

The Role of Symbolic Capital in Digital Inequality: Lessons from The Student Room's Reputation System

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Abstract

This thesis examines the role that digital reputation plays in inequalities on the popular forum: The Student Room. Reputation systems (sometimes described as rating systems) are conventionally theorised as mechanisms for the facilitation of trust and cooperation online. This study illustrates, to the contrary, that digital reputation is implicated in a range of additional social practices and goals, such as the pursuit of status and the exercising of power. The recognition theory of Axel Honneth, and Pierre Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital are used to propose a basis for reconceptualising digital reputation. It is argued that the full impact and significance of digital reputation cannot be understood without the use of qualitative, exploratory methods, without which it is impossible to identify the contextual goals and strategies that shape and stratify digital practice. This context defines the appropriation of digital reputation, and its meaning and impact. It is also argued that digital inequality literature stands to benefit from traditional sociological insights into the nature of inequality. To illustrate this stance, Bourdieu's apparatus is incorporated into the research design, which consists in participant observation of four forums (Chat, Fitness, Universities and Religion) alongside qualitative interviews. Research identifies the interests that drive users in their practice in The Student Room, and different forms of capital that they deploy in order to attain their goals. It also explores their perceptions and experiences of the reputation system, illustrating how reputation serves as a form of symbolic capital in the various struggles and pursuits of users across the site. These findings offer an important contribution both to the fields of digital inequality, and digital reputation by providing a finely grained exposition of the mechanisms of power in online spaces, and its role in conditioning both digital reputation and inequality.

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“This is the only forum in the world on which you could say ‘I want to be a brickie’ and be rewarded with a link to the LSE Masters in Planning the Urban Environment” *by cambio weschel.*

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This thesis was brought to you by the chocolate industry.

1: Of Reputation and Digital Inequality

Research Objectives

The aim of this study is to ascertain the social meaning and function of digital reputation on the popular forum, The Student Room, which is widely used by young adults in the UK for practical support relating to University applications and academic work. My research aim was derived from two prior concerns. The first was that digital reputation might somehow be related to inequalities and power struggles among users of The Student Room. The second, subsequent concern was that existing empirical approaches to digital reputation were incomplete in their conceptualization of its function and meaning.

A further aim lies in ascertaining the value of Pierre Bourdieu's social theory for researching and theorizing digital reputation and inequality. The field of digital inequality underrepresents traditional sociological theories of inequality. Through deploying a Bourdieuan strategy I hope both to contribute to sociological research in this area, and also to develop a rich account of the nature and operation of inequalities in The Student Room.

Digital Reputation is a Big Deal

In 2016, it is not difficult to convey the significance of digital reputation. Whether we are 'liking' a friend's comment on Facebook, reviewing a recent purchase on Amazon, reacting to an article on *The Independent*, or rating the service of our ride on Uber, reputation is an increasingly ubiquitous component of digital practice. Many of the social and economic implications of digital reputation are transparent. The success of sellers on Amazon marketplace, or freelancers on Upwork, is strongly defined by the ratings that these agents can solicit.

Meanwhile, ratings shape our choices when selecting apartments on AirBnB, or judging whether to make a purchase online. In doing so, they play a large role in determining the nature and quality of the goods and services that we consume. Reputational algorithms increasingly filter and determine which content is displayed to us on the websites we frequent, the search engines we use, as well as the reach and influence of our own contributions.

The rapidly growing ubiquity of reputation systems in sites of digital practice renders it vitally important to pursue in depth understanding of its effects, its nature, meaning, and the mechanisms upon which it relies. This is one of the concerns that this work speaks to. More precisely, I strive here to demonstrate the social and cultural significance invested in a particular reputation system – that of The Student Room – and its interrelation with power.

Online reputation systems quickly captured the attention of early Internet scholars, concerned with their ostensible function as decision support systems (Jøsang *et al.*, 2007). One of the central preoccupations surrounding the rise of Internet use was the challenge posed by interacting with strangers in disembodied environments devoid of traditional non-verbal cues and markers (see: Walters, 2007; Antheunis *et al.*, 2012; Byron & Baldrige, 2007 and Rhoads, 2010). Digital reputation offered a means through which to mitigate these risks, designed, as it is, to provide objective measures of a user, product or service's history. For this reason, digital reputation has largely been approached through the lens of trust, reflecting the enduring consensus that trust is one of the fundamental pragmatic and normative concerns surrounding the Internet, and that the chief function and purpose of digital reputation lies in its ability to foster this trust.

Of late, additional facets to online reputation have entered the spotlight. The rise of “Big Data”, and widespread convergence between platforms, has provoked concerns in relation to the integrity and security surrounding personal online reputations (Masum & Tovey, 2011). Anonymity has long been a significant factor underpinning the identities and choices of individuals in their engagement online. Critics fear a future in which our identities and actions in multiple spheres of online activity are traced and integrated into a coherent reputational measure, one that could be exploited by employers, law enforcers, landlords and insurers and used against us (*ibid*, 2011). Insurer Admiral's recent announcement of plans to price customers' insurance policies in reference to psychometric analysis of their Facebook posts (Ruddick, 2016), suggests that concerns of this kind are hardly far-fetched.

However reputation may also have additional interpretations and effects, given its function as an online social signal. It is of clear importance to monitor the performance of systems, such as these, which inform decisions worldwide. But the contextual interpretation and use of reputation by users is something that has not been explored, and which may add nuance and further insight to existing knowledge of digital reputation.

Digital Reputation and The Student Room

This work focuses strongly on the digital reputation system used within The Student Room (TSR). www.thestudentroom.co.uk is a forum targeting UK students from ages 15-25. Not only is it used by students to share information relating to learning and progressing through education, but it is also home to discussion areas for non-academic interests, needs and concerns.

The reputation system on TSR allows users to give positive ratings to the posts of other users. These ratings are visible on posts, and an aggregate of positive reputation received is displayed on users' profiles wherever they post on the site. This feature has potential repercussions for the quality of experience that users enjoy. Their personal reputational score will necessarily affect how their contributions are received by other users, while their reception of information and ideas in this environment will be similarly affected by their reputational standing.

However, my interest in reputation is one component of my broader concern to improve our understanding of digital inequalities, and in particular, inequalities that characterize the experiences and practices of users within online contexts.

This concern makes the reputation system of TSR an especially fruitful example to analyse for several reasons. Firstly, while TSR is a very large forum, hosting nearly 3 million registered users, it is also a relatively bounded community which a single ethnography can reasonably encompass. This provides a good environment within which to observe reputation as it is embedded within a specific cultural system, and thus to analyse it sociologically. While TSR encompasses educational aspects of young adults' lives, with the potential to bear upon their life outcomes, it also acts as a space for entertainment, socializing and culture. This means that an ethnography of TSR reputation allows me to consider possible differences in how reputation is used and understood within contrasting activity domains. Finally, the TSR reputation system grants users more power and discretion than many reputation systems on other websites. It does so by allowing members the freedom to give reputation to the posts of others at their own discretion, and for reasons of their own devising. This reputation system is also distinct in that it allows users different reputational power, based on how many reputation points the would-be donor has accrued. Those who secure good reputational standing are able to give more reputation points to posts and users than they like, than less established or popular members can do. This detail makes TSR reputation an especially interesting example to explore in terms of power relations between users.

These are considerations that merit closer inspection because they have been mostly neglected within existing scholarship of online reputation systems (as explored in Chapter 2).

However, my avenue to the study of digital reputation originated, in fact, in my wider concern for the theorizing of digital inequality. This engagement is itself an

outcome of my own experiences of online social space and so this thesis is better understood as the product of the trajectory that brought an avid online forum user, both “digital native” and sociologist, into the fragmented and nascent field of Internet Studies.

Inequality and Digital Practice: How Reputation Became a Big Deal to Me

As a young and highly active Internet user, issues of trust, anonymity, co-presence, privacy and data integrity are not problematic to me. Assuredly, as a sociologist I can reflect upon the efforts of other researchers to problematise these features, and critically assess them on an abstract level. But as a user, these themes do not hold salience within my, phenomenologically lived and immanent, negotiation of online space. This social proximity draws me to different questions and concerns to those that confront me in this literature. These questions are also deeply shaped by my sociological training. I want to understand the practice of people in online spaces. I want to grasp the nature, distribution and mechanisms surrounding power and inequalities in these spaces. I wish to capture and articulate both the lived reality experienced by Internet users, and the broader cultural and structural patterns that shape and are shaped by this reality. Finally, I want the academic community, and the public at large, to grasp and embrace the questions and answers implicated by this inquiry. These broad concerns are formative of my interest in digital reputation, and of the tools and questions I deploy in order to understand it.

The research concerns guiding this work became relevant to me through my own engagement with and stake within The Student Room (TSR). As a highly active participant of eleven years, my observations and experiences of TSR’s culture, and the concerns and practices of its users were the context within which I constructed my understanding of the Internet as a space. These experiences were often, additionally, the qualitative basis for my application and interpretation of the sociological theories and principles presented to me through the course of my undergraduate and postgraduate studies. At the same time, as my daily experiences on TSR fleshed out many of the concepts taught on my degree, sociology also shaped the line of my thoughts as I engaged with people on TSR each day.

This trajectory acts both to enhance and constrain my insight as a sociologist and an ethnographer. My proximity allows me to pose questions and craft avenues that are relatively under-exploited in existing academic research of digital reputation. Nevertheless, my proximity also brings with it the risk of distortion and bias; a limitation that I aspire to mitigate, at least partly, through reflexive transparency. What is offered is a deeply situated narrative, but one that also showcases rich and unique examples, with strong relevance to digital reputation research and digital inequality.

Digital Inequality Research

While the body of my thesis is devoted to conceptualizing and documenting the significance, meaning and function of digital reputation on TSR, my doctoral

research began with the broader aim of exploring the nature of online inequalities, through the example of TSR. This journey first demanded engagement with debates surrounding online inequalities. The history of this literature finds its origin in research on the 'digital divide', the socio-economic demography that determines the 'haves' and 'have-nots' of Internet connectivity and technology. It remains the case that financial and geographical access to the Internet, in terms of ownership (exclusive or shared) of connective devices, and in terms of connection to reliable, fast and affordable connectivity, is divided and dividing. For instance, the ONS 2016 report on Internet access found that 11% of Great Britain's households are without access to the Internet (ONS, 2016). Similarly, a 2013 BBC report on Media Literacy found that 21% of UK citizens experienced exclusion from the Internet, a figure that included those prohibited by a lack in skill, connectivity, hardware or a combination thereof (BBC, 2013). Globally, only 44 in 100 individuals use the Internet, according to data from the World Bank (2015). A breakdown of this data by country reveals extremes such as 1.1 in Eritrea at the base, and 96.8 in Norway amongst the peak (*ibid*, 2015).

From initial research on the Digital Divide, however, those concerned with digital inequalities began to probe more deeply into the matter, by identifying additional factors differentiating the way that individuals engaged with the Internet, and the advantages that they were able to leverage from their engagement. Notably, Hargittai (2002) called for the recognition of a 'second digital divide', one which affects the way in which those with Internet access engage, and the outcomes they are able to leverage as a result (See also: Hargittai & Zillien, 1999; Di Maggio & Hargittai, 2001; Mansell, 2002; Duran & Valadez, 2007; Livingstone & Helsper, 2007). Hargittai was one of a growing community concerned with exploring the way in which Internet users are differentiated in how they use the Internet, even after inequalities in connectivity and equipment are catered for. In *Technology and Social Inclusion: Rethinking the Digital Divide*, Warschauer explored four "technology-associated resources necessary for access and inclusion", which he sees as consisting in 'material', 'digital', 'human' and 'social' resources (2003, p. 95). Similarly, in *The Deepening Digital Divide*, Van Dijk (2005) redefined the Digital Divide, "not only as (a) the skill to operate computers and network connections but also as (b) the skill to search, select, process, and apply information from a superabundance of sources and (c) the ability to strategically use this information to improve one's position in society". These he categorises as 'instrumental', 'informational' and 'strategic' skills respectively" (2005, p. 21). Van Dijk goes on to distinguish between 'intermittent users', 'drop-outs', 'net evaders' and the 'truly disconnected' (2005, p. 90). Overall, the literature on digital skills and literacy recognised that differences in education, social context and experience would shape the things that individuals would feel comfortable doing on the Internet, and which activities and uses they were able to identify and exploit for their own advantage. There has therefore been demonstrative progress in identifying and appreciating the breadth and complexity of inequalities that affect Internet users.

Sociology and Digital Inequality

However, given the rich and sophisticated literature that exists in relation to social inequality within the sociological tradition, I found myself disappointed by the digital inequalities literature. The most pertinent reasons for this were twofold. Firstly, this literature is largely quantitative in its methodology. Even as van Dijk and Hargittai expanded the scope of differences that were included in research, in order to document the factors acting to advantage or disadvantage users, they fell short of embracing qualitative or inductive tools in order to observe online practices, and the lived reality of those who inhabit online spaces. This inevitably limited the extent to which the digital skills and literacy debate could fully capture the nuanced quality of online inequalities as experienced by users.

The second, and related weakness of this literature lay in its theorization of digital inequality. While those working in this field frequently expressed the importance of getting away from a “haves and have not” mentality to Internet inequality (Consalvo & Ess, 2013), they continued to deploy research questions and methodologies that conceived of the Internet as a tool and a technology, rather than a *social space*. A strong methodological individualism underscores this research strategy, which primarily aggregates individual actions. The spontaneous and collective co-production of meaning and value is too often overlooked.

Furthermore, the phenomenological component of digital practice is largely absent from research on digital inequality. When I read a thread on TSR, or post, I am very rarely conscious of the blue spectrum light from my laptop screen, the movement of my fingers over the keys, the visual design of TSR’s website, the position of my laptop within my domestic environment, or the (primarily) textual quality of my reception and expression of meaning. Instead, what is salient and pressing on my mind is my interaction with other *people*. I am predominantly taken up with the opinions they express, the jokes that they make, their efforts at fostering camaraderie and intimacy, and their role in deliberating the version of truth that is accepted, and therefore most influential, in the community. Indeed, these are the concerns and desires that I am invested in as a regular poster on TSR.

This experience challenges overdependence upon the ontology of Internet as tool, resource or technology. I might be *using* TSR for various strategic and emotional goals or desires, but I *experience* it as a social environment every bit as compelling and visceral as those I encounter when teaching a seminar or going for coffee with a friend. This quality to online practice must be reflected in the theory and representation of Internet ontology by researchers, if we are to understand inequality and power differentials between online users with any real depth.

The sociological principles that most forcefully shape my expectations of digital inequality research are found in the work of Pierre Bourdieu, who notoriously and powerfully demonstrated a number of illuminating mechanisms at work in the formation and reproduction of inequality. For example, Bourdieu highlights

the extent to which personal experiences are carried by individuals throughout the life course, bearing ultimately on the choices and intuitions that guide them (Bourdieu & Passeron, 1977). Bourdieu (1972) additionally illustrates how the desires and motivations of individuals combine with their personal history, and the combination of privileges and resources available to them, to generate highly specific, strategic and yet spontaneous practices within each situation. In researching digital inequality, this perspective would see researchers paying closer attention to how online actors bring a unique portfolio of constraints and advantages with them from seemingly unrelated contexts, and how these – in turn – interact with the specific properties of the online environment in question to generate their digital practice.

Bourdieu also pinpoints the way in which the values, attitudes and hierarchies of collectives are inscribed on physical bodies and spaces, to the extent that embodied experience and demeanor serve as objective markers of an individual's social position (Bourdieu, [1979] 2010). Similarly, the delineation of material spaces such as villages and cities, both reflect and reproduce the social divisions that structure their societies (Wacquant, 2009). While interrogating digital inequality, this insight would invite inquiry into whether and in what way the Internet is constructed by social struggles taking place both online and offline, and it would demand the suspension (at least temporarily) of an analytical heuristic that categorises the Internet as a tool or technology alone.

Finally, though not exhaustively, Bourdieu reveals the subtle and yet powerful way in which multitudes of individual efforts and reactions combine to transform every social environment into a charged and dynamic configuration, that generates pressures and opportunities distinct from those that each participant imports from their past, and from different environments. This insight would demand highly detailed scrutiny of the experiences and contexts that individuals negotiate on the Internet, and how they shape and are shaped by these encounters.

Some of my concerns regarding the omission of sociological insights such as this, have been echoed in the reflections of additional contributors to the literature of digital inequality. For instance, Ragnedda and Muschert refer to, “the relative underemphasis of classical (sociological) theoretical perspectives among digital divide studies” (2013, p. 6). They go on to stress how surprising this is, in light of sociology's “long and fruitful tradition of studies in aspects of social inequalities” and the fact that it has “contributed to debates about stratification more than any other discipline” (2013, p. 9). Witte and Mannon also stress the need for sociological insight, when exploring digital inequality, in their assertion that:

“you're not simply typing and clicking; you're participating in a social world in which patterns of inclusion and exclusion may be observed. These patterns are of interest to sociologists, who study how individuals interact in the context of larger social structures. The norms and rules that govern social interaction do not stop when we go online, although they might be transformed. The Internet can and should be studied from a

sociological perspective because it is fundamentally a social institution.”
(2010, p. 3)

Halford and Savage also comment that while,

“it is widely recognized that digital information and communication technologies are implicated in social inequalities... there are currently only limited, even restrictive ways of exploring this interface analytically”
(2010).

They turn to insights within feminist literature and the theories of Bourdieu and Latour in order to suggest conceptual routes forward.

It is evidently recognised therefore, not only that there is a significant reserve of untapped insight that scholars of digital inequality can draw from sociology, but also that the theorisation and analysis of these inequalities, in particular, is an area ripe for development. In *Sociology in the Age of the Internet*, Cavanagh (2007) cartographs an invaluable outline of the social theoretical themes and traditions that have been deemed relevant by Internet scholars. What stands out in her overview, is the omission by Internet researchers of theoretical perspectives that fail to conform to preconceived conceptual themes, namely Internet as network, Internet as medium, Internet as technology and Internet as community. I have also argued (2016) that some social theories have held immediate appeal to researchers of the Internet because of their compatibility with explanatory metaphors such as the network, even as those that do not readily fit are neglected.

Of course, it is also necessary to recognise the challenges and limitations that face Internet Studies, as a young, deeply diverse and interdisciplinary field of inquiry. These are eloquently captured by Livingstone, in her observation that:

“this emergent field of research is, like the Internet itself, by no means a settled intellectual endeavour. Its disciplinary roots are diverse, its concepts barely formulated, its methods still experimental and its politics much contested... as a technology, the Internet demands analysis within the specialist fields of computer, technology and information sciences. But as a social phenomenon, the Internet necessarily invites analysis from any and all of sociology, political science, anthropology, psychology, economics, the arts, linguistics, cultural studies, feminist studies and, perhaps most enthusiastically claiming the Internet for its own, media and communication studies” (2010, p. 133).

The purpose in identifying omissions and oversights in this field is not to undermine or dismiss the achievements and insights that have been made within existing scholarship. Rather, it is to highlight theoretical traditions that have yet to be utilised to full advantage. Accordingly, Ragnedda and Muschert edited a special issue of the *International Journal of Communication* in 2015, explicitly

soliciting the application of Weber's theory to the field of digital inequalities. They found that:

“exploring the Weberian approach makes it possible to elucidate the roles of status and prestige hierarchies in digital participation, the influence of worldview (*Weltanschauung*) on digital participation, and the role of digital participation on individual and group life chances” (*ibid*, 2015).

In other words they affirm the need of Internet scholars research for many of the themes that Bourdieu – who is strongly influenced by Weber - elucidates most powerfully in his conceptual approach (Bourdieu *et al.*, 2011). My research process is shaped, therefore, not only by my desire to critically reconceptualise the meaning and nature of digital reputation, but also by a broader interest in exploring the use of traditional sociological theory – particularly that of Bourdieu - for the study of digital inequality and Internet Studies more broadly.

How It's Done

The study begins with a review of existing research on digital reputation (Chapter 2). This chapter argues that, while the field is beginning to develop in terms of critical analysis, it has largely erred by explaining digital reputation in terms of its intended purpose. Reputation is understood purely in terms of its ability to replicate offline reputation, and this can act to constrain the direction which researchers take. I conclude by suggesting that a reconceptualization of digital reputation's role and meaning is needed. Chapter 3 introduces three theoretical perspectives aimed to tease out elements that may hypothetically relate to the social meaning and purpose of digital reputation. The first of these is Brennan and Pettit's 2005 work “The Economy of Esteem”, which builds an analytic framework describing how esteem might function in a tacit economy, based on the evident ubiquity of the demand for esteem. I then explore Honneth's theory of recognition (2005), which offers deep and provoking insight into how our worth in the eyes of others can hold causative effects for the successful formation of subjecthood, and for our long term self-actualization. Finally, I introduce Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital (1972) as a comprehensive framework that is able to encompass both the subjective and affective components of recognition and the structural and economic features of its acquisition and distribution. These perspectives combine to illustrate some compelling social tendencies that might reasonably relate to the function and value of digital reputation. Chapter 4 deals with explaining Bourdieu's theory in full, and clarifying the precise way in which it is operationalized within my work. Chapter 5 outlines the research design, discussing the relevance of TSR as a sample, and the rationale behind deploying an ethnographic strategy in order to explore the contextual function and role of the TSR reputation system. Chapter 6 provides an overview of the function, history, management and practicalities of TSR. It also draws on a History written by TSR users between 2006 and 2010. The History is used to highlight themes and tendencies within the culture and structure of the community. Chapter 7 exclusively focuses on TSR's reputation system, analyzing the replies of users to discussion threads about the reputation system. It dwells most strongly on discussions that took place during key

moments in the history of the system, and the reactions and reflections that such changes elicited from users. These data illustrate a variety of different attitudes, experiences, uses and interpretations relating to reputation. Chapter 8 seeks to place the data on reputation within a situated context, through a Bourdieuan strategy. It provides four simple overviews of very different forums on TSR, and illustrates the cultural differences in which actions and qualities are respected and disrespected in each one. The emphasis is on classifications that each community deploys, and what these entail for the use of reputation and for inequality. Chapter 9 discusses the findings presented in Chapters 6-8 and analyses them using Bourdieu's theory. The ability and propensity of people to shape their environments through co-constructing value is explored. Finally, Chapter 10 is a summary of important findings, followed by a discussion of avenues and considerations to be taken forward.

2: How We Understand Digital Reputation

The purpose of this chapter is to summarise and engage with existing academic debate surrounding online reputation. As the previous chapter has illustrated, online reputation is an increasingly ubiquitous feature of online spaces. The acquisition and provision of online reputation holds straightforward social and political consequences, as it directs the choices and behaviour of users in various ways. Online reputation is also, necessarily unequally distributed, designed as it is to facilitate choice and to discriminate between different products, services, users and content. The possession of good reputation by an online user affords tangible benefits. Consequently, it is imperative that any person committed to understanding and reducing inequalities surrounding Internet use should be familiar with the nature, implications and practices that surround online reputation.

Included in this review are studies from a range of different academic disciplines, as well as industry professionals in sectors such as web design, online community management and law.

I begin by exploring the definitions that are used to demarcate online reputation as a research object. From here I go on to discuss the conceptual tendencies apparent in this literature with regard to the nature of online reputation. I suggest that the concepts deployed suffer from a lack of critical reflection, and have been significantly shaped by practical and industry driven design concerns. Turning to the methodologies used in this area, I find that contributions are almost exclusively deductive and quantitative in nature. I also find that discussion surrounding online reputation draws predominately upon objective data pertaining to individual behaviours and interactions with site interfaces. Research that draws on social data to investigate the subjective perspectives and lived experiences of users is wholly absent from this research.

In light of these findings, I suggest that there is a need for qualitative social research, and significant theoretical work, to explore the possibility of distinct

meanings and explanations of online reputation, and to gain richer insight into its social significance and meaning.

Finally, I draw on empirical research which emphasises the significance of social cues and signals in online environments, and the universal need for status. I do so in order to identify new research themes to investigate relating to online reputation.

Concepts of Online Reputation Research

In studying online reputation systems, researchers tend to draw upon reputation itself for conceptual grounding. Clippinger defines reputation as, “a social signal that one party conveys to a relying party to mitigate the risk of the relying party in accepting that signal” (Clippinger, 2011, p. 29). Drawing on evolutionary psychology, he suggests that reputation should be seen as arising from an ongoing social and existential struggle, in which the fostering of false or stellar reputation affords various strategic benefits (*ibid*, p. 25). He goes on to note that, “all successful social species use social roles and signals to facilitate cooperation and mitigate excessively competitive behaviours” (*ibid*, p. 26). Similarly, for Whitfield, “reputation is one of the key means through which humans defend cooperation. It allows us to incentivise and reward altruism and to deter and punish antisocial behaviour” (2011). These characterizations are instructive, as they align with the main functions that have been stressed in studies of online reputation systems. For instance, where Jøsang *et al.* define reputation as “what is said or believed about a person or thing’s character or standing”, they go on to identify the purpose of online reputation research as that of finding “online alternatives for traditional cues to trust and reputation, and [to] identify information elements suitable for deriving measures of trust and reputation” (2006). Additionally, Masum and Tovey argue that, “[online] reputation helps with decisions and also provides important ‘signals’ about users that are essential for the overall governance and maintenance of complex sociotechnical systems” (2011, p. 78).

What emerges, therefore, is a consensus that reputation is a good that confers strategic advantages on the bearer, and mitigates uncertainty and risk for the perceiver. Online reputation systems are so named because their express purpose is to recreate traditional reputation in an online setting; to create codified tools, signals and attributes with which users can acquire the necessary information to interact online without facing significant risk. Accordingly, reputation systems are designed, understood and analysed in virtue of their efficacy as ‘decision support mechanisms’ (Jøsang *et al.*, 2006).

