart of low levels of positive support, sadness and depression. As one reduces human interaction, in order to feel more secure and safe from negativity, one’s levels of positive reinforcement also get reduced. In the end, seeking out this safety only fuels the cycle of depression. To battle this downward spiral a break needs to occur in the cycle: ‘The person needs positive guidelines that will lead them out through the maze of depression... here we see a chain reaction. Consistent application leads to the increased development of skills which in turn leads to a increase in confidence and more positive ways of coping’ (Barrow, 1985:3).

### **Treatments**

The treatments used for depression reflect dominant understandings of the disease. Unlike traditional or mediaeval conceptualisations of supernatural responsibilities and

resolutions for mental illness, in modern times (and in some ways, like Hippocrates theorises), depression is attributed to a complex combination of social, biological and psychological factors. To resolve the issues surrounding depression the common treatments are both by medication and psychotherapy.

From a medical perspective there are three main classifications of pharmaceuticals used to treat depression and similar ‘disorders’; Tricyclics, Monamine Oxide Inhibitors, and Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors. As well as these there are also several medicines that fall into other categories. Generally however these are a new generation of Tricyclic’s, so will be covered in that category. Medicines for depression generally work by interfering in one way or another with the neurotransmitters in the brain which allow brain cells to communicate with one-another (Bellenir, 2000:203)

Tricyclics are the original type of modern drugs used to treat depression. They work by increasing the amount of serotonin and noradrenaline the brain produces. Both these chemicals are important in areas of the brain controlling mood. People with depression have lower levels of serotonin and noradrenaline production than usual, so the pills compensate for this. (Norfolk & Waveney mental health partnership, Online).

The second common form of drug treatments is Monamine Oxide Inhibitors, or MAOI’s. MAOI’s are generally a very effective form of medication, but are not the main choice for treatment as many foods contain tyramine, an amino acid, which reacts with MAOI’s and cause greatly escalating blood pressure. Because of this one must take care of what one consumes to prevent high blood pressure (MyDr.com).

MAOI's act by stopping the breakdown of the chemicals the brain usually produces in mood stabilising. Unlike tricyclics, this assists the brain in keeping its natural chemicals and helps in the transmission of signals.

The final main type of antidepressant is Selective Serotonin Reuptake Inhibitors (SSRI's). SSRI's are the most common new form of antidepressant and act upon the body by inhibiting the reuptake of serotonin in the synaptic gap between two nerve cells. In doing this it allows a longer response time than the cell would usually get to allow signals to be passed successfully (Wikipedia.com). Some of the most popular SSRI's are Prozac, Zoloft and Paxil. Although generally successful drugs, SSRI's have faced criticism, firstly because they tend to be prescribed too readily, and secondly because of tests showing long term damage in the form of undesirable sexual side affects.

Often bio-chemical treatments alone are not enough in dealing with the issues surrounding depression, and psychotherapy is also recommended. In some cases of lesser depression, psychotherapy is used alone without medication, to deal with the problem. Within psychotherapy there are several different forms of therapy used to treat depression: cognitive, interpersonal, family and psychodynamic therapies.

Cognitive therapy is the primary form of psychotherapy used to treat depression. The main method of cognitive therapy is to work towards giving the subject a more balanced and realistic outlook on life. Cognitive therapy generally does not focus on the cause of the depression, rather what a person can do right now to help change the way they are feeling. This is not to say that the treatment does not reflect on the past, as this will often be done, but rather it focuses on the now and future to seek solutions for how people can improve how they feel. Essentially, therapy works on the idea that behaviour, thoughts and feelings are all interrelated in a cycle:

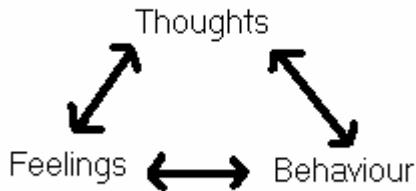


Figure 2(Owen, 1995:59)

When one of the areas is out of alignment as a result of depression all the other elements also are. ‘Depression clouds and distorts thinking. People with depression usually view their past, present, and future negatively’ (Owen, 1995:59). Cognitive therapy looks at the cycle, identifies the problem area and starts there by developing new outlooks in the problem area. As this improves, so to do the other areas of the cycle. Cognitive therapy meetings are generally weekly or bi-weekly for durations of typically less than a year.

Interpersonal therapy is generally used for people suffering from relationship issues. It looks at improving relationship skills and using communication to express emotions; something not always easy to do when suffering depression.

Family or support group therapy is sometimes used when depression is affecting the family or others around the sufferer. Here the focus is on building an understanding of depression for the non-sufferers and also looking to ways in which others actions may be reinforcing the depression of the subject.

When medication and therapy have been tried but the symptoms still exist, another option is to use Electroconvulsive Therapy (ECT). ECT is conducted by putting a patient under anaesthesia and running an electric current through the brain in order to produce a controlled seizure. Generally, ECT brings immediate success and relief of depression with the noted side affect of a loss of short term memory. This side affect is often outweighed by the difference it makes to an individual’s quality of life,

particularly in those who were highly suicidal or were resistant to medication (mixednuts.net).

## **Summary**

What we have looked at in this chapter is a brief overview of depression. I have shown how mental illness and depression have been treated through the ages, whether from a spiritual or scientific approach. We then explored through my participants and the work of Robert Burton, the emotions, feelings and actions one goes through as they suffer quietly with depression from day to day. Their comments and poems looked more at the emotions involved in depression, rather than being pure scientific statements. A sense of darkness, a void, and masks of emotion were all expressions of the ways depression is suffered. Following this, I provided contemporary definitions and means of gauging depression types, and showed how, through modern forms of medicine and therapy, the symptoms of depression are treated. Finally, I looked at the cycle of depression, and how some of the instincts one has when suffering depression can actually serve only to perpetuate the cycle. Throughout the chapter, we have looked at the ways modern western society gauges and treats mental illnesses like depression. Through looking at my participants' descriptions of how they live with depression, it is also suggested that the medical model and treatments alone are not enough for some. For this reason, some sufferers turn to support groups of people in similar situations, people who they can share experiences and feelings with. As depression is not generally an illness which encourages social interaction, something which is important in assisting recovery, many of these support groups have formed online, where participants can interact safely in the walls of their own homes without going through the daunting process of confronting these people face-to-face. It is these online support groups and the interactions surrounding them that I will now

focus on in the forthcoming pages. I will finish the chapter with another poem from Alethea, which encompasses an array of feelings that can be experienced when suffering depression:

Feelings

What is it that I'm feeling right now?  
I must explain it, someway, somehow!

The hurt and the anger, hidden inside  
The damage is done, I have no pride

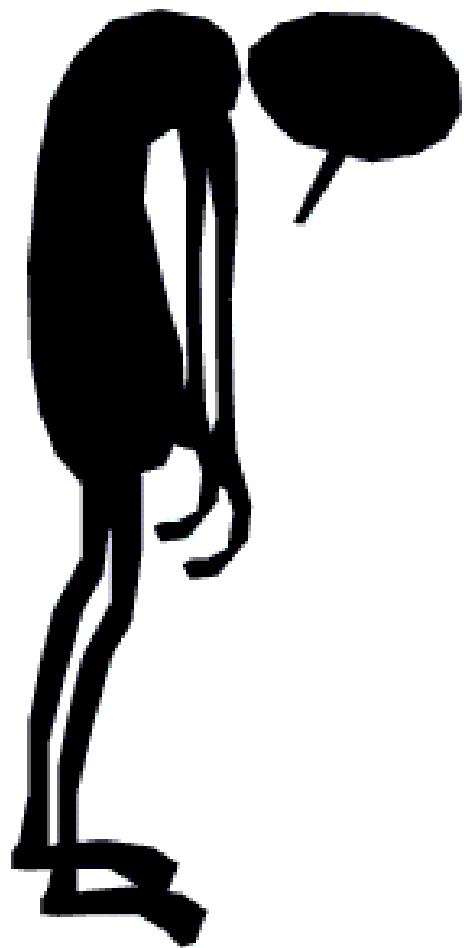
Must live each day, as though it's my last,  
Just sit and wait for this feeling to pass.

Must keep myself full of hope,  
Not sit around all day and mope

Keep myself going for all those around me,  
And for all those...I really do thank thee!

## Chapter Two

### Aims, Methodology and Internet Ethnography



(Depression, doktoranden-netz.de)

## Aims, Methodology and Internet Ethnography

In this chapter, I am going to explore internet ethnography and my steps of entry into the field. First, I will look at the general aims and methodology of the project, followed by a discussion of some of the key areas that separate online research from offline: place, time, and a form of ‘live history’. As with all studies, this also leads to some of the ethical and problematic areas of research that arise. We will then look at my first steps taken online.

### Aims

I initially planned for my research to study depressed males’ online activities, but, as explained below, this, like many examples of anthropological fieldwork, did not quite go to plan and the final study took a slightly different angle than initially anticipated.

My initial aims, however, excluding one, remained the same. They were:

- To explore the internet as a contemporary site for ethnography and participant observation.
- Discuss depression (originally stated as male depression), its causes and the available means of dealing with it.
- To use participant observation to explore the online use of depression forums as a means of assistance to those in need and in doing so, create a profile of those online and explore their reasons for using the forums.
- With both my literature research and participant observation, discuss the merits and possible issues surrounding the online forums.

As shown above, my only change in direction throughout the study was to look at depression across the sexes rather than focus on males.

## **Methodology: Grounded theory**

My research on depression and the internet is based on a grounded theory approach, with my main tool of research being participant observation. Grounded theory, developed by sociologists Glaser and Strauss, and Strauss and Corbin (1967, 1990, cited in Bernard, 2002:463), centres around the idea that theory emerges out of and is then organised around a burgeoning explanation of the data (Davidson & Tolich, 1999:98). Bernard outlines six specific mechanics of grounded theory:

- (1) Produce transcripts of interviews and read through a small sample of text.
- (2) Identify potential analytic categories - that is, potential themes- that arise.
- (3) As the categories emerge, pull all the data from those categories together and compare them.
- (4) Think about how categories are linked together.
- (5) Use the relations among categories to build theoretical models, constantly checking the models against the data - particularly against negative cases.
- (6) Present the results of the analysis using exemplars, that is, quotes from interviews that illuminate the theory. (Bernard, 2002:463)

The main reason I chose grounded theory is because I wanted to express the personal side of depression sufferers and their use of the forums. By using quotes and examples of my discussions with them I wanted to let the theory emerging from my research be built by the participants. There is no shortage of literature about depression, usually from psychological disciplines. However useful this is in discussing depression, I felt it excludes some of the human aspects I hope to convey from my small group of participants. This linked with the use of participant observation, make grounded theory an ideal choice.

## **Positioning in the field**

My entry to the field comes from what I will call a semi-native stance. Prior to this research I have been an active participant in online forums of various kinds and in 2004 I conducted some research on forums used by boy racers and car enthusiasts. I also consider myself as having links to the insider world, as I too have suffered depression for several years prior to this research. While my own experiences with the illness did not result in any prior use of depression forums, I believe it does give me a degree of understanding of how some of my participants may be feeling, which in the case of depression can be a huge help with initial communications with participants, and breaking of the ice.

Grounded theory, participant observation and insider knowledge would all, I hoped, help me answer the questions I posed in my study.

## **Place**

Whereas depression is no new phenomenon, depression groups, especially online communities are fairly recent. One of the distinct differences between traditional research, and the notion of cyber ethnography, is place. Costigan wrote, in relation to online communities ‘there is often the assertion that this research discovers unique properties of the internet, when actually they are properties of the community or group being studied or modified by this new form of technology.’ (1999, xix).

While I agree with Costigan that many new online communities are just that: products of their offline communities, I do not feel this is the case for online depression communities. In general, depression is not a communal illness, rather, quite the opposite. The introduction of the internet in this case therefore offers something new which did not, to any substantial degree, exist offline. There are support and social groups for men and women, which may deal with depressed individuals, but relatively

few explicitly depression-help groups, as generally the illness is treated one to one with a therapist.

Traditionally anthropologists went into a usually foreign field for a long period of time, living amongst the people of the culture they were studying. This travel to a physical place immersed the anthropologist into his/her chosen group and allowed her/him to gain deep understandings of the culture. The constant presence of the anthropologist allowed the participants to become used to him/her so as to allow them to be more relaxed and natural in their actions.

In more recent times, predominantly because of financial and teaching constraints, some fieldwork has moved into different research sites. Some contemporary ethnography is still conducted in foreign places, for example Popenoe in her ethnography *Feeding Desire* (2003). Popenoe, an American anthropologist travels to the Sahara to look at the local phenomenon of large bodied women as being more desirable than the western ideal of skinny ones. Other anthropologists have moved to more local areas within their own culture, for example Limon in his ethnography *Dancing with the Devil* (1994) which deals with Mexican-American history and culture, as well as a self reflective enquiry of the academic native anthropologist. Again, other anthropologists have still pursued overseas research, but for shorter periods then they may otherwise have wished.

Globalisation and the growth of the internet have brought about in the last decade a new range of potential ‘field sites’ within cyberspace. This is not surprising as the internet offers a new “virtual” place which reflects elements of everyday society, as Everard shows: ‘The internet reflects wider society. Just as there is pornographic material from the news-stands, there is pornographic material available via the internet...’ (2000:131). Just as we have groups like car clubs in the real world, the

internet also has car clubs. The internet has become home for many everyday activities originally done physically in the offline world. People now have the option to shop for their groceries and have them delivered to the door. One can browse a bookshop online, read blurbs or reviews, and order their chosen book online rather than going to a shop to buy it. Businesses offer the internet as a place to introduce themselves, book in for appointments, or purchase services. Other companies use the internet to display in-store specials much as they would by posting flyers into letterboxes. All these uses of the internet existed previously in an offline sense, but have been adapted in the easy to access internet arena. Accessing the virtual world simply opens up the options for research of all types of groups and cultures.

Ironically, going back to the early armchair anthropologists, this new site of study can be seen to be similar in the fact that the researcher may for long lengths of the research be at home or in the office, in a seat in front of their computer, the difference being that cyber-ethnographers are still collecting their own information and conducting their own fieldwork. Another possible research site would be in cybercafés, which offer the possibility of a dual site of ethnography both online and in the physical realm. Constable, in *Romance on a Global Stage*(2003) successfully conducts this kind of dual ethnography while researching internet and ‘mail order’ marriages. She gains some participants solely online but also arranges to meet some offline as well.

Unlike traditional sites, virtual ethnography raises the question of place to a higher level, one which is split into dimensions of physical and mental. Physically, online ethnography takes place in several areas. As shown, the anthropologist him/herself may be at home, in an office, or perhaps in an internet café. The participants of the community, like the anthropologist, will also be at home, in an office or at a

cybercafé. Everard describes this sense of space as a virtual place, in which all communication occurs. Although the place itself is virtual, the communities that operate in them are more-or-less real (2000:124). The actual site of the ‘field’ or community however, becomes a little hazier.

Physically the field site within internet research is also found in a particular location or place. As the community is based online, the host server as an assemblage of hardware and software also has to be located physically somewhere in the real world. Sometimes this is given away at least in part by the web address: org.nz being in New Zealand. The “community meeting place” could be locked away in a basement of a server network in a block of office buildings. This server holds all the information of the community, their history, their membership, their place of communal activity; all stored in an electrical device recording naughts and ones in succession to make up an enormous amount of computer data. If the anthropologist was to go and sit with this server at the centre of the physical realm of the community, they would walk away relatively unenlightened and most likely bored from the experience. With online communities, the centre of their group exists within the dimensionless internet, the virtual world - Cyberspace.

The virtual location of the internet community can be seen as existing simultaneously in many locations and in one location. The singular location of the community is located at its web address: [Myplace.org.nz](http://Myplace.org.nz). The community also exists at the locations of every member who is online and interacting in the community- in front of ones eyes, on the monitor. Just as the anthropologist is watching the screen, interacting with those on it, so too are the members of the community also watching their screens and interacting with them. This raises an interesting question about reflexivity. Anthropology has from time to time discussed the anthropological gaze,

how an anthropologist observes his/her chosen community and also how they also look at themselves observing the community. In the case of online research everyone has the potential to be the “the fly on the wall” watching everyone else. This is not just limited to the researcher who can observe quietly, but everyone in the community. In a physical sense, those whom one is interacting with online could be on the other side of the world, or in the next chair in a cyber café. Mentally, their community, the anthropologist’s field site is right in front of them.

### **Time**

As indicated above, time is another difference between traditional and online ethnography. As shown, traditional fieldwork in anthropology saw the researcher going to and living with their community for long periods of time, perhaps a year or more. Nowadays, it is not always practical or feasible to conduct such long periods of study away in the field as the anthropologist is faced with financial and academic constraints: ‘An ideal of two years (or longer) in the field as the standard...has today been shortened by half the time at best. Realities of academic life make even 12 months a standard that few committed ethnographers can afford (often literally) to make...’ (Wolcott, 1995:77). One popular solution is a succession of shorter periods in the field spread out over a longer length of time. A downside to this method is that it can potentially take longer to build up trusting relationships with participants and get deeper into the community. One advantage of this method is that it gives the anthropologist time to reflect on their research, its focus and where they would like to head next on their following stay in the field. Ottenberg is a good example of short yet repetitive studies in the field over a length of time. Between the years 1957 and 1994, he has made eleven fieldtrips amounting to five years in the field (Wolcott, 1995:78).

Over this extended period it gives the anthropologist plenty of time to reflect, develop and see the changes occurring within his/her chosen field of study.

Looking at the cyber field, some of these issues of time constraints can be overcome. The internet offers a solution to the problem of costs over long periods of study, as the anthropologist can potentially still be at home researching from there. Even visiting local cybercafés is cheap compared to plane trips and overseas costs. The internet itself is also relatively insensitive to time. By this I mean it is unimportant as to when you are able to access your communities, be it morning midday or midnight. Unlike traditional fields of study, online fields of research do not sleep or require organised meeting times, as members are potentially from around the world, running in shifts, 24-7. This sleepless community means participants may change at different points of the day, but with online forums and bulletin board posting, all messages can be seen, and therefore be discussed over a longer length of time. Often members access and add to discussions at different times of the day, even when the forum or community is a local one. These discussions can then last over the course of several days rather than minutes or hours.

### **Live History**

As well as time being unimportant in day to day communication online, community forums also offer an historical continuum. This can be useful for those who are either new or have missed out on the community's goings on for the last few days. In a traditional community, after an absence, one may come back to be given all the gossip of what has happened. If one is new to the community, through interaction one slowly learns how the community operates and who is who. Online this also can occur; general gossip can spread in discussions between members to a person who has

been absent, and new members are given words of advice upon joining about how the community works and who to look out for:

Teddy	Hi all!! I'm a newbie!!...
Burner	Welcome, stay away from the Dunedin forums ☺
Revman	Welcome,
	Don't take to much notice of some of the rubbish that goes on here...

(Toyspeed.org.nz 2005)

Much like cultures in the physical world, which record their history, online communities record all public interactions and conversations the community has had. This verbatim (because it is the actual conversations had) recording of history is of great use for new members and the researcher alike. Historical records show us how people think, operate and behave. It tells us what the community knows, which discussions are common, and how the community has grown. The records of the community history are one of its key factors that make it a community and allow it to grow. Without this recorded history, it would be much more difficult to acknowledge the group as a community from an outside perspective.

Although anthropology does not favour quick “in and out” styles of research, online communities do offer a potential toward this for other disciplines, and for the anthropologist a way to get to know the community and how it operates first hand before fully interacting with it. This can be done at a faster pace than would usually be expected in traditional ethnography. What must be remembered however, is that you are still looking at the history of the community as it is presented on the public face. Individuals and participants still need to be talked with to gain trust and other insights that forum discussions will not provide alone. An example of how the internet forums and their history records can help the anthropologist is when looking at the

interrelationships between community members. In the real world, it may take some time to find out why subject ‘A’ does not get along with subject ‘B’. Online, utilising the history search, one may find an argument or “flame war”<sup>4</sup> between the two members. This saves the anthropologist from needing to build trust with the participants before being able to dig into their reasons for disliking one another. One example of this I came across was in a discussion about a member’s decision to leave a car club forum:

Crimson: Just for reference, please don’t PM me for information. I don’t visit this website anymore.  
Thanks.

Sydney: Why are you no longer visiting...what happened?

Adrian: He cracked the shits again...look up his previous posts if you want the full rant.

(ausmini.com: 2005)

In this example we see a member who has not kept up with the goings on of the forum (Sydney) given some insight into why Crimson is leaving and told to use the history search to find out further details.

To assist with historical searches, most communities have a search function which allows you to look for either keywords in any conversation or the username of the person in question. Most forums also offer a list of ways to narrow down the search either by date or area of the forum posted into (e.g. the ‘general’ section or ‘for sale’ section).

### **Ethical issues**

Prior to conducting any research, my first task was to apply and seek permission from the ethics committee (MUHEC) to actually conduct research. This was required, because my research dealt with participants who could potentially be at risk of further

---

<sup>4</sup> A flame war is internet terminology for a type of argument or heated discussion.

mental, or even physical harm (to themselves). The main ethical issue I foresaw was that occasions might arise in the course of the research where I might encounter an upset or even suicidal participant who might require qualified help. Although I know what it is like to suffer the illness, I am not in any professional way qualified to offer any assistance if such a situation were to arise. Also, due to the fact that my participants could come from anywhere in the world, their physical location not even always divulged to me, it meant I could not simply have a professional at hand to offer assistance if required. My solution to this was to have a list of phone numbers of help-lines for what I anticipated to be the main countries my participants on the forums resided in, e.g. America, United Kingdom, Australia and New Zealand. I also had a list of online counsellors that operated for people either unable to go to local therapists, or who were more comfortable operating more discreetly. Most of this selection of therapists did charge in much the same way an offline therapist would. If the situation of someone being in desperate need of assistance was to occur, these lists gave me some options for what, or whom I may be able to recommend.

It would not however have been adequate to simply give my participants a list of places to try and leave it at that. I prepared myself, if the situation required, to be ready to talk to participants and make sure they knew someone was here to listen if they needed. In my opinion, killing contact would be one of the worst things to do to someone who is troubled and reaching out even if just to talk.

Fortunately, during the course of my research I did not need to refer any participants to help-lines or therapists. Whilst my participants were generally depressed, and suffered from fluctuating moods, neither I, nor my participants experienced any troublesome experiences throughout our interactions.

Aside from this, which I considered to be the main potential ethical issue, my other concerns related to doing no harm and protecting identities. When asking questions, I did my best to avoid anything causing unnecessary discomfort. I also, early in the research, in order not to disrupt too much of the forum activity, operated most of the study “behind closed doors” using email or the PM<sup>5</sup> function on the forums. This method was requested of me on one forum initially (see below), but I adopted it across the board as it made sense and did not greatly affect the operation of the forum like a medley of posts may. I also kept participants’ names and online names anonymous, and have changed them all in this research. While several said they were happy for their names to be used, I did not feel comfortable doing this. Both offline and online names of users are their identities in the real and virtual worlds. Although my participants were rightly unashamed of opening up to their depression, I feel there is still sufficient stigma regarding mental illness to warrant keeping them anonymous.

The pseudonyms I have given my participants are largely of Greek origin and have meanings associated with characteristics I personally saw in my participants. I chose these names as they are more identifiable than many online usernames, but at the same time unique enough to suggest we are dealing with a different from usual group and field site.

Aside from ethical issues associated with my entry into the field and participants, like traditional research there are still many, if not more, potentially problematic and ethical situations one has to face when conducting ethnography online. The first and quite possibly greatest problem and limiting factor to cyber ethnography is the notion of validity; how does one know what they are actually being told is true? Whilst this can also be said about traditional fieldwork and ethnography, due to the lack of a

---

<sup>5</sup> PM stands for private message. The PM function on a forum acts like a mini email site found on-site.

physical realm for the community, and that research is not in a normal sense face-to-face, it can be hard to validate what you are being told, or even who is telling you this information: ‘How do we know that the person who wrote this or that piece of writing was really that person and not an impostor?’ (Everard, 2001:121). The 20 year old female participant may actually be a 45 year old male! The perception of anonymity online creates the problematic situation of role-playing. As one is not physically seen by others, one can and no doubt some do, change one’s personality. This may simply mean that the usually shy individual is more outgoing, or that a usually polite individual is blatantly rude. It could also mean however, as in my example above, that someone takes on a whole new personality altogether.

Deception is not a unique property of the internet however, and can occur across all fields of research as well as day-to-day living. It is simply something that occurs at all times to some level or another. In traditional research the anthropologist may receive misinformation for a number of reasons; the participants may make up stories to tell the researcher what they think they want to hear, or the participant may simply enjoy fooling the researcher to see how much they will believe in an elaborate joke. This form of deception is by no means new to the anthropologist and in 1964 Chagnon experienced deception as an elaborate joke when researching kinship ties. Five months into his documenting, whilst visiting a neighbouring village Chagnon noted: ‘The named person would usually react with annoyance and hiss some untranslatable epithet at me, which served to reassure me that I had the true name [it was not considered good manners to openly discuss peoples names]’ (1983:19). What he soon discovered however, was that ‘They had invented false names for everybody in the village and systematically learned them’ (1983:19). All his work had been futile and he had been the brunt of an elaborate and clever joke.

What makes online validity more problematic however, is a loss of some of our key senses- that is, sight and hearing. In traditional fieldwork body language can (although not always) give indicators as to whether one is being told the truth or not. Eye contact and movement, body stance and voice tone all can give suggestions. Online body language is limited to emoticons<sup>6</sup>, as discussed in chapter five. In reality, the ability to decipher emoticons, however, very much depends on who you are communicating with, and what someone wants to tell you, or wants you to think they are telling you. In normal conversation amongst honest people, these can be very useful or at least assisting in their role of communication. They do not however work when people are acting in a deceptive manner. They can be manipulated by those who desire to create alter egos and fool others into believing they are someone they are not. This ease of deceit is in many ways highly problematic for the researcher and regular online user alike.

Whilst this can appear at face value to be a huge problem associated with online ethnography, the solution is, to an extent, the same as what it would be in an offline situation. One of the strengths of good ethnography is getting to know individuals beyond their simple face value. By extended conversations and observations in the field one can usually ascertain whether one is being told the truth or not. Slip-ups and contradictions may occur, and with access to old historical conversations word-for-word, this can make identifying a fraud easier online. It may be a question of what area of the field one is in. Although not impossible, I believe it unlikely that someone would join a depression forum, pretending to be depressed and pretending to help a researcher to understand what it is like and why they use the forum. What is unlikely however, is that they would spend a prolonged amount of time and effort building up

---

<sup>6</sup> Emoticons are simply ‘emotion icons’, for example : ) is a happy ‘smiley’ icon.

a character who expresses many indicators of depression and assisting in lengthy discussions. But people do strange things, so such deception is not beyond the realm of possibility.

In other circumstances lack of knowledge is often a giveaway for fake users. In my previous research in online car enthusiast communities (2004) I was able to identify this when a member talked about the modifications they had done to their car. With insider knowledge of the mechanical car scene, I was able to identify that some of what they were saying was untrue. I was not the only person to do this and it did not take long for the member to be ‘flamed’ by others pointing out the members erroneous knowledge.

Related to this problematic idea of trust is also anonymity. As an anthropologist, it is one’s responsibility to protect the identity of one’s participants. As well as having real names to protect, the online anthropologist also has their participants’ usernames and email addresses to protect. For many members of online communities, their life online is just as important, and in some cases more important than their offline one. Although some of my participants were happy to have their names used for my research, I was not so comfortable using them. Because of the search functions available on forums, any direct quotes taken from a participant in the forum could be found without much effort. As well as revealing their usernames, it may also provide links to their email address.

On many forums I visit, I often come across members using a small program in their signature<sup>7</sup> which tells one what type of computer one is using, which version of

---

<sup>7</sup> Like the personal posting profile discussed earlier, some members also have a signature at the bottom of their posts. This signature can contain anything from a picture to a favourite phrase. In general, this again just adds to the individualism of each member’s postings.

windows and msn messenger one uses and also where ones IP<sup>8</sup> address is located (e.g. New Zealand). This simple program is just an example of how easy it is for people to gain details off your computer. In the wrong hands, this potentially spells disaster to someone's online life. To a knowledgeable computer hacker, this could lead to the discovery of one's real name, and potentially even more details. Anonymity online is not as secure as people think it to be. Of course, the reasons for someone wanting to do this cannot be known, but it is a possibility that the anthropologist needs to consider. We have a moral duty to assess whether our work will cause personal harm or damage to our participants. The concept of the internet offering an anonymous and safe to explore field is a loose one, and only really applies to regular users of limited computer knowledge without any ulterior motives.

One way I attempted to overcome this problem was to talk with my participants via the PM and email functions. Although not 100% secure from prying eyes, it is about as good as one can get when communicating online without writing in code. These conversations are not accessible to searches on the forums, and hence secure the use of direct quotes from conversations had. I also used direct forum quotes to show examples of discussions had, but changed the names of users and delivered it in a context in which the information it gives would be of no interest to tracing the individual. Another method that could be used to protect the individuals of an online community is to give both the participants and websites pseudonyms. This method, although again not 100% effective would be no different to the protection of discussed village/community sites used in regular offline ethnography.

The third problematic ethical area of internet research is related to the historical searches I have been discussing. Whilst I have pointed out the merits to be had in

---

<sup>8</sup> IP- Internet Protocol is the protocol used to route a data packet from its source to its destination over the internet (bitpipe.com), much like a mail service for a letter.

utilising this search function and how it can help both new members and researchers in familiarising themselves with the community, it is also an area of debatable ethics. What needs to be asked is whether it is ethical to use this information from a research perspective. On one hand, records of conversations between members of a community can be seen as private within that community. On the other hand, many records are available to be read by anyone who desires to do so. What separates these two is that some forums require the user to sign into a forum to view posts while others do not. It is fair to say that those forums that do require membership to view content are not public forums. In this sense, when signing up to one of these forms a moral contract between the forum and yourself is made. In this case, any research or permission to use quotations need to be addressed through the correct channels and also cleared with participants of the study. In the case of totally public forums, this can be seen at a slightly different angle. Many forums have a disclaimer to remind people that anyone can see their postings and to be aware of this. For the researcher of these more public forums the use for historical content becomes more of a moral decision. As they are seen and read by anyone interested, it is acceptable that they can be quoted from as long as content is not overly sensitive or revealing. One's responsibility as an anthropologist to make sure one's work does no harm to participants, in my opinion, still applies in these situations also.

Another problem with online research also found in offline research is related to participant help. At any given time in any given study, participants may choose to finish their participation in the research, or simply ignore the researcher totally. Whilst terminating participation is very unhelpful and disruptive to an ethnographer's research, it is perfectly acceptable for the individual to choose to do this. Online, this can reach a new level with loss of communication with the whole community. As well

as having a participant simply drop out from helping the researcher, they also may drop from communication for many other reasons which cannot be discovered by the researcher. Some of these reasons may be a death in the family, an accident, a computer malfunction or virus. Excluding the later, the real world researcher at least has a chance of gaining knowledge as to why communication has ceased. Researching online, the participants can be from anywhere, so it is not so easy. Even the simple case of misunderstandings or causing offence online may cause more permanent or unresolvable lack of communication. Without the body language indicators, one may not be aware they have upset an individual or offended them. In the physical world, although this may still be unresolved, it does at least offer more indicators. In my own study, one of my participants had their computer break down for several weeks. As well as being distraught that they could not access their normal online groups and communities, they were also unable to respond to my emails. Prior to this conversations had been going well without any suggestion of tension, but when it occurred I had no way of knowing why communication had ceased. Luckily (for both of us) they managed to get their computer repaired and two weeks later things continued as normal.

### **Entering the field**

My first online task was to locate some depression forums. To do this, I used the search engine google.com. Searching under miscellaneous titles - depression, male depression, depression forums, depression groups, I was given lists of links to try. Many of these were unrelated or even dead sites<sup>9</sup>. Several led onto links for pharmaceutical products and medicines which were guaranteed to rid one of depression, anxiety and other mental illnesses. Other sites offered definitions of

---

<sup>9</sup> Dead sites are internet sites which still exist in search engines, but no longer are in operation.

depression, or tests to see whether one may be suffering from depression. Many of these test sites then referred the user on to medicines available for online ordering.

My later search for groups and forums proved a little more helpful with several links to forums.

The first forum I came across was [www.depression.about.com](http://www.depression.about.com). This extensive site contains a huge amount of information on depression as well as a forum, in which members of the depressed community can interact and share their experiences with one another. Continuing with the Google search, I found half a dozen more forums in which I decided to begin my investigation.

My first official night in ‘the field’ consisted of a jumble of data organising, name making, password forming and rules reading. All of these were done in order to join most of the forums based around the requirements of my research. I already held the position of a ‘lurker’, a lurker being someone who enters a forum as a guest (and at times a member) and lurks their way through the virtual rooms of discussions, listening/reading, but invisible in identity to those using the forum<sup>10</sup>. It was now time for me to take off my cloak as a lurker and enter into the world of the forum communities. To enter the forum as a member, as well as to seek permission as a researcher (it is difficult to contact the correct authorities as a lurker) I had to make an account and sign up. On most forums, signing up to be granted full access, or simply to be a registered user usually takes between 5 and 15minutes.

When signing up with many forums, there is some red tape to work around. Although one can view the forums as an invisible stranger (lurker), in order to have any input or say on subjects, you must identify yourself. There are also some cases, where even to lurk, you must sign-in. To become a member of all the forums and in

---

<sup>10</sup> Often a forum will tell you how many members and how many visitors are viewing the site. All visitors can be assumed to adopt the role of lurker as they can take no interactional role in forum discussions.

order to keep things simple, I kept an identical sign-in name across the forums I intended to use. I chose MeMichael. This pseudonym or nickname is shown both at the bottom of lists when I am online and signed in and also on all posts made. In order to protect this identity, it is also necessary to have a password. Like the name, I attempted to keep my password standard through the sites I was member of. Although this worked in most cases, several sites generate their own password for users. One reason for this is so automatic programs cannot be used to generate automatic sign in names which spam<sup>11</sup> the forums with advertising. This measure is also used to assure genuine email addresses are given, which is the next compulsory requirement. A valid email address is used, to finalise membership to the site, so a genuine address is required to activate a profile. Although not common on many non-related forums I joined, many depression forums also ask for a date of birth. This is done because of the nature and content of some of the forums. Some areas are blocked off from under 18 year olds. Obviously, this is a fairly easy thing to by-pass if one wanted (a user could simply lie), but it is most likely used to protect some of the bigger forums from any potential legal issues that could arise. One can also assume, in general, that people who join a depression forum on the whole are genuinely interested in seeking out this group and so have no real reason to lie. Once all relevant details are taken one must then wait for an acceptance email to arrive. This email either welcomes you to the club, or simply states that someone has used your email address to sign up on the given forum. They then have a link that must be followed back to the forum to finalise membership into the forum:

‘MeMichael,  
This email has been sent from <http://www.trappedforums.com/index.php>.  
You have received this email because this email address

---

<sup>11</sup> Spam is an online term for junk or advertising. When one receives spam email it is usually unwanted advertising.

was used during registration for our forums.