The majority of research in this area has emerged from the fields of economics, business, management, computer science and evolutionary psychology. Most of these studies seek to inform practical concerns regarding the outcomes that reputation systems can deliver, and the optimal strategies for improving these outcomes. For example, Jøsang *et al.* argue that the purpose of reputation system research is first to find “adequate” substitutes for traditional trust and reputation

cues, and secondly to utilise web technology to create efficient mechanisms with which to implement these. This focus leads them to propose the following guiding questions for researchers of online reputation:

“...what information elements are most suitable for deriving measures of trust and reputation in a given application? How can these information elements be captured and collected? What are the best principles for designing such systems from a theoretic and from a usability point of view? Can they be made resistant to attacks of manipulation by strategic agents? How should users include the information provided by such systems into their decision process? What role can these systems play in the business model of commercial companies? Do these systems truly improve the quality of online trade and interactions” (*ibid*, 2007).

Similarly, Ba seeks to identify the configuration of social structure most effective at facilitating online trust and securing transactions (2001). His approach is to model online transactions using game theory, and he posits that communities are structurally optimal for fostering and maintaining trust, a quality that he defines as comprising reliability, predictability and fairness. Meanwhile, Bolton *et al.* experimentally contrast markets with and without online feedback mechanisms, in terms of the transaction efficiency afforded, drawing on their findings to suggest improvements to feedback system design (2004). This practical focus is also visible in research by Lampe *et al.*, who seek to identify the impact of distributed moderation (in the form of universal content rating ability) upon the quality and civility of online discussion (2014). The chief concern in this corpus, then, is to assess and enhance the efficacy of reputation system design, for the purpose of simulating traditional reputation.

Within this body of literature, therefore, an unproblematic connection is assumed between traditional reputation and online reputation. What's more, there is a stable normative consensus in terms of the goals and objectives underlying the application and creation of online reputation systems. Online reputation is deemed to be functioning optimally when it successfully replicates traditional reputation and cues. In a sense, therefore, this research paradigm can be seen as demarcated away from open critical and normative appraisal of reputation as a social and political apparatus. The question of whether or not reputation is a desirable or optimal social mechanism need not be considered by researchers in this field, as long as the uncertainty and disorder produced by its absence is perceived to be the greatest and most pertinent practical concern. In this respect, this empirical sub-strand is striking in how it differs from the thrust of wider Internet research of its time. From its early beginnings, Internet research has been beset by excessively optimistic and pessimistic evaluations (Consalvo and Ess, 2013), perhaps most significant of these: a focus on the potential of online platforms to deliver empowerment, liberty and democratization (Barlow, 1996; Rheingold, 1993; Sassi, 2001; Pigg & Crank, 2004). Conversely, within the online reputation research, it is taken as read that we want to recreate the traditional mechanism of reputation as it functions offline. At the same time, however, some of the aims and expectations expressed

by this research do rely upon basic normative assumptions. For example, reputation is feted to provide sanctions against anti-social behaviour (Lampe and Johnston, 2005) and incentives for honesty (Ba, 2001), cooperation (Dellarocas, 2003), trust (Resnick *et al.*, 2000) and engagement (Lerner and Tirole, 2010), while simultaneously curating better quality content (Lampe and Resnick, 2004; Terveen and Hill, 2001). These examples speak of an underlying optimism towards online reputation as a social good.

In sum, then, the focus of studies in this field coheres around designing reputation systems that offer accurate strategic information about unknown services, content or persons, for the purpose of facilitating trust, supporting decision-making, and fostering cooperation. To this end, studies interrogating the efficacy of reputation systems have identified a number of potential barriers to securing outcomes assumed to be optimal.

Firstly, the matter of online identity is frequently highlighted as a practical concern. In 'The Social Cost of Cheap Pseudonyms', Friedman and Resnick (1999) discuss the challenge to trust and reliability posed by the freedom of individuals to create several anonymous online identities, at little or no inconvenience and cost. In order for online reputation systems to be efficacious, individuals must be forced to face reputational consequences should they violate community norms or expectations. In order to achieve this goal, some longevity and consistency is necessary in terms of the identity an agent may take in that environment. Other actors need to have the knowledge necessary to link past wrongdoings with their protagonist in the future, in order to avoid harm, and in order to pressure the perpetrator to behave appropriately. Friedman and Resnick note, on the other hand, that fostering a culture in which only individuals with proven and identifiable records are trusted, may lead to adverse consequences for well intentioned newcomers who have yet to establish a reputation. An online equivalent, in other words, of failing to secure a loan as a result of having no credit rating. A further repercussion is that requiring consistent identification of users may lead to damaging infringements of anonymity and privacy (Ba, 2001; Terveen and Hill, 2001).

Researchers also see participation in reputation systems as a point for concern. A recurring theme is the notion that online reputation is a public good (Lerner & Tirole, 2002; Goes *et al.*, 2014). Reputation consists in a combination of markers, cues and information, which serve as an indicator to communities, of what can be expected of the user to which the reputation pertains. A significant number of reputation systems - perhaps the majority - rely upon user-generated feedback. For instance, on Slash-dot, it is the ratings that users give to posts and articles which rank the content, and act to make most available the content which is deemed desirable by the community (Lampe *et al.*, 2005). On Amazon, it is the voluntary gesture of buyers to submit reviews of products and sellers that equips future shoppers with evaluative context to support their purchasing decisions (Shen, 2009). There is a large body of users, in short, that will benefit from the public service freely provided by the choice of a minority to donate the time and attention needed to contribute to the reputation system in question. Researchers

see these 'altruistic' acts as essential for delivering an optimal and reliable measure of quality and reliability. Reputation systems of this kind are therefore undermined if too many users 'free ride' on the labour of others, without contributing to the stock of public knowledge (Lerner & Tirole, 2002). These systems are also vulnerable, should reviewers contribute or withhold content in response to some motive other than accurate description. For instance, a disappointed customer may contribute an exaggerated negative review in order to exact revenge on the retailer. Conversely, customers who have experienced poor service may refrain from submitting feedback out of a desire to evade confrontation, or as a result of some informal private settlement, thus robbing the community at large of a useful quality indicator.

However, other researchers have found that users may be motivated to voluntarily participate in generating useful content if they are rewarded by peer recognition (Lerner & Tirole, 2002). Shen (2009) observes that Amazon book reviewers strategically compete to earn the status of being a high ranked reviewer, which suggests that, on Amazon at least, sufficient incentives may be in place to motivate and reward the cultivation of reputation as a public good. Similarly Huang *et al.* find that the introduction of incentives through gamification serves to elicit contributions from users on Stack Overflow up to a point (2015). These findings suggest that participation in generating reputation need not be a concern if users are appropriately incentivized.

Researchers also found that reciprocity plays an important role in fostering participation. Sadlon *et al.* (2008) find that the most active contributors of content on Digg are motivated by reciprocal exchanging of karma on the site. In this case, the acquisition of online reputation (karma) incentivizes users to produce content, but it is their reciprocal interactions with other users that motivates them to give out karma. Similarly Lee *et al.* focus on the reciprocity of 'faving' and sharing on Twitter and Flickr (2010), noting that 'faving' the content of others can be deployed as a strategy to encourage the return of this favour in the future. They refer to research from game theory and economics, which suggests that reciprocity is important in enforcing cooperation within resource sharing systems (*ibid*, 2010). It is therefore understandable that reciprocity is drawn upon in this body of literature, as it offers continuity and consistency with the conceptual principles that reputation researchers are already relying upon.

Cooperation, order, and resource distribution are seen to be the central problems that online actors face in navigating and inhabiting online spaces. Once more, this concern aligns with classic and literal conceptions of reputation, described earlier on, which view reputation as a vital evolutionary power broker and insurer. The theoretical angle that emerges from these studies, therefore, is one that assumes online reputation to be a positive and necessary component to online practice¹, and one that needs to be supported and perfected. A further

¹ Although that is not to say that it is only research from economics, e-commerce and management which adopts an optimistic stance towards reputation systems. See Maxson and Kuraishi (2011) on how creating reputation systems aimed at informing donors can introduce more accountability and transparency in the

example of this tendency is the emphasis on reputation as a mechanism for regulation, norm enforcement and social order in online interaction. For example, Lampe *et al.* (2014) argue that the distributed moderation system (a type of reputation system) on Slashdot serves both to minimize 'information overload', and to equip users to 'enforce norms of civility'. In "Etiquette online: From nice to nasty", Preece (2004) briefly alludes to reputation systems, arguing that "schemes like [karma] provide a basis for self government in which communities determine and maintain their own etiquette standards. They encourage commitment and community service" (*ibid*, 2004). Additionally, Lampe and Johnston argue that "online communities have their own norms, values and language which new users are expected to adhere to (2005). Transgression of these expectations results in irritation from established users. New users draw on observation, past experience from other platforms, and feedback (e.g. through reputation) in order to judge appropriate behaviour" (*ibid*, 2005). Here reputation is seen as a means to reduce antisocial behaviour, such as flaming and trolling, to improve the quality of content by reducing information overload and to highlight worthy content and reward its production. It is also seen as a valuable aid to newcomers, in that it induces them into the norms and culture of their new environment. Reputation is even framed in an empowering light by Preece, as it purportedly furnishes individuals with normative self-determination in shaping the kind of community they wish to experience, and in implementing preferred values and expectations.

In keeping with this perspective, many studies draw on theories of social capital theory in order to understand online reputation. Social capital is conventionally defined as consisting in the advantages that individuals or groups are able to acquire through their social ties to others (Coleman, 1988). Resnick, a pioneer in reputation system research, characterizes social capital as "social resources, like trust and common identity..." (Resnick, 2001). Meanwhile Ganley and Lampe argue that "social capital is important as both a mechanism for governing online communities and a product of the interaction in those communities" (2009). The fact that social capital is frequently used within this area does not tell us anything that has not already been identified. The functional characteristics of online reputation (as conceived by this literature) line up perfectly with those commonly associated with the particular conception of social capital that these studies deploy. In Coleman's foundational article, "Social Capital in the Creation of Human Capital" (1988), he describes a variety of different forms that social capital takes. Among these are the material and social advantages that are afforded by the maintenance of ongoing reciprocity, and the application of norms and social sanctioning. The mechanism that produces social capital is trust itself, and Coleman details how the configuration of a social network acts to either create or dismantle social capital. In his view, networks with a degree of closure are necessary to cultivate trust. For there to be trust, it must be the case that a community can be assured that those they interact with will face penalties

charity sector. Relatedly, Steffen (2011) lays out his vision of 'attention philanthropy', in which online reputation tools can be used to accomplish social change by drawing attention to good ideas and innovations that may otherwise be overlooked.

should they violate the terms of agreements that are reached. Individuals also need to be relied upon to be present and accessible in the long term, to make good on the agreements and expectations they enter into. Each form of social capital identified relies, to a greater or lesser extent, on this 'social contract'. Although many studies of online reputation systems do not explicitly name social capital, there is a remarkable overlap between the themes and conceptual approaches they adopt, and the brief for social capital provided by Coleman. As we have already seen, trust, reciprocity, closure and norm enforcement are some of the biggest themes and models utilized to understand and enhance online reputation. In contrast to marking something new, therefore, the prevalence of social capital as an approach in studies of online reputation renders more explicit the degree to which research of online reputation is interlinked with this particular intellectual heritage.

I have alluded to the fact that the majority of studies in this field adopt a fairly functionalist approach to online reputation, in that they mostly sidestep normative and evaluative considerations in favour of emphasising social stability and regulation. It is worth noting recent changes to this pattern. Masum and Tovey's edited collection, "The Reputation Society: How Online Opinions Are Reshaping the Offline World" raises fresh considerations about online reputation in the light of changing structural conditions such as the rise of big data, increasing consolidation and corporatization of online platforms, and the increased concerns surrounding privacy (2011). As with the literature already described, many of the contributors write from a background in business and economics. However, the collection also brings together journalists, science fiction authors, lawyers, practitioners, media scholars, computer scientists and a geneticist. For the most part, the entries in this collection do not depart from the conceptual roots that define other studies of online reputation. "Real life" reputation remains the point of departure for conceptualizing online reputation, and principles of rational choice, game theory and evolutionary psychology continue to frame the way in which the practice and outcomes pertaining to online reputation are understood. However, the work does depart from prior research in that it opens up avenues for normative and evaluative critique that were largely absent hitherto.

The most significant example of this is a growing focus on the threat to privacy that online reputation systems have come to assert. In a piece called 'I hope you know this is going on your permanent record', Ashby and Doctorow write a fictional anecdote of a world in which the reputation that we accrue in one area of our lives is collated into a permanent record, accessible to the state, employers and insurance providers. They compare this hypothetical to the present and past, in which is characterized by "the fracturing of the self into disparate masks, each of them contextually appropriate" (Ashby & Doctorow, 2011, p.196). In this traditional context, people have freedom to adopt and perform different identities as they engage in different facets of their life. By contrast, however, as online reputation tools begin to converge across different platforms, we face a future where this freedom may become untenable as reputational information

begins to follow individuals into each distinct domain of their lives. As Ashby and Doctorow speculate:

“we may carry our online karma through multiple stages of our lives, the story remains resonant. Our friends may forget our sins, but Google never will. The record of our failures will be there when our grandchildren’s fingers itch for the stories we refuse to tell. Our reputations will not merely precede us, they will outlive us and everyone else who helped us establish them” (*ibid*, 2011, p. 196).

Zimmer and Hoffman concur with Ashby and Doctorow, especially on the matter of ‘contextual integrity’. This notion addresses the dangers of interpreting information outside of its intended context (2011). Zimmer and Hoffman argue that individuals are at risk, in a Web 2.0 environment, of losing control over their personal ‘information flows’. While the sharing of personal information online offers many new conveniences and advantages, individuals do not have sufficient control over the reach and consumption of their data, a phenomenon they dub ‘leakage’ (*ibid*, 2011, p. 177). Overall, therefore, there is a concern that the ongoing development of online reputation may lead to negative externalities, which outweigh the benefits of the functional improvements that they are designed to confer.

Recognising the significant impact that online reputation can exert upon individuals, Farmer (an online community design expert) raises the question of whether reputation systems should be monitored or regulated to ensure both the safety of users, and the contextual integrity of their personal information. He believes this to be especially urgent in light of the proliferation and convergence of systems such as Facebook’s ‘like’ feature, and so he asks:

“...should there be an effort to shape or identify the taxonomy of shared reputation contexts? Should there be a set of suggested practices or even requirements for calculations associated with the important real-world impact of reputation scores – e.g. a set of branded guidelines that build consumer trust in these models? In short, do we need a ‘Good Housekeeping Seal of Approval’ for reputation systems?” (2011, p. 18)

All in all, therefore, these contributions offer a challenge to some of the implicit assumptions underlying earlier research on reputation systems. The conceptualization of reputation as an informational marker that facilitates trust and cooperation online remains unchanged. Instead what is called into question is whether or not reputation systems are creating the kind of world we want to live in, as this technology continues to develop in ways that may not have been intended or anticipated.

That is not to say, however, that recent research is uniformly disenchanted with the future of online reputation. In contrast, there remain utopian assessments of the social goods that online reputation can provide. For instance, Picci suggests that reputation systems could enhance democracy, by making politics more

accessible to citizens, and allowing them to hold their leaders to account through providing publicly visible ratings (2011, p. 142). Strahilivetz addresses the fascinating context of discrimination within the US rental market. In his example, landlords rely strongly on statistical profiling and stereotyping in order to make judgements about whether or not to award tenancy. Strahilivetz observes that profiling often leads to reliable individuals being wrongly discriminated against because they happen to hold certain features in common with others who have been found to be untrustworthy in the past. He believes that integrating a reputation system into this market, would enable landlords to attain more accurate and faithful information about the reliability of prospective tenants, and would so reduce instances of unfair discrimination. Maxson and Kuraishi (2011) see reputation as a means to improve the information available to charitable donors, while also providing incentives for philanthropic organisations to improve their performance and efficiency. Charity evaluators such as GlobalGiving and GiveWell are good examples of this principle in action. Steffen (2011), meanwhile, argues for the use of 'attention philanthropy', a term he uses to describe techniques that direct attention and publicity to causes that deserve it most. Clearly, therefore, optimistic assessments of online reputation remain prominent in the literature, even as new critical accounts emerge.

Whether pessimistic or optimistic, however, there is a distinct sense that contemporary interest in online reputation is more explicitly evaluative in its focus, than earlier research seemed to be. Returning to the older and larger body of research on reputation systems, there is no question that implicit normative judgements can be found within it. Insofar as researchers assume a reputation system to be efficacious and successful when it is able to recreate offline reputation and the mechanisms and functions that surround it, they exhibit a functionalist acceptance of the status quo. By functionalist, I refer to the shape and flavor of traditional sociological accounts such as those by Parsons (1937), Durkheim (1893) and Garfinkel (1967), each of which analyse social phenomena as performing vital roles in the maintenance of social order and the facilitation of mutual cooperation and understanding. For scholars of this tradition, the most compelling question regarding social practice is the accomplishment of mutual understanding, ontological security and societal order. Scholars engaged in this project do not take it upon themselves to ask whether the social order under observation is fair, desirable or optimal qua any given human needs, values or interests other than the need for mutual understanding and mastery of the social arena in which individuals are immersed. While it is unquestionable that this focus has delivered rich accounts of the techniques, mechanisms and institutions that underpin societies and interpersonal interaction, it is equally clear that this tradition often overlooks possible alternative motivations to social practice, the conflicts and struggles found within them, and the factors that give rise to them.

By framing contemporary social life as an *accomplishment* on the part of humans, focus is directed towards risks or problems that agents and institutions have mastered, evaded or managed. That humans do cooperate, and create and recreate meaning in a collectively coherent system indicates that, on a certain level, collective life *works* and *functions*, where it otherwise might not have done.

In some ways, this perspective sets the bar very low in terms of the extent of mutual cooperation and harmony that a social cultural system might be asked to deliver. It is true that agents do exercise skill when drawing on past experiences in order to weave meaningful interpretations of the situations they encounter, and in selecting actions and representations to assert when interacting with others. However, it is also true that we can find inequity in the ability of different agents in society to secure inclusion, representation and other necessary social goods. Recognising this does not deny the insights offered by social interactionists and functionalism, however it does encourage us not to neglect further questions about the normative outcomes of modern socio-cultural systems, and the degree to which they could 'work' better.

Overall, therefore, there is a strong risk that normative considerations of alternatives that might be or might have been are excluded from analysis that results from functionalist approaches. We know that the status quo is functional, and the specifics of how it functions. We also know why it functions. But we don't know how else it might function instead, and whether the alternative may be superior. Ultimately the error is not one of inaccuracy but incompleteness. In combination with a critical agenda, this tradition can contribute to a holistic appraisal of social systems, but on its own there is the danger that such an approach, at best overlooks problematic features of social behaviour, and at worst, inadvertently entrenches or reproduces these.

Returning to online reputation research, it must be stressed that there is no direct relationship between functionalist social theories and the intellectual heritage that underpins early reputation research. At best, it can be observed that social capital theory and social network theory, both traditions that are frequently drawn upon within reputation research, do have distant roots in a school strongly influenced by Parsonian theory (Postill, 2011). Yet the function and shape of this line of thought bears close resemblance. When literature in this field defines trust as the most important problem facing online communities and services, they too embrace a low bar of expectation regarding what we might desire from online social environments. An opportunity is missed to explore questions regarding alternative meanings, experiences and needs that users might have with respect to online environments, and reputation systems in particular. Furthermore, the same risk is present, of producing an assessment of online reputation that is incomplete, and thus either inaccurate or merely partially accurate. Are online reputation and reputation truly synonymous? Is online reputation best understood as a decision support mechanism and a facilitator of trust, or are there additional functions and meanings attached to it? Drawing inspiration from sociologists such as Weber and Bourdieu, there are good grounds to believe that individuals might have needs and motivations connected to their online engagement that transcend the specified goods of cooperation, risk management and secure decision making. It is reasonable to anticipate that individuals will desire recognition, status and inclusion within their online interaction just as they will experience a need for certainty and will look for reliability in those with whom they engage. Furthermore, informational signals in co-present environments frequently have more significance and

function than merely enabling onlookers to predict the signallers' behaviour. Markers such as dress, accent or qualification act as positional goods for those who hold them, bestowing a range of different advantages, such as cultural capital and status, in addition to allowing those who interact with them to make strategic predictions of the bearers' reliability and identity. An open investigation into online reputation should therefore anticipate that online reputation may manifest qualities and functions that exceed the descriptor of a "decision support mechanism". And if this is true, then it is unduly hasty to operationalize a concept of online reputation that amounts to "reputation that is online". It is out of this concern that I am resolved to ascertain whether a reconceptualization of online reputation is needed, and if so, what adjustment or addition is needed in order to fully understand online reputation, and the systems it depends upon.

Methods of Online Reputation Research

In addition to these conceptual concerns, however, I believe there is also the need to deploy qualitative methodological strategies in order to enable a sufficiently inductive, exploratory and open-minded approach to understanding online reputation. Returning to the literature conveyed in this chapter, it becomes clear that a very specific range of research strategies have been utilized, as determined by the disciplinary background that those writing about online reputation are situated within.

Game Theory Modeling

Game theory modeling is one approach commonly used in this area. For example, Friedman and Resnick set up a model in which a fixed number of players are randomly matched in a sequence of prisoner dilemma games (2001). After each round, players have the freedom to leave, and if they do, new players enter (while keeping the total number of players the same). A history is recorded of the actions that players take under specific identities. The authors then experiment with two different conditions; one in which players may change identity for free between rounds, and one where they are required to pay an entrance fee for the first game each new identity plays. They use this model to prove that entrance fees are the best way to balance users' need for anonymity with the need to protect the community from malicious users, and to attract optimal participation and expanded membership. Another example is Ba's investigation into the role of specific community network structures for ensuring trust between strangers in an e-commerce context (2001). Ba uses game theory to demonstrate that cheaters will be disincentivised and that players will trust more readily if each participant is a member of a community that will both sanction cheating, and act as a guarantor in terms of compensating for any harm or loss that a member of their community visits upon a trade partner.

In both cases, the nature of the research problem is settled prior to the deployment of formal testing. The studies offer us clarification of the likely behaviour of individuals in very specific circumstances where trust and honest

interaction is required between strangers, but leave no room for the possibility that online reputation measures - in this case traceable player history, and identifiable community membership – might serve different purposes than trust, and may thus generate additional, unanticipated incentives and stakes for players.

Experimental Research

Several researchers employ experimental research designs. For instance, Lampe and Garrett explore the issue of striking the right balance between the supposed user burden of providing rating or feedback, and the necessary level of complexity needed to ensure rating accuracy and reliability. The authors focused on the non-profit news rater 'Newstrust', and administered an online exercise to 418 respondents, recruited from MoveOn.org and MediaChannel.org. Participants were randomly assigned one of two versions of a news article, a summarized version and an in depth version. They were also randomly assigned one of four different rating tools with which to rate. These were described as 'mini', 'normative', 'descriptive' and 'full', with the different tools varying in terms of which questions participants needed to answer and how many questions were included. The authors found that ratings that included more complexity in terms of the number and nature of questions asked led to more accurate ratings that the participants also saw as most indicative. In another example of experimental work, Bolton *et al.* explore the importance of the information available to buyers and sellers online by recruiting University students to compete for cash in one of three different types of market, defined as 'strangers', 'feedback' and 'partners' markets. In the strangers market, players have no reputational information about others. In the partners market, players are provided with information and have played previous games with the same partner for several rounds. In the feedback market, players are given some reputational information about their partners. While the feedback market was the most efficient of the three, the authors found that it suffered from a public goods issue, in terms of incentivizing players to provide reputational history about others. (For more examples of experimental studies of online reputation, see: Sakamoto, Ma, & Nickerson, 2009 and Wanas, El-Saban, Ashour, & Waleed, 2008.)

As with the use of game theory modelling, experimental research of this kind is valuable in identifying features of environment and design that determine whether online reputation fulfils its designated purpose. This approach is less useful, however, in fulfilling an exploratory function, because researchers have to draw upon specific interpretations about what reputation is, and how it might function, in order to design effective experiments. Experimental research enables researchers to test a small number of variables, so long as other features are kept constant. In judging which features to hold constant, and which to vary, researchers deploy judgement, and act upon presuppositions regarding the nature and function of online reputation. Experimental research is therefore of limited use for the purpose of generating a comprehensive understanding of online reputation as a social mechanism.

Quantitative empirical research: Data Mining, Surveys and SNS

More naturalistic empirical approaches frequently used by researchers of online reputation include various data mining techniques, social network analysis, surveys and interviews.

For example, Sadlon *et al.* explore the function of reciprocity for shaping 'karma' on Digg, an online news consolidator. Over a three month period, the researchers gathered all story submissions on Digg, as well as details of poster identity, the time of submission, the number of diggs (amount of reputation) received and the times at which the diggs were made. From this data, the authors randomly sampled 94,441 and 42,625 distinct users. Their analysis suggested that an elite group of Digg users secured the most popularity and status for their submissions, largely through the mutual reciprocation of digging. Similarly, Shen (2009) records the fiction titles released on Amazon over a two month period, also noting sales ranking and price. He then records information of the reviews each title receives, the names of reviewers and the time that reviews are submitted, as well as the specific ratings each review receives. He follows reviewers' profiles in order to chart changes in their rank and the amount of reviews they have published. Shen's quantitative analysis reveals patterns which suggest that those reviewers who secured the highest ranking in the community, were those who had exhibited rational strategies in terms of the titles they chose to review. This, for Shen, offered clear evidence of the importance of status and attention pursuit in driving practices surrounding Amazon's reviewer rating system. Cavusoglu, Li, and Huang (2015) also used data scraping to explore the impact of badges on user contributions on StackOverflow. Reviewing activity between 2008 and 2012, the authors sampled 354,029 users - eliminating those with low activity, or less than 1 year of site membership - and filtered the sample according to a basic threshold of reputation compatible with basic levels of activity. The authors introduced four categories of behaviour: 'asking', 'answering', 'revising' and 'commenting'. From here the researchers analysed 27 different badge categories in use on StackOverflow, and compared the activity of users who had earned a badge with the activity of a control sample who had not earned a badge, in order to gauge any changes in behaviour. This was supplemented with analysis of aggregate sitewide data on the badges attained and different activity levels. The authors conclude that "badges have both economically and statistically significant impacts on encouraging user participation and continuous engagement" (*ibid*, 2015). Also employing data scraping techniques, Lee *et al.* conduct a social network analysis in order to explore the role of reciprocity in the giving and receiving of 'faving' and 'retweeting' on Flickr and Twitter (2010). Drawing on publicly available datasets from each site, the authors trace the path of content transmission through constructing a network of nodes (users) who either directly share content (retweeting) or raise its visibility through faving. The authors used data on per-user faving, reciprocation between pairs of users, and time stamps associated with these actions. They go on to question whether the action of faving is a genuine reflection of the opinions users have towards content, or whether - instead - it may be influenced by social obligations such as

that of reciprocity. Their network analysis allows the authors to confirm the significance of reciprocity in motivating faving, and to emphasise different functions to this form of reputation beyond that of simply expressing evaluative judgement. Instead, "faving and following actions in addition of communicating appreciation becomes this way an action for promoting content, and thus can have both psychological and practical benefits for the receiver" (*ibid*, 2010).

What stands out in each example is the kind of data researchers gathered in order to test their theories. Data scraping as a technique is amenable both to qualitative and quantitative analysis, as well as to both deductive and inductive inquiry strategies. However, the approach favoured by researchers in this literature tend to be exclusively quantitative and deductive. Researchers derive their hypotheses from related (quantitative) literature. After this step, they focus exclusively on behavioural and objective data about users, almost exclusively focusing on information that users do not purposively generate, or deploy for self expression. For example, the time of particular posts and interactions, the number of posts users have made, and the amount of reputation they acquire over time.

The purpose of this observation is not to deny the value of analysing this information. Instead it is to problematise the exclusion of data that does directly clarify the meanings that users associate with online reputation. Some of this meaning is indirectly made available through quantitative data analysis. For instance, as shown earlier, Shen is able to discern that status motivates the practices of Amazon reviewers, without directly interacting with these reviewers, or observing them discussing reviewing among each other. Nevertheless, there are straightforward reasons to believe that direct social research would offer further relevant information about online reputation to researchers in this field. Both Facebook and Twitter have recently made significant changes to their online reputation systems. Twitter changed the faving symbol to a heart, while Facebook added a range of moods to choose between when reacting to a post, to complement the longstanding 'like' feature. In each case, the changes were widely reported in global media outlets, and lively discussion emerged across both platforms and many others besides (such as the comments features facilitated on news websites). It seems very likely that users of many other websites and platforms will also have participated in debate and discussion surrounding reputation systems, given the widespread existence of designated forums and site sections that explicitly elicit discussion, feedback and questions relating to website design and functionality. Given these facts, it is both surprising and concerning that researchers of online reputation have taken no steps to incorporate data from users into their research. Data scraping would be equally appropriate for acquiring data of this kind. Search tools can be used to identify threads with titles relating to a site's native reputation form, and also to identify explicitly relevant posts. In failing to consider user perspectives, online reputation research is one sided, and therefore restricted.

Regrettably, the other empirical approaches frequently used in this field suffer from the same oversight. Looking at survey research, for instance, Lampe and

Johnstone (2005) surveyed 233 members of SlashDot as part of their investigation into the role of reputation in educating new users into site norms regarding appropriate participation. Their survey asked users to clarify their level of computing expertise, their academic attainment, and their past experiences with other internet forums. Lampe and Johnstone combined this data with server data logs for 11,000 new users, their activity levels and their reputation rank, demonstrating that reputation acts alongside the viewing patterns of new users, and the responses they receive to their posts in shaping participation outcomes. Therefore, where their chosen method could have been used to ask open questions about the meaning of reputation and the experiences people associate with it, instead they only sought demographic information from users directly, and used descriptive behavioural data and their preconceived theoretical model to draw conclusions about the function of online reputation. While the authors acknowledged the need for qualitative research in this field, their focus was acknowledged to be pragmatic; guided by an interest in assisting online community managers in their goal of retaining new users. This goal, combined with their chosen strategy, precluded opportunities to identify unanticipated aspects to online reputation.

Drawing on another example, when Lampe, Resnick and Johnston (2007) asked Slash Dot users, via survey, whether these users believed the site's moderation tool to be effective in reflecting worthy content, respondents answered in the affirmative. This study is unusual in that it did seek to incorporate the perspectives of users with respect to online reputation. Their study falls short, however, of indicating the entirety of Slash Dot users' beliefs and experiences surrounding reputation, partly because the survey elicits opinions on a very specific aspect of reputation, namely its role in providing evaluative information regarding site content. The assumption, held by the researchers, that reputation primarily serves its intended function is integrated into their research design, and it demarcates the questions they consider asking users. There are only a narrow array of responses available to survey participants, who might have to select from multiple choice options, interact with likert scales, or who may not see room in the content of specific questions to opine on different aspects to reputation, even if the survey provides text boxes. Furthermore, surveys necessarily act to either plant or elicit particular interpretations from the minds of participants, or to weight these interpretations over others. This outcome is necessary, because if researchers' first contact with participants is through a survey, they have no surety that respondents were thinking along the same lines, prior to reading survey questions, and being encouraged by these questions to view the phenomenon through a particular lens. Analogous to the use of data scraping, then, researchers favour quantitative epistemological strategies when appropriating survey methods. It is plausible that surveys could be fruitfully deployed as part of a qualitative and exploratory research design, but to date, online reputation researchers have not exploited this opportunity.

Overall, the empirical approaches described here offer clear advantages when compared to studies exclusively reliant on game theory or experimental methods. Researchers are able to make use of the significantly large datasets

available through data mining, and the data they gather reflects natural behaviours of actors, as they respond to real reputation systems, rather than that of hypothetical actors, or solicited research participants. This increases the extent to which researchers are positioned to identify practices or mechanisms connected to reputation that may not have been anticipated through the more deductive and theory led strategies of game theoretical modelling and experimentation.

Nevertheless, there are still significant limitations in relying upon quantitative research designs as an exclusive empirical strategy for understanding reputation and its effects. As demonstrated in this section, although the quantitative data drawn upon in this literature reveals objective information about users' behaviour, they are suboptimal when it comes to identifying the underlying meanings, experiences and beliefs that users have regarding online reputation. While this weakness could be moderated if researchers of online reputation were to retain a quantitative research design, but begin to gather data from users directly, either through surveys or analysing post content, there are further limitations that would still apply. Firstly, quantitative methods are not amenable to lengthy and complex data, such as that which users might produce if given complete freedom to articulate their thoughts and experiences regarding reputation. Second to this, quantitative analysis requires very precise inputs, which necessarily require a researcher to impose strict judgements, at the offset, as to how the concept they are investigating should be operationalised, and which variables should be included in the research design. Although it is possible to arrive at possible alternative meanings and uses of online reputation using *a priori* reasoning, if such considerations had not occurred to a researcher, then deploying a quantitative approach would do very little to problematise what was taken for granted. In the previous section on the conceptual principles running through this literature, I demonstrated that reputation researchers satisfy themselves with a functional explanation of online reputation, and tend to operate within the perimeters of existing traditional descriptions of reputation. I now suggest that this tendency is directly (although not exclusively) related to the methodologies that have been employed in this area. While pragmatic research objectives, such as the desire to inform design and management strategy, leave little room for open ended critical consideration, it is also likely that overreliance on deductive and quantitative techniques acts to insulate researchers of online reputation from its wider social connotation and appropriation.

Assuming that it is worthwhile to question the full social meaning of online reputation, then there are clear incentives for deploying qualitative research strategies to this end. Qualitative methods sacrifice the statistical significance and generalisability offered by quantitative research, but in its place they offer significant gains in nuance and depth. They also encourage inductive approaches to theory building, and allow researchers more flexibility with respect to modifying the direction and focus of research in response to field discoveries. Qualitative research is historically associated with an epistemological and ethical commitment to reflecting the 'lived experiences' of participants, and to vigilant

epistemic modesty. A qualitative approach to researching online reputation would draw on detailed, textual and in-depth social data from users. It would also incorporate the perspectives of users into theory building, and research design. Data derived from users of online reputation systems may confirm the conceptual assumptions prevalent within academic and professional discussion surrounding reputation, but it would also better serve to identify additional elements that have been overlooked or inadequately examined. This advantage is afforded by the fact that qualitative researchers seek out and invest time in more rich and detailed accounts from participants than that which is practically achievable within quantitative methodological constraints. They also allow more freedom to respondents in terms of directing and framing the interpretation that is crafted through the research process. For this reason, I will utilise a qualitative research strategy in order to initiate a remedy to the shortcomings and simplifications that I have identified in this chapter. This strategy will be fully outlined in the forthcoming methods chapter.

Altogether, while there is a healthy academic and professional interest in online reputation systems, existing research contributions exhibit certain methodological and conceptual biases and limitations. Conceptually, researchers are guided by practical interests in terms of design and utility. This concern brings with it a tendency to analyse online reputation with reference to its performance in delivering the functional goals intended for it by its designers. Perceiving online reputation through the perspective of online community managers and designers omits the experiences and perspectives of users who interact and appropriate reputation as part of their daily practice. The research community exhibits a further tendency to draw an unproblematic relationship between traditional theories of offline reputation, and the nature and meaning of its online counterpart. This tendency imposes limitations on the scope of theorization surrounding online reputation, both through assuming the nature of online reputation to be given, and by foreclosing any open investigation into the various mechanisms, uses and effects of reputation beyond the perimeters deemed to be relevant.

The literature pertaining to online reputation also neglects to scrutinize the theoretical roots of the conceptual apparatuses that it imports. These roots lie predominantly in rational choice models of practice, and evolutionary psychology. Together, these perspectives act to stress the functional benefits of reputation as a social mechanism. In failing to critically reflect on the normative implications of traditional reputation, researchers import the notion wholesale as a basis for practical and theoretical orientations to online reputation. This results in a consensus regarding the social value of online reputation, and with regard to the projected vision of online society that is endorsed. Not only does the prevalent notion of online reputation err in its critical and normative function, but also in its explanatory power. In assuming a straightforward link between traditional and online reputation, researchers and practitioners leave little room for exploring the specific properties that define online spaces, and the practices which arise within them. The consequence of this oversight is that not enough attention is given to the possibility of alternative functions, properties

and meanings that may be associated with online reputation, as defined by the context in which it is defined, appropriated and deployed.

These limitations are compounded by an exclusive reliance on deductive and quantitative research strategies. Many contributions to the literature are theoretical rather than empirical, and those which employ empirical methods draw almost exclusively upon objective, behavioural and quantitative data rather than considering the social data that would convey the subjective and phenomenological experiences of users.

It is evident, therefore, that there is benefit to be gained in supplementing this literature with research of a more qualitative and critical quality.

The What and Why of a New Direction.

What, however, of the implication that runs through this chapter, of an alternative explanation of online reputation? How can I claim so confidently that online reputation is more than reputation, as conventionally defined? I refer to two *a priori* considerations that support this assumption. The first concerns the importance of social cues for digital practice, and the research relating to this. The second concerns the motivation of status, and research depicting the patterns surrounding its pursuit.

Traditional reputation theory acknowledges the status of reputation as a specific kind of social cue; defined by being difficult or impossible to fake, and by its content; specifically, consisting in information of an individual's past conduct in order to gauge their likely behaviour in the future. However there are many other evident processes that social cues are tied to, as much online as offline, if not more so. For instance, Tajfel and Turner's famous research on social identity demonstrates the role of cues in determining in-group and out-group formation (1986). Their insight is found to apply to online interactions in experimental research by Erturk and Pena (2012). Meanwhile Walther initiated research into the importance of cues for shaping successful interpretation of messages and interpersonal impression formation (1992). Furthermore, Ellison, Lampe and Steinfield demonstrate the importance of profile personalization on Facebook (particularly profile pictures) in determining how successful users are in securing friends and building social capital (2007). These examples demonstrate that there are good grounds for hypothesizing that online reputation, as a visible cue, may serve more functions than that of providing reputation, and in doing so – may hold different meaning, and play a part in different mechanisms to those emphasized in the literature.

Distinct from, but related to, the themes of research on digital social cues is the example of social status. In a thorough, interdisciplinary, empirical review of social status, Anderson *et al.* argue that the desire for it is a fundamental and universal human motive (2015). Their claim rests on the existence of ubiquitous affective, cognitive and behavioural patterns. Humans demonstrate vigilant monitoring of status dynamics particular to their context. They go to great effort to appear socially valuable, and they seek out environments that afford them

higher status. Furthermore, they react strongly when status is threatened or diminished. The authors also gather evidence that social and self-esteem directly depend on status, and that both physical and mental health are impacted by it. Especially relevant were findings which documented the level of sensitivity that humans exhibit with relation to status differences, and symbols and markers that reflect these differences. For example, children from a young age express distress if an adult provides slightly unequal amounts of orange juice. Meanwhile in another study, identically ranked managers in a company were provided with identical offices, with the exception that one office had a two pen set on its desk rather than the single pen desk set present in the other offices. This difference prompted struggles by the participants, who quickly found ways to ensure that they had secured the same kinds of desk sets as each other. Overall, the review demonstrated that individuals are very attentive to any distinguishing features that mark people out from each other, which has clear implications for thinking about online reputation.

3: Reputation, Recognition and Esteem

Introduction

In the last chapter, I demonstrated that existing concepts of online reputation suffer from a narrow, instrumental and insufficiently critical perspective as a result of foundational assumptions regarding the character and function of online reputation. Most importantly, I propose that reputation is not the only salient feature characteristic of online reputation. Although online reputation does, indeed, act as a source of reputation within online spaces, it also functions not only as marker of status, but a mechanism for the consolidation and delineation of status.

To illustrate my meaning, I devote this chapter to exploring a constellation of concepts pertaining to status, from different disciplinary perspectives. The aim is to demonstrate how issues surrounding status are applicable to online reputation, and also to establish the theoretical groundwork for a reconceptualization of online reputation.

To begin with, I discuss Pettit and Brennan's bold account of 'The Economy of Esteem' (2005). Here, Pettit and Brennan lay out the logical, *a priori* grounds for believing that an economy of esteem operates throughout society. They also offer useful commentary regarding the distinctions and homologies between the family concepts, status, recognition and esteem. Together with the empirical findings on status pursuit from the previous chapter, there are compelling grounds to accept that the pursuit of and demand for status is sufficiently ubiquitous as to warrant close attention within all contexts of social practice and interaction. I then turn to social theory to explore the pragmatic reasons for the centrality of status, and also the position of status within societal configurations of agency and structure; in other words, the distribution of power. From here, I

comment on what we might reasonably expect to be true of online reputation in the light of this theoretical corpus, and discuss its significance.

Reputation or Esteem?

From an economic and political philosophy perspective, Brennan and Pettit construct a relatively behaviourist account of esteem, and its character as an attitudinal good within society. By this I mean that the authors emphasise observable behaviour, and dwell lightly on inner psychological experience. Esteem, for Brennan and Pettit, is understood as "...the positive asset of approbation and the negative liability of disapprobation" (2005, p. 3). It is important for Brennan and Pettit, that esteem is distinguished from reputation, as "esteem may accrue to someone who is not re-identifiable – someone who lacks a recognizable name or face – whereas reputation presupposes re-identifiability" (*ibid*, 2005, p. 3). In addition to the absence of the need for historical context, the authors hold that esteem cannot be reduced to reputation, because it is desired intrinsically, rather than because of the goods it can be exchanged for. Accordingly, "we seek esteem and shrink from disesteem among people we are very unlikely to meet again; we even seek esteem or shrink from disesteem among those who will live after our time and whom we will never meet. It is hard to see how this could make sense if esteem had no value for us other than as a means of securing consumption goods" (*ibid*, 2005, p. 4).

Essential to Brennan and Pettit's claim, is the universality of the desire for esteem. To this end, the authors begin by identifying derivative reasons that would render esteem reliably valuable to individuals in any social context. Esteem secures the cooperation and goodwill of other actors towards an individual, and reduces the likeliness of others interfering with, or resisting that individual's efforts. In this, esteem shares similar value to that attributed by evolutionary psychologists to reputation. However, Brennan and Pettit also see esteem as a necessary prerequisite for self-esteem, noting that it provides individuals with feedback on how well they are living up to cultural standards and expectations. Individuals supposedly share in these social values and standards, and therefore, their own judgement with respect to their self is sensitive to this rating. Accordingly Brennan and Pettit assert that, "given the ubiquity of the pragmatic and evidentiary concerns mentioned, it is plausible that no matter what else a person desires... those desires will tend to be well served by the enjoyment of esteem" (*ibid*, 2005, p. 29). But the authors also point to evidence of the intrinsic, anthropological attraction of esteem. Examples provided include the fact that we experience anxiety over disesteem from people we will never see again, and those we will never meet. We also value being held in good esteem by people whose opinions and values we do not share, and thus would not be likely to refer to for self-affirmation. Another example that supports the universality of a desire for esteem is the biological imperative to reproduce, and to signal evolutionary fitness. However, the authors correctly note that it is not necessary to defend a claim to biological hardwiring in order to demonstrate that an economy of esteem is in operation. It suffices to identify the

character and prevalence of distinct patterns of supply and demand in connection to esteem. And thus, after defending the existence of a universal desire for esteem, the second essential pillar of their argument is found in the scarcity of esteem.

The availability of esteem is limited first and foremost by the aforementioned evaluative and comparative quality pertaining to it. It is not sufficient for an individual to perform well in a given domain valued by others. Instead they must also prove themselves to be outstanding in that domain, when compared to the performance of others. This means that there is competition for esteem that leads to individuals engaging in efforts to increase their ability to attract esteem, and to modify their behaviour in order to avoid disesteem. This introduces an additional distinction from reputation. Theoretically there is no limit to how many actors could secure a 'good' reputation. In the context of online exchanges of products, services or expertise, the strong performance of one actor does not have to come at the expense of the reputation of another. For example, if I am buying a second hand book on Amazon, and ten out of thirty sellers offering the book have 100% five star ratings, this in no way undermines my belief that each of these highly rated sellers will provide a reliable and satisfactory service. Similarly, if long-standing members of a forum enjoy a good reputation for giving good, knowledgeable advice, their reputation is not diminished by the existence of other members who perform similarly well. By contrast, the comparative component to esteem means that this attitude is only elicited if the esteem seeker outperforms their peers within the domain in question. For this reason, Brennan and Pettit characterize esteem as a directive attitude (*ibid*, 2005, p. 16), as it motivates individuals to modify their behaviour in order to stand out. Brennan and Pettit point to the manifest existence of practices oriented towards supplying and demanding esteem to affirm their claim to an *economy* of esteem.

Brennan and Pettit are very quick to acknowledge logical contradictions that challenge the concept of an esteem economy. Most pertinent of these is the fact that esteem, by definition, defies commodification because it is unalienable from the specific, substantive evaluative judgements of particular actors. To trade esteem for some other good, or to provide a good in order to elicit the bestowing of esteem, would immediately rob esteem of its character and value. An individual who is seen to perform well in a particular domain with the direct motivation of eliciting esteem, will instead disqualify themselves from sincere esteem. Similarly, an agent that seems in any way insincere in their gift of esteem will deter consumers, who recognize that esteem can only stand them in good stead with their audience if it is known to be truthful. Furthermore, consumers can also only base their self-esteem on the esteem granted to them by others if they believe it to be authentic (*ibid*, 2005, p. 38). Brennan and Pettit resolve this contradiction by arguing that the supply and demand of esteem mostly rely upon virtual rather than actual transactions (*ibid*, 2005, p. 41). In this view, individuals are mostly motivated by unrelated factors such as social norms and cultural values, which happen to simultaneously secure the esteem related transaction that is advantageous to the individual. One example they provide is that of an academic supplying esteem to another by writing a favourable review of their

latest work. In providing this service, the reviewer is likely to benefit from goodwill and some equivalent reciprocation on the part of the reviewee at some future point. However, the fact that this collaboration serves interests separate to the expression of support and respect by the reviewer does not mean that the reviewer is conscious, or mindful of the fact. The reviewer can therefore supply genuine and sincere esteem to the reviewee in good faith. The same is true for the case of esteem demand. An individual is best able to secure esteem when experiencing some other concern as their primary motive for action. The reason that these examples do not undermine Brennan and Pettit's portrayal of esteem as directive in character is that it relies on the function of virtual controllers.

A virtual controller only comes to the fore in circumstances where the desired esteem transaction is no longer served by the pursuit of distinct aims and motives. For example, while the reviewer might be perfectly sincere in her admiration for her friend's work, if she perceives that the friend does not similarly respect and esteem her, she might feel that her overtures and affective dispositions were not appropriately appreciated, and respond by scaling down the attention she gave to this friend, while investing more effort in other friends who seemed more compatible. This would be an example of the virtual controller kicking in. While there would be no need for a conscious concern for esteem exchange if the transaction were to be successful, some intervention would be needed in order to direct the reviewer's efforts elsewhere, if she was engaging in activity that did nothing to secure the goods she was using the esteem economy to secure. Similarly, an individual who is virtually rather than actively pursuing esteem might genuinely enjoy playing a particular sport. But if they were insufficiently esteemed in their performance, they would likely experience feelings that would either result in deliberation over how to alter their performance in order to secure the respect of others, or a choice to withdraw the stakes they held in the activity, and find some other pursuit to attend to instead.

Overall, then, Brennan and Pettit demonstrate that esteem can effectively shape and direct practice in ways that are not always transparent or direct. When considered in the light of both demand scarcity, and the manifest ubiquity of its demand, this offers strong grounds for believing it necessary to inquire into its precise function within any social context. Brennan and Pettit also make the case for distinguishing between reputation and esteem. While these two qualities bear some similarities in their value, such as the function they perform in securing goodwill and cooperation for those who hold them, they cannot be reduced to one another. It is not necessary to have established a history of appropriate conduct in order to elicit esteem. Meanwhile, good reputation can be shared by a potentially infinite number of actors, whereas esteem is finite, and affected by the degrees to which individuals evince certain desirable traits.

These insights have clear implications for how we might consider online reputation. Where existing research focuses on the instrumental concerns that are facilitated by reputation systems - such as security, cooperation, and the matching of users to service providers of good faith - it is clear that users may additionally be motivated to compete for esteem, rather than remaining satisfied

by securing enough trust from others to satisfy these pragmatic needs. Failure to consider the role of esteem not only leaves researchers of online reputation at risk of reductionism, but also renders them susceptible to oversight and error. Brennan and Pettit's theory of the esteem economy is therefore a significant first step towards a rigorous reconceptualization of online reputation.

Nevertheless, their account is hardly complete. Primarily this is because the theory is designed with a distinct problem in mind - that of establishing the existence of an economy based on esteem. However, even allowing for this, Brennan and Pettit refrain from interrogating the affective and phenomenological properties that undergird the directivity attributed to esteem. Their approach is behaviourist in the sense that they resist any reference to inner subjective states, and ground their concepts in those features that are manifest in behaviour and outward expression. Brennan and Pettit lay the ground for identifying in the practices surrounding online reputation, an interest in competing for esteem. They are not, however, able to support a phenomenological appreciation for the affective relationship that individuals may have towards online reputation, and the meanings that they attach to it.

To move towards a deeper understanding of the subjective significance of online reputation, I therefore propose engaging with the recognition theory of Axel Honneth (1995). This is, admittedly, a controversial move, because of the seeming incompatibility between the concept of recognition as it is understood in Honneth's tradition, and the concept of esteem. The authors concerned would not hesitate to assert the incommensurability of their concepts with those of the other. Brennan and Pettit, who explicitly reference Honneth, and also Taylor (1992), conceive of recognition as the attitude of deeming an individual to be a proper subject *qua* a particular evaluative concern (*ibid*, 2005, p. 185). The authors recognize that individuals may enjoy recognition in some domains while suffering its absence in others, something they illustrate through the example of a woman who may enjoy recognition for her beauty and company, while simultaneously finding that her opinions on political issues are overlooked and ignored. However, within a particular domain, they characterize reputation as relatively binary in nature. One is either deemed deserving of recognition, and perceived as a relevant agent within that context, or one is not. In their words, "the distinguishing feature of recognition is a preparedness to register performance if one observes it. Recognition simply involves the presumption that the other, whoever she may be, is a moral equal" (*ibid*, 2005, p. 189). This is to be contrasted against esteem, which can be held in many degrees based on comparative and evaluative judgments of where the esteemed individual stands in relation to others *vis-à-vis* the domain concerned. Brennan and Pettit also argue that recognition is not affected by scarcity, and that it is therefore different from esteem in terms of its relation to any market. Recognition, they argue, is sheltered under the esteem economy concept, because of the frequent overlap between efforts to secure both recognition and esteem. But recognition remains a subsidiary within this market, because of its vicarious function; a derivative relation that is located in how it serves as a prerequisite to any successful esteem driven pursuit. This belief is illustrated in their claim that, "people who have very

low recognition, or think they do, will, if they aspire to esteem, have reason to seek attention even if in that instance the attention does not generate esteem. Attention can be an investment in recognition... This recognition is sought, we think, because of the future esteem it promises. Certainly, no esteem can accrue without it" (*ibid*, 2005, p. 187).

If I accept Brennan and Pettit's characterization of recognition, then it would certainly pose a problem for seeking to relate recognition and esteem to one another as part of a single explanatory initiative (with respect to online reputation). Fortunately, however, I do not. After outlining Honneth's position, I will discuss the elements in which he is mistaken about his own theory, which overextends itself by reducing too many components under the umbrella of recognition. In particular, this can be seen with the features in Honneth's account of recognition that align with the notion of esteem. Concomitantly, I also suggest that Brennan and Pettit are susceptible to overstating the absolute distinction between recognition pertaining practice and esteem because of their need to construct analytic demarcation around esteem, for the purposes of their market model. I will therefore reclaim certain insights from these two approaches while discarding those features that are not relevant, in order to clarify how they may both inform a coherent conceptual heuristic for understanding online reputation.