If you did not register at our forums, please disregard this email. You do not need to unsubscribe or take any further action.

---

#### Activation Instructions

---

Thank you for registering.

We require that you "validate" your registration to ensure that the email address you entered was correct. This protects against unwanted spam and malicious abuse.

To activate your account, simply click on the following link...<sup>12</sup>  
(Email notification)

Once one's details are validated, one is then given the opportunity to provide more details about one's self that will be viewable to others. Location, job, age, email and general statements are typical of the content seen on these profile links. This is also an opportune time to edit one's avatar<sup>12</sup> for one's posting profile. The posting profile contains the personal details of a user's membership, which is displayed beside each message the user places on the forum. Here is mine:

**MeMichael**



Potatomon Baby.

Member Group: Members

Joined: 5 May 05

From: New Zealand

Member No. : 9,093



Gender: Male

**Real Name/ Nickname:**

Michael

(My profile:Trappedminds.com)

---

<sup>12</sup> As apposed to the traditional definition of an avatar as being 'a visible manifestation of an abstract concept' (Hanks, 1988), the internet terminology of an avatar is a image or picture displayed next to forum members' posts to assist in making them readily identifiable.

As can be seen here on my personal profile, the profile outlines the user's name, shows their avatar, date joined, location, mood, and name options. What this serves to do is make the user visually recognisable when posting and provides other members with a quick reference to basic details of the member. Avatars chosen can either be chosen from a list, as mine is, or created by users themselves, individualising them even more. The mood image is also customisable to match different moods the user may be experiencing. The one displayed above is "anxious" and when online dances up and down.

Once I had signed up to my first list of potential forums, my second evening was spent sending out greeting and explanation messages onto the forums. Although on the whole, the concept of posting (writing a message on a forum) is very similar amongst all internet forums, they all have slightly different ways of posting new messages. There is also a selection of different topic areas in which to post, for example, general, introduction, depression help, off topic. I will discuss these in greater detail in a later chapter. Once I had decided on the most appropriate area of the forum in which to post an introduction/research outline I wrote it out and selected the post option. I went about this in several different ways throughout the course of the research. On most of the forums I posted a brief introduction describing my research and its goals, and myself and my history of depression. A typical intro post to some forums was similar to the following:

'Hi Everyone, My name is Michael Hawkey. I am a Master of Arts student in anthropology at Massey University in New Zealand.

As part of my thesis year I would like to look at Internet groups for depression among males and females. Essentially I'm interested in learning about why people use the forums and what you get out of them.

My research will be conducted entirely on-line and all names- both real and usernames kept anonymous.

I'm mainly looking for any participants who could spare some time every now and then with generally email/PM based interviews and discussions. I hope

that the results that I get from all of you will be of use and interest in areas of treatment of depressed peoples like us...'

I then went on to share my personal experiences with depression and give ways by which people could contact me.

Once the introduction posts on the forums had been made I spent some time browsing the forums as a member and waiting for some post results. The next day I received two emails in my inbox, had one post go missing and another topic locked. The forum [www.trappedminds.com](http://www.trappedminds.com) had a clause in its membership agreement I had overlooked: unless prior permission is sought, research is not allowed to be practiced on the site. Someone with little ethical concern could easily conduct secretive research, however this was not what I wanted, or was permitted under my university's ethical approval procedure, to do. I hastily sent an email to the moderators apologising for my mistake, outlined my research goals and asked for permission to conduct research. I received a reply, asking me to email the head administrator as the person I had emailed was on leave from the forum at present. The head administrator's message inbox was always full, so after trying for a week, I eventually sent it through to the technical help address, which they also controlled. I got a reply from the administrator giving me permission to use the site as long as I followed several specific rules:

'Re: Research Query

Hi Michael,

You may use the forum for personal reasons and personal posts.

However there are some conditions for research projects that you MUST follow:

1 Your project is limited to 1 thread in the "General Depression Discussions" folder.

2 You may not use anyone's posts outside that thread.

3 All those participating must be fully aware of what you are using the research for and how it will be used.

4 All those who volunteer must be allowed to leave at ANY point.

Once you post a thread for the research please state you have done so with

express permission and include the conditions above so our moderators can monitor if you are following them or not.

If you have any further questions feel free to let me know.

Regards,

Jo [name changed]

Administrator' (email response)

Once that misunderstanding was sorted out I proceeded to place a similar post back on the forum explaining my intentions, some background information on myself, and made reference to being granted permission from the administrator.

The other replies I got on my initial forum postings were two short emails from members of the forums. One was a brief outline of the person's condition and the medication they were on. The other was a short name introduction and a quick statement that they were willing to assist in my research. I responded to both these emails by thanking the sender for their interest and providing a fuller outline of my research.

The final problem was on the about.com depression forum, which had for some reason lost my entire post. It may have been deleted by moderators, or been lost in the void of the internet, but nevertheless, I posted again.

Over the next week I received and communicated with several other potential participants. I sent information sheets out to each as attachments, but had a problem with several not being accepted by the sender's email server. Whether they had strict known address filters, or 'work only' email addresses I do not know, but it proved impossible to contact them and as I was on several forums I had no way of knowing where they had read my introduction.

Of the information sheets that did send without a problem, I received several replies and confirmations that people were willing to help. For these initial people I then sent out an official permission slip, asking them to digitally sign their

name/pseudonym and return the email. Two participants sent this back, and several others did not, but contacted me to say it was fine to use them as participants.

As a month rolled by, I had only two definite participants. Although I had received confirmation from several, only the two kept in regular contact every four to five days. The remainder, who had initially expressed interest and consented to participation in the research did not keep in contact. On the forums, my introduction posts had been approached by members in several different ways. Some, although not wanting to participate, wished me well, while others had more questions. One member questioned my offering of anonymity to all participants. Although hard to prove to someone online, all I could respond with was that I treated anonymity very seriously, and did not have any intention of divulging the true names, or even usernames of participants. Really, all I could give was my word. I explained I understood their concerns, and I felt it to be as important as they did. Not surprisingly, this member was not interested in becoming a participant. Another member replied that they would love to help, but they were bad at communicating both online and offline, and therefore did not feel they would be helpful. To this person, who later became a participant, I said my thanks and added that I would be happy for any help they could give, as any communication would be better than none.

At this point, my research shifted from focusing on males only to looking at the use of the depression forums by everyone. Prior to this, when I only had several definite participants, I had “bumped”<sup>13</sup> up my posts in an attempt to get more feedback. One of these feedbacks was from a woman offering to be a man if it would help my research. Whilst amused and grateful for her offer, I explained that I could

---

<sup>13</sup> To “bump” a post up simply means to move it to the top of the list of topics. To do this users typically either add additional comments or simply state “bump” in a post.

not really lie as part of my research, but would keep their contact details if I did open the research up a little. Eventually, when I did, she became a participant as a female.

Once the direction of my research changed to include both males and females, I edited my posts on the initial forums (the unisex ones) to include both males and females, and also attempted to seek participants from several woman-only forums. While I had no success on the women-only forums (only several bites of interest), once the project was aimed at everyone, I found I received several more inquiries of interest. Although these were generally from females, I also had several other males offering their help. My final selection of regular participants consisted of three males and seven females. With this group I used both open discussions and set questionaries to get to know them and their reasons for using the sites better. Reply time varied from participant to participant. Some replied within two days, some within hours, and others sometimes took a week or more to reply. I did urge them not to drop everything to reply to me, and also to just read it and have a think first if they felt the need. My reason for this was that I did not wish to add any undue stress or anxiety to already potentially stressful lives. Because my participants were in a position of being vulnerable, I wanted to assure them I was not rushing them for replies.

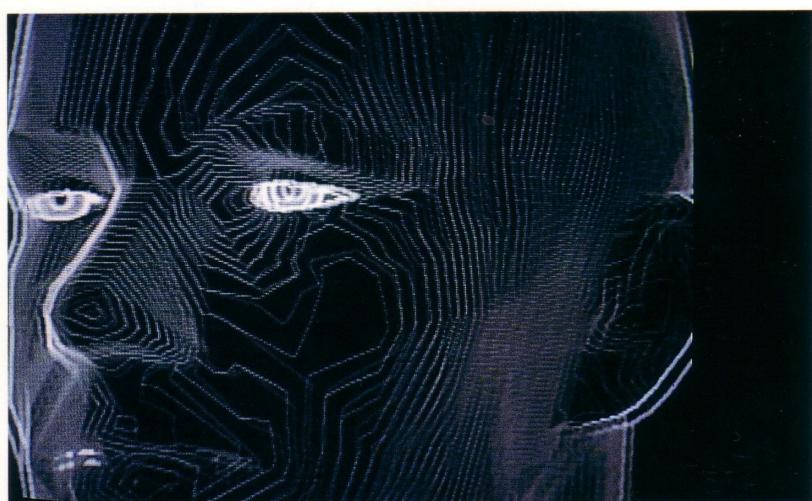
About two thirds of my participants remained in contact until the end of the study. The rest, at some time or another disappeared from contact. Although I have no reason to believe my discussions caused this, it is something I will never know. Once contact is lost online, and emails are not replied to, there is little that I can do. When discussing this with other participants I was reassured that my discussions were not too obtrusive or the cause of any pain, so this gives me some reassurance.

## Summary

What we have looked at in this chapter is my initial aims, methodology, and entry into the online field. In doing this, we have also examined a comparison of traditional and online ethnographic ways research occurs and the possible benefits and dilemmas associated with this. By using grounded theory and participant observation I set the foundation for how the rest of the research would be shaped and what path it would follow. The theory of the research has been guided by discoveries made within the research and developed from there. My initial entry into the field shows both how the research is based and problematic situations that can arise out of commencing research online. What we can see from this chapter is that the internet offers an extension to possible fields of study that anthropology can look at in this technological age. Benefits of history searches are balanced out by problems with validity in a bodiless environment and ethical and moral dilemmas remain as high in priority as they are in offline fields of study. As cyber research becomes more widespread, these debates on privacy, validity and moral conduct can only become wider and more important in the realm of online research.

## Chapter Three

### Sites and Participants.



(Allen, in Popper, 1993:103)

## Sites and Participants.

In this chapter we will explore the sites and participants used to familiarise us with online communities and humanise the participants in my study. To do this, I will first give an overview of the general site layouts and follow with summaries of my chosen forums of research and participants I gained within each site. I will also use the metaphor of a village in describing the online communities. This metaphor gives us a sense of physical place, which I have alluded to in an effort to show how the communities online are similar to, or an extension of some that are found offline. The forums, although not set in physical place, are all the same very real to my participants. In painting the picture of a real community or village situation, I am attempting to share their outlooks on their communities.

### Site overview

When entering online communities, most follow a similar pattern of layout to introduce browsers/new members, as well as to guide regular users to the various points of interest. When initially stepping inside the boundaries of the forum, you are greeted with a welcome page which outlines where you are and what the site is about; for example one of my sites, MixedNuts:



(MixedNuts.net)

As can be seen from the cover page, the initial screen outlines in a light hearted way what the site is all about: ‘....a haven for people who suffer from depression and need to be with others who understand the problems associated with depression’ (MixedNuts.net).

Introduction screens usually notify the user of who is providing the hosting service, various sponsors, and often, how many “hits”<sup>14</sup> a site has had. Some intro pages then offer links to different parts of the site: forums, FAQs, chat, but many simply have an ‘enter’ tab which takes us into the next section of the forum.

Once we have entered through the virtual gates we find ourselves in the centre of the village, a point of high activity, junctions to side alleys and signs explaining what things are so that the browser and ethnographer alike can roam and explore. Some of these areas are open to all to stroll down, while others require community permission. On the screen, this central point of the village is seen as a list of subject area categories down a menu bar on the left side of the screen. These categories then contain sub-categories, all leading to a different section of the community. Usually the menus and sub-menus have small summaries of what each area consists of. As well as the left-hand menu bar, most forums also have another quick menu bar across the top of the screen both providing access to not only some of the subcategories linked down the side, but also to the forum, chat and PM sections (discussed shortly).

The middle of the screen is usually used for news and important notices. This could be a new medical discovery, with links to the source, or perhaps news about updates to the site. Down the bottom of many depression communities is a display notice of who has been onsite in the last 10-15 minutes, as well as any birthdays members may be celebrating on a given day. Most also tend to say how many

---

<sup>14</sup> Hits are the number of times a site has been accessed or viewed by internet users.

members of the community now exist. All these pieces of the page serve to form the community feeling of the site. News keeps members in the loop about what is happening in the wider depression world, and birthday reminders help people remember fellow members' special days and feel less isolated. Total number of members of the community shows users how popular the site may be and how large the community of like minded individuals is growing.

Moving back to the category menus, this is the area where we access the rest of the village areas. As stated above, these lists are found both along the top of the screen and down the left hand side. Many points can be accessed without further permission, offering passageways to more information on depression. Often links to tests which give an indication as to whether one may be depressed were given, followed by links to areas of the site that explained different types of depression, phone numbers to call for help, guides for what the next step to take is, and links to discussions about different medications available along with their potential side-affects which may result. These areas of the sites were core areas where members and browsers can read and research their conditions (or potential conditions). Although not intended to be seen as a 'virtual doctor' for self diagnosis, the test and description sections of the site serve to provide people with potential answers as to why they feel as they do, and what the next steps to be taken could be.

Beyond the areas of our virtual villages supplying tests, information, news and contact numbers for professional help, several sites require the browser to join the community so they may venture deeper into the field. This predominantly applies to some sections of the forums, chat areas and PM areas (explained below). Many forums allow restricted access to some of these areas under the title of visitor, but as a visitor none allowed one to speak or have their say in discussions.

To access the forums, most links were found in the top menu bar of the main screen. Once one clicks on this link the site would usually ask for a username and password. If one has gone through the painless initiation process to become a member (as described in chapter 1) then subsequently one can also choose to be remembered by the community and skip this screen. When using this option, one's details are saved in the "cookies"<sup>15</sup> on one's computer, remembering one has been there before and allowing an automatic sign in.

Upon entry, perhaps equivalent to using a swipe card to enter a secure business area, or password into secret club, we are greeted by another list of menu and sub-menu options to different areas of the forum. These menus are commonly split into sections under general topic areas such as 'Introductions/notifications', 'General' and 'Off topic' (although different titles were given in different communities).

These menu areas were then broken up into sub-menus. 'Introduction/notifications' had submenus of 'important notices', 'rules and regulations', and 'new member introductions'. This provided forum members with a place to introduce themselves, welcome new members, and forum moderators (discussed below) somewhere to pass on any important notices about forum use or updates to the site.

The general section for the forums had submenus of different categories related to depression, for example, 'general depression', 'bipolar', 'abuse', 'suicidal feelings'. These submenus were the heart of all serious and helping areas of the communities. This is where people opened up about their feelings and asked for help or opinions on matters of importance to them. It is also this area of the forum where friendships are built and people get to know the community as a whole.

---

<sup>15</sup> Cookies are small information and text files from internet sites stored on ones computer.

The final main area found in most forums is an ‘off topic area’. This area, although not always strictly off topic from the whole depression theme, is where we can find sub-categories like ‘jokes’, ‘art’, ‘poems’ or ‘just for fun’. Art and poem categories offered a place for some of the more creative members to express their feelings in alternate ways. Jokes and just for fun were typically areas of a more light hearted nature and allowed members to have some fun with other members whom they had grown to know without dwelling on depression and negativity.

These menus and sub-menus can be compared to standing in a big university complex. Each level offers a different school of thought, or topic area. Each door on each level offers more specific discussion classes on particular areas of the given category, for example, the general depression floor has a room for bipolar discussions, one for abuse discussions, another for suicidal discussions. Back online, when we click on the sub-menu of choice, it opens the door into that specific area of forum discussions.

Layout within the sub-menus is identical within about 90% of all forums online I have visited. Across two thirds of the page we see the title of the subject of discussion, followed by the name of the author and the date posted. Next to this is the name of the last person to comment and the date and time they commented. These discussion titles are listed down the page from newest to oldest comment, and as a discussion topic is replied to it moves up to the top of the list. Clicking any selected title enters you into the screen, which shows the initial discussion and all consecutive replies made. Clicking on the author’s name or the name of the last person to comment takes you to the summary link about that person (if they have filled out information about themselves):

## Phedra

[Find all topics by this member](#) · [Add to contact list](#)

Active Stats		Communicate	
Total Cumulative Posts	2,835 ( 19.72% of total forum posts )	Email	Private
Posts per day	9.9	AIM Name	No Information
Joined	19-April 05	ICQ Number	No Information
Last Activity:		Yahoo Identity	No Information
User's local time		MSN Identity	No Information
		Personal Message	<a href="#">Click Here</a>
Information		Posting Details	
Home Page	No Information	Member Group	Members
Birthday	5 November 1976	Member Title	No Information
Location	United Kingdom	Avatar	
Interests	I love animal particularly cats, rats, dogs insects especially butterflies and dragonflies. I like to read and write poetry, books regarding nutrition, nursing and anything that involves getting well. I do amateur aromatherapy and know quite a bit about herbalism. I would like to retrain and become a nutritional consultant if I ever get better and my goal in life is to be well, happy, free from anxiety and to be able to help others with their depression through nutritional therapy.	Signature	Its not the end that counts, its the process.

(Mixednuts.net, edited for participant security)

Additional to the menu/sub-menu options available within the forum area of the sites, there is also a PM area, the Private Message area. This section, again accessed via the top menu bar when signed in is a place where one can have private conversations with other members of the community. This operates similar to email, with members mailing other members messages and conversations within the site. It's also used to voice any concerns or complaints to forum moderators without the rest of the community being made aware of your thoughts. The PM area is also a place members can access to change personal details, character summaries, avatar images

and passwords. The PM area offers members their own little offices within the community where they can organise their identities and correspond in private one to one with fellow members or friends.