Honneth's Recognition

As one of the most prominent third generation representatives of the Frankfurt School, and a former pupil of Jürgen Habermas', Axel Honneth unsurprisingly retains a concern for the normative potential supposedly inscribed in intersubjective communication. Drawing influence from the humanist components in Marx's thought, the Frankfurt School has historically concerned itself with generating critical theory capable of facilitating emancipation in addition to mere explanation (Baert, 1998, p. 134). Where first generation Frankfurt School members, such as Adorno and Horkheimer (1973), were deeply pessimistic about the rise of instrumental reason seen to accompany modernity, Habermas – embodying the second generation - sought to reclaim the ethical status of reason and rationality, through his theory of communicative action. Habermas holds that humans exhibit a universal species-interest in fostering mutual understanding, which he draws upon as the basis for a deliberative procedure of discourse ethics, which might reconcile the contradictions between the cultural, creative features of the 'life world', on the one hand, and the instrumental and utilitarian orientation of the 'system world' on the other (Habermas, *Towards a Theory of Communicative Action: Lifeworld and System: A Critique of Functionalist Reason*, 1987). Representing the third generation, Honneth retains an interest in drawing on the notion of an underlying drive towards intersubjective interaction as a basis for social moral grounding. However, Honneth expresses concern regarding Habermas' exclusive emphasis on public deliberation within the public sphere, believing that this perspective cannot capture experiences of suffering or injustice that have yet to manifest cognitive and or political representation, and thus be amenable to public deliberation (Basaure, 2013, p. 216). Thus, Honneth seeks to broaden critical theory's understand of the phenomenology of social suffering, and sets about

extending Hegel's early philosophy in order to elaborate a model of recognition relations that can capture this missing affective dimension, while also outlining a procedural anchor for the ethical life of society.

Honneth particularly draws on Hegel's (1977) belief in the human prerequisite of interaction with distinct autonomous subjects for the arrival at self-consciousness of one's own agency. Positioning himself in contrast to Hobbes, Hegel believes that man's state of nature not only involves struggle for material interests, but also normative struggles for recognition, which take on different forms (Hegel, 1820).

Honneth proceeds by integrating psychoanalytic and pragmatic principles of subject formation into the substantive core of his theory of recognition. His aim is to furnish recognition with a fundamental and primal causal role in the construction of agency, and accordingly to position the reciprocal relationship of recognition as a causal prerequisite to both the self esteem and self actualization of individuals, and their ability to respect, affirm and enable the same in others.

From the pragmatism of Mead, Honneth draws on the concepts of the *I/Me* distinction and the *Generalised Other*. For Mead, 'I' represents our outward facing subjectivity, the disposition and attitude needed for self-expression and for the claim to self-actualization and acceptance from the community around us (1934). The 'Me' represents the inward facing component of subjectivity, and is fashioned by our self-objectification, which we achieve with reference to our model of how others perceive us, which we are able to intuit through awareness of our own objectification of others. This modeled objective perspective is strongly dependent on the 'Generalised Other', Mead's term for the medium through which we perceive, approximately, the values, expectations and other salient mental properties of agents distinct from us. It is crucial to Mead that subjectivity cannot emerge without this reciprocal, intersubjective process of shared meaning and definition. We learn who and what we are only through our understanding of what and who others around us are. Honneth views this as clear grounds for recognizing the primacy of recognition for the development of complete, and morally competent agents. This ontological notion acts as an ideal type that reflects Honneth's optimism with regard to a supposed, underlying desire for mutual understanding, which he shares with Habermas.

Implicit in Honneth's thought, regarding the importance of recognition throughout the formation of subjectivity, is the idea that recognition holds within it the key to resolving societal division. This is well illustrated in the following statement:

"One is capable of 'asserting' oneself... only if, instead of taking the perspective of the existing collective will, one can take the perspective of an expanded community of rights. The ideal 'me' thus erected, provides one, in spite of the break with the community, with the inter-subjective recognition without which one cannot maintain a sense of personal identity. But because the impulsiveness of the 'I' cannot be stilled, it

introduces an element of normative idealization into all social practices. In defending their spontaneously experienced demands, subjects have no option but to secure acceptance, again and again, from a counterfactually posited community that grants them greater freedom, as compared to the established relations of recognition.” (Honneth, 1995, p. 83)

Evident in this characterization is the fact that Honneth sees in humans the creative and spontaneous tendency to fashion, and push towards, alternative normative ideals to those delivered by their existing social environment. This is especially true for groups or individuals who are denied recognition by those around them, and indeed, Honneth views the moral suffering caused by a denial or withholding of recognition as a principle mechanism in the mobilization and catalyzing of political struggles. He explains this by asserting that “the reproduction of social life is governed by the imperative of mutual recognition, because one can develop a practical relation-to-self only when one has learned to view oneself, from the normative perspective of one’s partners in interaction, as their social addressee” (*ibid*, 1995, p. 92). When individuals or groups are consigned to a distorted and negative relation-to-self, they have no choice but to strive for an expansion of recognition criteria, and the extension of cultural value horizons. This predicament and the struggle it inspires is sufficiently ubiquitous as to drive constant, if gradual, social development. This instills, in Honneth’s account, a teleology of continually expanding liberties within modern democratic societies (McNay, 2008, p. 135).

Honneth supplements Mead’s account with psychoanalytic principles, drawn from Winnicott’s object-relations theory (Winnicott, 1965). After this perspective, Honneth suggests that initial relations between mother and infant are of critical importance in securing the healthy accomplishment of subject formation². It is believed that humans begin life with no phenomenological experience of ‘self’ independent from the vicarious agency of which the mother is conduit. Similarly, the mother experiences her child as an extension of herself. Honneth claims that in order for infants to acquire a healthy understanding of their own individuality, and their position in relation to others, a separation needs to occur between the identity of the mother and that of the infant. Furthermore, this separation must be executed in a particular fashion, namely that in which the mother introduces enough distance between herself and her child for her child to learn how to respect her as an objective, distinct agent with her own needs and wishes, while also retaining sufficient support to avoid traumatising from this sudden induction into a state of (relative) independence. This theory is useful to Honneth because it describes a similar reciprocal intersubjective mechanism to the model of subjectivity that is found within the perspective of Mead. Infants rely on the support of their mothers in departing from their initial state of interdependence, and thereby establishing their fundamental understanding of their own independence and identity, distinct from that of others. However, in perceiving that its needs and wishes are goals particular to self, rather than desires shared between mother and child, the

² It is unsurprising that Bowlby’s controversial Attachment Theory (see: Bowlby, 1969) receives a mention by Honneth in this context.

infant also needs to acquire an understanding that Mother, as a distinct agent, has her own separate goals and wishes, that may – at times – contradict those of self. For Honneth, it is in coming to terms with this truth that humans are able to form, not only a healthy self esteem and identity, but also cognition of the principles of appropriate recognition owed to others. In other words, infants require an initial gift of recognition (of the appropriate kind) from Mother before they master the ability to grant recognition to her, and each new other they meet subsequently.

Having woven reciprocal recognition into the development of human subjectivity, Honneth goes on to identify three distinct forms in which recognition is manifest - love, legal status and solidarity. These distinctions allow Honneth to paint a picture in which recognition remains central to the practices and motivations of individuals, throughout the life course, both within private and public domains. Familial love provides the initial form that is drawn upon for the establishment of independent identity and selfhood by individuals, as infants. Honneth characterizes this recognition form as a “fundamental level of emotional confidence – not only in the experience of needs and feelings, but also in their expression”, which serves as the “psychological precondition for the development of all further attitudes of self-respect” (1995, p. 107). Meanwhile, outside of the home, legal rights guarantee the fundamental, mutual principles of recognition that facilitate cooperation, mutual respect, and the possibility of self-actualization in society. For Honneth, “modern law represents a medium of recognition that expresses the universal features of human subjects” (Honneth, 1995, p. 122).

In these two forms of recognition, it is clear to see why Brennan and Pettit deemed the notion of recognition to be binary in nature. There is minimal evaluation or competition in legal status or love, as conceived by Honneth. Instead, these are afforded to individuals based on shared, universal human traits. The third form of recognition, however, operates differently. Honneth sees solidarity as a form of social esteem that recognizes individuals for their concrete, personal traits and abilities, as opposed to universal features they exhibit by virtue of their humanity. In other words, “persons can feel themselves to be ‘valuable’ only when they know themselves to be recognized for accomplishments that they precisely do not share in an undifferentiated manner with others” (Honneth, 1995, p. 125). Solidarity therefore demonstrably incorporates an evaluative dimension, and is clearly aligned with the notion of esteem outlined by Brennan and Pettit. Honneth argues that solidarity emerges as a form of recognition only after a historical shift in which it is decoupled from legal recognition, contrary to a supposedly more rigid and stable honour system in pre-modern times. The recognition of solidarity is first seen in status groupings related to the social role and occupation people hold within a modern division of labour, as characterized by Weber (1947). This kind of recognition requires for its operation, “a symbolically articulated – yet always open and porous – framework of orientation, in which those ethical values and goals are formulated that, taken together, comprise the cultural self-understanding of a society” (Honneth, 1995, p. 122). Individuals share in the recognition – described

in this context as social standing and prestige – afforded to members of particular status groups, based on the hierarchical ranking of these groups in relation to social values. However, individuals also elicit esteem based on their personal traits or qualities. For Honneth, the cultural framework of orientation serves, “as a system of reference for the appraisal of particular personality features, because their social ‘worth’ is measured by the degree to which they appear to be in a position to contribute to the realization of societal goals” (*ibid*, 1995, p. 122). As modernity progresses, however, processes of pluralization and individualization enhance the significance of personal esteem in comparison to the status afforded by traditional social categories. Commenting on this historical development, Charles Taylor - in *The Politics of Recognition* - argues that:

“In those earlier societies, what we would now call identity was largely fixed by one’s social position. That is, the background that explained what people recognized as important to themselves was to a great extent determined by their place in society, and whatever roles or activities attached to this position. The birth of a democratic society doesn’t by itself do away with this phenomenon, because people can still define themselves by their social roles. What does decisively undermine this socially derived identification, however, is the ideal of authenticity itself. As this emerges, for instance, with Herder, it calls on me to discover my own original way of being. By definition, this way of being cannot be socially derived but must be inwardly generated” (Taylor, 1992, p. 31).

According to both theories of recognition, then, as it becomes culturally possible - and indeed desirable - to form individualized identities, and to strive for ‘authentic’ self-expression, the shared ‘value-horizons’, and moral orientations operating in society necessarily become contested, diverse and pluralized. Individuals are compelled to struggle for more inclusive value parameters, in order to secure the form of recognition their unique qualities depend upon in order to find expression. It is this process that comprises Honneth’s ‘struggle for recognition’. This sense of ‘struggle’ is emphasized even more strongly in his description of the affective responses that accompany the denial of recognition:

“Not until we consider these, as it were, evaluative forms of disrespect – the denigration of individual or collective ways of life – do we arrive at the form of behaviour ordinarily labeled ‘insulting’ or ‘degrading’ today. As we saw, a person’s ‘honour’, ‘dignity’, or, to use the modern term, ‘status’ refers to the degree of social esteem accorded to his or her manner of self-realization within a society’s inherited cultural horizon. If this hierarchy of values is so constituted as to downgrade individual forms of life and manners of belief as inferior or deficient, then it robs the subjects in question of every opportunity to attribute social value to their own abilities. For individuals, therefore, the experience of this social devaluation typically brings with it a loss of personal self-esteem, of the opportunity to regard themselves as being whose traits and abilities are esteemed” (Honneth, 1995a, p. 164).

Overall, then, Honneth's theory of recognition offers a vivid account of the affective and pragmatic dimensions that underscore the dependence of individuals upon esteem and recognition. If Honneth is to be believed, our ability to act in the world, our independence, and our ability to interact with others in a way that strikes an appropriate balance, between self directed and outward directed respect, all come to rest on whether or not we are able to construct and maintain our identities within relations of mutual recognition. In contrast to the behaviourism of Brennan and Pettit, Honneth offers phenomenological insight into the implications of recognition and the absence thereof for individuals. He also outlines a compelling mechanism for understanding how the giving and receiving of recognition become imbricated in the function and development of subjectivity. Finally, Honneth uses these insights to construct a causal link between the moral and normative orientation of cultures, and the accomplishment of intersubjectivity. It has to be asked, though, whether the recognition conceived of by Honneth is feasibly compatible with Brennan and Pettit's conceptualization of esteem.

Esteem or Recognition?

Both the explicit and repeated emphasis that Honneth places on social esteem, and his insistence on the necessity of value pluralism for solidarity-as-recognition, bring him into congruence with the thought of Brennan and Pettit. In stressing the evaluative nature of esteem, Brennan and Pettit share with Honneth an awareness of the fundamental role of a collective value orientation in serving as the reference upon which esteem is judged and allocated. Moreover, the form of recognition manifest in solidarity, from Honneth's perspective, could conceivably be attributed a competitive and scarce character insofar as agents are frequently in a position of having to struggle against the confines of existing value horizons, in order to meet with approval. For Brennan and Pettit, scarcity and evaluation formed the key features that set esteem apart from recognition, and allowed esteem to operate within its own economy where recognition could not. Honneth's recognition of solidarity, therefore, challenges the distinction drawn by Brennan and Pettit between recognition and esteem. To resolve this challenge, one or both of the following possibilities must be true:

Firstly, Brennan and Pettit might be wrong in seeing recognition as fully distinct from esteem. Their definition of recognition might be too simplistic, or they might overlook instances of evaluative and competitive processes at work in the acquisition and dissemination of recognition.

The second consideration is that Honneth may be overreaching himself. Just as Brennan and Pettit have an interest in preferring a definition of esteem that renders it consistent with their theory of the Esteem Economy, similarly, it is of vital importance to Honneth that he make available the evidence to support his claim that recognition is a central and consistent shaping feature of social life in its entirety. Therefore, Honneth may have been too ready to portray social esteem, and its pursuit, as a continuation of his recognition thesis.

I suggest, in fact, that both things are true.

This is partly demonstrated in the critique of Lois McNay, who executes a thorough dismantling of Honneth's thesis, with the intention of establishing a stronger account of subject formation and agency. McNay's central concern lies in the insulation of subject formation from relations of power that is brought about by an insistence on the primacy of recognition dyads. This insistence, in her view, leads to the assumption that action is an expression of identity, rather than the necessary acknowledging of the way in which identities are constructed in relation to practice. While she recognizes the contribution that Honneth makes towards a more phenomenological account of the affective dimensions to moral suffering, she expresses concern towards the 'naturalizing' of agency within his account:

“One of the problems of the limited conception of power that is deployed by thinkers in their work on recognition is that the idea of agency is often yoked too closely to unified ideas of identity. On this view, social action is impelled by the individual's primordial desire for recognition. This simplifies the diverse logic of action by imputing to it a single cause and a relatively unmediated relation to embodied existence” (McNay, 2008, p. 162).

In her view, Honneth oversimplifies subject formation, by assuming that identity formation and self-realisation are invariably the most compelling, and far-reaching orientations for individual practice. This ignores the way in which the unique material and social position occupied by individuals exposes them to power relations that exert significant influence upon the identities that individuals forge. Honneth's account is naturalistic, according to McNay, because of its emphasis on ontological psychological traits that are assumed to unfold independently of power.

This can clearly be seen, according to McNay, in the fact that many of Honneth's further observations and assumptions regarding the function of reciprocal recognition ties, and their potential, are deeply naïve and “quasi-functionalist”, to the extent that they assume a socially integrative quality to social development. It is not adequately clear why the drive for recognition should necessarily lead to cooperation and mutual understanding, rather than competition and division, for instance. There is a tension between the fact that, on the one hand, Honneth lauds the experience of moral suffering and disrespect as origins for social struggle, yet at the same time argues that the human orientation towards mutual recognition is leading to ever-expanding degrees of tolerance and freedom within society. As McNay argues, “the idea that, in response to the heterogeneity of social life, individuals develop an ever-refined capacity for the liquefaction of the self is a questionably normative account of action. In emphasizing the individual's accommodative capacities, it underplays the likelihood of negative and aggressive responses to difference” (*ibid*, 2008, p. 143). While Honneth's account stands out for its articulation of why it is that agents strive for esteem

and mutual recognition, and what experiences they have when these goods are lacking, his model is too simplistic to adequately clarify when the need for recognition will lead to complacency or cooperation, and when it might lead to conflict.

McNay sees it as a particular weakness that Honneth draws so heavily on object-relations theory. Her belief is that the mother-child relationship is romanticised in disregard for complexities and fragmentations that regularly characterise interaction, and which may reasonably lead to violence or aggression. McNay concludes that, “agency is a complex phenomenon which is not just motivated by a desire for recognition or thwarted by an insidious compulsion to self-realization. Rather it is realized unevenly in the complex interplay between embodied being and social position” (*ibid*, 2008, p. 147).

In criticizing Honneth’s naturalization of subject formation, McNay identifies the way in which reciprocal recognition is overstated in Honneth’s model. As she implies, equitable and evenly matched interaction pairings cannot be taken for granted. Moreover, the embodied situating of individuals within unique power configurations introduces a necessary tension into interpersonal relations, no matter which pairing is concerned. This is even true for familial bonds, such as those between mother and child. Atkinson provides an excellent illustration of this fact in his Bourdieuan analysis of the field of family relations, which points to historical and cultural struggles that structure family relations, and to the affect and lifestyle deemed appropriate in the field of family relations:

“...those agents cohered by a family-specific doxa possess different levels of authority to set and enforce its elements (i.e. symbolic capital) yet engage in struggle over them, they themselves constitute a system of objective structural relations, that is to say, a field (Bourdieu, 1998: 68-70). Differences over what should be done and what is right – whether in terms of the future trajectories of offspring, the household division of labour, political proclivities, sexuality, elements of lifestyle (music, clothing, etc), or all the small regionalisations (‘that’s my chair!’), routines (‘why do you always have to do that?’), typifications (‘you don’t know me at all!’) and so on – thus, as in any other field, splinter the doxa into a conservative orthodoxy and subversive heterodoxy to greater and lesser degrees, with different alliances, factions, rifts and, ultimately, levels of recognition” (Atkinson, 2016, p. 57-58).

Atkinson goes as far to argue that love itself acts as a capital (in the Bourdieuan sense), in that it is a form of power that can be given or withheld as a means to dominate and influence others:

“...love – or affective recognition, being cared about, depended upon and so on – is not just a straightforward and evenly distributed product of the practical realisation of ‘family’, but functions as a form of capital with currency in this particular cluster of relations. Evidently it is unlike the capitals that operate in many other fields in contemporary societies

insofar as it bears a very low degree of objectification, i.e. institutional validation and regulation. This makes familial fields more like the localised social spaces in which symbolic capital was judged, mystified and struggled over in pre-capitalist society, i.e. maintained via constant interpersonal exchanges (including through gift giving, favours, displays of interest/care, or disinterest, direct threats and violence), but that makes its structure no less topological” (Atkinson, 2016 p. 58-59).

This account offers a striking contrast to Honneth’s depiction of family life. Instead of a mutual and equal recognition, Atkinson illustrates the fact that families are deeply hierarchical spaces, structured by normative and cultural assumptions regarding what kinds of traits and skills are most commendable, and which are to be discouraged. Families also enforce significantly different roles, standards, privileges and levels of authority based on members’ gender, age, and any other specifically salient defining feature. In Atkinson’s characterization of family interaction, not only are roles and positions highly differentiated, but supposedly neutral virtues and affects like love, and indeed, recognition, are shaped and deployed in alignment with the different roles and positions different family members occupy, and the needs and desires their unique position furnishes them with. Assuming this to be true, the recognition relations that individuals engage with at a young age, will be situated in a wider contextual pattern of relations, opportunities, limitations, expectations and so forth.

McNay points to Honneth’s tendency to reproduce the Frankfurt School’s reification of the communicative ‘life world’ over the instrumental ‘system world’ in order to expose the underlying orientation that leads his thought astray. In her view, “it is an error to assume that the economy and culture have ever operated as autonomous systems with which an exclusively external relation to each other... no single type of economic or organizational system can exist entirely on its own. Instrumental relations can only function to some degree with the support of communicative relations and vice versa” (*ibid*, 2008, p. 145). Honneth’s insistence on maintaining a concrete demarcation between communicative and instrumental domains is what prevents him from accurately capturing the role of power disparities in shaping subjectivity. McNay’s remedy to this oversight is to adopt Bourdieu’s concept of habitus, which she sees as offering the appropriate balance between acknowledging the affective, phenomenological experience of agents on the one hand, while also accounting for their tacit embeddedness in relation to power dynamics on the other.

Honneth’s beliefs regarding recognition are cast into significant doubt in the light of McNay’s criticism. While Honneth is convincing in arguing that humans have an ontological need for the affirmation and respect of those around them, the process by which agents come to understand themselves in relation to others is more fraught than the idealized model he proposes. Furthermore, relations of reciprocal recognition cannot be abstracted from the complex and unique situation each agent occupies in terms of the opportunities and constraints imposed by their specific circumstance, and how this interacts with their unique

and embodied traits. In order to understand the significance of these truths for subject formation, and for the specific needs and orientations that guide practice, McNay is right that we need a theoretical framework that is less essentialist and more sophisticated in its ability to account for multiple influences upon subject formation simultaneously.

Honneth's theory overextends itself in relying upon a very basic and idealized notion of recognition to not only do the work of accounting for subject formation in its entirety, but also to act as a coherent platform for social change and social struggle. When Honneth moves from his pragmatic account of reciprocal recognition - as an interaction that enables individuals to grasp their individual identity and its relation to distinct agents around them - to purporting an extrapolated account of the same dynamic operating within the development of legal frameworks and group identities, he is not able to account for why it is that certain ways of living are endowed with recognition, and why others are not. Honneth refers to the expansion of 'value horizons' and cultural self-understanding, but does not provide any means for understanding how existing values came to assume dominance, and why it is that new or divergent traits, values or ways of being are met with hostility. Honneth correctly identifies that the denial of recognition and respect *can* act as an impetus for propelling agents to strive for social change, although McNay cautions that many individuals suffering a shortage of respect and recognition do not ever mobilise. However, the function of reciprocal recognition as a basis for social practice is void of any mechanism that would explain the emergence and perpetuation of inequalities and conflicts of interest. What is needed, therefore, is an account that retains the phenomenological experiences associated with attitudes such as respect, recognition and affirmation for individuals, while also clarifying how material and symbolic needs and inequalities affect the formation of this very recognition.

If Honneth's concept of recognition requires critical re-articulation in order to salvage its explanatory power, then this also places in question the disavowal that Brennan and Pettit issue in separating esteem from recognition. On the one hand, they recognized recognition to be an 'attitudinal state' held by individuals regarding others. But Brennan and Pettit were confident that, although recognition was a prerequisite to esteem, esteem could be clearly delineated based on its comparative and evaluative character, and the extent to which it could function as an economic good. This demarcation becomes less airtight if we are to reconsider recognition as an attitude that is itself affected by evaluative and comparative processes, as communities struggle over the basic principles upon which individuals are to be understood and afforded recognition.

McNay's proposed introduction of Bourdieu's habitus would be compatible with such an adjustment. Habitus, which I will discuss more fully in the next section, acts as the mediator between the affective and phenomenological components to 'self' and the cultural and structural environment in which it is embedded. It operates by generating dispositions and motivations in individuals that combine their specific areas of advantage and disadvantage with a complementary strategic orientation. Where habitus is different from Honneth's reciprocal

recognition process is that it incorporates an element of sensitivity to the wider structural configuration of power into the relationship between self and society. Habitus avoids foreclosing the possibility that needs and interests other than recognition might play a role in this dialectic. If individuals generate very personal and contextual orientations to their circumstances, an element of comparison and evaluation is necessarily present. It might not be explicitly conscious, but within the formation of subjectivity, there is a degree of connecting one's individual needs with the world view and orientation that best reflects these, as well as an element of receiving influence from the external cultural framework of expectations and values that one is encouraged to embrace. Unlike the uniform model of recognition posited by Honneth, the principles of habitus lead to a view in which the considerable diversification in the values and orientations that individuals acquire are incorporated into identity formation. The salient implication of this assumption is that relations of recognition are not likely to be disinterested or evenly matched, even in the early stages of infancy, contra Honneth.

Honneth is therefore mistaken in viewing the contestation of value orientations as something that only takes place in relations of solidarity among social groups in modern society. The struggle over value perimeters, and the criteria around which recognition can be granted, permeate all aspects of social practice and interaction. Honneth is loathe to accept this, wedded as he is to the Frankfurt School's disposition towards modernity, and especially to instrumentality. But it is essential to recognize the extent to which values both reflect and shape power, if one is to understand relations of recognition in a way that can grasp how and why processes of struggle and unequal provision of recognition come about.

In relating Brennan and Pettit's approach towards esteem with Honneth's theory of recognition, therefore, we might see Brennan and Pettit as overly rigid in their characterisation of recognition, given the fact that Honneth's recognition theory seeks to incorporate esteem, and the function of evaluative attitudes to others. Meanwhile Honneth is too generous in incorporating different social attitudes under the umbrella of recognition. An alternative exists in the theory of Bourdieu, who addresses the way in which symbolic powers such as esteem and recognition are subject to certain market patterns, (as Brennan and Pettit's "Economy of Esteem" seeks to capture) while sharing with Honneth, an interest in the phenomenological experiences interwoven with these patterns.

Symbolic Capital, Recognition and Misrecognition

Bourdieu arrives at questions pertaining to the nature of esteem and recognition from a different theoretical trajectory to that of Honneth or Brennan and Pettit. Bourdieu characterizes his intellectual project as one of resolving the theoretical opposition between structure and agency. Coming of age in the 1970s, Bourdieu's first major work, *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, highlights the limitations of objectivism that are characterized by the brand of structuralism

(best displayed in the theory of Levi-Strauss) prevalent in social anthropology at the time (Bourdieu, 1977). On the other hand, he is equally critical of the naivety residing in approaches such as symbolic interactionism and ethnomethodology, which, in Bourdieu's view, accept the world-view of individuals at face value, while failing to perceive underlying motivations that shape and guide choice. Bourdieu's conceptual model of *habitus*, *capital* and *field* is constructed with the explicit intent of enabling what John Thompson describes as a double hermeneutic (1990) of social practice, interrogating as it does, both objective and subjective dimensions, and how they are intertwined and mutually constitutive.

Bourdieu first trained as a philosopher, under the same pedagogical environment as Michel Foucault. He spent several years in Algeria during the French-Algerian war, and his doctoral thesis was situated in social anthropology, drawing on his ethnographic study of the agrarian and pre-industrial Kabyle community. On returning to France, however, Bourdieu fully transitioned into sociological research, going on to become one of the most famous sociologists of all time.

Bourdieu's approach evinces an eclectic intellectual heritage, drawing on both analytic and continental philosophy, as well as traditional social theory. Bourdieu draws on Wittgenstein in his emphasis on practice, and the use of a game metaphor in characterizing social struggles. The notion of *habitus* incorporates phenomenological insight from Merleau-Ponty and Husserl, although the term was first used by Norbert Elias in relation to subjectivity (Paulle *et al.*, 2013). Bourdieu's conceptual framework is frequently interpreted as a reworking of classic sociological theory. From Marx, Bourdieu takes a relational perspective of social structures, characterized by struggle for power. Bourdieu distances himself from Marx, however, by refuting the subordination of symbolic practices to the determination of the prevailing economic mode of production. Instead Bourdieu extrapolates the shape of Marx's thought to spheres of struggle that emerge around symbolic and cultural goods (Bourdieu, 1986). In this respect, Bourdieu can be seen as Weberian, emphasising, as he does, the importance of values and status in shaping social structure. Finally, Wacquant attributes Bourdieu's empiricism and his commitment to the project of social science to the influence of Durkheim (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992).

Within Bourdieu's theory, recognition and misrecognition are significant social forces in shaping the configuration of power throughout social space. However, Bourdieu uses the word in a distinct sense from that employed by Honneth and like-minded recognition theorists such as Taylor. For Bourdieu, recognition is the belief, and its expression, through which agents affirm particular world-views and values as legitimate and worthy. Which values and perspectives attain this legitimacy is the outcome of ongoing symbolic struggles that permeate every aspect of human activity. Bourdieu emphatically distances himself from the interactionist tradition that Honneth draws upon so strongly. In contrast to it, Bourdieu believes that the most salient ontological connections are the relative positions that individuals occupy with respect to a range of cultural, symbolic and material forms of power, and the way that these positions influence their

perspective and orientation with respect to one another. This distinction is clear in Bourdieu's assertion that, "what exist in the world are relations – not interactions between agents or intersubjective ties between individuals, but objective relations which exist 'independently of individual consciousness and will' as Marx said" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). What this clearly means, in contrast to Honneth, is that the notion of a mutual, non-hierarchical reciprocal tie between two agents, of any kind, is virtually inconceivable within Bourdieu's conception. The principles of his theory insists that every interaction and reciprocation between agents will be in some way characterized by the differences in position between each agent.

Bourdieu's basis for this belief is his model of social structure, which he characterises as a three dimensional space made up of semi-homologous 'fields'. Fields are defined by the particular form of power that orients the practice of agents within the space in question. "In analytic terms", Bourdieu clarifies, "a field may be defined as a network, or a configuration of objective relations between positions. These positions are objectively defined, in their existence and in the determinations they impose upon their occupants, agents or institutions, by their present and potential situation (*situs*) in the structure of the distribution of species of power (or capital)" (*ibid*, 1992, p. 97). It is important not to confuse the notion of a 'field' as being a simple demarcation of different thematic or institutional domains, common to modern democracies. Even though a Bourdieuan perspective would point towards, say, the economic field, the field of education, the media, and so forth, the means through which these domains are identified is distinct.

In order for an individual to be active within a given field, they need to see its form of power as valuable and worth striving for. Bourdieu characterizes this in terms of different levels of investment that individuals have within a field. He also likens practice within fields to a game, claiming that individuals have to 'buy into the game' in order to enter into and participate within a field. In Bourdieu's words:

"those who take part in the struggle help to reproduce the game by helping more or less completely, depending on the field – to produce belief in the value of the stakes. The new players have to pay an entry fee which consists in recognition of the value of the game (selection and co-option always pay great attention to the indices of commitment to the game, investment in it)" (Bourdieu, 1993, p. 74).

This is an example of the central role of recognition, because the particular concern of the field and the form of power it centers around, rely upon the disposition agents have to deem it valuable. If agents do not recognize a particular activity or good as valuable, then they do not orient their action towards pursuing its acquisition or mastery, and there is therefore no competition or struggle with one another that arises as a result. Nor will their mastery or possession of that good be useful as a form of power and influence over others. Since, for Bourdieu, fields are zones made up of dynamic power

relations between individuals qua a particular forms of power (capital), recognition is critically important to the maintenance, reproduction and creation of fields. Of course, there are certain kinds of capital that are less sensitive to recognition. For instance, as a basic prerequisite to survival, economic capital is extremely stable in its status as a form of power, and an object of pursuit. But many other fields operate around immaterial, symbolic goods that rely solely on culturally specific values for their meaning and effect. For example, in analyzing the cultural field, Bourdieu claims that, “works of art exist as symbolic objects only if they are known and recognised, that is, socially instituted as works of art and received by spectators capable of knowing and recognising them as such...” (1993, p. 37).

Overall, therefore, it is striking (when looking back to the arguments of Brennan and Pettit, or Honneth) that in Bourdieu’s account the emphasis is placed on the evaluative and comparative judgements made by individuals and societies, which collectively give rise to the structures that they are governed by. It is not only the esteem afforded to individuals that relies upon significant evaluative and comparative dispositions, but rather this is a feature pervasive throughout a great many domains of social life. Contra Honneth, even basic recognition exchanges between agents draw upon a background of judgements and evaluation regarding what agency means, or about the significance and meaning of basic differences such as age, gender or race. (In the context of the initial recognition reciprocation between mother and child, even birth order may carry significance in the attitude that a Mother might have towards a child.)

Just as important, if not more so, is the function of misrecognition in Bourdieu’s account. Counter-intuitively, Bourdieu does not use the word to denote an absence or withholding of recognition. Instead he uses it to refer to a veiled attitude, towards a form of power that intensifies the extent to which it is recognized and perceived as legitimate. Misrecognition is sometimes characterized as an enchanted perspective that fails to notice the vicarious functions of a particular capital in serving particular interests. In short, misrecognition could be viewed as one of Bourdieu’s means for referring to ideology. Misrecognition is closely related to the concept of doxa. Doxa is a taken for granted perception or narrative through which individuals represent their lived experience. For Bourdieu, each field will tend to produce a particular doxa, that is an essential cognitive disposition for any agent seeking to act within that field. Introducing the notion of doxa in *Outline of a Theory of Practice*, Bourdieu claims that:

“Every established order tends to produce (to very different degrees and with very different means) the naturalization of its own arbitrariness. Of all the mechanisms tending to produce this effect, the most important and the best concealed is undoubtedly the dialectic of the objective chances and the agent’s aspirations, out of which arises the sense of limits, commonly called the sense of reality” (Bourdieu, 1977, p. 164).

Doxa should not be confused with a crude form of false consciousness. In Bourdieu's account, it is not only the disadvantaged who embrace a field's doxa, but also those individuals who occupy the most powerful positions within the field. It is not the case that powerful individuals are conspiring to dupe those they exploit. Instead both those who benefit and those who suffer within fields share in its doxa to greater or lesser degrees. If they did not, then they would not see the field's capital as valuable. Furthermore, they would be unable to follow the 'rules' of the field in question sufficiently well to profit from it.

This dynamic can be illustrated very well with the myth of meritocracy. The most privileged and educated individuals in society are invested in the belief that academic attainment reflects academic merit. While a critical analysis of academic attainment demonstrates that there are a host of ways in which socio-economic circumstances determine and constrain the ability of different individuals to excel within that field, it is important to both the winners and the losers to believe that what academic credentials truly reflect is intelligence and hard work (merit)³. This is a perfect example of the importance of misrecognition, for without it the field of education as it stands would collapse.

Bourdieu's reference to misrecognition bears some similarity to Brennan and Pettit's notion of a virtual controller. Brennan and Pettit observe that esteem, as a good, loses its power and value if those who bestow it are not sincere in their attitude. Therefore, the only way in which esteem can be commodified and subjected to exchange, is if buyers and sellers are able to retain a sincere belief in the authenticity of their esteem. Bourdieu would say, therefore, that the dynamics according to which esteem functions as a form of power, depend upon misrecognition for their execution and perpetuation. Where Brennan and Pettit clarify that buyers and sellers must be virtual rather than active in their initiatives, it is likely that they characterize the same mechanism that Bourdieu identifies.

At this point, one might well ask where esteem, disesteem and the denial of recognition are within Bourdieu's theory, if neither 'recognition' nor 'misrecognition' refer to them. With respect to esteem, Bourdieu's framework is compatible with Brennan and Pettit's prescription, that esteem is an evaluative attitude, tied to the relative standing of individuals vis-à-vis specific substantive criteria. For Bourdieu, as there are many different domains of social action, each of these and the capital forms pertaining to them, will be connected to attitudes of esteem. Esteem in this conception is one of the vicarious rewards that agents would reap through securing a favourable position within a field. When field occupants are bestowing esteem on others, that is one way in which they *recognize* the values of that field to be legitimate and worthy, and their holding of that attitude would have directive impact on their choices and dispositions, just as Brennan and Pettit suggest.

³ This forms the focus of Bourdieu and Passeron's *Reproduction in Education, Society and Culture* (1977).

There is a more specific concept that Bourdieu deploys, related to both recognition and esteem. This is his notion of symbolic capital. In terms of how Bourdieu understands power, and its different forms, he draws a distinction between *specific* forms of capital - that are unique to the fields that define them, and meaningless outside of this context - and *general* forms of capital that are sufficiently ubiquitous to hold influence across different fields. Cultural, economic and social capitals are examples of the major general forms of power (Bourdieu, 1986). Symbolic capital, on the other hand, is better understood as a shared mechanism through which immaterial (non-economic) capitals are able to operate. Symbolic capital is a concentrated and objectified form of legitimacy and the power to legitimate. Agents who possess high degrees of symbolic capital are able to exert command over which interpretations, classifications and visions of the world are deemed to be the most persuasive and dominant. Symbolic capital is a form of power that operates entirely via misrecognition, and could be seen as a kind of power that enables holders to elicit recognition from those around them. Drawing on Thompson's description of the theory:

“symbolic power is an ‘invisible’ power which is ‘misrecognised’ as such, and therefore ‘recognised’ as legitimate. The terms ‘recognition’ (*reconnaissance*) and ‘misrecognition’ (*méconnaissance*) play an important role here: they underscore the fact that the exercise of power through symbolic exchange always rests on a foundation of shared belief. That is, efficacy of symbolic power presupposes certain forms of cognition or belief in such a way that even those who benefit least from the exercise power participate, to some extent in their own subjection. They recognize or tacitly acknowledge the legitimacy of power, or of the hierarchical relations of power in which they are embedded” (Thompson, 1991, p. 23).

Symbolic power of this kind tends to be secured by individuals who have strong positions within the social fields they inhabit. Expressed differently, what this means is that it is those individuals who are able to perform well within the value based domains of social action, who acquire this legitimacy and influence. Symbolic capital is akin in some ways to Honneth's meaning of recognition, and also to the more narrow kind of recognition described by Brennan and Pettit. Although both of these kinds of recognition were directed towards other human agents, as opposed to value orders or concepts, they otherwise function in similar ways. There is little comparison or evaluation involved, other than an initial binary criteria of relevance. In Bourdieu's view, every field involves constant struggles over which beliefs and values become *consecrated*. These struggles emerge from the objective differences between individuals in terms of the amounts of capitals they possess, and their specific relative situation, compared to other field occupants, with respect to its central value. For Bourdieu, the everyday practice of individuals is an expression of their embodied dispositions, and the strategies that they are compelled to pursue in order to satisfy these dispositions. Bourdieu suggests that practice generally takes the form of either moves that serve to reproduce and maintain the status quo, or, conversely, to undermine and reform it. Which of these strategies an agent engages in, depends on what makes the most sense for securing an optimal

position within the field. Returning to how symbolic capital is understood, while symbolic capital is itself the power of legitimacy, it is only acquired after an evaluative process of struggle. Therefore, when I say that symbolic power is comparable to Honneth's recognition - in the sense that it is an attitude of compliance, affirmation and support that the agent imbued with symbolic capital is able to solicit from others - it is key that this power is not rooted in any universal or stable property (such as a basic, and universally shared humanity), but rather upon contested and contextual value judgements. Assuming, however, that recognition and symbolic capital share homologous features, a number of salient features stand out in Bourdieu's line of thinking.

Most pertinent of these is the fact that a very clear path is constructed between the social position a person occupies and the recognition they are able to acquire, both for their own person and for the vision of the world they wish to advance or to defend. If the attitude of recognition acts as a kind of symbolic capital, then certain propositions can be inferred. Firstly, the recognition of those with the most symbolic power will be more desirable than recognition from those with little influence or power. Secondly, the access individuals have to recognition and the quality of recognition they receive, will necessarily be connected to where they stand in relation to the recognized value domains of the society they reside within (or, in other words, their social position in fields). This is a strength in Bourdieu's framework, because it provides a more convincing set of principles for understanding why there are differences in the recognition afforded to different individuals and communities across society. The suggestion that recognition is related to the relative standing of different values, which in turn reflect the positional concerns of individuals, carries more explanatory power than an essentialist understanding of recognition, that treats it as an intersubjective good that is insulated from power and other interests.

A further relevant component to the notion of symbolic power is the accompanying concept of symbolic violence. This is somewhat akin to the class of injuries related to a withholding or robbing of recognition, which Honneth frames as disrespect and the denigration of ways of life. Symbolic violence describes a form of injury in which the attacker draws upon a hegemonic value framework in order to silence, delegitimize, control or weaken the position of the victim. The reason this violence is symbolic, is because it carries with it the appearance of being reasonable, fair and possibly even amicable or conciliatory in nature, whereas, in fact, its action is to disempower the victim and to consolidate and reinforce the position of the attacker. A victim on the receiving end of an act of symbolic violence might find themselves crippled by the fact that there are no culturally acceptable ways to resist or revoke the perspective that is imposed. This leaves the victim no choice but to acquiesce, which must be felt, not just as disrespect but possibly a more fundamental retraction or diminishing of recognition of the kind Honneth describes. Aside from Honneth's disappointingly rosy vision of "the struggle for recognition", symbolic violence is the terrain in Bourdieu's thought that most closely overlaps with Honneth's in that there is consideration of the affective vulnerability attached to the public categorization of individuals, and the deep and profound importance associated

with agents' ability to define the version of their self that is expressed and affirmed by others.

Summarising the understanding and functioning of esteem and recognition within Bourdieu's account, what we see is a model of social development that places power struggles at the centre of all practice and human experience. Power is shaped and circulated by the material and cultural values that agents strive for and struggle over. This ongoing struggle drives social development. The particular goods that are recognized as valuable, and their relative value in relation to one another are stakes in these struggles. Classification and reinterpretation of value is one of the means through which agents are able to gain power. The corollary of this behaviour is that the 'logic' of fields, and the rules which govern them, are open to change in response to the particular configuration of power operating in a given time.

Earlier, we saw how McNay raises Bourdieu's notion of habitus as a superior alternative to the model of agency implicit in Honneth's theory of recognition. Habitus is defined as an embodied scheme of perception that generates an individual orientation to the wider world. Bourdieu draws on phenomenology to incorporate the corporeal, instinctive and habitual components to social action. Unconscious and tacit sensibilities have an important bearing on practice. Bourdieu suggests that the habitus is formed through the interaction between an individual's affective needs and the constraints and opportunities they encounter on engagement with the outside world. From a young age, infants acquire dispositions that are sensitive to their context⁴. Dispositions are internalized, not just psychologically, but physically too, as manifest in the deep-seated responses individuals have to food, smell and other visceral cultural tastes. While this account clearly affords a strong causal significance to structural influences, Bourdieu does not see agents as passive bearers of structure. Rather he shows how their interaction with their environment leads them to fashion, and internalize an orientation towards, an understanding of the world around them that enables optimal coherence between needs and the objective possibilities that accompany relative social positions. Furthermore, the earlier overview of fields and capitals illustrates the formative power that individuals have over social structure, which is, itself, largely an expression of collective value delineation and pursuit.

McNay's preference for habitus over the model of reciprocal recognition is based on both the balance that Bourdieu strikes between objectivism and subjectivism, and between symbolic and material power. By emphasizing the phenomenological, subjective experience of agents, Bourdieu is able to account for their self-understanding and motivation in how they engage with the world. It is a particular strength that he links this to the structural significance of choices and attitudes, without denying subjective meaning. For McNay,

⁴ Agents continue to acquire dispositions, as they encounter and adapt to new fields throughout life. Wacquant helpfully extends Bourdieu's account by introducing the idea of secondary and tertiary habitus (2013). In doing so he demonstrates that, in theory, there is no necessary limit.

Honneth's critical weakness is in succumbing to subjectivism, and interpreting the affective component to identity construction as an independent, driving force. The repercussion of adopting this view is that power disparities and inequalities are given secondary importance, and explanatory weighting, in contrast to affective identity concerns. These oppositions, of course, are not relevant to the present concern over how online reputation is best theorized. Nevertheless, the differences that McNay teases out are still relevant for assessing the performance of each perspective. Habitus, in company with Bourdieu's wider conceptual framework, offers a way to capture the affective importance of esteem and recognition for individuals, while also offering a heuristic for linking their subjective experience to the configuration of power around them, and the relative position it places them within.

Honneth is by no means ignorant of Bourdieu's theory, having himself directly influenced the German reception of the theory through a review piece (Honneth, 1995b). Honneth praises Bourdieu's analysis of symbolic struggle, but expresses concern with an undertone of utilitarianism he perceives in Bourdieu's thought, and his supposed failure to consider the normative components of practice. Honneth believes that Bourdieu views agents as guided by utility maximisation, even though they are unconscious of this motive. In an attempt to identify areas of compatibility between Honneth and Bourdieu's theories, Basaure argues that Honneth's theory comprises distinct axes, which serve to clarify the precise relationship of his theory to that of Bourdieu. Honneth's theory, he sees as being characterised by a highly developed moral-sociological axis, which is the perspective from which Honneth criticises Bourdieu. However, the political-sociological axis in Honneth's theory is underdeveloped, and in this dimension Honneth borrows from Bourdieu significantly in order to talk about how groups and individuals strive to change the classifications and value horizons which constrain them in order to improve their position in relation to social esteem (solidarity), and reduce the suffering imposed on them by a lack of esteem, prestige or respect. In this element of Honneth's theory, he directly appropriates Bourdieu's principles in order to make up for this underdevelopment. In Basaure's view:

“it is precisely in relation to that ‘practical habitus’ – which takes place between singular negative experiences and the formulation of collective goals that are discursively articulated and sustained through stable collective work – that a fundamentally political-sociological argument develops. Through this process, individual or singular forms of social suffering can be articulated, cognitively and politically represented, and expressed through adequate language, such as that of the construction of goals. I want to argue that this is the phenomenal field to which the political-sociological axis refers to in general – an axis that, as I have stated, is underdeveloped and barely perceptible in Honneth's work” (Basaure, 2013, p. 211).

It is interesting that habitus is explicitly mentioned by Basaure, just as it was by McNay, as a mechanism which connects the phenomenological experiences so well described by Honneth, to the wider structural context.

Towards a social theory of online reputation

In the light of the theories addressed in this chapter, how might online reputation be better understood? I have gathered together a family of related concepts in order to reconsider the nature of online reputation. While it has been made clear that reputation is distinct from esteem, in that reputation is vicariously rather than intrinsically desirable, and that reputation represents an accumulated historical indicator of an individual's past, and likely future, behaviour rather than an immediate evaluative rating. The distinction between the terms of recognition, esteem, status and prestige, however, is slightly less clear cut. I sought to capture the ubiquitous role of values as the source of comparative and hierarchical social positions. There are differences between authors over the historical perimeters and precise structures that emerge in relation to values, but each contributor in this chapter identifies a general human tendency to strive for a good relative position in relation to these values, and to refine or expand the values operating in society, if such a position is not available. The principles to be carried forward, then, are that individuals manifest a need to secure positive evaluation from those around them and for themselves, and that individuals are engaged in efforts to shape the values which demarcate the precise social positions that are available.

Bourdieu's framework offers the most detailed and complete heuristic when it comes to not merely representing these broad tendencies, but also laying out the mechanisms through which they come to be, and continue to be. These mechanisms route back to the affective dispositions that individuals experience for their impetus, and through them Bourdieu is able to encompass the psychological, subjective experiences, described by Honneth, alongside the behavioural, market model deployed by Brennan and Pettit. The choice to focus primarily on Bourdieu's framework allows for some leeway in the use of the terminology family that incorporates recognition, esteem, status and prestige. Where Honneth's understanding of recognition muddies distinctions, by seeking to incorporate esteem under the notion of 'solidarity', Bourdieu's perspective separates the two.

In this view, esteem, status and prestige are goods that individuals desire and need, but recognition and misrecognition are forms of power that bestow and facilitate access to these goods. Status, esteem and prestige may therefore be interchanged without conceptual confusion resulting. But recognition remains distinct. And the understanding of recognition that is retained within this paradigm is one in which recognition is an acknowledgement and affirmation that both expresses a normative orientation - *I not only recognise that this is the case but also accept that it is so, rather than condemning it* - while acting to sustain and strengthen that normative orientation.

Altogether, then, the theories discussed in this chapter challenge existing approaches to online reputation by answering a question that was not being asked: “what is the meaning of online reputation for users?” Once this question has been asked, a narrow focus on the intended function and meaning of online reputation for community managers and designers becomes unsatisfactory, and it is possible to bring into focus other social meanings and functions that might be connected to it.

We have grounds to believe that online users will be motivated by a desire for esteem in any aspect of life in which they might be evaluated. This means, necessarily, that users will have an intrinsic desire to develop good reputation ratings online in comparison to their peers. This desire is not borne out of an instrumental concern to achieve related goals (such as attracting buyers, or reaching a greater audience as a result of good ratings), but rather representative of the direct and tangible reward of being held in good esteem. And this will mean that users will seek to secure good online reputation even if all other pragmatic needs, that online reputation was designed to ensure, are satisfied. The fact that esteem is comparative and scarce means that the actions and choices of users will be influenced by a competition to secure good esteem. We therefore cannot risk thinking of online reputation only in terms of its function as reputation, because if we do so we might fail to recognize the motivations that incentivise users to strive for good reputation, and the bearing this may have on online practice. At the same time we might fail to consider the role of reputation in signaling something about a user other than that which the reputation system was designed to reflect, and we may also fail to perceive the connection that reputation has to undercurrents of power within online interactions.

Drawing on Honneth’s insights, we can anticipate that online reputation might have powerful affective repercussions for online users. In simple functional terms, online reputation is a measure which provides users with an indicator of how they are performing, in the eyes of others in their community, or in relation to the algorithm that defines a user’s progress. This means that online reputation can be a means through which both recognition and its denial can be conveyed.

Users who receive positive reputation rating, from other users or from a specific system, may enjoy positive feelings of affirmation, acknowledgement and esteem, in relation to a particular value- that which is designated by the measures the reputation system in question is designed to reflect. We can also anticipate that users who receive negative reputation, or who fail to acquire good reputation, may feel self-conscious, insecure and inferior in that online environment. This might result in a loss of confidence and perceived freedom when it comes to self-expression in that space, and it would lead to the individual in question pursuing strategies to either secure better reputation, to reform the reputation system to be more inclusive in its scope, or to seek to undermine online reputation as a reliable measure of worth.

Through Bourdieu's perspective, online reputation can be understood as a form of symbolic power. By seeking to gain good reputation, and by treating the reputation that other online users have as indicative and legitimate, online users imbue reputation with authoritative meaning. Depending on what the online reputation measures, and how it is attained, online reputation may become a mechanism through which a specific set of values are consecrated and reinforced. In this scenario, reputation rating would be important because members of the community would perceive it to be legitimate, and would misrecognize it as a reliable, and meritocratic indicator of the holder's nature or performance. The techniques and patterns of behaviour that would be required of users to foster high levels of online reputation would then also become the logic of that particular field, acting as rules that users would have to follow in order to be respected in that environment.

As a form of symbolic power, we would expect that online reputation could furnish those who held it with wider influence and legitimacy in their other pursuits within that environment. Therefore, the possession of a good online reputation sum would not only be affectively rewarding to users, and necessary for their self confidence, but also an important resource in facilitating the pursuit of other goals, and the acquisition of other goods.

Finally, we might expect that the symbolic power of online reputation would rely on widespread *misrecognition* in order to be efficacious. Users would need to believe that they earned online reputation meritocratically, or – in other words – through possession or performance of the traits that the reputation system purports to measure. Users would need to avoid being seen to directly pursue online reputation, and they would also need to believe that they were not motivated by online reputation alone. If these conditions are satisfied, then online reputation systems might serve as a source of status and esteem for users, over and above the pragmatic reputational function provided.

These insights provide a starting point for investigating the broad social significance of online reputations and the systems that define them. They are unlikely to serve as an exhaustive account of the meanings and functions that various online reputation systems might hold. Neither do they serve as a denial of the traditional reputational function that reputation systems are designed to support. Different functions and meanings may reside, and indeed are likely to reside, in online reputation side by side, depending on the particular social context and web design in question. The value of this theorization lies in constructing a heuristic that can be used to think critically about the complex social significance that online reputation might hold in particular contexts. The simple theoretical move of acknowledging that online reputation might engender meanings and processes beyond the scope of the purposes envisioned by its designer already leads to a deeper engagement with the nature of online reputation, that may strengthen the rigour of empirical engagement with online reputation.

From this conceptual base, the next step lies in designing a research project that can adequately test this theory.

4: Operationalising Bourdieu

Bourdieu and Internet research: an unlikely alliance?

During the previous chapter, I surveyed different theoretical approaches relevant to online reputation, and I illustrated the substantive relevance of Bourdieu's account of symbolic capital for theorizing reputation in terms of its social function and meaning. Symbolic power, as conceived by Bourdieu, is hardly novel. Similar concepts can be identified in the works of Marx, Althusser, Weber and Gramsci. However, it is the wider theoretical framework that Bourdieu elucidates that lends symbolic capital its strength. Symbolic capital is not fully understood in abstraction from the wider principles in which it is developed. Furthermore, Bourdieu's holistic approach bears advantageous features, which directly satisfy many of the objectives that my research is oriented towards. For these reasons, I choose to adopt Bourdieu's overall conceptual framework within my research design, both methodological and theoretical, as opposed to focusing exclusively on the notion of symbolic capital.