### **Community laws**

So far we have looked at the site layout and menu/sub-menu systems that operate within it. As in the real world however, communities do not operate without rules and rule enforcers of one type or another. Forums are no different in this respect and as well as having a list of rules and guidelines for members, most internet forums also have moderators. Moderators act both as a type of ‘elder’ to the communities and as the law enforcers. This job is especially important on forums such as depression communities where unwelcome behaviour can be particularly harmful to the members. Terentia, one of my participants, is also a moderator and summed up her view of the role moderator’s play on the depression sites like this:

‘As a moderator, I basically keep an eye on posts and threads, watching for anything that potentially upsets the rest of the forum. I think the second priority is to keep the forum organised, so this includes moving topics, editing and closing when necessary. I think generally, as a moderator I just tend to keep the peace and make sure all rules are followed’ (email conversation).

As Terentia explains, the main role for a moderator on the depression forums is to keep an eye out for anything causing potential harm or which is in breach of the forum rules. An example of this would be if someone signed up with the community then proceeded to simply abuse members on the forum. In this case the moderator could both lock the topic from further use, if necessary, and ban the member from further use of the forum. Another example, as I myself experienced, is if something which requires permission is posted without acquiring it. When looking for participants on one site I failed to seek administrator permission to do-so. As I was a researcher, the moderators locked my topic from comment until I had been granted

permission. Members could read the post, but as it was locked, no one was able to comment on it.

The secondary job Terentia outlined is to make sure things were organised on the forum. Sometimes people post topics in the incorrect section, for example an introduction post into the poem section. The moderator in this case simply moves it into the correct area of the forum so the forum does not become a jumbled mess. Although most moderators participate freely in conversations like the rest of the community members, they also have to remember their duties and make sure their own comments are not overly biased or negative, potentially causing harm to others.

### **My sites and participants**

We have now looked at a general overview of the operations of the sites and the people behind the scenes keeping everything under control. As I have suggested throughout, each forum operates slightly differently from others, some offering more than I have shown and others a little less, but all containing the common elements I have discussed. I will now take a look at the specific sites used in my research as well as the participants gained from each one of them.

#### **About.com**

The first fieldwork site I came across and gained participants from was About.com. Unlike the rest of the sites, About.com's depression site was in itself a submenu of a broader site offering forums on interest areas from the arts to zoology. The site itself receives around 22million visits per month (About.com statistics page), with the depression section receiving substantially fewer than this huge figure. Perhaps because of the large range of topic offerings or because of the number of visits per month, About.com had a large amount of advertising per page. At times this advertising could be very distracting and even misguiding from what you went to look

at, but aside from the advertising, the site does offer a lot of information to potential sufferers and has a good active community in which members can participate. Access to the forum was either as a member or guest, and when signing in as either you had to accept a list of rules and conditions before entering the forum area of the site. I gained two participants from About.com, Eirini and Aeneas; two American males who had been only recently diagnosed with depression.

### **Eirini.**

Eirini is one of my first confirmed participants to volunteer to assist me in my study. A 19 year old male, Eirini had been recently diagnosed with major depression and believes he has had problems with depression to some degree for the last 5 years. Residing in New York, Eirini had just finished his freshman year at college. When discussing how he found the forum community Eirini told me:

‘A friend pointed me to crazymeds.org when I was looking at starting meds. The site recommended some sort of group, either in person or on the net. The link was right there, so...::SHRUG::’ (email conversation).

During my research period I had many discussions and conversations with Eirini about the forums and depression. Closer to the end of my research period, his medications were making him feel a lot better and subsequently his use of the forum reduced. All conversations between Eirini and I were via email.

### **Aeneas.**

Aeneas is my other participant from About.com and came along fairly late in my study when I had stopped looking for more participants. Reading over old posts he had come across mine and emailed me to offer any assistance that may help, along with a brief overview of his life and discovery of suffering from depression. Aeneas is the youngest member of my research at 16 and lived in Florida USA. Although he had been to the doctor once in secret about his depression, he was told that it was just

stress and given some medication. Through our subsequent discussions however, it was clear that he displayed many similar characteristics of depression my other participants also suffered, so his doctor's diagnosis appeared questionable. His use of the forum was to find people who felt like him, without the fear of being ostracised as a male with 'feeling' problems:

'I joined this website because I want to feel like I'm not alone in my struggle; being alone is the worst feeling in the world right?...' (Email conversation).

Aeneas and I had several long conversations before he mentioned lots of forthcoming exams and fell from contact. Like Eirini, all conversations I had with Aeneas were via email.

### **Maledepression.com**

The second main site of my research was Maledepression.com. As the name suggests the site was predominantly focused on males and their problems with depression.

Although families and females were welcomed to view and use the site, perhaps for their partners or out of interest, they were requested to keep all discussions and comments in the submenu set aside for them leaving the rest of the site for the men only. The reason for this is that the site is designed as a haven for males with problems they may not feel up to discussing with others or members of the opposite sex. Many other forums are vastly populated with female members and the tone of the conversations is slightly different at times. It can also be harder for males to open up to feelings, so the male only areas of the forums were an attempt to assist this. In talking to other males about one's depression, within a male only area, it made it ok, and did not affect one's preconceptions about masculinity.

The site and forum use only required membership to add comments and was open for all visitors or those who lurk to roam freely in. Compared to all other sites I participated in, Maledepression.com was a very slow moving forum, which at times

had only one or two posts a week in certain sub-menu areas. The forum also saw a lot of first-time posters and depression sufferers who did not wish to discuss things with people offline just yet. This is not surprising because, as stated, preconceptions of the masculine role and the idea that showing feelings is synonymous with showing weakness may exist for some members. Online this feeling of weakness is less real and identifiable as you are not in a physical space. Like About.com, Maledepression.com was an American focused site and during the course of my research was planning its first annual retreat. The retreat was not aimed at any kind of group therapy, rather a holiday to get away from the rigours of everyday life and match some faces to usernames (and usernames to real names). From this site I gained one primary participant, Zorba.

### **Zorba.**

My only participant from Maledepression.com, Zorba is an American who lived in Minnesota. At 36 Zorba suffered from bouts of on/off seasonal depression. Although not 100% sure, he thinks he came across the site much as Eirini did with a link from another mental health site:

‘...maybe thru the NIMH site...my therapist did say to use that site when I mentioned that I lurk at the depression forums site. I can understand a professional having to refer to an “approved” site and not just any old site where the whims of the community can be good or bad’ (email interview).

During the week Zorba worked as a software engineer, something he referred to as being ‘less tangible’. Whilst at work he accessed the depression community and by my observation often played an important role in greeting new members to the community and where appropriate, adding his support and opinions. During the weekend he often took up more rewarding hobbies such as woodworking which he felt had much more therapeutic value and kept away from computers altogether, trying to give his family his attention. During the course of the research Zorba played

an important role in discussing with me the male side of depression and the different ways in which males may use the forum. Aside from initial contacts being made via the PM function, all our conversations were by email.

### **Mixednuts.net**

The next site, Mixed Nuts Depression Forum was one of the higher flowing sites used in the course of my research. In this forum I received many enquiries of interest to participate and eventually ended up securing two permanent participants: Phedra, and Xylona. Mixednuts.net provided its users with many resources about depression, medication information, as well as overviews of famous sufferers of depression and bi-polar disorder throughout history and on the ‘big screen’. Like the other sites, most of the forum areas could be accessed as a visitor and one had to be signed in to add any comments in discussion topics or to access their PM menu. Mixednuts.net, as with my final site (discussed next) were both very high flow sites with many posts made daily in various different menu areas of the site.

### **Phedra.**

Phedra is one of my key participants with whom I had many open discussions over the course of the research period. Phedra, a 28 year old female from the UK, is an active member of the community and has interests and skills around nursing, aromatherapy and herbalism. Long term she hopes to retrain to become a nutritional consultant, something which came up in discussion several times in relation to diet and its affects on mood. Phedra got her brother to find Mixednuts.net for her and has been using it ever since. In our discussions, a mixture of PM and email, Phedra gave many insights into the day to day life of living with depression:

‘... [I] feel like I’m living in a dream half the time and just going through the motions. Sometimes wonder if I’m going to spend the rest of my life in a fog and never wake up’ (email conversation).

### **Xylona.**

Xylona, my other participant from Mixednuts.net is a 29 year old female from Canada. Her discovery of the forum came about from a search when her mood was particularly low:

‘I had been really down for a long time and I wanted someone to talk to so I searched for depression chat rooms. I stumbled upon this one and really liked the people that I chatted with...’ (PM conversation).

I only had several lengthily discussions with Xylona over the term of my research as she appeared to be a fairly busy individual. All of our discussions were via the onsite PM function.

### **Trappedminds.com**

My final ethnographic site, Trapped minds was the busiest and most informative depression site I used. The amount of information and support available was second to none and the security offered to members was also the best offered. Unless one was a member of the community several sections of the forum were invisible from view and were not accessible via search engines like some forums were. In addition to the usual menu/sub-menu information and forum options, the community also offered several other communication options: Support link and Net pals. Support link was a section where members could talk one on one with volunteers about their problems:

‘This system is run by a group of peer volunteers who have agreed to talk with those who have suffered similar problems with mood disorders. If you are in crisis, please exit this site and seek immediate professional support... This system is specifically for those suffering any mood disorders, so we can provide as much understanding as possible for those contacting us.’  
 (Trappedminds.com: Support link page).

During my period of study, Support link had to stop new submissions due to a shortage of volunteers (one must be selected to become a volunteer).

The other additional offering to the community, ‘Net pals’, was a list of names, email addresses and backgrounds of members’ that had volunteered to be open to

chatting to anyone looking for an open ear. Aside from being members, the site was careful to point out that there was no training or professional background to Net pal volunteers; they were simply there to offer closer private conversations and discussions with those in similar circumstances.

Trapped minds had the largest number of members of all my sites with 9,838 members in early November, and the greatest number of forum topic areas or sub-groups. This combined with Support link and an extensive menu of information made it the most functional of depression communities I studied. As a result, I gained three important participants from the site: Terentia, Alethea and Dione.

### **Terentia.**

Terentia is one of the site moderators, who through discussions with the site administrator had agreed to participate in helping me understand the forum and its operation. As well as being a forum moderator, 19 year old Terentia is also the head of Support Link. Outside the community, she was a college student living in New York. My discussions with her were all by email.

### **Dione.**

Dione is a 32 year old mum who initially belonged to another site which closed down. Unlike other participants who selected the forum from a search, or were recommended by a professional, Dione had a slightly different story:

‘I was a member of a similar site where I became friendly with someone my age with similar experiences. The site closed soon after and Sonya [name changed] joined TM; then she invited me and I’ve been a regular user since’ (PM discussion).

Dione and I corresponded via onsite PM function for the course of the research period.

### **Alethea.**

Alethea is my final research participant from trappedminds.com and has been a great help throughout my fieldwork in discussing the forum and depression. Alethea, a regular user of the forum, found the site like others through a search engine when:

‘...bored, lonely, stressed and upset’ (PM conversation).

Also from the UK, Alethea is a college student studying animal management. Like Dione, all of our discussions and conversations were on the PM function.

### **Ophelia.**

My final main participant Ophelia initially contacted me by email after reading my request for participants. Although not a member of any of the sites used during the research, she did belong to another depression site, Bipolaraware.com, where she is a fairly active individual. Over the course of the research Ophelia provided me with many rich conversations about being bi-polar, depressed and using the forums. At 38 years old and from the UK, Ophelia had suffered depression for many years, barely remembering what it was like to not suffer from it. She had also recently been diagnosed as bi-polar. Often I was given insights into her world of depression in our correspondence:

‘My world [r]evolves around a dark and sad place wider than the universe and in it each day I get lost’ (email conversation).

All of our conversations were via email.

### **Summary**

What we have looked at in this chapter is an overview of depression communities, their layout and methods of functioning. Following this I took a closer look at each community in my research and the participants gained from them. In doing this we have seen how some came to use the forums and why. I have also given additional information to show the differing geographical areas my participants come from and

what they do outside their forums. This assists in humanising them, something which is both important in my aims of discussing depression and also as showing the human face of these online participants. Although members of the communities come from different areas around the world, mine have come from America and the United Kingdom, apart from one who is from Canada. Ages range from 16-38, which shows the broad range of people online communities deal with. Now we have examined the layout and background of the participants, the next chapter will explore deeper, the online forums and their reason for use amongst my participants.

## Chapter Four

### Online Forums for Depression



(Severini, in Clay, 1978:156)

## **Online Forums for Depression**

In this chapter I am going to look at my participants' experiences on the forums and see how they compare with the main aims of the forums themselves. To do this we will look at several key areas of participant experiences on the forums; more specifically how they define the forum as a group, and their perception of culture within the forum. I will look at the positive and negative aspects of the forums, as well as what the forum has to offer in real life and how people's lives would be different without it. It is also necessary to explore friendships made on the forums and finally, how long my participants spend on these forums. In doing this we will be able to see how the online networks become to many an integral means of dealing with their depression and social encounters in general.

### **Why do people use the forums?**

Depression forums are all very similar in what they aim to offer their members - a safe haven for peer-to-peer support, which allows members to share their experiences, stories and opinions with other sufferers. Some forums, as explained in the introduction, offer extensive additional information and options like Trapped Minds Support Link, but all are similar in that they are predominantly discussion forums for depressed individuals. This general aim of the forums was reflected in the conversations I had with my participants regarding their reasons for using the forums and what they feel they get out of them overall. Phedra almost mirrored the aims of the forums in her explanation of his use of the forums and also explained one of the benefits of using the forum over conventional support options:

‘For advice from other depression sufferers, also to give advice to others and for support and understanding and to not feel so alone....people can't see you and they cannot judge by appearances...you can be a lot more frank than you would possibly dare to be face to face.’ (Email discussion)

As well as Phedra's explanation that you can be a lot more open and honest with people as you do not have the face values and judgements associated with the physical world, Aeneas also expressed a similar attitude towards the positive uses of the forums:

'...it lets people express their condition to one another without society ostracizing them. It's also very helpful because when you're at your lowest point it's always nice to know that you can talk to someone who knows exactly what you're going through' (PM conversation).

Because of the perceived anonymity of the internet, the forums offered the participants a secure way of being able to talk about their depression and be listened to without the fear of being ostracised for it, as well as sharing with a community that can understand where they are coming from. Predominantly, as already suggested, the forums are a place for others suffering depression to get together and talk without fear, as the following quote from Xylona displays:

'I use it [the forum] to chat with others "like" me. I use it to answer questions that I might have, for self affirmation, for companionship and a sense of belonging, to help others or at least encourage/support others and I use it to pass the time when I cannot sleep' (PM conversation).

Dione also discussed her similar uses of the forums:

'I mainly use the forum for support...looking for others with similar experiences. I also like to give support and enjoy chatting to other members' (PM conversation).

Zorba, did not usually post about his own problems for opinions or help, but often used the forum to support others, using his own experiences and knowledge to provide examples:

'It makes me feel better trying to help others...we should help each other out. But men have their stigmas about such things, maybe an example will help someone loosen up and get the help they need' (email conversation).

Zorba also viewed the forums, for some, as a beginning point for those with depression:

'I see the forums as an entry way for people to ask for help. Once one gets over the stigma of having an illness or having to see a psychiatrist or being on a med, they can get some help' (email conversation).

Because of the stigma involved in male depression, Zorba saw forums as an entry point in which members of the community would be able to support potential new members in a way to relieve the pressure of admitting one has a problem. Although simply being on the forum may suggest they are doing just that, the forum is still in ways a safe anonymous way of admitting ones problems, but with the ability to switch off if reactions received are undesirable.

As both a long term member and moderator, Terentia had an overall view which covered both the forum aims and the general view of many of my participants:

'After finding a place like TM, people learn about themselves FROM people who are like themselves. It provides for a very different experience than just going to therapy or even group therapy. It's an open community which tries hard to support each other, while simultaneously giving/receiving feedback' (email discussion).

From Terentia's statement we can see that, like others she views the site as a place of communication for giving and receiving help. Additionally, it is somewhere people can learn about what they are going through by reading other experiences and conversations. This learning can be both beneficial, but also detrimental (as I will discuss shortly). What this does show, is one of the key features of offline support groups - group cohesion, giving a sense of belonging and acceptance (Nichols & Jenkinson, 1991:16).

### **Friendships and social networks**

What became a common trait in many conversations I had with participants was the use of the forum not just for advice and support, but also the use of the forum as a tool for finding new social networks and friends. Some participants, like Zorba, solely used the forums to support and help others, but not form online friendships. This is

understandable, as it depends on how personal an individual feels the internet is, or should be. Many of my participants saw it as an extension to the normal world, whilst it also can be seen as a fragmented area of society, which is not as real as what we can experience with our full array of senses. When discussing friendships with my participants they were generally split into three categories; those like Zorba who preferred to keep friendships more offline, others who had already built up close meaningful online social networks and those who may not yet have, but could foresee the possibility of it happening in the right circumstances within depression forums.

Beginning with those who did not have a large online social network was Eirini, who still acknowledged that it could be an attractive option for many because:

‘I think that this comes a lot easier for some people than others. I don’t make friends well in large groups, so I don’t really have this too much. I think when it comes down to it, I need either a face, or else a particularly friendly personality to stick out from everyone else. Even there, because of distance etc, I don’t think my friendships with people online are anywhere near real life friendships’ (email conversation)

Xylona acknowledged that although what attracted her to the forums was the anonymity, she too could see herself making friends in the future:

‘I have met a couple of people and converse with some more than others but I wouldn’t say they are friends yet. With time I am sure that I will make friends but it is difficult when you can’t look someone in the eye...even though that is what attracted me to the online chat in the first place’ (PM conversation).