It is hard to ignore the relative absence of Bourdieuan research within Internet research. As one would expect, many isolated instances are to be found of studies that draw upon Bourdieuan concepts. Yet other comparably prominent theorists have enjoyed far greater appeal among researchers of the Internet. Marx's influence is unambiguously present in the literature on digital labour, focusing as it does, on the concentration of capital and the exploitation of free labour, which is a hallmark of the digital economy (Terranova, 2000; Postigo, 2003). Castells' Network Society (1996) and Lash's Information Society (2002) run in a similar vein. Habermas' metaphor of the public sphere (1989) is ubiquitous in studies aiming to speak to the democratic potential of online discourse and civic engagement (Benson, 2015; Cavanagh, 2007, p. 64). Post-structuralist theory has been particularly attractive, in the context of exploring issues connected to the supposed fragility and ephemerality of virtual identity (Turkle, 1995), and its disembodiment and performance (Cavanagh, 2007, p. 120). The assemblage theory and Actor Network Theory of Deleuze (1972) and Latour respectively have spoken to concerns about the materiality of human-technical interrelation. Foucault's concepts surrounding disciplinary power and governmentality (1975) offer direct relevance to concerns about the implications of the Internet for privacy and surveillance (Fuchs, 2011; Aycock, 1995), while the wider theme of knowledge/power and discourse in his work strongly resonate in a context where the substantive nature of the Internet is specifically themed in terms of information and communication (Rajagopal, 2014). Finally, Social Network Analysis, of a rational choice rather than anthropological inflection, is probably the preeminent strategy of choice for a substantial proportion of social research of the Internet (Rainee & Wellman, 2012; Haythornthwaite, 2011; Hogan, 2008).

These examples serve to illustrate the representation of comparable social theories within Internet research. In a previous publication I further argue, however, that there is an underlying practical orientation and body of assumptions that underlie social inquiry towards the Internet (Herzig, 2016). This orientation renders some theoretical traditions more appealing to researchers than others. Foremost among these is a preoccupation with the *newness* of the Internet, not only as a medium, but also as a prominent structural principle of organisation. Whether internet researchers are optimistic or pessimistic about the rise of the Internet and its implications, they share implicit consensus over its significance as a vehicle for change. This is evident when we consider the form that inquiry related to the Internet has taken. Whether we are questioning the ramifications of social media for civic engagement, exploring the risks and virtues of citizen journalism, or documenting the bullying of adolescents on Snapchat, in each instance we are preoccupied with those aspects of society and human experience that have experienced change as a result of new media. I draw this observation not in order to imply that there is anything intrinsically problematic about this tendency. Indeed, work of this nature is vitally important and necessary.

I propose, however, that this orientation carries with it the risk of bias. This bias is seen in the theoretical perspectives that have been coopted by Internet researchers, as well as those that have been excluded. Each of the social theories mentioned reinforces belief in the centrality of the Internet, and its transformative significance. For instance, the tendency to represent and study the Internet as a network affirms a social ontology that emphasizes interpersonal communicative ties as the primary shaper and 'social glue' in society. Castells explicitly privileges purposive, conscious communication as the driver of social change (2009). Social network analysis affirms this perspective, by framing individuals as nodes who exchange information and resources through strategic interactive connections with others. While Latour resists the emphasis on human-centric agency and consciousness, he also endorses an explanatory model preoccupied with individual ties between nodes in a network. Similarly, Habermas' notion of the public sphere is embedded within his model of 'communicative rationality', which proposes that it is through collaborative deliberation of meaning and value that democratic societies can find normative grounding (Habermas, 1987).

Where the poststructuralist influence does not bring with it the same commitment to an interactionist ontology, it is perfectly positioned to reflect and confirm concerns regarding the significance of the Internet for agency and identity. Bringing with it themes such as performativity, the fractured and fluid nature identity and the constructive force of language, it gives ready voice to perspectives that emphasize the emancipatory potential afforded by the anonymity and plethora of tools for self-representation found online (Turkle, 1995; Van Zoonen *et al.*, 2008). Its emphasis on linguistic constructivism reinforces presumptions regarding the power of the Internet, as a co-produced text, and as communicative vehicle.

The risk of bias lies in the affinity between the tenets of these theoretical traditions and the assumptions that Internet research is oriented towards. Without any measures to problematise belief in the Internet's transformative significance, researchers run the risk of being blinkered by technological determinism.

From this perspective, it becomes easier to see why it is that Bourdieu has enjoyed relatively little attention within Internet studies. His field theory has been particularly criticized for reflecting an outgoing phase of modernity, characterized by strong nation states and advanced division of labour. It is seen as less suitable for capturing increasingly globalized and deterritorialized cultures and collectives, which are supposed to comprise the form of social structure in modern societies, after the rise of the Internet (Lahire, 2011). A related objection is that Bourdieu's perspective is better suited to characterizing stable, self-replicating cultures and structures than it is to environments of rapid change and transformation (Jenkins, 1992). Finally, some dismiss Bourdieu's approach as one that is overly concerned with the social, while blithe with respect to the material significance of human-technical interrelations (Latour, 2005).

In this context, the decision to adopt a Bourdieuan approach may be seen as quaint or passé. I believe that this is a mistaken assumption, however, and in this chapter I aim to demonstrate precisely how Bourdieu's theory can be exploited for effective critique of online spaces, such as those in which digital reputation is circulated and sought after. My chapter will involve a clarification of my interpretation of Bourdieu's framework and how I use it to construct my research design. I also use this chapter to reflect upon the ways that my interpretation of Bourdieu differs from that of other Bourdieuans, and to comment on aspects where I have developed, or envisage developing the theory beyond the confines of what Bourdieu explicitly articulated in his work. I will also reflect upon potential areas of bias that can be encouraged by a Bourdieuan strategy. The chapter will conclude by affirming the strategic value of Bourdieu's approach for social research of digital practice, and for online reputation in particular.

General Principles

The lynchpin of Bourdieu's framework are the concepts field, habitus and capital. These elements are strongly interrelated, and together form a coherent and compelling explanatory heuristic for human practice.

Field

Field is the concept that Bourdieu uses to characterize social structure, and the shared environments in which individuals act. A field is made up of positions and relations. On a surface level, this bears similarity to the concept of a network (Benkler, 2006). For Bourdieu, however, the relations - not ties (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97) - between the different positions consist in the distance

or proximity that positions have with respect to a particular form of capital, when compared to other positions. Bourdieu explicitly clarifies that fields arise around distinct forms of capital. If there is no capital present, then there cannot be a field. Positions are typically occupied by individuals within Bourdieu's thought, but occasionally a position is occupied by collective and corporate entities such as institutions. There is some variation in interpretation with respect to whether or not institutions and collectives should be understood as unified actors within a field. This can be opposed to deeming them subfields, or aggregates that occupy the same local region within a field (Atkinson, 2014). For example, Bourdieu attributes a similar habitus to entire classes in *Distinction*, but their ontological status in his analysis is that of a collective of individuals who happen to occupy very similar positions within their fields (1979). By contrast, Reay coins the notion of *institutional habitus* in order to analyse schools as agents within a wider field of education (Reay & Crozier, 2009).

No two entities occupy the same position within a field, although they might share a very proximal place. To occupy a position in a field, an agent must be invested in the capital that characterizes it. Fields operate by bringing agents into competition with one another for specific profits. If an agent has no interest in the profits of that particular field, they are not acting within it, and being influenced by it. The fact that field occupants are invested in the values that the field affords places them in a hierarchical and competitive situation in relation to one another, since none will share exactly the same space within the field. Bourdieu characterizes the practices of agents within fields as taking one of two forms. Agents will either act to conserve and reproduce an existing social state of affairs, or they will seek to transform or undermine it. Which of these actions they choose will depend on their field position. If they are in an advantageous position in relation to the field's profits, they will seek to preserve its configuration. If they are at a disadvantage, they will seek to reform it, in order to improve their relative position.

Each field exhibits its own *logic*. This can be understood as the cultural and structural principles that are produced by the accumulated history of the field in question, in response to the interaction and struggles of field occupants over time. Each agent in a field shapes its logic through their actions to reinforce or undermine its nature. The actions available to them, however, are always shaped by the logic that those who acted before them collectively produced.

The fact that field occupants are always engaged in efforts to reform or transform the fields in which they are immersed lends fields a fluid and dynamic character. Some fields are more rigid than others, but no field is static, as living and acting human agents are always involved in a process of acting within and upon a field in order to secure the profits that are offered by participation. It also follows logically from Bourdieu's definition, that the entrance or exit of any agent from a field would constitute an instant recomposition, however mild, of its structure. This is because a field is solely defined by the shape of the relations between different positions with respect to capital. Since no position is identical with any other, any addition or subtraction changes this shape. Even if the

majority of such changes are imperceptible in their effect, they must inevitably exert change over time.

It is also important to note that fields are semi-homologous. By this Bourdieu means that they are not self-contained, but overlap with other fields to greater or lesser degrees. I view this overlap as logically necessary because agents never occupy only one field over the course of their lifetime. Rather, they will be involved in many fields, some of them at the same time. This interpretation leads me to reason that agents are being influenced by the logic and pressures of one field in ways that will necessarily shape how they behave in other fields to which they belong. In the same vein, I do not interpret Bourdieu as insistent that the capital composition possessed by an individual is fixed and static from a young age. Rather, I assume that capital accumulation will continue over the life course, and will be added to and reformed based on the combination of fields a person inhabits over time, and their positions within those fields.

Individuals are able to convert forms of capital between fields in some cases (for example, possession of economic capital can be converted to cultural capital via investment in education), and that some of the most widespread forms of capital have currency in most fields (economic, social and cultural, specifically). The porous nature of field boundaries, and the particular nature of overlap gives fields an uneven and polarized nature. Bourdieu characterizes many fields by drawing axes between the volume of cultural capital agents have in contrast to an axis of economic capital. This kind of structure allows a sociologist to easily map out different social experiences such as that characteristic of someone who possesses high cultural capital and low economic capital (for instance the child of a religious minister with little wealth but good education), or somebody with high economic capital but low cultural capital (for instance, the *nouveau riche*, individuals who are upwardly mobile but retain low status tastes in terms of cultural pursuits, clothing, and who may have lower status accents).

The porous and overlapping nature of field boundaries also gives rise to fluctuations and fluidity in field boundaries. For instance, the neo-liberalisation of British Higher Education would be viewed, in Bourdieuan terms, as the encroachment of the economic field upon the boundaries of the academic field; an issue discussed at length in *Homo Academicus* (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 84).

Operationalising Field

I have used the concept of field as both a theory and a method in the course of designing my case study. As a methodological heuristic, 'field' encourages me to think about the distinct circuits of power and endeavour that define the lives of TSR users. It cautioned me against seeking out an 'easy' categorization of the space under consideration. TSR is a contained online community, but that does not mean that it necessarily represents a field. If any fields or subfields specific to TSR exist, I can't assume that they will share boundaries with the site itself. Moreover I needed to stay open to the possibility that wider fields were more relevant in explaining practice on TSR than any site-specific field may have been.

Although I was interested in the significance of reputation from the offset, the strength of Bourdieu's concepts would have been undermined if I had immediately delineated my inquiry and sample so as to highlight reputation, as opposed to considering the full context in which reputation might have meaning and value (or might not). Therefore, I purposively strove to set aside preconceived notions about the fields I might observe on TSR, and precisely how they might be defined. I began the research process, instead, with relatively open-ended observation in which I sought to answer questions such as:

"What are the motives of users in this thread, forum or interaction?"

"Are there any particular strategies, skills or attributes that confer advantage on users in this environment?"

"What attributes are deemed undesirable or objectionable in this context, and why?"

"What is the history of this thread, forum or environment? Are there any wider historical and cultural influences that define the 'logic' of this space?"

The theoretical principles of the field concept also encouraged critical reflection on distinctions and categories such as online/offline. It is intuitive to hypothesize that the activity and practice taking place on TSR can be bracketed away from the practices and concerns of users' daily lives because it is an online environment, that mediates practice in strikingly different ways to the mediation of co-present interaction. But Bourdieu's clarification of field makes it clear that field boundaries are not necessarily materially defined. What draws agents together into a field is investment in the same 'game', and it was perfectly plausible, and indeed likely, that the motives and struggles that users of TSR were invested in transcended the boundaries of the forums. This reflection led me to adopt a weak hypothesis that practices on TSR would best be understood as occurring at an intersection, wrought by TSR itself, between an array of different fields. For the most part, the actors I concerned myself with were individuals. But The Student Group Ltd, who own and administer the website for profit, were also a significant force in shaping and defining the environment in which users acted. The TSR Group was best understood as a player in a wider field of online communities, primarily concentrated as they are, with securing and improving their share of traffic among British young adults and counterparts abroad interested in studying in the UK, and thereby safeguarding custom from advertising firms.

Finally, Bourdieu's notion of field logic encouraged me to pay attention to the history of TSR itself, and to specific norms, attitudes and rules that governed it. This context was vital in critiquing specific interactions and practices observed during fieldwork.

Applying Bourdieu to online practice in this way yields a distinctive approach to analyzing digital practice. It allows me to take a grounded approach to identifying which material, social and environmental constraints and affordances are significant with reference to the aims and struggles of actors, rather than

adopting a substantive list *a priori*. As an illustrative contrast, Boyd proposes “four structural affordances of networked publics”, which consist in persistence (recording and archiving of data), replicability and searchability (2010). Papacharissi and Yuan suggest the addition of shareability to the model as a fifth structural affordance (2011). It is demonstrably evident that these categories point to clear differences between online and offline practices, and to practical differences in what individuals can do and how they can do it in each context. What is considerably less assured is whether these affordances and constraints will be meaningful to individual actors in the pursuit of their goals and values, in any given online context. Bourdieu might have issued the same criticism to Boyd as he did to the structuralist school so dominant in his time. Structuralism, he believed, acted to impose the theoretical reductions that theorists created in order to capture their own interests, onto the actions of ordinary individuals. In doing so they created the conditions to confirm their own theories, and failed to grasp the lived meaning of the individuals they observed. Boyd’s model is very compelling if my question is ‘what is distinct about social practice on the Internet?’ However, what I would prefer to find out is “what is salient to the individuals who are active on TSR?” This question might lead me to similar observations, but Bourdieu’s concepts would have guided me there through reference to the manifest goals and values of situated individuals.

Capital

Capital is defined, by Bourdieu, as a ‘species of power’. It is a deliberately economic metaphor, that reflects Bourdieu’s intention of revealing the ‘economy of symbolic goods’ that can be found within every domain of social practice, rather than exclusively within economic markets. While some characterize Bourdieu as a neo-Marxist, he is critical of Marx’s attempt at conflating every aspect of human practice within the bounds of the economic sphere, and he sees his theory as a corrective to this tendency. He praises Marx for recognizing the significance of actors’ relation to economic capital, but suggests that economic capital and the market are only the most explicit example of market forces, out of an array of different forms of capital, most of which are immaterial, and disguised through a veil of disinterestedness. As a result, the way that economic capital is acquired and accumulated is distinct in important ways from the means through which other types of capital are acquired, and the strategic and cultural implications that this has for actors renders Marx’s theory incomplete and reductive. A key example he uses to illustrate this is the logic of the field of cultural production, where elite producers must appear to eschew popular and monetary success, and be seen to pursue art for its intrinsic merits alone. The acquisition of popular success tends to prohibit its benefactor from receiving recognition and status among *avant garde*, elite cultural producers.

Bourdieu’s characterization of capital can also be seen to be Weberian in character, given the stress it places on values. As each field can be understood as a relatively durable configuration of relations and practices that arise in response to shared pursuit of different ‘goods’, it is implicit that the values actors hold are significant forces that shape and define social structure and power. Actors would not be motivated to invest in struggle for a good unless they

deemed it to be valuable and desirable. The centrality of values is similarly and more tellingly implicit in the fact that the nature of the power struggles that Bourdieu describes often involve actions aimed at securing legitimacy, or removing legitimacy from particular goods. The more that people are convinced of the value of a particular skill, trait or commodity, the more power the person who possesses that good will hold. Similarly, once the value of a particular good is questioned, the position of the holder is undermined. A contemporary example of this includes the decline of influence and status held by medical doctors. A range of historical changes, and the rise of the Internet have each contributed to the decline of public respect and trust in 'expertise' (most recently exemplified by Brexit and the stance of Michael Gove) such as that offered by general practitioners (GPs). In this case, one might argue that the amount of influence an 'expert' has is dependent on the beliefs that people hold regarding the reliability of the medical profession, the scarcity of the good it offers (which is altered by the heightened availability of information and advice via the Internet), and thus the *value* that is placed in the opinions of doctors.

Bourdieu is not especially forthcoming about the difference between the goods that power affords in contrast to power itself. Capitals are positional goods that confer vicarious benefit to their holder, via the status and power afforded to them by its position. Capitals are also goods bearing intrinsic value to actors. This ambiguity is not necessarily problematic, as long as the nature of the capital in question is sufficiently contextually defined, and clearly connected to the mechanisms and practices that support it. In Bourdieu's own research, this definition takes place in his application of the framework to substantive empirical investigation.

It is clear that Bourdieu is more interested in subtle and ideological methods of dominance than in direct physical dominance; the latter takes the same place in his thought as it does in that of Weber, who argues that physical violence is monopolized and contained by modern states by virtue of the power afforded by their democratic mandates (i.e. their legitimacy).

Bourdieu's description of capital leaves room for the interpretation that an infinite number of different forms of capital could, conceivably, exist. In the context of the substantive examples to which he applies his theory, however, it is clear that he sees cultural, economic, social and symbolic capital as the main forms that power takes. Of these, it is also clear that symbolic power is the most universal form of power, and (as defined before) this is the ability to conduct one's will under the veil of legitimacy, and disinterestedness. His thematic stress on these specific social domains belies his assessment of the substantive character of modern democratic societies, and in many of his works he creates maps of 'social space' which position the fields that he is considering in relation to the more fundamental fields of political and economic power.

Habitus

Habitus marks the final distinguishing lynchpin of Bourdieu's heuristic system. This is the notion he uses to define the subject. He describes habitus as a

structuring structure comprised of durable and embodied dispositions acquired through the life course, but most influentially during childhood. Dispositions, in Bourdieu's view, are orientations, desires, impulses and preferences that strongly predispose individuals to act and react in particular ways to the world around them. It is important to note that dispositions are tacit and often unconscious in terms of how their effects are experienced by individuals. Bourdieu incorporates phenomenological insights in seeking to capture the lived, moment-by-moment experience of inhabiting an (at least seemingly) immanent physical body and universe. This represents one important difference between his thought and that of contemporary constructivists such as Foucault, in that dispositions are not solely discursive and representational, but also deeply rooted in physical traits such as mannerisms, gait and taste. Also important, regarding the nature of 'habitus' is its historical and temporal emphasis. It is the chronological acquisition of experiences and opportunities that fashion the particular dispositions that habitus hosts, and the composition and volume of capital that is acquired. This history defines the context in which any action or reaction originates.

For Bourdieu, dispositions are a product of the interrelation between habitus and field. As described, each individual will face a situation with a personal amalgam of capital and dispositions. The situations that they encounter in a field will similarly be shaped by the history of that field. In other words, the field has a certain 'logic' based on the actions that have defined it to date, and it affords the individual a limited array of possible actions, which will themselves reflect the configuration of different positions that make up that field at that moment, and where the individual in question is positioned in that configuration.

This interplay is facilitated by the 'sense of limits' that individuals have regarding what is possible, and where they fit in the world around them. Bourdieu believes that habitus regulates the desires so that they align with opportunities and constraints. This component of habitus is characterized as 'doxa', Bourdieu's version of an individual's world-view or inner narrative. Unlike dispositions, doxa is largely experienced on a conscious level. Although Bourdieu is not explicit on this point, one might reasonably infer from the shape of his overall framework, and his manifest social constructivism, that individuals do not have perfect knowledge of the field, and that doxa amounts to an approximate reflection of reality, as mediated by field position and personal disposition.

Given the interlocking that this system produces between subjectivity and objectivity, it is unsurprising that doxa is sometimes framed as a field property rather than one of habitus. Particular fields are sometimes described as generating a particular doxa. This is akin to the way in which, for instance, the notion of a collective habitus is sometimes implied; for instance in *Distinction*, where Bourdieu is describing certain sensibilities that are common to entire social classes by virtue of their socio-economic position. Despite these examples, I believe that doxa is a component of habitus, however, because it is human agents that are doing the perceiving and representing of the field. Fields are co-produced and corporeally embodied environments that each individual has to

negotiate in order to satisfy their needs and reach their goals, but field has no discursive agency of its own, a fact that draws an important distinction between the thought of Bourdieu and Latour, for instance. It also marks Bourdieu apart from Foucault. Where Foucault tends to be imprecise and vague about the locus of human thought and agency in relation to dispersed power, in Bourdieu's theory it is possible to trace beliefs, power, will and action to particular agents while retaining an appreciation for collective and structural forces.

Altogether, then, Bourdieu's "genetic structuralism" (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992) creates a model of agency that seeks to reflect the role of both unconscious and conscious influences and experiences in shaping human practice. It also seeks to reflect the embodied, temporal and material dimensions of agency along with those aspects that are discursive and representational. Bringing field, capital and habitus together, we have an explanatory framework that reflects the cultural and material structures which come to bear on the freedom of individuals, while also demonstrating how the attitudes, emotions, preferences and beliefs of individuals combine to create those very structures that are to be negotiated by those that follow. Bourdieu's offer scalability, functioning just as effectively in combination with quantitative or qualitative methods. This is something he demonstrated himself throughout his career in which he deployed a diverse range of methodological strategies, from ethnography and detailed interviews, to multi-correspondence analysis, the statistical technique that he pioneered as a tool for mapping fields on a large (usually national) scale. For these reasons, Bourdieu's framework offers a powerful and thorough heuristic for interrogating social practice.

Applying Key Concepts

General Reflections

My appropriation of Bourdieu's principles is at once generous and strict. For instance, I adopt a relatively strict approach to interpreting and applying Bourdieu's principles. For instance, where possible I see it as strongly desirable to use the notions of habitus, capital and field in concert with one another. Each of these components to social practice and subjectivity are strongly interrelated. To extract one of the concepts from the framework to which it belongs is to alter the very content and premise of that concept.

In another sense, however, I adopt a relatively generous reading of Bourdieu's theory in comparison to many of his critics. To clarify, I draw a distinction between the theoretical principles that Bourdieu outlines, and his empirical work, in which he applies these principles to particular examples. For example, Bourdieu's empirical work has dwelt heavily on class, and does not directly explore race or ethnicity. A critic lacking in generosity might claim that this undermines the applicability of Bourdieu's theory to issues surrounding race. A more generous approach, however, would isolate the universal claims that Bourdieu makes about the human habitus and its relation to social fields, and would seek to test them out on a problem in which race was an element before assuming its incompatibility. Doing so might reveal that race positions

individuals in different positions within fields, and that the habitus and forms of capital influenced by race will hold a value within those social spaces that reflects the history of material and symbolic struggles to define what values are consecrated and endowed with respect in the field. An example of this includes the strategic choice of Ivy League Universities in the 1930s to emphasise cultural capital in the form of non-academic skills in areas such as sports or music as a reaction to the perceived monopoly that Jewish students had on academic excellence (Khan, 2012).

In a similar way, I see it as no limitation to my research that Bourdieu wrote little to nothing of substantive relevance to the contemporary Internet (what content can be found is limited to his brief allusion to 'technical' capital (Sterne, 2003), and to his brief observations about the functioning of the French field of mass media in the 80s and 90s (Bourdieu, 1998). Instead, I use the tools of capital, field and habitus as heuristic devices with which to generate questions about the practices of individuals and the context in which these take place.

I also take a generous approach to Bourdieu's theory in that I seek to follow the underlying logic of the principles he articulates, even when it comes to details that Bourdieu was not very forthcoming or explicit about. Two examples are as follows.

Firstly, Bourdieu's theory has been interpreted as deterministic in character (Jenkins, 1992), owing to the fact that the relationship between field and habitus tends to discourage reflexive awareness on the part of agents, and often acts to secure complicity and the reproduction of power relations, rather than dissent and reform. While defenders of Bourdieu point to the fact that Bourdieu characterizes his model as one of 'structured indeterminacy', and one that concerns probabilities rather than determinants, I go a further step in my interpretation by arguing that the logic of Bourdieu's principles contain within them the conditions that would not only account for change and reform, but anticipate them. The concept of a field provides insight into how a large group of individuals (such as a class) might occupy very similar places within social space. Their similar field position means that the strategic choices that make most sense to them will be shared. This reality is enough to lead to reproduction in the majority of situations. However, there is also a logical inevitability to deviations from the most probable trajectories. These deviations come about for a range of reasons. The first reason, and the only one which Bourdieu outlined explicitly, is the situation of hysteresis (1980) in which an individual's habitus is not sufficiently attuned to a field to be caught up in its reproductive tendency. This can happen if an individual has only recently entered a field, and has not yet fully internalized its values and logic. It can also happen when fields are unstable or undergoing rapid change, for instance in periods of political unrest.

There are other truths which would explain deviations and divergent trajectories while remaining compatible with Bourdieu's principles. The most important of these is the undeniable uniqueness of human agents (which Bourdieu does not deny). However similar two individuals are in positional socio-economic

characteristics such as class, nationality, race and gender, each person occupies an exclusive place in space and time. The fact that no two individuals ever encounter exactly the same circumstances and experiences in the same order means that each person will form at least subtly different habituses and personal histories. While the differences might be small enough to render it sensible for most individuals of the same social position to pursue similar trajectories, it is likely that some of these differences will prove significant enough to orient a minority of individuals towards divergent paths.