Some of my other participants had formed several friendships online and had even extended these relationships into the offline world, or at least had plans to, for example Alethea:

‘I have made some really good friends on TM and they mean the world to me, hopefully I will be meeting Jessie [name changed] when she comes to the UK (from NZ) and I can’t wait!’ (PM conversation)

Dione and Ophelia both had many people they considered true friends online and, on occasion extended this networking into the offline world:

'I've made lots of friends at TM and communicate with several via MSM or email. There are some good people and I feel honoured to know them....I have a much better social life online than offline and have actually met 5 internet friends. I've even been to a wedding lol. I've lost a lot of real life friends since I've been unwell...they jus don't know how to take me...My best online friends have stayed in touch over the last 4 years' (Dione, PM conversation).

Ophelia, like Dione took her membership of one of her forums to the next level when they organised a party amongst people in a localised area:

'Went to a party off the site last night (BP forum) 8 people with BP, hilarious...had the best night in 3 years, there's something wonderful about being round people who are as loopy as you are' (email conversation).

Even at different stages of friendships, most of my participants showed that although without face to face contact, many still made or were in the process of making meaningful friendships. Because of their shared suffering of depression the forums offered a place for them to meet people who were likely to be more understanding of what they were going through and this understanding led to friendships. Much like one's close social networks through work, or hobbies, some of my participants were linked in their friendships through depression. As the internet was an important site of their social networking, for many it only becomes natural to introduce friendships into this. In wider society, those with internet access use email to keep in contact with friends and associates who are out of easy physical reach (and even those within it).

What differs here is that some forum users actually also have their introductions online.

### **Life without the forum?**

Once I had discussed with participants what they felt they got out of the forums and any friendships they had made through them, we also talked about whether their life would be different without the forums at all. Of the four I discussed this with, Phedra, Dione and Alethea all concluded that they would be affected if their forum were to be closed down:

'Without the forum...hum...well...I feel incredibly lonely and isolated, I start getting really depressed and have no one to talk to...erm...well...yea, life would be hell' (Alethea, PM conversation).

'...yes my life would be different without the forum. Everyday when I'm home I check the site for new posts or replies. TM provides me with a focus from which I interact with lots of different people. However, if TM wasn't there I'd find another mental health site...' (Dione, PM conversation).

'...I think the forum has helped me a lot, I have felt a lot more understood and much less alone thru being able to connect with others who understand. I was without the computer from last night to this afternoon and I really did miss the forum and felt that I was letting people down by not responding to their posts. I think it has become a little unhealthy, although it helps me try and help others, I don't want to become more absorbed in depression and suffering at the expense of getting better...' (Phedra, Email conversation).

Zorba personally didn't feel it would make a huge difference, but acknowledged that depending on ones situation, the existence of a forum was important:

'Would my life be different without the forum? No not really. I do like helping others, but I can do some of that person to person vs. electronically. If I were depressed and fighting one of the common triggers for the first time (e.g. divorce) than I probably would be in NEED of something like an online forum, but I'm too old now...I know how I feel and I don't believe that talking thru something to get a stranger's, but fellow sufferers opinion would benefit me much. (Email conversation).

From the above examples we can see that members who feel the need to use the forums, and have social networks built up around them, feel they would be affected at one level or another if the forums no longer existed. Alethea and Dione both view the forums as integral to their day to day life and suggest that it would make a marked difference to them. Phedra also shows a strong link to the forum, but in doing so also reveals some negative aspects of it.

### **Disadvantages of the forums**

Although my participants saw many advantages and benefits for the use of the forums, they also discussed disadvantages or negative aspects associated with using

them. Given the participants' continued use of the forums, these negative aspects were generally outweighed by the advantages, but they did exist none the less. One negative aspect that may occur online for depression sufferers is a sense of unreality. By this I mean that because the internet is located in a virtual and fluid sphere, the interactions within it are not always solid as they are in more traditional interactions based on physical meetings. Other disadvantages online involve things such as continued social isolation and even disadvantages with public forums talking about depression and its related habits. Beginning with the latter, Dione discussed how the forums have the potential to be damaging to persons reading them:

‘The disadvantages...is that most of the forums are accessible...even to young teens. I first cut about 4 years ago after I’d interacted with cutters and read their stories. I’m not saying I copied...more that I learnt how good it could make me feel. Young kids should be getting out into the world...not sitting at home talking to depressed ppl [people]. You get ppl who are suicidal also...that can bring your mood right down’ (pm conversation).

What Dione shows in her example is that as well as offering a place for people to discuss their problems and depression with others who might understand it can also be the same place which could trigger or reinforce this depression. Although one is on the forum trying to get help and help others, it can be hard to keep a positive mind frame when another is talking about how bad life is- a feeling that you as a member may be trying to overcome yourself. In her example of the cutting<sup>16</sup>, it again comes from the use of the forum discussions. Whilst trying to confront their problems, ‘cutters’ may talk through with others why they cut themselves and how the action of cutting leads to relief and ultimately makes them feel better. For someone who has never tried it, but is depressed, it may turn into another option for relief.

Linked to Dione saying young people shouldn’t be hanging around on depression forums are Phedra’s thoughts on the disadvantages of the forums when she talks about

---

<sup>16</sup> Cutting is the literal action of cutting oneself as a form of relief or escape from pain.

the romantic notion of depression she once held when a little younger. As well as this she also saw that the forums could, depending on the person reinforce their feelings:

‘...I do believe that people would intentionally become absorbed in forums to reinforce their depression. I have noticed that some people seem to have a romantic notion of depression and some actually appear to enjoy in a sense suffering and depression, I don’t judge them for this because they are either very lonely or young...maybe I had a little bit of a romantic and poetic notion of depression in my younger days, when it was almost considered cool to have mental health problems, teenage angst. I think my depressions were milder than and I do notice that people can sometimes enjoy being consumed within this darkness, as time wore on and my depression worsened, I quickly woke up to the idea that there was nothing romantic or poetic about depression or suicide in any sense.... Regarding whether I think it is a better form of social interaction than the outside world, NO I don’t, but I have no other choice as I have become agoraphobic since this last major depressive episode...spending so much time on a forum I don’t think is conducive to recovery from depression...I feel there is a danger of becoming so absorbed within the depression and peoples suffering, that it could possibly reinforce the depression’ (email conversation).

In this quote Phedra shows that being depressed, whether it is a romantic notion or a more serious diagnosis, can lead to an absorption in the forum, possibly a wilful wallowing in depression. Whilst recognising that if this happens it is unhealthy, she also states that in some cases, like her own, the development of a phobia because of the depression and anxiety can in ways trap them into the forum as there are no other options for the individual to take, for fear of confrontational or terrifying social experiences.

Alethea’s opinions regarding the disadvantages of depression forums and the internet as a whole also echoed the thoughts of Phedra when she stated;

‘well, I guess the internet as a whole can be disadvantage to depressed people or anyone, yes, people can start feeling more sorry for themselves or start a self diagnosing kind of thing...’ (PM conversation).

Ophelia saw the disadvantages of the internet forums in being that although they are real, in a sense they still portray something less than solid. The whole environment of

the internet is fluid and not bound in place or shape. She saw this surreal nature as being problematic when trying to understand one's feelings:

'The forum is wonderful and I feel I found home, but when you are through the dark and on the bottom verge of a hill, you need to break away to put something into reality. The internet can have a non reality substance that creates yet another universe within the mind. Then you are fighting 3 levels of acknowledgement and thought processes. Mixed nightmares and disassociation are encouraged by the net. If you are psychotic and don [adopt] the web it is inevitable really' (email conversation).

Ophelia's own experience showed how these online disadvantages may also spread into the real world for depression sufferers, after her party she attended caused ripples back online:

'I've had a terrible time after the party for BP people. I was under the assumption that people who suffer as I have would never make waves and never cause problems for another person...the BP peeps are holding an even bigger meeting. Which I wonder is safe at all. Too many troubled souls, in one place, to many triggers' (email conversation).

Although the 'ripples' caused online after the social gathering were not discussed further, one can assume normal rumour or judgements were made at the party as they are at all social gatherings (and online!). What makes it ironically unfortunate for Ophelia as a bipolar sufferer is that at the party a week previous, she had expressed having the best time in several years.

These disadvantages could make the forums sound like a negative and unsafe environment for the participants. What needs to be remembered is that they are all depression sufferers. In many cases the forums are the only functional social area of their lives where they can open up and share and support others. While this also can lead to almost wallowing in one's depression, forum users still find it an important place to help each other and form social networks. When depressed, it can be very easy to look at the negatives and not the positives. Whilst acknowledging these

negative aspects, the participants also feel they get adequate positive support to warrant being there.

### **Online/offline relationship**

This leads us to an investigation of the role online forums play in relation to offline or real life aid. As in several other discussions I had with participants, their opinions on the online roles of the forums compared to offline help varied. Zorba, as aforementioned, saw the roles of the forums as being an entry point for those with depression to ask for help and to seek support for taking it to the next level of gaining professional help. He strongly believed that the forums are just for this and not for more serious issues surrounding depression. Whilst he viewed the initial stages of depression as being within the grasps of the forums, he saw a definitive cut-off point with more serious cases:

‘But then we have the chronic and more serious versions of the illness. I don’t see “community support” as playing a major factor long term for them...maybe enough to get them to see a doc or start on meds. I hope some of those that have longer term depression don’t just ask for help when we need it, but offer to help others when they need it. Unfortunately, most of those who are depressed don’t feel like they could would offer help and support when they are down (“who am I to talk”) and when they aren’t down, they should be enjoying life’ (email conversation).

Eirini also agreed that forums are a good start to facing up to depression, and also assessing if one needs to seek further help, or whether the forums alone can cater for their needs:

‘I think that there might be some people who stumble onto the site who clearly need more help in real life.  
One of the weird things about most mental illnesses is that even when people know SOMETHING is wrong, they’ll ponder “how wrong” and such; pretty much delaying help for quite a while. Someone else coming out and saying it “you need to see someone for this” can be the push people need’ (email conversation)

Ophelia had a slightly different attitude to the forums role compared to offline help. In her area it can take a long time to get an appointment to see someone and she also

expresses a feeling that although medically therapists help, there is still a lack of true understanding what their patients feel:

‘Unless your therapist has admitted to you they have BP (or other mental illnesses) then how can they help you totally, they are brilliant for cognitive thinking relaxation and someone who will listen (not just anyone, this is someone from the “norms” or “non sufferers” who have been negative towards behaviour and judged on actions and not understood the internal confusion you are so desperate to share all your life)

But someone who can explain what it is like to inhale the stars and touch the moon, feel the sunrise for you alone and then comedown to set to say hello. Only then do you know that you are with a soul mate, only then do you find that you are not a reject in the gene pool and only then do you realise, its not life telling you, that you don’t belong here and you should be dead. AND only then do you really start to get better’ (email conversation).

What Ophelia explains in her poetic way is that although offline help is good in what it does, there is still an aspect of the illness that is not treated in conventional treatments. The forums offer ways for like minded individuals to express feelings and emotions and show each other that they are not alone, they are not individuals suffering from this ‘disease’ but that they are part of a larger group, who when online are not alone in their experiences. Whilst most participants had been to therapists and taken medication they still joined forums as an additional means of dealing with depression. When new potential members joined describing their problems and feelings, one of the first things many people would say is whether they have been to a doctor about it and if not, recommended them to go. There is a clear understanding on the forums that they are not an exhaustive diagnosis and treatment area. What they offer is the social aspect to coping with an illness, which in many cases requires medical attention. The communities offer their members a place to reduce the social isolation many feel when suffering depression; ‘Isolation...has an insidious, destructive effect, almost like a veil slowly cutting off the rest of the community. Many of the people who actually need to join a helping group will have been in a state

of retreat from the social world...’ (Nichols & Jenkinson, 1991:17). The forums offer a way out of this retreat, whilst still being safe.

### **Are they real communities?**

This raised another conversation topic I had with my participants. The discussions we had were based loosely around their opinions as to whether their chosen forum was an actual community or just a gathering for depressed persons. Rheingold describes virtual communities as ‘...a group of people who may or may not meet one another face to face, and who exchange words and ideas through the mediation of computer bulletin boards and networks’ (1998:116). Unanimously, all participants do see, in one way or another, the depression forums they are members of as being communities. Some like Zorba saw their community as a dying one:

‘Is maledepression.com a community? maybe...if so it’s a dying one. Not much traffic is there? I would say this is natural as it is not exactly “manly” to talk about depression...’ (Email discussion).

Although I would contest Zorba’s opinion that maledepression.com is a dying site, it is most definitely the least active and smallest community in my study. As Zorba expresses, this is perhaps not surprising as it is predominately for males, who often do not discuss feelings so readily.

Dione acknowledged that her forum was also a community, but that it was not unique amongst depression communities:

‘...Trapped Minds is not unique in its content as there are lots of mental health communities across the internet...I have been a member of around 4 such at a given time which are all very similar; but I chose to participate most in one main group at a given time’ (PM conversation)

Eirini expressed his opinion that it was some form of community because the people on the forums all gathered because of a universal understanding about what others in the same situations were going through:

'...it is a community to some extent. And from what I've seen, very much so for the people who need it to be... There's something important about talking to people FIRST HAND about a situation you're in: people from the other perspectives might not understand you quite, but people who have been there simply do' (email conversation).

This idea of being in a community for the common understandings reflected across most participants, particularly Ophelia who found membership in her community very important:

'Very much, its like we imagine this little community, as BP is a very hard illness that separates you from reality (being society) on there we all know each other with out explanation. It is a disease that fingerprints in everyone alike. When I go in the forum I am visiting home' (email conversation).

Alethea reflects Ophelia's sense of home with her vision of the community as place where people close to you (in terms of experience as opposed to physically) come to meet up and pass the time together:

'I view TM as one big universal family. A close nit community that is growing all the time, a chance to meet new people and associate with those you already know...' (PM conversation).

Xylona summed it all up by stating that it is a community where people share a commonality and even on good days join to socialise with those in one's community:

'Yes I consider the forum a community. We all have something in common, we support each other through our bad days (and good days), we share jokes and stories...everything that you would do with your friends we do' (PM conversation).

What my participants express as a community is a gathering point for members to socialise, help and just be. Like the bar in the TV series 'Cheers', the forums offer a haven 'where everyone knows your name' (or pseudo name anyway). The forums have long lists of regular members as well as new members of the community who come to view and join. Evans, in discussing the social impacts of internet relationships states that internet communities are truly personal communities because: '...these communities are not constrained by geography and do not form as a result of

chance encounter, they are fully chosen by their members' (2004:39) The communities formed online like those of my participants, are formed out of choice and desire.

### **Culture?**

After looking at the notion of the forums being acknowledged as communities, I discussed with several participants whether they placed any particular notion of culture upon the forum. I was interested to see if people felt that an online community, functioning transnationally would have any feeling of culture. When discussing the notion of culture with participants I looked at both simple ethnicity based and also more in depth notions of values, actions, beliefs and actions perhaps unique to their community. In the simplistic sense of culture, Phedra considered her community to be American.

'...I associate it with American culture, even though there are people from all over, I think its because most users appear to be from the US and the Administrator is American'(PM conversation).

Phedra's example shows how she associated American culture to the forum because of the majority of users being American and the administrator being American. This was contrary to her recognition of herself as English. Xylona had a different view on the culture of online forums:

'When I talk to the other members I see them as 'Canadian'. In other words I relate each person to people that are familiar to me. I have no idea what the other members look like, what nationality they are, what country they live in, how old they are...unless they have disclosed the information. Here for me this community is in Ontario Canada and hence bears the same culture as me (in my mind that is)' (PM conversation).

Xylona's example shows how she acculturates the community into her own culture. She is sitting in front of her computer in Ontario Canada and that is the point at which she corresponds with other members of the community- in Ontario Canada. They become Canadian because it is where she is and is her way of moulding the

community into her own life. Any actions they take, or statements made are evaluated from a Canadian perspective and judged that way accordingly to her norms as a Canadian.

Eirini again took a slightly different stance on the notion of culture online. In his mind, the internet was a big melting pot for the traditional notions of culture, in which something a little different is being produced:

‘I think that any internet forum is unique in that it tends to unite at least a few different cultures. I don’t know if I necessarily think of the net as its own culture, but I think it has groupings of culture that are arranged very differently than real life “groups” like...instead of being limited by geographic closeness, were instead limited by language. There are still limits, but there just...different’ (email conversation).

Eirini’s view shows the internet forums as a blend of culture arranged by the boundaries of language. Although other nationalities may join the forum, they would enter the community through the limits of what language can be used.

Terentia saw the forums as predominantly traditional English and American, and thought that they shifted through periods of each:

‘I think TM is a good mixture of a English (UK) and American culture, because that’s what mainly makes up the boards...there are months where more of the UK topics and slang get thrown on the boards and then for another few months American culture gets discussed in the off topic folders. I must admit that I get to learn about much of UK culture; had it not been for this place I really wouldn’t have known much about the UK’ (email discussion)

Terentia’s statement shows that the notions of culture do not necessarily change on the forum, but the position of the forum shifts between the two main cultures at any given time. What it does create is a place of cultural learning, which over time could result in some form of fusion between the two.

Zorba dispelled the traditional notion of culture and asserted that the internet offers a new subject based form of culture instead:

'I don't read too much culture into any forum...If anything, the culture of fighting mental illness is the culture and that is the important part (as goes for other forums, car culture, audio, cycling etc etc)' (email conversation).

This view transfers the notion of culture to a more contemporary idea of what it is.

Different internet groups develop their own culture based accordingly to the topics/subjects they are centred on; depression, the cars, the music or whatever the construction of the community is. It allows people of all cultural backgrounds to join (using a set language usually) and the topic in question becomes the culture of that forum. Beyond the boundaries of the forum, the members are still independent and part of what ever culture they identify with, the forum based culture is limited to the particular website it originates from. This definition could simply be seen as an uncultured community, but it can host its own specialised language and behavioural practices which make it unique from others.

When looking at the idea of the forums being a culture within themselves from an anthropological perspective I am hesitant to believe this to be the case. Whilst they are certainly independent communities with their own unique set of practices and understandings, I don't believe they are a culture. People may speak of the culture of depression, or mental illness, but it is not culture in the correct sense of the word, rather an appropriated use of the term. The internet itself could be considered as a growing form of culture, or in ways as Eirini put it, a meld of cultures. Because of the changing language, subject and ways of communicating, the internet is forming something new. However, all people operating on the internet still retain their own notions of knowledge, belief, art, morals, law, and custom. Perhaps the question is not is the internet a new form of culture, but is the internet a cultureless area being adopted by many around the world.

### **Time spent online**

The last main topic this leads to is the length of time my participants spend on the forums. For my participants this tended to vary considerably, from those who visit several times a day to those who visit less often. It also varied depending on their degree of depression and outside demands and responsibilities. Phedra and Dione both accessed the net daily to communicate with friends and read new topics on the forum:

‘I only use this one [depression forum], and I guess I spend about 4 hours daily on it, on and off and messaging one of the girls...’ (Phedra, PM conversation).

‘I prob spend 2-3 hours on the site and on messenger a day also...but it’s divided up into lots of short bursts through the day’ (Dione, PM conversation).

Like the two above, Alethea also spends a lot of time online. Her online routine was centred around the rest of the day’s schedule of work and college:

‘I get up in the morning and turn my computer on so I can listen to music and chat to a couple of friends who live on the other side of the world. I work/go to college/I come home/ I go on my computer. I do do other stuff too but generally my computer is on for a seriously huge amount of hours...between 6pm and 1am generally...’ (Alethea, PM conversation).

Terentia also varied her time online based on her study demands and the time of year. As a moderator and head of support link, her time online also varied accordingly to the duties and demands on the forum itself, which changed day to day, week to week:

I usually spend at least 2 hours a day on the forums when I am consistently here. During the school term I will spend considerably less time, and may not be on everyday. So I’d say somewhere between 10-20 hours a week. It really does vary because hours are flexible and dependant on factors like what needs to be dealt with on the forums...’ (Terentia, email conversation).

Because of his job, Zorba usually accessed the forum during the week and liked to spend the weekend’s computer free and focus on his family:

‘...try to [access] once a day, but weekends I tend to stay away from computers’ (Email conversation).

As Zorba mainly uses the forums to help others, or set an example, his once daily sessions during the working week allowed him to review any new postings. As the male forum was fairly slow moving, this meant that some days there was nothing new at all.

Access was also dependant on how participants felt emotionally and their social life online. Aneas accessed the forums based on how depressed he felt:

‘Sometimes once a week, sometimes everyday. I’ve been there everyday for the past week or so’ (email conversation).

Eirini, who moved home during his period of participation, decreased his use of the forum as other social support became evident:

‘I moved from a dorm back into my house, so I don’t access the forums as often as I used to (probably everyday). I go maybe 2 or three times a week since I’ve been home’ (email conversation).

What my participants show here is the broad spectrum of users on the forum. When browsing the forums daily it becomes obvious who is on consistently and fully participates in the community and who is on less often. The variation of the time spent on the forums can also be, but is not always indicative of either the level of depression or isolation one feels, or participants desire to ease others suffering. As people built their social networks and friendships on the forums, this also leads to longer online use.

## **Summary**

What we have looked at in this chapter is the general functional makeup of my participants’ experiences, thoughts and reasons for use of their chosen online depression forums. When exploring why they use the forums we can see a general pattern of either seeking or offering help within the communities; often both. For many this introduction into new social networks leads to friendships and occasionally even offline meetings. For many, because these friendships are built around common

grounds i.e. depression, they become an important part of the individuals lives and the potential loss of the forums would markedly affect their day to day living. As with many areas of life, there are generally negative sides also. Through my participant discussions we have learnt that as well as helping individuals with their depression, the forums can also put them in the cycle of continued depression by potentially reinforcing ones negative feelings rather than helping them move along. The forums also, through content, introduce members to new unhealthy methods of emotional release (for example cutting) as people discuss their addictions as a way of trying to get over depression. These negative aspects are overall viewed as of less importance in comparison to the positive aspects they offer, and members feel the forums offer a community or even family in which they can lean on in times of need. This sense of community is exactly what the forum administrators generally attempt to achieve. The forums never pose as being a total solution to those suffering depression, rather a place where people can feel comfortable in discussing their problems and building networks with likeminded individuals. In this respect, the forums work well because they provide something important that other forms of treatment don't provide – something to do with mitigating that sense of being alone that seems to be one of the hardest things about depression.

## Chapter Five

### Language and the Internet



(Berenger, in Popper, 1993:174)

## **Language and the Internet**

In this chapter I discuss language and how it is affected by the internet. The reason I will examine language and the internet is both to familiarise the reader with online language use and also to show how depression communities, as well as other online communities function without the senses of sight and audio as they would in offline communities. This topic of language and the internet was unanticipated in my initial exploration of the research, but during the course of it became obvious in importance. In all means of human communication, expression of emotion can be an important factor. This becomes even more so the case when one is literally dealing with topics which are based upon ones emotions, as in the case of my participants, and depression forums. Because of this it is necessary for us to explore the use of language on the internet further. From an academic perspective, it is also important to look at how language is changing as it adapts to a new medium.

Whilst the internet is primarily a text based forum of communication, many people use it as if it was a spoken based forum. Because of this, we need to investigate and unravel it further. To do this we will examine several different areas of discussion. First I will analyse interactional and transactional forms of language, followed by a comparison of spoken and written word. It is then necessary to look at technology, where the internet has evolved from, and how forms of communication have changed. Following this, I will discuss internet linguistics, and the various forms it is found in, i.e. email, chat and the forums. In this discussion I will explore how the roles of interactional, transactional, spoken and written language have changed in order to adapt to the online environment. Where possible, I have used forum examples from

depression communities, but have also used non-related forum examples which show clearly the point being made.

### **Forms of Speech**

When communicating with others, by one means or another, we use either transactional or interactional language. ‘Transactional language use involves one person speaking or writing to a person or persons who are receiving the language’ (Brugman, 1995:17). Transactional language is one-way and does not involve interplay between the producer of the language and the receiver. A typical example of transactional language would be either reading or watching the news. In these situations you are being given or fed the information, but have no immediate interaction with the person feeding it to you. Interactional language on the other hand does involve this play between persons and is a form of language behaviour used by two or more people in ongoing interactive situations. A typical example of this is a conversation you may have with a friend whom you are visiting. As well as face to face interactions, Brugman notes there are other kinds of interactional exchanges: ‘...for example, a telephone conversation or a conversation over a computer network where the speaker is actually typing onto a screen and the addressee is reading it as it is typed’ (1995:17).

Transactional language, like interactional language, can also occur both face to face and in written form. What makes transactional language different is that the addressee is never the speaker or writer of the communication and the communication is one-way. Transactional texts can have problems because of this, and if the given audience does not have the insider knowledge expected of them, communications can fail. One verbal example of this could be given with a lecturer giving a speech on the

week's chosen text. Because it was in the previous week's readings, it can be assumed the audience - the students know the background. However, if there was a misunderstanding of the week's readings, or the students simply did not do the readings, the main audience will be lost and transactional language in a sense will fail (if the lecturer continues the speech unchanged). The reality of my example however is that a lecture would never be totally transactional as interaction in one way or another plays a part in this forum of communication. In the above situation, either a student may inform the lecturer that it was not in the readings, or the lecturer will read the student's body language, their verbally silent form of communication which may say, 'what are you on about?'. Although not spoken or written language, body language can make the communication switch to interactional simply with puzzled or confused faces.

Another form of transactional language Brugman discusses is when the author knows their addressee, for example writing a letter to a friend (1995:19). Because the recipient of the letter is known on a personal level to the author, they have potentially some influence over what the letter contains and how it is written. This means the author can cover a wide range of subjects without evaluating the reaction of the receiver.

As well as language having different types of communication, be it the one-sided transactional, or the two way interactional, there are also obviously differences between written and spoken language. Whilst both written and spoken communications are used to communicate, traditionally they have different roles to play linguistically, as well as distinguishing features. Writing on the whole is objective and planned, while speech is interpersonal and generally spontaneous. Writing is also in the traditional sense highly structured and syntactically complex.

When writing, punctuation and grammar are used with care and content can be more in-depth. Speech is typically more informal and loosely structured with syntactically simple content.

Both transactional and interactional languages are fairly fluid in their boundaries and can on occasion slip into each other. Speech can of course be used formally with a complex syntax, but on many occasions this may be a direct translation from its written original as in an official speech. Writing also, particularly as I will show shortly, can be informal and even spontaneous, but in the general sense, it is still structured and planned.

Another obvious difference between written and spoken language is in dialect. Written language is often more universal in its communication, whereas different cultural groups verbally sound their words differently. Brugman gives a good example of this with New Zealand's 'r' loss (1995:36). Unless from more southern areas of New Zealand, many Kiwis often loose the 'r' in their pronunciation of words such as after and water, rather verbally ending in an 'a' rather than an 'r'. While this sounds different from say someone from America pronouncing it, in written form they are identical. These verbal differences can also be seen as written word in the form of orthographic differences from country to country. In an orthographic sense, different countries are clearly distinguished by spelling differences, for example color and colour being an English/American comparison (Crystal, 2001:8). Usually however, these differences do not detract from the general understanding of the material.

The relationship between the two, whilst being somewhat fluid, also raises problematic situations when one tries to convert one into the other, for example speech into written word. When anthropologists go out into the field, they typically write about what the other does, what their actions, songs and spoken words mean.

When we do this, we are translating spoken word into written word and the possibility of loss of some content or meaning can potentially occur. This is even more so when we deal with cross cultural studies and attempt to apply our own framework of understanding upon a totally different culture. Writing, unless planned well can very easily lose the emotional meaning or tone that was evident in spoken form. Whilst media like poetry can act as a bridge between them, it is often not as easy to understand as the original spoken meaning. This is something that could initially be seen as a problem with the internet and communication shifting over. Before we discuss this further, we will take examine how technology has shifted communication from face-to-face, to traditional written material, to what we have now in the internet age.

### **The Internet's family tree**

For as long as records show, people have developed methods of communicating over long distances. The use of fire as a signal of transmitting information is mentioned in many early written texts. One example of this is in 525-456 BCE when Greek playwright Aeschylus wrote about fire signals used to indicate the capture of Troy; ‘ I wait; to read the meaning of that beacon light, a blaze of fire to carry out of Troy the rumour and outcry of its capture (Aeschylus, cited in Meadow, 2002:78). Native Americans also successfully used smoke to transmit varying messages over long distances. ‘By varying the number of columns of smoke different meanings are conveyed by the messages’ (Custer, cited in Meadow, 2002:81).Other early methods involved the use of animals, for example pigeons and eagles to carry messages fast over long distances, or drums and horns, carrying a audio message over shorter distances. Later in colonial America we saw the use of the pony express- a man/horse means of delivering letters and messages across the frontier. From a linguistic view,

these signals would be seen as transactional as the messages are from sender to recipient without interaction.

In technological terms, the internet's grandfather can be seen as the electrical telegraph. In many ways the telegraph, successfully developed (but not created) by Morse has many similarities with today's internet communication, in which we substitute the receiver/translator for the computer. Initially patented in 1837, with its first long distance transmission in 1844 (Baron, 2001:217), the telegraph revolutionised communications. Using the telegraph, messages could be sent over vast distances, and new networks of business relations could begin to prosper. For the common person however, the telegraph never had a huge impact simply because of the cost to set up a telegraph line, and skill required to use the machine with the telegraph language, Morse code- an alphabet made of a combination of dots and dashes, not dissimilar to the smoke signals used by the American Indians. Again the telegraph linguistically was transactional, from one receiver to another and very much still a form of written language rather than spoken word as it was planned and punctuated. However, unlike traditional written media, it was not always as complex.

The next step on the communications evolutionary wagon was the telephone. Arguably the biggest influence on communications ever, the telephone was initially viewed by some as being '...very interesting scientifically[*but*], it has no commercial value at present, for they can do more business over a line by methods already in use [*the telegraph*] than by that system' (Elisha Gray, 1875 sited in Baron, 2001:220). Invented by Alexander Graham Bell, the telephone, over the next century after Elisha Gray's comments, revolutionised communication, and to this day, with the advent of cell phones it has made daily living difficult for some lacking or without access to these technologies. Telephones opened up social opportunities not before so readily

seen. Families could keep in contact over long distances and after 1956, transatlantic communication became available by phone rather than just telegraph (Meadow: 141). Local social events could be organised with greater ease. Language over the phone, whilst obviously being verbal, can be both transactional and interactional depending on the situation. Typically however, in everyday conversations, it is interactional with both participants using interruptions, pauses and tone to denote meaning. Without phones and phone lines, the next step, the internet, could never have existed.

The internet initially began on September 1 1961 with ARPANET<sup>17</sup>, a very early computer system owned by the US department of defence and run by several universities and research institutes as a way of sharing data (Castells, 2000:47). This developed into the sending of messages rather than simply data, and in the late 1970's, with a deregulated system, the first BBS system was started up. BBS stands for Bulletin Board System, and is an early form of today's forums. Originally it was designed by computer fans with the intention to create an online community to publicly discuss and exchange information. Much like Gray's comments on the telephone, early internet communication was not faster than other methods of communication. Early computer systems, aside from being big and expensive, were also fairly slow. Both skill and patience were required to operate them. The early 80's saw the introduction of email- a place where people could electronically send mail to recipients. Initially, like the telegraph, this was used from business to business and was still out of the reach of many general public members.

All this changed in the 1990's, when the computer age really took off in the mainstream sector. The internet offered ways of communicating exceeding both the

---

<sup>17</sup> Advanced Research Projects Agency Network

telegraph and in ways the telephone. BBS boards/Forums became a common haven of online communities and email had become more widely available.

### **Online linguistics**

Moving back to linguistics once again, I will now discuss how the internet forums and email appear to have adapted the traditional faces of written/spoken and transactional/interactional communications. Unlike traditional forms of writing, email and online forums are in some respects closer to spoken text than they are to written. Baron, when discussing the linguistics of email poses the question ‘Is email use more like a letter sent by phone or spoken language transmitted by other means?’ (2001:247). When we look at the previously covered characteristics of written and spoken language, it would appear that the actual speech forms of email are like a spoken language. When looking at forums online, it appears even more so the case, and with chat rooms, more even still. While traditional writing is generally a formal exercise (personal letters perhaps being an exception), many examples of email are more informal. Forum use is on the whole highly informal and respondents ‘speak’ using written words. Online communication in many cases is syntactically simple, contains slang and is often grammatically ‘loose’.

As I began to discuss earlier, one problem with converting spoken language to written is that the recipient cannot rely on other suggesters such as body language or even tone of voice. As the internet community grew, this was something that needed to be addressed as the chance of misunderstanding or even offending can easily occur with written material when the receiver does not know the intended meaning behind the sender’s message. In email, or traditional writing, this can be overcome with clear

written content. As Zorba explained when we discussed conveying emotion and how it is expressed online:

‘...Written work loses so much context without the body language or voice intonation...if I do not express myself clearly, I should not be writing. But that is a standard I hold myself to. If I am implying a subtext (sarcasm, irony, etc) I am very careful’ (email conversation 06/05)

As Zorba states, characteristics like sarcasm, happiness and sadness can be difficult to show and careful planning of text content can be required to express it. In an attempt to combat this, one solution online is with the use of emoticons to help express what the sentence means. Emoticons online have drawn mixed reactions ranging from people who despise them to people who rely on them greatly. It can also depend on the situation in question as Eirini explained to me in our discussion on language:

‘I tend to feel that emoticon use is more for light hearted events. Even the frowny ☹ I wouldn’t use unless it was something that was somewhat unpleasant, but overall not too huge a deal. When dealing with depression and other depressed people, I feel that it it’s not quite that light...There is NO comparison to body language. You must very deliberately try to clue people in to your shades of meaning and as such, there’s not too much emoticons can really do. They sum up immediate emotional reactions SOMETIMES (only very basic emotions at that)...’ (email conversation 06/05)

One potential reason for this is the writing style of the author. If one adopts clear traditional writing practices, it may not be necessary to show emotion, as Zorba explained above. This can limit your language use however, and often this form of writing online is similar to traditional writing practices, especially if acronyms are also not used, as I will describe further below.

People who do use emoticons, as on many forums and chat rooms, tend to feel they do assist as Cylona explains:

‘...it is harder to show emotions through written language. I get around this by using the ‘smiles’ If I am joking I use the laughing smile or the one with the tongue stuck out. If I am angry I use the angry smile, etc. That allows some of my expression to come through. Without body language and facial expression it is difficult to get across how you are feeling’ (PM discussion, 06/05)

Dione feels that at times, emoticons and online conversations make conveying emotion easier online than offline:

'I believe it is infact easier to show emotions via the net...emoticons exist for this purpose and I do use them widely' (PM conversation 07/05)

Online communication in many ways resembles spoken language more than written. In general, language on forums is less syntactically complex, and is written as it is spoken. People use emoticons to express how they feel about what they are talking about, or to show they are joking, or taking the mickey. Emoticons are an attempt to incorporate body language into written text, so it turns into a written spoken language (i.e. interactive). One question Crystal raises about the use of emoticons on the internet is why now? Traditional forms of writing have never adopted a well known "icon" system to express emotion, yet the internet did in a relatively short period of time. (2001:38). Written language has always lacked the emotive expressions of body language. My participants have expressed their opinions on emoticon use, showing it as a desire to convey or assist in conveying emotion into the text and prevent misunderstandings. Crystal also theorises the use as being a method of overcoming perceived rudeness: 'In traditional writing, there is time to develop phrasing which makes personal attitudes clear; that is why formal conventions of letter-writing developed. And when they are missing, something needs to replace them. A rapidly constructed net message, lacking the usual courtesies can easily appear abrupt and rude. A smiley defuses the situation' (2001:39). Whilst the net is written based text, many "speak" on the forums as if it is spoken language. Lacking the mannerisms of both spoken language and the phrasing of traditional written text, the use of emoticons allows a bridge to be formed between the written and spoken conventions.