In addition to this deduction, I also interpret Bourdieu's model as one that acknowledges the positioning of individuals within an array of different fields, many of which will be occupied simultaneously. There is some ambiguity in Bourdieu's writing on this matter, given that he comments at one point that habitus always exists in relation to a field, in an analogous manner to the connection between fields and capital. A strict interpretation of this condition might then perceive the model as prohibiting any interrelation between the habituses that individuals have in one field with the habituses that they hold in others. Wacquant goes some of the way to resolving this by arguing that individuals do not simply exhibit 'primary' habitus, but also secondary, tertiary, quaternary and so on (Wacquant, 2013). This immediately allows more room within the framework, because those using Wacquant's reading are no longer compelled to treat the experiences that individuals have in their earliest formative years as the 'final say' on their agency and orientations over the life course. Critics such as Atkinson (2014) still argue, however, that Wacquant's solution fails to deal with the question of the multiplicity of different habituses. Even if we assume that individuals hold different habituses over life, how do we understand the connection between each of these different habituses, and how do we discern whether traits, dispositions and orientations remain bound to particular fields, or whether they can be transferred between individuals across fields?

My solution to this is to take a more generous reading of Bourdieu's intent, drawing on wider details and comments about his framework for evidence. When it comes to capital, Bourdieu already suggests that some of the most major forms of capital (economic, social and cultural, for instance) are frequently convertible across many different fields because of the ubiquity and fundamentality of their value to humans universally. Their conversion 'rate' is determined by the governing structure of the field of power at a given point in time, which Bourdieu characterizes as an underlying symbolic space in which the classifications shaping social space (and its fields) is fought over (Bourdieu, 1998). Bourdieu also provides numerous examples of overlap between fields, demonstrating that the capital to a particular field is strongest in areas that the field is most independent, and weakest in areas that it overlaps with other fields, losing some of its autonomy in these connections (See: Bourdieu, 1993, p. 29). Since a field is simply a relational space between a collective of individuals, we should understand the overlap between fields as representing areas where individuals who may be relatively disadvantaged when it comes to the specific capital of the field in question may instead be compensating by seeking to

convert or affirm the value of some external capital that they hold advantage in relation to (for instance economic capital). Their strategic choice to draw on a capital from a one field for use within a different field is the means through which one field is pulled into homology with another. It is the individuals themselves who connect different fields by existing in different spaces at once. Assuming this reading to be correct, one must either interpret Bourdieu as contradictory in his characterization of habitus, or one must assume that in fact he believed that individuals experience a degree of unity between different habituses, and that they are capable, or indeed predisposed, to draw on the experiences, capital and dispositions acquired in one field when negotiating their position within others. This interpretation also illustrates why rigid and determinist readings of Bourdieu might be mistaken. If individuals are involved in many 'games' across different fields at the same time, they can't be seen to be fully locked into the reproductive tendencies of any one field. Indeed, a clash between the habitus they acquire in one field and that acquired in another, is reasonably likely to occur. This clash could lead to reflexive deliberation and introspection. But it may also lead to more tacit strategic choices to pull out of one field in order to invest more heavily in another, or to use the dispositions and values from one field as inspiration with which to challenge and reform that of another.

To remain relevant and useful to social scientists, it is necessary for researchers to adapt and refine Bourdieu's concepts, so that their explanatory power is both preserved and extended. While I prefer a generous interpretation of Bourdieu's account, I recognise it as fundamentally necessary to clearly signal where Bourdieu ends and the amendments of a theoretician begins. To this end, in my own work, I aspire to clearly signal instances where I deploy my individual interpretation and analysis in order to bridge, extend or correct concepts originally devised by Bourdieu.

Field and Capital

Since a field is always defined by the relations between agents and a capital, the logical means of utilizing this concept is to question whether or not the actions and experiences of individuals in a situation can be explained with reference to orientation or struggle over particular goods, be they material or cultural. Bourdieu's guidance regarding identifying a field is that its boundaries rest at the points where its capital ceases to hold currency and to exert influence (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 100). Many situations are influenced by several distinct fields, none of which can claim primacy. For instance, if we were to study the passengers in the carriage of a train on a particular journey, there would be some broad fields through which each person was connected, such as the stake that each passenger held in being able to access affordable train fares, and a reliable and comfortable facilities. However, this relationship would not provide much pertinent information about the context. In that particular time and place, the dynamics that were most strongly affecting the experiences and behaviours of passengers would likely implicate a vast number of distinct fields in which passengers were individually invested. This is a moment in which the concept of field might not be very helpful to a social researcher, in contrast to alternative

theoretical strategies such as those pioneered by Garfinkel (1967). Appropriate application of 'field', then, must incorporate consideration over how many different fields might be implicated in the context of interest, and whether any one or few fields in particular point to details of salience and explanatory value.

In selecting *The Student Room* as my case, I was presented with different possibilities when it came to charting social fields. TSR can be interpreted as one of many competitors seeking to secure the traffic of British young adults, seeking to share information and experiences of education online (direct competitors include specific sites such as Studential, the forums hosted by UCAS, and social media platforms such as Facebook). As demonstrated in Chapter 6, TSR as a company seeks to fashion itself as an advocate for students' interests, and to claim influence and to attract attention in public and mediated discussion surrounding policy affecting students, perhaps in an effort to emulate the public role of Martin Lewis: the founder and CEO of moneysavingexpert.com (O'Callaghan, 2017). TSR has also sought to garner influence with educational institutions directly, through means such as school visits, and through formal partnerships with Universities, who may pay for 'official representative' accounts with privileges on the website.

TSR is also, however, a for-profit organization that relies on advertising revenue, and directly appeals to advertisers in terms of its ability to deliver the 'voice' of students. From a digital labour perspective, users on TSR engaged in free labour when they choose to generate content on the site (Campbell, 2011; Banks & Humphreys, 2008).

Within the boundaries of TSR itself, it is impossible to identify those who 'lurk' (Schlosser, 2005). While only registered users can post on TSR, any internet user can read the majority of TSR's content. If TSR hosts its own field, then I cannot rule out the possibility that its boundaries extend further than the manifest interactions of registered users who choose to post. Countless readers may be invisibly influenced by TSR content. It is well known among the moderation staff that national exam boards have monitored activity on TSR in the past. In recent years formal agreements have been made between the moderation team and exam boards in terms of exactly what responsibility TSR's team has to prevent discussion about exam questions on key dates. Any TSR defined field, then, is likely to have boundaries that exceed the material perimeters of its webhosted content and its Brighton headquarters.

The interactions of those who post on TSR must also be recognized as forming a part of a diverse range of wider fields, unrelated to TSR, that are brought into relation with one another in the persons of TSR users and the discussion forums it hosts. An individual posting in the Fitness forum is simultaneously acting within a field of physicality and of strength, while also constructing the social space of TSR as an online community.

Drawing each of these observations together, my strategy when engaged in fieldwork was to bear each of these contexts and field overlaps in mind, and to

avoid privileging any particular field or context prior to fieldwork. In the field, I approached each instance with the priority of seeking to identify what things were the most valuable and motivating towards users of TSR, and which things conferred upon them the most influence and privilege within their interaction in that space. This approach introduced a natural limit to the breadth of my research, and also prohibited any extensive attempts to map out each of the fields that were implicated.

After identifying which values are the most important for orienting behaviour in a particular situation, the notion of field also encourages consideration of the history and processes that have shaped the existing status quo. What is the current logic of the field, by which I mean the often unspoken rules and norms which dictate what one can or can't do, how one does it, and what the consequences will be if one deviates? Have things always been the way they are now? Is there any practical or logical necessity to the configuration of the field, or fields in question, or is it arbitrary? How have attempts to preserve or to reform in the past led to the present? What positions in a field are stable and robust, and which are in flux? Where is the context in question positioned in social space more broadly? What wider forces exert influence upon it?

The charting out of field structure and field boundaries is one and the same as identifying and mapping capital, and my approach was effectively the same. Observing and interviewing posts and users with the underlying concern of finding out the values that motivate them, and the attributes, features or behaviours which advantaged them allowed me to identify the forms in which capital operated. Most frequently, this was revealed in the particular ways that individuals discursively positioned themselves within conversation threads, with humour being one of the most telling reflections of the contextual logic that ordered users' choices and experiences. Other times, however, it was vicariously visible through discrepancies between the claims and self-fashioning of individuals, and the actions that they would then take, or the experiences or outcomes that would occur later on. Finally, the capitals and values that were most salient on TSR typically enjoyed institutionalization and consecration, of varying levels of formality.

Habitus

Where field and capital can readily be observed through empirical observation, habitus is considerably more challenging to empirically verify. Burawoy goes as far as to dismiss the notion as a 'black box' (2012). There is a certain inevitability to this limitation, given the reliance of habitus upon the existence of embodied, instinctive, non-representational and unconscious determinants. Some of these influences are not reflexively accessible to actors themselves, let alone to an outside observer. The methodological deployment of habitus is therefore an important and challenging consideration. As it happens, there are neurological and psychological studies that provide empirical backing to some of the claims Bourdieu advances through the notion of habitus (Lizardo, 2009). These might serve to protect the concept from criticisms of armchair theorization, but they are of limited use to a sociologist or ethnographer, seeking to understand the

specific forces at work in a given situation. Knowing the general truth that the internal state of my research subjects involves both unconscious and non-discursive instincts as well as conscious representations and intention may discourage me from excessive naïvety towards the explicit avowals of those I research, but it does not provide me any additional ability to access the particular content of my subjects' experiences. Qualitative social research methods allow me to pursue a certain descriptive depth that is secured through focusing on a particular case, rather than on a great many, and through observing and interacting with people in a naturally arising context to which they belong of their own volition or, at least, not of mine. My loss, however, is the insight that an experimental approach might provide, and the use of techniques such as brain imaging via MRI scanning. For this reason, I invoke the concept of habitus relatively little in my analysis, despite bearing it in mind as an explanatory resource to consider.

Despite this fact, there are various strengths and practical implications that it offers. In particular, provisional acceptance of the principles of habitus raises certain questions that must be kept in mind during the research process. In my work these include the following, non-exhaustive examples:

How do the past experiences and social positions of TSR users influence their behaviour and orientation to TSR? What set of dispositions, and which composition of capital is necessary for individuals to feel confident and 'safe' about posting in different areas of the site? For example, my own habitus, formed as it is by my experience of being raised as a pastor's daughter, renders me averse to posting in Health and Relationships, a section of the site where many of the threads are directly sexual and physically explicit in nature. For this reason I have omitted the section entirely from my research, despite the fact that it is one of the more popular and active sections of TSR, and also one that stands out for the number of trolls that it attracts. As Bourdieu opines, my habitus is manifest not only in my conscious opinions and intentions, but also in deeply rooted and embodied reactions. I feel vulnerable, exposed and humiliated at the thought of posting in many of the NSFW⁵ threads that can be found in "H&R". This instinctive reaction is accompanied by rational considerations, such as the risk to my professional reputation should I be associated with such material, and conscious aversion to the risk of appearing naïve and ignorant amongst the comparatively worldly wise denizens of H&R. Just as I am unseen and absent from Health and Relationships, the notion of habitus invites me to think about which people are eliminated from those areas I choose to research, and whether I can infer any patterns by looking at features that are present in those who are attracted to a particular section.

What do behavioural and stylistic differences in the performance of TSR users tell me about their habitus, and thus about ways that they might be unconsciously and consciously positioned on TSR? For example, what do users

⁵ NSFW abbreviates digital content that is "Not Safe For Work". For instance, it is commonly used in email subjects when sending unprofessional links to a person's work email address.

put in their signatures? If they posted their AS level results and their conditional University offers, what does that tell me about them? How about if they include a quote from classic literature, or if they include an anime image, or one of a celebrity? What is their avatar (profile picture)? What font style and colour do they use, and what kind of vocabulary, punctuation and grammar do they adopt? Of the customisations that are available to users on TSR, what do they choose? Do they hide or display gender icons, post counts and reputation levels? Do they include personal information on their profile or are they conspicuous, instead, for the lack of detail and personal specifics that they display?

What is the phenomenology of using TSR? Where are users when they post? At home or at school? On personal or shared computers? Laptops, tablets, mobiles or desktops? Are they spending hours on the site, or visiting in short intermittent bursts? How does engaging with TSR qualitatively affect the day-to-day quality of users' lived experience? How do users experience the layout and visual interface of TSR? Over the years, as TSR was commercialised, the colour scheme and graphic design was subjected to a dramatic overhaul, and it has – since – been subject to regular revision.

Each of these questions is associated with habitus. Some of these questions begin with habitus and work outwards, and some of them draw on observations or information I already have to hand, and operate by enabling me to piece together impressions of what particular users' habitus may be. Many of the questions that are inspired by this heuristic will not find answers in my research, but that does not mean that they don't serve a purpose. Being aware of possible influences upon the practices of those I research furnishes me with a consistent procedure that demands reflection beyond the confines of what is immediately apparent, and provides a frameworks of checks that act to disrupt easy simplifications or naïve readings of social situations.

Bourdieu Online

In the beginning of the chapter, I problematized the 'newness' of the Internet. I suggested that changes in media and technology can't be assumed, *a priori*, to exert any significant transformations upon the lived experience and practices of individuals. Instead, particular instances of online practice need to be considered on a case-by-case basis, with open consideration to the influence or lack of influence of new media on practice. Bourdieu talks at great length of the importance of reflexivity during the construction of the research object (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 235). Not only does he stress the need to reflect upon how the categories and boundaries introduced during research can introduce bias and act to mask the underlying social logic to a situation, but also of the need for researchers to consider their own social distance or proximity to the research object, and to interrogate how this may have a bearing on what it is possible to elicit or to avoid. I apply this when approaching The Student Room by seeking to avoid certain received assumptions about TSR as an environment. For me this means putting aside attentiveness to the novelty of online environments in contrast to face-to-face physical co-presence. I also sought to avoid reifying the opposition of 'online' and 'offline' interaction. I suggest that this offers a fresh

and grounded way to discern the meanings, imperatives and logic that are relevant and salient to TSR users' experiences and choices, and a means to avoid some of the biases inherent in existing theory regarding digital sociality.

Epistemology and Ontology

Bourdieu is keen to claim that his theory is more of a heuristic procedure than a theory. Despite popular criticism to the contrary, the intrinsic mechanisms of this approach do not presume many determinate outcomes or explanations. Bourdieu also defends himself against claims that his framework is historically and culturally contingent (See: Bourdieu, 2001; Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992). However, there is no question that there are some preconceived epistemological and ontological assumptions within the framework, that act to shape the nature of the account that is afforded through it.

The first such assumption implicit in Bourdieu's theory is that actors are interested, and that these interests matter. Bourdieu expects that individuals will be motivated by these interests, and that their pursuit forms the basic universal principle to which all human practice conforms. For this reason many critics characterize Bourdieu as a realist, albeit one of a very sophisticated kind. This stance is evident in the theoretical tools that Bourdieu advances. *Habitus*, Bourdieu's model of agency, operates by first furnishing individuals with subconscious orientations towards and away from different goals, experiences and environments, and acts to bring these instinctive and tacit dispositions into alignment with the affective and conscious perception that agents have of themselves and the world. The environment in which individuals develop and act is one that is characterized as being shaped by relations of struggle between individuals and the forms of power that they value and pursue. Bourdieu's notion of field, and his insistence on the ontological primacy of relations rather than inter-subjective ties, distinguishes his theory from that of approaches such as ethnomethodology, social network analysis or critical theory. Bourdieu additionally claims that social practice takes one of two forms: that of either reproducing the status quo in order to preserve or improve one's position within the field, or that of undermining the status quo, in order to devalue the power of others in relation to that of oneself.

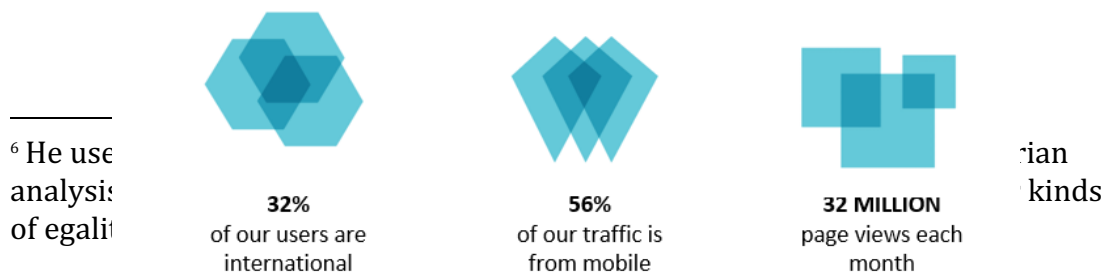
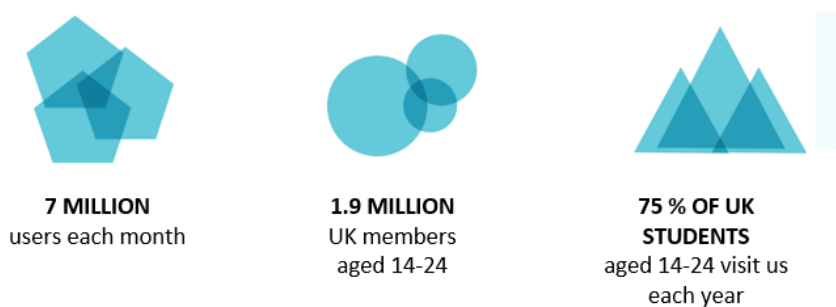
Bourdieu's approach carries with it a deep skepticism towards purportedly disinterested practice. Bourdieu explicitly rejects the suggestion that aesthetics have any transcendent ethical or descriptive standing, for instance. He is also opposed to the suggestion that inter-subjective co-production of meaning somehow escapes the competitive and strategic characteristics of other dimensions of social practice (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). Communication and mutual meaning making are as imbued with power discrepancies and strategic interests as any other arena, for Bourdieu. One might ask where this leaves Bourdieu with respect to the status of social science as source of knowledge, and also of critique. As actors embedded within fields of struggle, how is it that researchers (and Bourdieu in particular) are able to provide interpretations of the social world that are not compromised by the

strategic struggles that characterize all human behaviour generally? Bourdieu seeks to resolve this partly through his technique of reflexivity, which calls on researchers to apply the same heuristic interrogation of their own motives, practices and scheme of perception as they do to that of their subjects (Bourdieu, 1988, p. 6). However, he also seeks to claim a degree of immunity for sociology, in particular, from within the logic of its field. Bourdieu claims that sociology cultivates an ‘interest in disinterestedness’ (1988, p. xi). In other words, within this field, actors profit from acting and being seen to act in a disinterested fashion. Consequently researchers will certainly be benefitting vicariously from their pursuits, but in order to attain those benefits, they must strive to be free of bias in their academic efforts. Bourdieu also believes that this internal value system places Sociology (and some other academic fields) in opposition to fields with very different logics, which grants researchers the social distance necessary to ground their insights, without falling prey to the same structural limitations that they wish to describe. The variety of different fields, and contrasting value hierarchies therefore serve to generate a reflexive space, where actors are at least partially able to escape the doxa that each field perpetuates⁶. When it comes to the application of Bourdieu’s framework, however, these principles tend to produce accounts of social practice that stress the subconscious and tacit strategic logic rather than the conscious perceptions and narratives that agents hold with regard to their actions and lived experiences. Notably, the self avowed goal of Bourdieu’s conceptual apparatus is to reconcile the academic opposition between structure and agency in accounting for practice.

5: Researching Online Reputation: Research Design

My Case: The Student Room

The Student Room (TSR) claims to be the largest online community for students in the UK. The following infographic on their demographics was supplied on request by TSR Group staff in 2016:

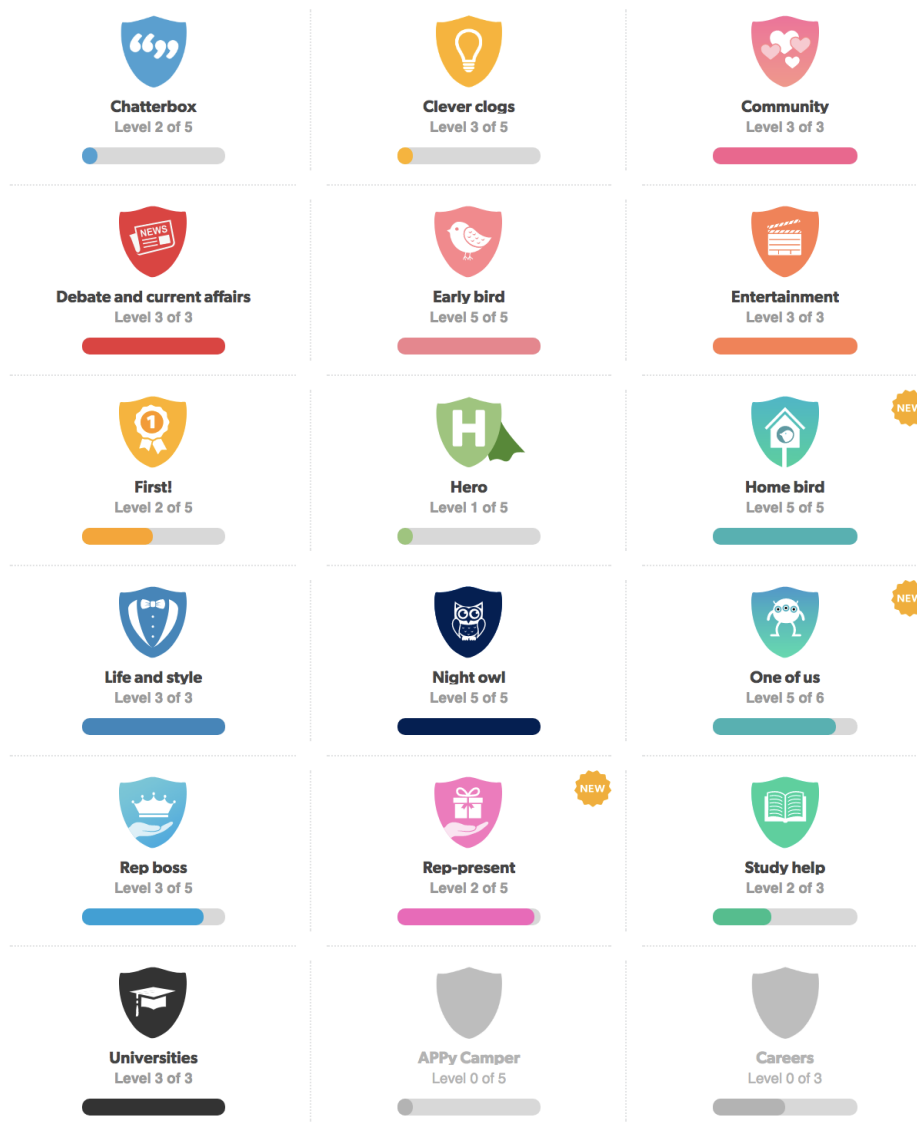


⁶ He use analysis of egalit

ian kinds

TSR targets secondary school students from GCSE through to adults enrolled as mature students or postgraduates. Although TSR markets itself as an educational website, it hosts forums focusing on a diverse range of interests, activities and practical issues. Some examples include Fitness, Programming and Computing, Health and Relationships and Travel.

Various factors made TSR an attractive choice as a case study. The first is the nature of TSR's reputation system. Originally, TSR's reputation system was identical to that of other forums based on vbulletin, a third party proprietary template for forums. The default reputation system allowed users to give reputation to other users, through selecting a thumbs-up icon displayed at the bottom of posts. They could also take away points, by selecting a thumbs-down icon. New users had 0 reputation points. If they remained active they would normally accrue points. The amount of points they held determined the number of reputation gems that were visible on their postbits. It also determined how many points they could give to others. The amount a person could give to others was also the amount they could take away. Originally, users had the option of providing a message to accompany the giving or taking away of reputation points. This ability was eventually disabled in order to combat widespread abuse. Eventually the ability to 'neg' (deduct reputation points) was disabled altogether; a development which will be explained more fully in Chapter 7. Presently, TSR's reputation system comprises the ability to give positive reputation to other users without leaving comments, in the manner described above. Another feature allows users to provide *personal reputation*, which is administered by visiting a user's profile. TSR also now deploys a simple, automated badge system.



TSR's reputation system provides a good case with which to explore the social appropriation of reputation, because of the amount of direct influence and discretion that users exercise when bestowing reputation upon others. Where online reputation systems vary in the degree to which reputation is automated (for instance, in response to triggers such as post count or viewing statistics), TSR's reputation is strongly dependent on the choices of its users. This means that the beliefs, evaluations and attitudes that users have regarding reputation are vitally important for constructing a holistic understanding the function and effect of reputation on TSR. Of course, this advantage might also be seen as a weakness, if my case is seen as exceptional and unrepresentative. However, I don't believe that this is so. While TSR's reputation is particular to its community, it still shares a great many substantive features in common with other reputation systems around the web. Furthermore, the intent of this study is to generate hitherto disregarded leads for further investigation, rather than to propose a generalized or schematic theory of reputation.

TSR's reputation system is also a propitious example to explore because of the multiple design changes that it has experienced. These changes provide many opportunities to compare and contrast social dynamics and attitudes surrounding reputation, given the abundance of attention and discussion that each change has inspired. The archival structure of forums such as TSR affords the opportunity to conduct a genealogical investigation that captures the wider processes that reputation is implicated within, rather than relying on a static and rigid characterization of reputation's function and meaning.

In addition to its reputation system, TSR offers a good balance between diversity and consistency. The same reputation system operates across the entire site, but there is a significant degree of internal differentiation in the themes and concerns that draw users together. This provides the opportunity of comparing the practices surrounding the same reputation system in different contexts; a process which may reveal features about reputation that are common across the site, or specific to particular activities and subcultures, which in turn contributes to establishing a more nuanced understanding of online reputation.