Another item which makes the internet different from traditional written text is its use of acronyms, an online equivalent to both specialised language and slang. Initially, especially if one has little experience online, these acronyms are very much a specialist language that makes no sense. However, with more experience, these acronyms provide another way of expressing emotion in written text. A good example of this is the very common ‘LOL’ which stands for lots of laughs, or laughing out loud. Acronyms can also be used to simply make writing faster, this is particularly useful on chat rooms where the discussion can be fairly fast paced and contains many subject fields. As well as using emotion acronyms like LOL, participants may use text chat<sup>18</sup>, substituting words so they have more of a phonic base to them, for example ‘GR8’, instead of great. On the forum, although not so constrained by space or time, acronyms like ‘IMHO’ are used rather than writing ‘in my humble opinion’.

When looking at the makeup of the internet, the roles forums and chat rooms play is very much a social and community one. Discussions are more related to spoken conversations in the offline world than they are to any offline areas. Chat rooms, for example, depending on subject type, can be more likened to going out to a nightclub or bar and catching up with friends or meeting new people, albeit in a virtual manner. In contrast, forums, although more specific in content, could be viewed as similar to attending a book club meeting or get-together of likeminded individuals.

Linguistically, when we look at the internet, which is on the whole a written medium, we might expect it to be more transactional in its language than interactional, but in many ways this is not the case. To demonstrate this more, let’s look at email, forums and chat rooms.

---

<sup>18</sup> Text Chat is a shortened form of writing commonly incorporating both phonics and numeral systems which provide users with a quick and short method of communicating. The advent of mobile phones and texting has increased the use of text chat in many areas of the internet, not just chat rooms.

Email is the closest online communication to traditional written language. With email we correspond with messages to and from, between author and author. This can be considered transactional language as email is written start to finish without interaction. As the recipient is known (in general conversational situations), it lessens the chance of misunderstanding, and the author of the email writes the full message without needing to evaluate the reaction of the receiver. In this role the addressee is never the writer of the communication, and the addressing is one-way. Once the email is sent, the roles of each change and the addressee becomes the author and responds with another email. Whilst this fits into Brugman's definition of transactional language, one thing which may change with its shift into email is the actual content of the electronic mail. Whilst the addressee is unable to respond instantly to the authors writing, the written conversation may contain a host of topics and questions which the addressee, once roles shift, can respond to, hence making it somewhat interactional. A typical email, as shown by Crystal, can contain spoken/written replies to the previous email without specifically alluding to what the original statement or question was:

'...sorry for the delay in replying...yes, I think you're rite' (2001: 113). Whilst still a to and fro contact, the language used is more spoken and assuming the conversation is fluid. The 'yes, I think you're rite' assumes the original writer knows what the subject being replied to was, rather than explaining what they are actually right about. This communication takes place over a succession of sends and receives however, and is not instant interaction. The topics are also planned. These elements combined still make email a transactional form of language, much the same as a traditional letter.

The shift from written to spoken however becomes more evident with informal emails containing slang and verbal words such as 'uh-huh' or 'yep' being used.

Forums appear to break with the general idea of writing being transactional, and rather fall somewhere between transactional and interactional language. On a forum, the topic of discussion is posted up and replied to by others in the community. Although the initial question or discussion topic may be transactional, the resulting replies tend to lean towards interactional communication. The reason I say this is because many replies are broken down into short responses. While replies still come from a transactional point, as the message is written uninterrupted, it is written in such a way to pose further discussion, and written as if it were spoken. While this can turn conversations into a rather slow discussion, respondents evaluate their responses by reading over previous responses (and added emotion) before placing their own- much like being in a group of people talking. The only difference here is that the conversation can be somewhat long-winded as not all members of the group are 'listening' to the conversation at the same time:

Simon 30<sup>th</sup> November 8.48pm:

Does smoking make depression worse?

I understand that as bipolar's we are more prone to smoking (normal cigarettes/roll-ups), I certainly am.

Just curious as to if anyone has given up while depressed and if it made them feel better. as obviously smoking affects the brain.

Any thoughts?

John 30<sup>th</sup> November 9.22pm:

Don't have any facts but in my experience it did not seem to effect depression. Anxiety is another story - it makes one feel relaxed but in fact causes anxiety - watch how shaking increases if you on Lithium.

Sue 1<sup>st</sup> December 1.22pm:

I'm not sure if smoking makes you more or less depressed, but I do know that it makes you dead, and usually in an unpleasant way. Smoking contributed to my being a "sickly child", having chronic ear infections, tonsillitis, etc., I think that it contributed to one or more of my mom's strokes, and my dad had lung cancer. It's bad stuff.

Mary 1<sup>st</sup> December 5.07pm:

Smoking helps me relax.

Yes it is bad for you but I smoke.

I have quit before but started again.

Henry 1<sup>st</sup> December 11.45pm:

I don't know if it was a contributing factor...but when I recently tried to stop smoking (and I was doing sooo good) I had a full blown manic episode. 😊

Needless to say I'm smoking again ...might try to stop smoking again when I'm a little bit more stable 😊

Ford 2<sup>nd</sup> December 6.23pm:

Hi - been absent for a while, but things have gone to sh\*t a bit so I'm back here - meant in the nicest possible way, really.

I gave up smoking for a year, got really depressed, saw that on the pack that 'Smokers Die Younger' and thought, that'll do nicely thanks, that was in January. I'm still smoking and thinking of suing the tobacco companies for misleading advertising. Just joking, I think.

Mary 3<sup>rd</sup> December 6.27pm:

When I saw my doc the other day I told him I read where it said you should not smoke with this med.

I asked him and he said smoke away!!!!!!

(Bipolaraware.co.uk, Names changed and spelling edited)

As the above discussion shows, Simon outlines the topic and discussion. Throughout the next few days the conversation takes place, with responses being based on others responses. If the example given did not include times and dates of responses, it would read like an interactional conversation had offline between a group of peers.

The final form of written language online, and by far the most interactional is in chat rooms. In these rooms, conversation is live and spoken a sentence at a time. In chat rooms people continually evaluate what people have spoken about and expressed via emotions or acronyms. Language in chat rooms according to Brugman is interactional communication as '...the speaker is actually typing onto the screen and the addressee is reading it as it is typed' (1995:17). It is also the loosest 'speaking' written word as conversations are often fast paced, and the traditional grammatical rules of writing are too limiting to be used on chat rooms. Often, in the rooms I have visited, the conversations had via written word are no slower than what one would have in a group of people over dinner offline. The following example shows a typical example of chat between some regular and a newer member online:

Chill: good to see JH back

TheBrat: Why do ya ask...Chill?

Symmetry: my life is really out of balance....this computer stuff is far to

consuming....

Belle: good i would hate to think you beecame a woman on me

YieldNot: hehe

Bandit: Its TheBrat!

Belle: hi JH

YieldNot: good to be back

Newbie: hello everybody

Barney: NO more crotch jokes, Avenger.

Chill: good to have you back JH

TipTop: we don't keep our sanity... that's the problem!!

TheBrat: ??????????????????it made no sense...

Symmetry: reading a book about humor and disabilities

Avenger: I love you too Barney, not.

Chill: that's yer sister calling

YieldNot: thanks everyone!

Bandit: Hah! Busted JH!

Newbie: what's up everyone?

Chill: I wondered that too :)

Symmetry: my interest is sociology of time and space

TipTop: interesting topics!

YieldNot: hmmp...

TipTop: I love that kind of stuff

TipTop: and philosophy too

YieldNot: Chill...gotta show you my server some time!

Symmetry: i think it is interesting...how cultures think about time, particular, or even individuals and how that impacts on our behaviors

Chill: having trouble with my typing and log

(Suler, 1996: Hypertext)

As we can see, the conversation is fast paced and highly transactional. Often there is more than one conversation occurring at the same time, and you need to filter out what you are not ‘listening’ to, much like one would in a noisy bar when talking face to face.

As well as using emoticons and acronyms in online conversations, there are also established rules and etiquette to follow when one participates in online conversations. These are often referred to as ‘netiquette’. Much like when one is interacting offline, certain rules and manners are expected of you. A good example of this is raising one’s voice or shouting. When corresponding in offline conversations, it

is not considered polite to shout at others and the same applies online, as the following example shows:

Joshua  
 Mar 28 2003, 01:12 AM  
 INDIANA JONES AND THE EMPEROR'S TOMB BY LUCAS ARTS IS...  
 Katrina  
 Mar 28 2003, 01:27 AM  
 Dude, whats with the caps? TURN IT OFF!  
 Tiffany  
 Mar 28 2003, 02:04 AM  
 who cares of he has caps on  
 Katrina  
 Mar 28 2003, 02:05 AM  
 Because its shouting Tiffany [name changed], not very polite. Would you like someone screaming in your ear?  
 (www.flexbeta.net)

In the above example the author writing in capitals is considered to be shouting.

Whilst this example appears to be accidental, when people argue, or attempt to make a strong point online they frequently use caps<sup>19</sup>, much like people in arguments offline who shout or raise their voice in attempt to get their point across. On the depression forums this did generally not tend to be a problem, and when caps were used they were generally in an acceptable context to assist in expressing strong emotion.

Although I have shown how emoticons and acronyms have assisted the online linguistics of the internet, it still, as my participant Eirini stated, is no real, or full substitute for body language. Emoticons offer a successful means of communicating language and feeling when desired only. Body language or nonverbal communication ‘...is a process in which people transmit and receive messages without using words’ (Madonik, 2001:3). This use of nonverbal language includes what people don’t want you to know or reactions that are hard to hide. It is this area which is precisely the problem with newer forms of social communications online. When corresponding

---

<sup>19</sup> "Caps" is short for caps lock on a keyboard, suggesting capital letters.

online, although we are given language hints, it can be difficult to know if who you are talking to is really who they say they are. Even if they are actually who they say they are, we still don't know if what they say is in fact the truth. In face to face communication, things like breathing, eye movement, stature, and tone all give us conscious and unconscious indicators as a means of assessing viability of what we hear. Online, we can only rely on text and any wilfully given emoticons as indicators. Over time online, it can be possible to catch people out with their stories, or pickup on their lies if they do not know their facts. However, in other situations, when the user has a less than ethical hidden agenda they are able to portray false characteristics and personalities, as with the sad cases of paedophiles for example. Whilst being serious issues, on the whole, I believe that the majority of net users genuinely portray elements of who they are. People socially shy online may be bold, while big talkers may be outspoken, however, I do not believe the internet to be significantly higher in deviancy than in the offline world.

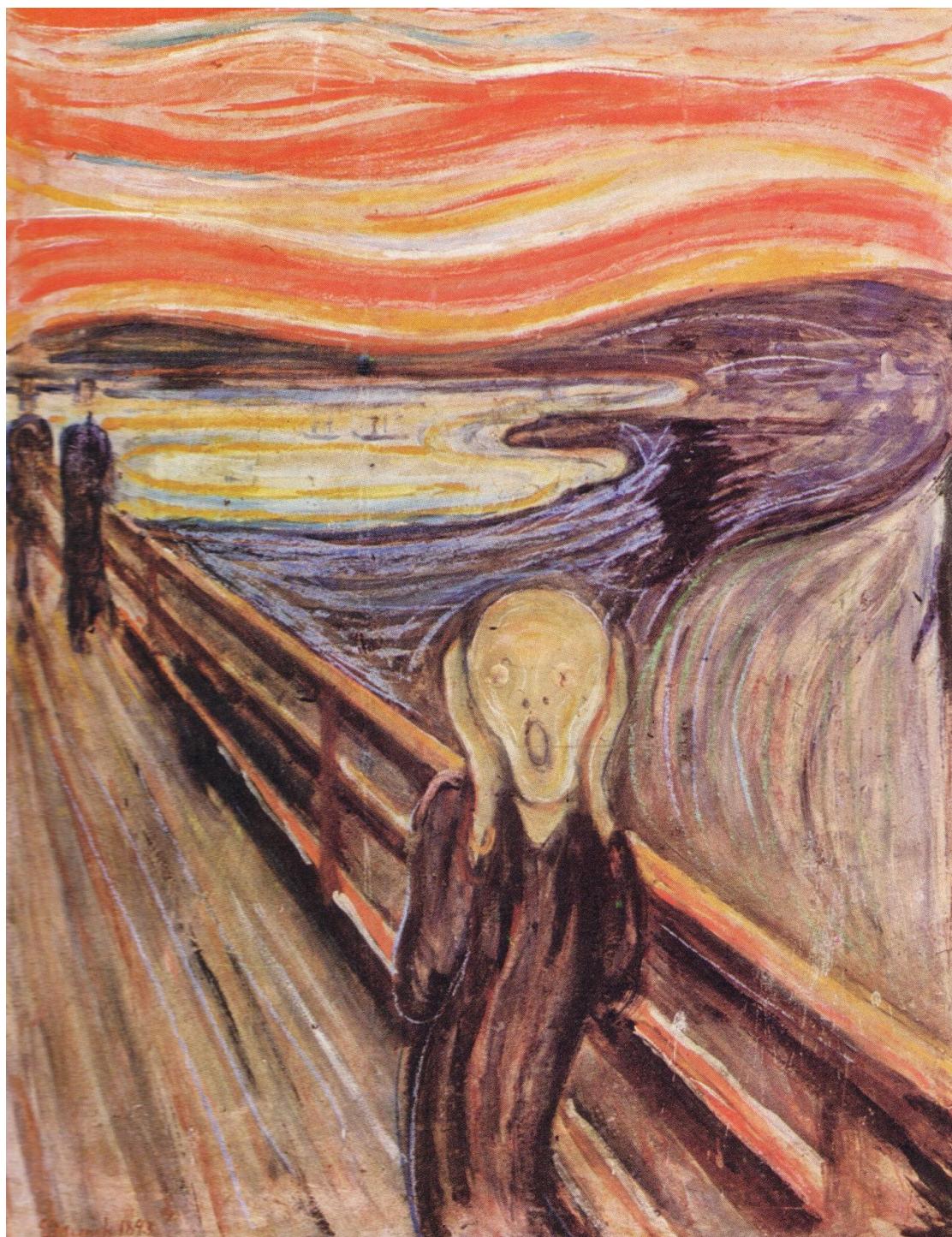
## **Summary**

What I have done in this chapter is attempt to show a historical and transitional passage of linguistics through to the internet. What makes the internet unique in written form is the amalgamation in parts, to linguistically interactional language forms. As well as this, we have seen how online communications through emoticons, acronyms, and slang have changed language into a form of written-spoken communication. In doing this, written text and communication via the internet has opened up new and vast social and cultural groups and means of communication. Whilst there are still issues regarding the legitimacy of some on the internet, this is not specific to online use, rather an extension of offline society as a whole. The

importance of this chapter can be seen from a dualistic perspective. Depression itself is a highly emotional experience for many people, so, when going online, expression of emotion, through language is of great importance. It is also important from an academic standpoint that we understand what is occurring to language online, and how interpersonal discussions, be they on the forums, in chat rooms, or by email occur, and why. When the dynamics of online language is understood, it then assists the researcher them self to understand the participants and online setting to a fuller degree.

## Chapter Six

### Conclusion



(Munch, in Clay, 1978:103)

## Conclusion

This study has examined online communities for sufferers of depression. At the same time, I have also looked at the internet as a contemporary site for anthropology and ethnographic research. The reason for this dual approach is simple. Anthropology of the internet is still a fairly new subject. Several anthropologists have already incorporated it into their studies, but it is still in the early stages of development, as is the continual development of the internet itself. In order to keep following culture and community it is appropriate that anthropology too goes online, seeking out new communities to see how they function and perhaps why. Depression communities are an interesting online group because, in general, depression is a very isolating and individual experience. Whilst group therapy does exist for depressed individuals, it is less common than one-to-one counselling or simply medicating chemical imbalances in the brain. What makes this an interesting paradox, is that whilst being around people is an important factor in recover for a depressed individual, it is just this which people shy away from. The attraction of the internet and online communities for depressed individuals, is that it allows them to be ‘with’ people, but at their own time, on their own terms.

One of the primary aims of this research has been to look at the internet as a contemporary site for ethnography and participant observation. To do this I have compared traditional and online research, with its associated ethical problems and also the development of language online as more internet groups and forums emerge every day.

One of the important notions involved with cyber-ethnography was place. In comparison to traditional anthropological fieldwork, online ethnography is not placed in one simple setting, rather a diverse collection of areas bound together by the idea

and practice of a community. Whereas participants in traditional research can be found within their village, district or town, the members of an online group may be from almost anywhere in the world that has access to the internet. In comparison to a traditional community operating on a face-to-face level, the online community interacts digitally, from face to monitor, to hard drive, to server, to hard drive to monitor to face. Participants are not localised together through the screen, but have a sense of being localised in their chosen online community. They are called web-sites and it is called cyber-space after all.

This online form of place operates on several planes of existence. Digitally, the community meets inside a computer in some office basement somewhere in the world. The members of the community come from all over. The heart of the community, only viewable through the ‘online window’, our monitors, is on the WWW, the World Wide Web. Where is the World Wide Web? Depending on how you look at it, it’s either in all the computer server basements, or it’s on another realm, accessed via computers in each user’s home/internet café and viewable only through a monitor. Although cyberspace can be viewed as being fluid, on a plane of existence which has no physical realm, the communities and interaction which takes place in it is real. The people interacting online do exist, as does the community they interact in.

What the internet offers the anthropologist is a new host of communities which operate and are accessible 24 hours a day, 7 days a week. Interaction with one’s participants does not have to be scheduled within particular times or at specific physical places. The anthropologist is not constrained to limit his/her time in the field through financial or time constraints due to other academic duties, several factors which ordinarily put continued pressure on long term research.

These advantages however do not come without associated disadvantages which deserve (and/or require) more theoretical research in order to be overcome. One of the biggest of these problems is associated with identity and trust. As with more traditional forms of fieldwork, it can be hard to ascertain whether what you are being told is true or false. Anthropologists have long been in situations where they are told either what the participants think they want to hear, or simply told lies to see how gullible they are. Online these issues are even more problematic because we limit most of our indicating senses. Without sight to see facial expressions or eye movement, or audio to hear tone and pauses, it can be even harder to ascertain whether we are being misled. As with traditional forms of research, this can be overcome in time by a collection of facts and cross referencing, something which long term research is blessed with.

Associated with this is the further problem of knowing whether or not your participants are even who they say they are. An elderly male participant may in fact be a young teenage girl, who is trying to see how gullible you are. To switch the roles around, online research also makes it a little more difficult for a participant to be able to trust the researcher in believing they too are who they say they are.

Without visual signs, the internet offers us both a site of perceived increased anonymity and also increased deception. To the regular user, they can surf the internet, contribute in community and chat rooms without disclosing who they are. People with alternate reasons for being online (Hackers/identity thief's) can also use these strengths as a means to deceive others who trust the faceless field of the internet. This is by no means a significant disadvantage associated with online research, but must be kept in mind all the same when researching the internet.

Whilst looking at the internet as a contemporary site of research for anthropology, it was also necessary to look at the development of language as it shifted from face to face to electronic means. For depression sufferers, expression of emotion can be difficult, at the best of times, yet, still important all the same. Because of this, language use and changes when going online needed to be examined. The reason this is important is because the operation of these new online communities are different from most offline ones in the fact that they operate solely via a written medium. Because of this online language has made alterations to adapt to a physically emotionless world. Traditional written language is found in the form of transactional language- communication from one to another without interrupting dialogue. Although this form of communication still exists online, communication can also be seen as embodying an adaptive transactional form of language. This is no more obvious than in chat rooms, but also evident in forum discussions which visually become a slowed-down discussion written in words.

Because of the limiting power of the written word we have also looked at how language online has evolved and developed using both acronyms and emoticons. While in offline situations, person to person, it is relatively easy to see and judge emotion, online this is not so. The integration of emoticons has allowed a part of the physical sensors to become transferred into the written language to assist in clear meaningful communication. Whilst not adopted as a sufficient tool by all who use online communities, those who do adopt the use of emoticons find them useful in both setting the tone of a discussion and humanising the plain written text.

Acronyms, as I show, also play a role in adding emotion to written text as a way of describing actions of the user in their offline environment, for example ‘lol’ when

they are laughing out loud. Even the use of word casing has meaning online, with total capitalising insinuating one is shouting.

An understanding of these language changes within online communities gives the anthropologist more key tools for successfully undertaking virtual fieldwork.

In parallel to looking at the internet as a contemporary site of research, this study has also focused on depression sufferers and their use of the online communities designed for them. In this I have looked at what it is like to suffer depression from a sufferer's perspective as well as looking at medical criteria of depression. Through my participants we saw the different ways in which people define depression in their own words from their own experiences. The emotions, or lack thereof, caused by depression affect each sufferer in a different way throughout their day-to-day life. Some feel the depression as a darkness surrounding them, while others feel an almost out of body experience, watching themselves operating day to day, but feeling no emotion at all. Depression isolates and disables people from their normal daily routines. This causes a perpetual downward cycle, which without amendments or a break to the cycle fuels itself into further depression. When someone suffering depression suffers a negative life event they may begin to isolate themselves from normal interactions which provide positive reinforcement. This in turn causes a sadness or general drop in emotion which further fuels their depression. The depression then causes limits to social interactions and begins the cycle again.

We looked at the different types of depression on the medical model, ranging from major to seasonal and what affects they each have on sufferer's lives. This was followed by an overview of typical treatments available. All my participants suffered depression differently on an individual level, but also followed the typical patterns set out in the medical models of depression diagnoses. What I looked at in particular was

their own emotional feelings and understandings on what they were going through. Several showed us through creative writing and poems what it felt like for them in their world of depression, like in Alethea's poems, her depression is covered up and put on by a happy face.

As well as examining the diagnoses of depression and the personal definitions of it, we took a look at the participants' use of the online communities. To do this, I first showed how the community operates through the analogy of an offline village with an entrance, a community centre and the many roads and buildings of different subject matters which bridge out from the centre. This description of the forums, as well as introducing us to the main sites of research, showed the typical layouts of online communities in general and outlined some of the ways the rules are made and upheld by forum moderators.

We also looked at various reasons why participants became members of the online communities. For most it was a combination of seeking help and giving it. For many, it made them feel better about themselves helping others who were in similar circumstances and had joined the group as a form of support. Many of my participants also used the forums as a place of regular social interaction with peers and newly made online friends who were in likeminded and similar situations. Although not all of my participants felt they would be affected if their forum ceased to exist, some felt strongly it would be a very bad thing, which indicates the importance some attribute to these communities.

As well as all the positive aspects off the forum use, there were also negative ones. The largest of these was the possibility of using the forum to reinforce and strengthen ones depression by simply hanging round other depressed individuals and discussing dark and negative thoughts. Although this is a possibility, I do not view it as being too

great a risk. All participants and general members I met over the course of the research period were quite aware of the effects depression had on their life and sought to try and escape from it as best they could. Life without depression, or a desire for such was commonly discussed both amongst my participants and on the more active general sections of some forums.

What made the forums so good for many was the fact that it was a place where they could be better understood than in their offline worlds. Many had offline experiences of peers, family and friends not really understanding the extent of their depression and that it is not as simple as just “getting over it” and moving on. People on the online communities, fellow sufferers, did understand the difficulties associated with it.

It appeared clearly unanimous that online communities were not a total treatment for depression, and many members and communities themselves clearly stated that additional help, be it medication or therapy, was imperative for rehabilitation back into the non-depressed world. The forums simply offered an information site and haven for likeminded individuals to gather and not feel so isolated with their typically isolating disease. Through the forums, people could understand why they were feeling like they did, what to do about it, and be given support from the rest of the community.

Because of the understandings fellow members had for one another, the forums also became for some a place of greater social interaction, with close friendships being made. Several participants even had met friends from their online communities in offline environments.

An overarching theme throughout my research is the notion of space and place. Online communities of depressed individuals appear to be growing continually as a

place for those trapped in darkness or unexplainable places of mood. It is ironic that the internet itself is so difficult to define in terms of space and place, as many sufferers of depression also struggle with a sense of understanding oneself. What the internet, this spaceless, placeless, fluid world appears to offer is yet another dimension to the world of some depression sufferers. In this fluid venue however, is the offering of companionship from others who also wade through some of the more confusing (and often uncharted) dimensions of their mind.

## Appendix One: Information Sheet

### ***Male Depression and the Internet.***

#### **INFORMATION SHEET**

My name is Michael Hawkey, I am a Master of Arts student in anthropology at Massey University, Albany, New Zealand. ‘Male Depression and the Internet’ is a proposed anthropological study of Internet groups for male depression. I am interested in learning about why people use these groups and what they get out of them.

This research will be conducted entirely online, requesting participants from Internet forums that cater for depressed communities. Participants recruited for this study, will at all times have their identities (both real and usernames) kept anonymous, with pseudonyms given for all purposes involving the research. Basically, I want to hang around on the forum and let you get an idea of who I am and what I am doing. I will then observe what actually happens on the forums, and invite anyone interested to take part in a more in-depth “interview” by email or other online forms of communication.

The aim of the research is to look at the social reasons participants join and participate in online forums on depression. Because of this, I see no risk in your participation. If for any reason you do feel uncomfortable or upset in discussing issues raised I have a list of possible sources of assistance to try, or, you may withdraw from the research at any point.

Data collected through forum discussions and informal online interviews will be used collectively to produce a thesis about depression forums online. Participants, if interested may receive copies of sections of the thesis their input has been used.

As a participant, you will be required to take part in informal interviews, online. Your time involved in partaking in this study will be entirely dependent on methods of online communication we use. Over the term of the study (7 months), a total of 5-10 hours is estimated.

### **Participant rights.**

You are under no obligation to accept this invitation. If you decide to participate, you have the right to:

- Decline to answer any particular question;
- Withdraw from the study (Prior to October 2005);
- Ask any questions about the study at any time during participation;
- Provide information on the understanding that your name will not be used unless you give permission to the researcher;
- Be given access to a summary of the project findings when it is concluded.

### **Project Contacts**

If, at any time during the research you have concerns, questions or complaints involving the research you may contact either my supervisors or myself:

Michael Hawkey (researcher) [HawkeyX@hotmail.com](mailto:HawkeyX@hotmail.com)

Dr Graeme MacRae (supervisor) [G.S.Macrae@massey.ac.nz](mailto:G.S.Macrae@massey.ac.nz)

Dr Kathryn Rountree (supervisor) [K.E.Rountree@massey.ac.nz](mailto:K.E.Rountree@massey.ac.nz)

This project has been reviewed and approved by the Massey University Human Ethics Committee, ALB Application 05/022. If you have any concerns about the conduct of this research, please contact Associate Professor Kerry Chamberlain, Chair, Massey University Campus Human Ethics Committee: Albany, telephone 09 414 0800 x9078, email [humanethicsalb@massey.ac.nz](mailto:humanethicsalb@massey.ac.nz).

## Appendix Two: Participants Consent Form

### ***Male Depression and the Internet.***

#### **PARTICIPANT CONSENT FORM**

**This consent form will be held for a period of five (5) years**

I have read the Information Sheet and have had the details of the study explained to me. My questions have been answered to my satisfaction, and I understand that I may ask further questions at any time.

I agree to participate in this study under the conditions set out in the Information Sheet.

**Signature:**

**Date:**

**Full Name -  
printed**

### **Appendix Three: Interview Schedule**

#### ***Male Depression and the Internet.***

##### **Interview Schedule.**

Interviews conducted during the course of the research will be informal and free flowing. Questions asked will be based on those raised during the research. Several initial questions I will discuss with participants are as follows:

- How did you initially discover the online forum?
- What do you use the forum for?
- How often do you access it?
- What use do you get out of it?
- Do you consider the forum a community for depressed persons?
- Has the forum changed your life at all?
- If a participant receives 'off-line' aid, how does the forum assist or compare to this?
- How long have you been a member?
- Have you made close friends/associations with others on the forum?
- Do you use any other similar forums?

The answers to these questions may also be found from informal chatting. I have decided to keep interviews informal as it opens up the possibility to hear something related to the research that I may not have otherwise thought of.

## Bibliography

- American Psychiatric Association (2000) *Diagnostic criteria from DSM-IV-TR*, American Psychiatric Association, Washington.
- Baron. Naomi S (2001) *Alphabet to email: how written English evolved and where it's heading*, Routledge, New York.
- Barrow. Iris (1985) *Fifteen steps to overcome anxiety and depression*, Heinemann, New Zealand.
- Bellenir. Karen [Ed] (2000) *Mental health disorders sourcebook: basic consumer health information about anxiety disorders, depression, and other mood disorders*, Omnigraphics, Detroit.
- Bernard. H. Russell (2002) *Research methods in anthropology: qualitative and quantitative methods*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek.
- Blazer. Dan G (2005) *The age of melancholy: “major depression” and its social origins*, Brunner-Routledge, New York.
- Brugman. Claudia (1995) *Communication and context: a guide to issues in the interactional and transactional uses of language*, University of Otago press, New Zealand.
- Castells. Manuel (2000) *The rise of the network society*, Blackwell Publishers, Malden.
- Chagnon. Napoleon A (1983) *Yanomamò: The Fierce People*, Third edition, Holt, Rinehart and Wilson, New York.
- Cockerham. William C (2004) *Medical sociology*, Pretence Hall, Upper Saddle River.
- Constable. Nicole (2003) *Romance on a Global Stage: pen pals, virtual ethnography, and “mail-order” marriages*, University of California Press, Berkeley.

- Costigan (1999) "Forests, Trees, and Internet Research" in *Doing Internet research: critical issues and methods for examining the Net*, ed. Steve Jones, Sage Publications, California.
- Crystal. David (2001) *Language and the Internet*, Cambridge University Press. UK.
- Davidson. Carl, Tolich. Martin (1998) *Starting fieldwork: an introduction to qualitative research in New Zealand*, Oxford University Press, New Zealand.
- Desmaison. Kathleen (1998) *Potatoes Not Prozac: A natural seven-step dietary plan to control depression, food cravings and weight gain*, Simon & Schulster, Australia.
- Evans. Karren F (2001) *Maintaining Community in the Information Age: The importance of trust, place and situated knowledge*, Palgrave Macmillan, Great Britain.
- Everard. Jerry (2000) *Virtual States: The Internet and the Boundaries of the Nation State*, Routledge, New York.
- Hanks. Patrick Ed (1988) *The Collins Concise Dictionary of the English Language*, Collins, Glasgow.
- Lewis. I. M (1989) *Ecstatic Religion*, Routledge, London.
- Limón. José Eduardo (1994) *Dancing With The Devil: society and cultural poetics in Mexican-American south Texas*, University of Wisconsin Press, Madison.
- Madonik. Barbara G (2001) *I hear what you say, but what are you telling me? The strategic use of nonverbal communication in mediation*, Jossey-Bass, San Francisco.
- Madsen. Suzanne Mary (1998) *Response style, gender, and depressed mood: a thesis submitted in partial fulfilment of the requirements for the degree of Master of Arts in Psychology*, Massey University, Albany.

- Martell. Michael E, Addis. Neil S (2001) *Depression in context: strategies for guided action*, W.W.Norton, New York.
- Meadow. Charles T (2002) *Making connections: communication through the ages*, Scarecrow Press, Lanham.
- Nichols. K, Jenkinson. J (1991) *Leading a Support Group*, Chapman and Hall, UK.
- Owen. Patricia (1995) *I Can See Tomorrow*, Hazelden, Minnesota.
- Popenoe (2003) *Feeding Desire: fatness, beauty, and sexuality among a Saharan people*, Routledge, New York.
- Rheingold. Howard (1998) 'Virtual Communities' in *The Community of the Future*, editors. Richard Beckhard, Marshall Goldsmith, Richard Schubert, Frances Hesselben, Jossey-Bass Publishers, San Francisco, pp 115-125.
- Spiro. Melford E (1967) *Burmese Supernaturalism*, Prentice-Hall, New Jersey.
- Wolcott. Harry F (1995) *The Art of Fieldwork*, AltaMira Press, Walnut Creek.
- [www.ausmini.com](http://www.ausmini.com) : Online forum for Mini enthusiasts
- [www.bipolaraware.co.uk](http://www.bipolaraware.co.uk) : Online community for sufferers of Bipolar disorder
- [www.bitpipe.com](http://www.bitpipe.com) : Online IT information and resource site.
- [www.depression.about.com](http://www.depression.about.com) : Online community for those suffering depression
- [www.flexbeta.net](http://www.flexbeta.net) : Online community for technology news.
- [www.google.com](http://www.google.com) : Online search engine.
- [www.headspace.org.nz](http://www.headspace.org.nz) : Online NZ site for youth with depression.
- [www.maledepression.com](http://www.maledepression.com) : Online community for Males with depression
- [www.mentalhealth.org.nz](http://www.mentalhealth.org.nz) : Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand.
- [www.mixednuts.net](http://www.mixednuts.net) : Online community for people with mental illnesses.
- [www.mydr.com.au](http://www.mydr.com.au) : Online medical website.
- [www.nmhct.nhs.uk](http://www.nmhct.nhs.uk) : Norfolk & Waveney Mental Health Partnership.

[www.outoftheblue.org.nz](http://www.outoftheblue.org.nz) : Depression awareness site from Mental Health Foundation of New Zealand.

[www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber](http://www.rider.edu/~suler/psycyber/psycyber) : Suler. John (1996) *Hypertext*, Online.

[www.trappedminds.org](http://www.trappedminds.org) : Online community for persons suffering mental illnesses.

[www.wikipedia.com](http://www.wikipedia.com) : Online encyclopaedia.

## **Chapter image description and bibliography**

Chapter One: ‘untiled depression medication image’

[www.cybersluagh.com](http://www.cybersluagh.com) : Online individuals Blog (Web-log) site.

Chapter Two: ‘Silhouette of depressed individual’

[www.doktoranden-netz.de](http://www.doktoranden-netz.de) : Online Networking community for graduate students.

Chapter Three: ‘Modelisation d’un visage’. Image by Rebecca Allen.

Popper. Frank (1993) *Art of the Electronic Age*, Thames and Hudson, Singapore.

Chapter Four: ‘Human face splintered as in a broken mirror’. Painted by Gino Severini. Clay. Jean (1978) *From Impressionism to Modern Art*, Chartwell Books Inc, New Jersey.

Chapter Five: ‘an explicit form of virtual reality’. Photo by P Berenger.

Popper. Frank (1993) *Art of the Electronic Age*, Thames and Hudson, Singapore.

Chapter Six: ‘The Cry’. Painted by Edvard Munch.

Clay. Jean (1978) *From Impressionism to Modern Art*, Chartwell Books Inc, New Jersey.