TSR targets students in search of information or support relating to academic work, and to educational choices. It enjoys institutional consecration, as exemplified by the number of Universities that hold 'official representative' accounts on the site, with which to interact with potential applicants. Two examples of these include representatives from the Cambridge colleges of Peterhouse and Clare. This dimension of activity provides one example of some direct ways in which engagement on TSR has a direct impact on the social trajectories of users, offline as well as online. It is not the only example, as users turn to TSR for practical support and information regarding issues as diverse as health and relationships, to travel, to computing and IT support. TSR also hosts activity targeted at leisure and entertainment, its Chat forum and Model House of Commons being two examples of very active extra-curricular areas of the site. In each of these environments, users have different needs, preferences and goals. Some of these have direct, tangible consequences for their socio-economic position while other consequences are more indirect. In either case, however, together these environments are well placed to inform questions about the implications of online reputation with respect to online inequality.

While TSR is a significantly sized online community, it is small in comparison to major global platforms such as Facebook, Twitter or Tumblr. This makes it more amenable to traditional ethnographic methods. As a participant observer, it is possible to produce a faithful representation of the entire community as a whole, rather than simply a segment of a much larger whole. It is necessarily the case that different platforms and websites foster different kinds of community. The means through which users interact with one another and with the site, are, in the first instance, delimited by the affordances of the platform in question. Users acquire a 'practical sense' (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 19) towards the sites that they engage with, as a result of repeatedly seeking a path through which to attain their goals, as permitted by the enablement and constraints of the site's material design. This orientation informs the particular culture, habits of speech

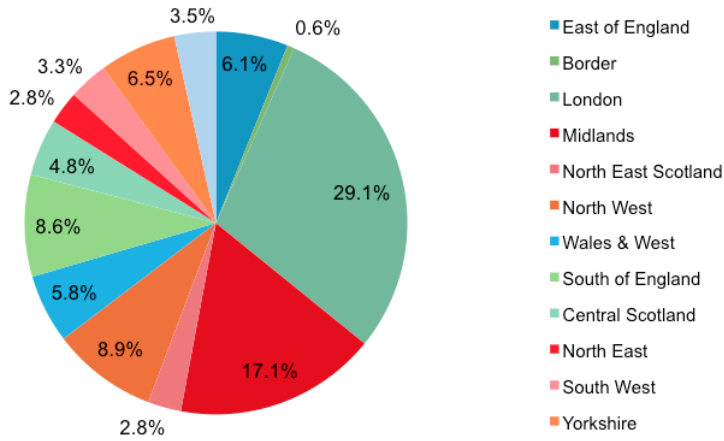
and idioms that mark members of particular online communities out from those of others. Given this truth, it is advantageous to be able to consider the entirety of TSR as a site of practice, through qualitative methods, where this would be much harder to achieve on significantly larger platforms.

Overall, therefore, the size of TSR, its diverse substantive scope, and the instrumental influence it has on UK students' lives render it an excellent environment within which to explore online reputation with a critical and ethnographic approach. I expand on the role of TSR within the UK higher education context in the first section of Chapter 6. A further compelling feature of TSR is the historical evolution of its reputation system, and the relative reliance of the system on users' discretion. This renders it a particularly good case to use for my research objectives, because there is more room to observe the agency of users towards a reputation system than might be seen on a site with a more moderated reputation system.

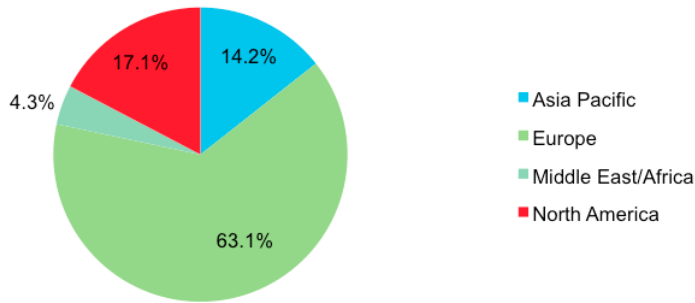
There are certain limitations to this sample, of course. TSR's userbase can't pretend to proportionally represent the British (or global) population of Internet users. The Internet as a whole has been shown to exhibit a strong age bias, with a many more youths using it than elderly (Pew Research Center, 2017). The Internet has also historically exhibited language bias, with over 25% of Internet use taking place in English during 2017 (Statistica, 2017). These broad demographic trends are constantly changing, but it remains the case that no online population straightforwardly reflects offline societies directly. While this limitation cannot be avoided, my case study vicariously limits my sample to current or hopeful UK University and school students; a category that could be viewed as narrow and also arbitrary. Admittedly there are no particular properties of students and young adults that make them specifically relevant to questions about online reputation. I do not, however, believe this to be a problematic limitation. Firstly, the unavoidable age bias of the Internet renders this population at least as – if not more – representative of the wider community of the Internet. Secondly, forums and online communities as a genre tend to cohere around very specific communities and themes. As one of this category, TSR is relatively diverse. Finally, however, if I demonstrate that online reputation has practical bearing on the wellbeing and prospects of this population, then it is reasonable to assume it worthwhile to investigate the possibility of similar significance for users from different demographics.

It is more problematic that TSR attracts a relatively privileged sample of young adults. Regional data, routinely gathered by TSR, reveals that individuals from the South of England are overrepresented in the site's membership. London and the South of England jointly comprised 37.7% of TSR's users in 2014, which was the most recent demographic data my source at TSR headquarters was able to supply.

TSR Group – UK reach



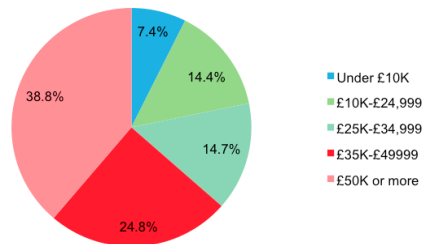
TSR Group – International reach



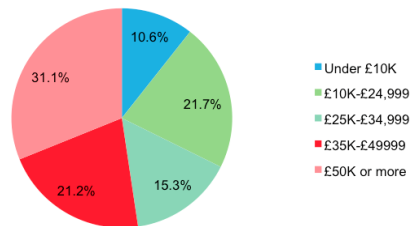
Source: Comscore, January 2014, TSR Group Sites

As this region is more socio-economically advantaged than others, we can assume that TSR serves a relatively middle class and privileged community. Indeed, in 2014, the average household income for TSR users was higher than the average for Internet users as a whole.

TSR Group - Household income



Internet - Household income



A greater household income than the Internet average

Source: Comscore, January 2014, TSR Group Sites

Given the critical aspirations of my research, this could be seen to undermine my case study choice. However, as with the limited age range on TSR, this particular bias is very hard to avoid in online research of this kind. Indeed, as part of TSR's 2014 Audience Profile, the company illustrated that they - in fact - ranked favourably against competitors such as UCAS, Student Beans, the National Union of Students, Hotcourses and the national Internet average in terms of the number of visitors that qualified for government widening participation categorisation.

Given the avowed tendency for forums such as TSR to target niches, some might wonder why I chose to study a forum rather than a ubiquitous social media platform, such as Facebook or Twitter. Once more, my qualitative and ethnographic goals are principally relevant here. To gain a faithful account of Twitter or Facebook as a whole is an aim that is beyond even quantitative methodology. TSR self-contains its own reputation system, and does so on a scale that allows for the retention of a holistic analysis without the sacrifice of qualitative depth.

Methods

The Ethnographic Tradition

My methods are coordinated within an ethnographic approach. Ethnography is historically a method from social anthropology, which has become a widespread practice across many social sciences. Ethnography is chiefly conducted through participant observation, in which researchers seek to immerse themselves within the social context they wish to investigate, and – in doing so – to gain a more nuanced and rich understanding of the phenomena in question. Traditionally, anthropologists would spend at least a couple of years immersed in the field, however there is more diversity in the length of time committed to participant observation by researchers in neighbouring disciplines.

In the process of fieldwork, ethnographers have drawn upon a diverse range of methods in order to record and analyse their findings. Interviews are commonly used, as well as detailed daily logs, recording what is observed. Many ethnographers have made use of visual media, such as photographs and video.

Historically, ethnographies were often covert, with researchers providing alternative alibis to justify their participation within communities, other than their research objectives. As the research community became more concerned with ethical implications pertaining to research activity, anthropologists have moved away from covert ethnography, and have – indeed – become trailblazers with respect to the theorization and elaboration of research ethics (Atkinson, *et al.*, 2007). Contemporary social anthropologists frequently involve research subjects in the research process, sometimes inviting feedback and scrutiny of their analysis prior to concluding research (for example, see: Levinson, 2010).

Epistemologically, ethnography is a fully qualitative method, which privileges descriptive depth and naturalism over quantification and universalism. Ethnography integrates a strong degree of inductive exploration. While ethnographers do not claim to approach the field from a point of neutrality, they are committed to regularly and reflexively reconsidering working assumptions, and modifying the direction of their focus in response to discoveries made in the field.

Ethnography has enjoyed wide appeal among Internet researchers, and a diversity of approaches have been used to reinterpret traditional ethnographic techniques within a digitally mediated environment (Hine, 2000; Miller & Slater, 2001; Kozinets, 2009). 'Digital Ethnography' or 'Netnography' brings with it a range of advantages and disadvantages when contrasted to traditional, in person ethnography. The most striking advantages, in the case of my research, were the ability to observe unseen (in other words, to 'lurk') and the access to perfectly preserved, and near permanent records of actions, interactions and events.

My 'lurking' privilege brought with it the ability to observe social processes without the disadvantage of their altering in response to my presence. The cost to this advantage was the greater risk of harm or injustice towards those I was observing, and diminished accountability. The ethical responsibility was heavier than it would have been in a conventional research environment, where various non verbal means of negotiation might have conveyed preferences without the need for me to materialise in a thread and announce my intentions. After some consideration I chose not to seek informed consent from every user I observed, and each post I analysed and reported. Aside from the practical fact that doing so would have severely compromised the viability of the study, my ethical consideration is that the posts I read and recorded as a 'lurker' were all already fully visible to the public. This certainly did not imply that I should feel free to do anything I wanted with the data. A useful analogy is to consider appropriate conduct offline. While anybody in a coffee shop might be able to hear the conversation taking place between a couple seated at a nearby table, that does not suggest that it would be morally appropriate for customers to secretly record a conversation without the couple's knowledge, and to subsequently broadcast it publicly. Of course, behaviour of this kind is increasingly ubiquitous, as all of us are at risk of discovering ourselves in a trending video on YouTube, should we happen to do something striking near a stranger holding a smartphone. That doesn't mean, however, that we are completely comfortable with becoming an unwitting YouTube sensation, or that the couple would take kindly to hearing their intimate conversation broadcast out of context to an unintended audience. In the same way, I concluded that I had a moral obligation to be considerate and sensitive towards how I dealt with public posts and threads on TSR. First of all, I anonymised each author, and removed any identifying content from the posts that I recorded. Secondly, I discussed my intentions with staff at The Student Room Group, and secured their approval. Thirdly, I avoided including any sensitive content without informed consent. Last of all, I embraced the goal of *participant* observation, by engaging in discussion in each of the sections I observed.

The textual and archival nature of online ethnography was advantageous in allowing me to travel back in time, in order to recreate a faithful history of the development of TSR and its reputation system. This enhanced the reliability of my findings by allowing me to compare past to future, as well as comparing behaviours in different sections of the site. Historical perspective also made it possible to gain a sense of structures and values that have the most long term causal power in shaping the community and its future.

The archival nature of researching a forum made it possible to gather a greater volume of data than I would have been able to had I been participating and observing in person and in real time. However, this advantage also brought with it significant challenge when it came to making decisions about how to narrow the scope of data included, and how to strike the optimal balance between depth and breadth. The storing and sorting of data was also a practical challenge. My response to these challenges was to introduce time frames after which I would cease exploring user generated content in each of the target sections I wanted to explore. I also paid attention to saturation patterns, and took prolonged repetition of themes and patterns as a helpful indication to move on.

Finally, the asynchronicity and digitally mediated materiality of online ethnography brought distinctive advantages and limitations. The liberation of interaction from embodied co-presence brings significant advantages to an ethnographer. Participants are often more candid and open when given control over the degree of anonymity to assume. There is no need to schedule designated meetings, or to travel in order to connect. The cost and difficulty of travelling to a community, and staying with them for a prolonged period of time was removed. Asynchronicity allowed myself and my participants the space and freedom to determine when to engage, and all involved could 'catch up' on activity that took place while we were absent. Ostensibly, these features are disadvantageous should an ethnographer wish to verify the sincerity of a participant, or attend to features such as dress, ethnicity, gender, age, accent or similar. In the case of this research, however, I believe it was an advantage to engage with online practice 'on its own terms', so to speak. As existing reputational research exhibited a specific shortcoming in terms of attending to the meanings and perceptions of users towards reputation systems, an immersive participation with users and the context in which their reputation system was used, allowing for a much closer and more grounded inspection of the phenomenon and its appropriation. Users of TSR engage with one another through the asynchronous, textual and anonymous mediation of TSR's forums. By joining in this kind of interconnectedness, an online ethnographer can access a more faithful and phenomenological understanding of the culture in question than they otherwise might have done. This was especially true for this project because the research object was an online reputation system bound to the pixels and codebase of www.thestudentroom.co.uk.

Overall, ethnography was an optimal strategy for attaining my research objectives for several reasons, some general and others particular.

As demonstrated in Chapter 2, existing theoretical and empirical studies of online reputation are undermined by their overreliance on quantitative methods, objective forms of data and deductive assumptions regarding the nature and role of online reputation. I wanted to pave a path for alternative research design in this field, specifically through the use of qualitative principles. Ethnographic principles support a more exploratory approach to online reputation because they require immersion and participation within a research context. These two actions greatly increase the likeliness that researchers will recognise the perspective of users who appropriate online reputation as part of their ordinary practice. Researchers will also experience practice of a similar kind themselves. Ethnographic principles discourage researchers from relying upon presuppositions, and compel them to seek out interpretations and meanings hitherto inaccessible to researchers. When applied to online reputation, ethnography would therefore provide many opportunities to develop an alternative understanding of online reputation, to that which dominates the literature.

Ethnography also elicits social data. Ethnography does not eschew objective methods, for instance, descriptive features about a person such as their social class, appearance or job title are necessarily included when conducting a thorough observation. But these details are taken into account alongside subjective data such as the expressed opinions, beliefs and feelings of research subjects.

Ethnography stands opposed to the methodological individualism that is intrinsic to common Internet research methods such as game theory, the experimental research which draws on it, social network analysis and many instances of data mining. Instead, it integrates a focus on phenomena that collectively arise or are co-produced. Through this perspective, social structures and cultural phenomena are shaped, at least in part, by forces that can't be understood as aggregates of individual choice. By observing and sharing the practices of individuals within the context that they are experienced, ethnography allows researchers to establish nuanced appreciation for the specific interrelation between individual choices and experiences and the social environments that give these particulars meaning.

Ethnography is therefore a strategically beneficial approach to reconceptualising online reputation for general reasons. However, it also bears two particular advantages that influenced my choice.

The first is the strong affinity between ethnography and Bourdieu's conceptual apparatus. While I wish to observe the particular dispositions of individual users, and how online reputation is understood through these, I also adopt Bourdieu's belief that the wider structural field in which actors are immersed is vital to accurately and fully understanding their experience and their choices. For Bourdieu, "the notion of field functions as a conceptual shorthand of a mode of construction of the object that will command, or orient, all the practical choices

of research. It functions as a pense-bete, a memory-jogger: it tells me that I must, at every stage, make sure that the object I have given myself is not enmeshed in a network of relations that assign its most distinctive properties. The notion of field reminds us of the first precept of method, that which requires us to resist by all means available our primary inclination to think of the social world in a substantialist manner” (1992, p 228). This process of identifying structural and contextual properties that form the ‘conditions of possibility’ for online reputation, and its significance is strongly necessary. Each online reputation system must be understood in relation to the social space within which it is deployed. In the case of reputation systems such as the Facebook ‘like’ or the Twitter ‘retweet’, identifying a boundary is extremely tricky, now that such a significant number of websites and web platforms are integrating these into comments areas. However, many sites, such as The Student Room, have their own, unique reputation system. Reputation of this kind ceases to function or hold meaning outside of the boundaries of the website itself. It would be problematic to assume, *a priori*, that a particular website comprises a field. It might, instead, be a crossroad between many fields. It might be a bit of both. But if we are to gain a qualitative understanding of the reputation particular to a given site, then one has to incorporate the entire website in order to identify the processes, norms, and the culture that gives rise to that form of online reputation, and determines its use and value.

In order to attain this macro perspective, I might have chosen to use quantitative multi-correspondence analysis (as Bourdieu himself often did, in order to map out field structures, for example see Bourdieu, 1998, p. 340). I could also have used social network analysis in order to assist me in constructing a socially-centric space. However, neither of these methods would have supported the personal and in depth attention to individuals within the field, as well as the field. Conversely, ethnography offers the flexibility with which to support both macro and micro levels of inquiry.

The second particular reason to utilise ethnography, is my own personal experience. In the case of TSR, whose reputation system I am analyzing, I am advantaged by my prior involvement and inclusion with the community. Prior to commencing fieldwork for this study, I had been an active member of the site for six years. In addition to participating as an ordinary user, I also hold a moderator role on the site, and previously volunteered as a ‘personal statement helper’, assisting University applicants with improving their personal statements. This experience affords strategic advantages that are best exploited through an ethnographic approach. Whichever research design I deployed, I would have benefitted from familiarity with the community, and particularly, a practical sense (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 19) of the different kinds of activities and experiences supported by the site, and its substantive geography. Ethnography is a technique that allows me to coopt this experience to maximum benefit, because my insider status affords trust and acceptance by the community, friendships and connections, and a favourable position from which to ask the site management for additional access or information. As access is often a significant

methodological barrier for ethnographers (Kozinets, 2009), this amounts to an especially appealing opportunity to conduct thorough ethnographic research.

Research Design

The main research period took place between Spring 2013 and Summer 2014. However, there were also several less intensive instances of resuming fieldwork, or seeking further information. Throughout the duration of the doctoral candidacy, I have been a regular participant on The Student Room, for leisure rather than research purposes. This activity has inevitably fed into and influenced my perspective and approach during formal fieldwork. In terms of technique, I used qualitative interviews, and I analysed and interacted with threads (linear chains of posts, responding to a single OP⁷), posts, thread titles and forum structure, the latter by way of participant observation.





Despite the length of my activity on The Student Room, my engagement with the site is strongly affected by my personal interests and needs, as it is for my participants. I first came across the website in 2005, when seeking help for coursework as an A level student. I became a regular member of discussion threads for students enrolled on OCR A level exams in Chemistry and Biology. I supplemented this activity with participation in a thread named 'The Insomniac Society', within the Chat forums, and a thread named 'The Literature Society', within the Hobbies and Entertainment forums. After completing my A levels, I had a period of absence from the site (nearly a year), but I returned in order to seek out information regarding application to University. From here I became a regular of the University of Cambridge forum, where most of my activity was based between 2006 and 2011. I also became a personal statement helper at this time, which involved access to a private forum, and interaction with a team of fellow personal statement helpers. I briefly held the responsibility of being the Secretary General for the Model United Nations, in the Debate and Discussion forums. From 2011 to the present, I have been active primarily in the Postgraduate forum of the site. I became a moderator in 2009, and I first moderated the Oxbridge forums, before holding responsibility for 'General University Discussion' for a few years. At present I am moderator for the Postgraduate forum. This trajectory is quite typical for users of TSR. There are a vast number of forums and themes to choose between, and few individuals spread their activity very evenly. In terms of my position as a researcher, my partial experience of The Student Room motivated me to conduct research in sections that I had very little direct experience of, with the intention of approaching the field with a fresh eye.

I therefore selected four sections of the site, with the aim of conducting equal amounts of fieldwork in each section, in order to arrive at a more holistic impression of the site as a whole. This selection included Chat, Religion, Universities and Fitness. I have intimate acquaintance with the Universities forums, as a participant and moderator, but attention to Chat, Religion and Sports provided me with an opportunity to observe activity from a different

⁷ OP is an acronym for 'opening post'.

social position and also with fewer prior assumptions. These three forums also provided examples against which to compare analysis of my 'home turf', Universities.

Of course, my purposive selection of Chat, Religion and Fitness was influenced by certain prior assumptions derived from my time on the site. Though anybody could identify this from viewing post data, I already knew that Chat, Religion and Fitness were some of the busiest areas of the site, just as Universities was. I decided that forum size and activity was practically important, for the simple reason that if you want to understand the experiences of users, areas where they are most active and would likely yield more information. Additionally, I take an interest in the values that users have, and how their social environment is shaped around these . It seems transparently clear that areas which attract the highest activity from users, are areas that users deem to be important or valuable in some way. Lack of interest and activity, conversely, could indicate that a particular area is of low value to users. In addition to this assessment, prior participation on the TSR furnished me with notions about each of the sections that I included, which suggested to me that they might be distinct and interesting as examples to research. For instance, Religion is the forum which causes the moderation team the most difficulties because of the volume and intensity of conflict and dispute which takes place there, especially between Muslims and atheists. I had previously had one or two minimal, and fairly unpleasant experiences in the Fitness forum, being aggressively called out for some fitness advice I had given a new user while passing through. In 2007, The Student Room restructured the site design to include 'widgets' which appear on users' screens wherever they go on the site. One of these 'widgets' lists 'Latest discussions', and has resulted in a lot of users (myself included) visiting and passing through forums that previously they'd never gone near. In the image below, look at the "forum" column to the far right. Before this widget was introduced, many members would select a few forums to regularly visit, but avoid others.

Latest discussions		Trending	
thread / started by	last post/replies	forum	
 Would you date someone in prison? by Bang Outta Order	UWS 1 minute ago ▶ Replies: 19	Relationships	
 The Return. by Connor27	joecphillips 1 minute ago ▶ Replies: 34	Model House of Commons	
 CTAM: Count to a million (Part 19) by spotify95	Aaro1270 1 minute ago ▶ Replies: 334	Forum games	
 I don't want children, AMA by BigAnt	Caesar333 1 minute ago ▶ Replies: 111	Chat	

Chat was also infamous, partly because of its regular role in hosting many of the site's most infamous and high profile trolls, but also for its playfulness and self-avowed superficiality (a feature which is explored in Chapter 8).

Overall, therefore, I drew upon past experience and impressions in order to focus on areas of the site that I had reason to think would diverge from one another significantly, and therefore provide a range of different contexts in which to explore user values and field dynamics, and how online reputation was involved in each of these.

After this initial activity, I chose to search directly for discussions pertaining to the reputation system. Over time, the structure of The Student Room has evolved, to accommodate the site's rapid expansion. Historically, direct public discussion about the structure, functionality and administration of the site has been housed within a forum named 'About The Student Room'. (Eventually this section was renamed 'News and Feedback'.) I knew from experience that many debates surrounding the reputation system had taken place here. In particular, I also knew that the site's reputation system had been amended and restructured at several distinct points in the site's history, and that each change had been accompanied with an announcement from administration in this section, and many days of lively discussion from the members. This prior knowledge helped me to narrow down my search of relevant content, using the native search tool, without needing to deploy any third party data scraping tools, as many reputation researchers commonly do (as demonstrated in Chapter 2).

I reconstructed a history of the reputation system on TSR, by retrieving each of the announcements surrounding site changes, and analyzing each of the busiest and lengthiest threads of discussion that these announcements inspired. Typically one dominant thread emerged in response to each change, but these threads were never alone. When secondary and tertiary lengthy threads were to be found, I analysed these as well as the 'dominant' ones. I chose to put aside the abundant short threads that were made about reputation, close to major changes. For example, threads with two pages of comments (the default display on TSR is 25 posts per page) or less were not analysed. This is because of the overwhelming number of such threads in this forum. TSR is 15 years old, and as long as there has been a reputation system on the site, threads discussing reputation have been consistently and very regularly created by members in the 'About' or the 'News and Feedback' forum. As I seek to perform a qualitative investigation, it was necessary for me to limit my sample to a size that I could thoroughly read through. My commitment to open and exploratory research principles ruled out any quantitative techniques such as content analysis. Although I knew I was interested in reputation, I did not know which replies would be relevant and which would not. Therefore it would not have been appropriate to cover a wider sample of replies by using a search to discard posts that didn't contain keywords (such as 'rep', 'neg', 'reputation', 'points').

Observation and Technique

The observational component of my research took place across two phases. The first phase was exploratory. This was the point where I spent several weeks in each chosen section (Chat, Religion, Fitness and Universities), with the view to answering broad questions such as identifying which forms of capital were most valued and important in these areas, considering whether there were section specific traditions, attitudes, attributes and so forth which conferred status and approval on individuals. I spent my time in these sections by reading the title of each new thread that was posted, and skim reading in a fairly random manner. Doing this on a daily basis for days and weeks made it possible to identify patterns and recurring themes. It was also possible to identify regular active users, and to get a sense of which conversations interested them most, and what role they played in an area's structure. I also paid attention to rules and moderator guidelines that were unique to each section, and to any tendencies in the attitudes of moderators, as they patrolled forums and intervened in situations. This process was most akin to a kind of qualitative content analysis. The purpose was not to conduct any in-depth analysis of what was observed, but rather to calibrate my research, and flesh out a map of each area that would allow me to identify which users and threads to narrow down on, and to give me the context needed to understand the significant of specific examples in relation to a wider system. Just as content analysis traditionally uses quantification as the basis for verifying findings (for example, the absence of LGBT characters in a 1 year span of British television, or the recurrence of the term "Brexit" in media content during 2015), the volume and frequency of specific topics, themes and users was my method for honing in on examples to closely analyse and users to interview.

Having mapped out my chosen TSR sections in this manner, I began to select threads for in depth analysis. This process involved reading many threads from beginning to end, and making careful notes about interesting interactions, opinions or tendencies. What I saw as 'interesting' was anything that could inform me about my research questions. To reiterate, questions in this exploratory phase of fieldwork included:

What attitudes, attributes, behaviours, opinions, or features are advantaging users in this situation? (I parsed 'advantage' as the securing of visible popularity, affirmation or status. Attention could also be considered as an advantage, for example if a user starts a thread asking a practical question, they may or they may not receive an answer. Whether they do depends on various factors some of which include how they framed the question, what their standing is in the community, what topic they were asking about, and so on. In cases like these, the absence of a reply can be informative, whereas the soliciting of answers, and thus attention, can tell us something about what traits, topics or behaviour styles are most acceptable to forum users.)

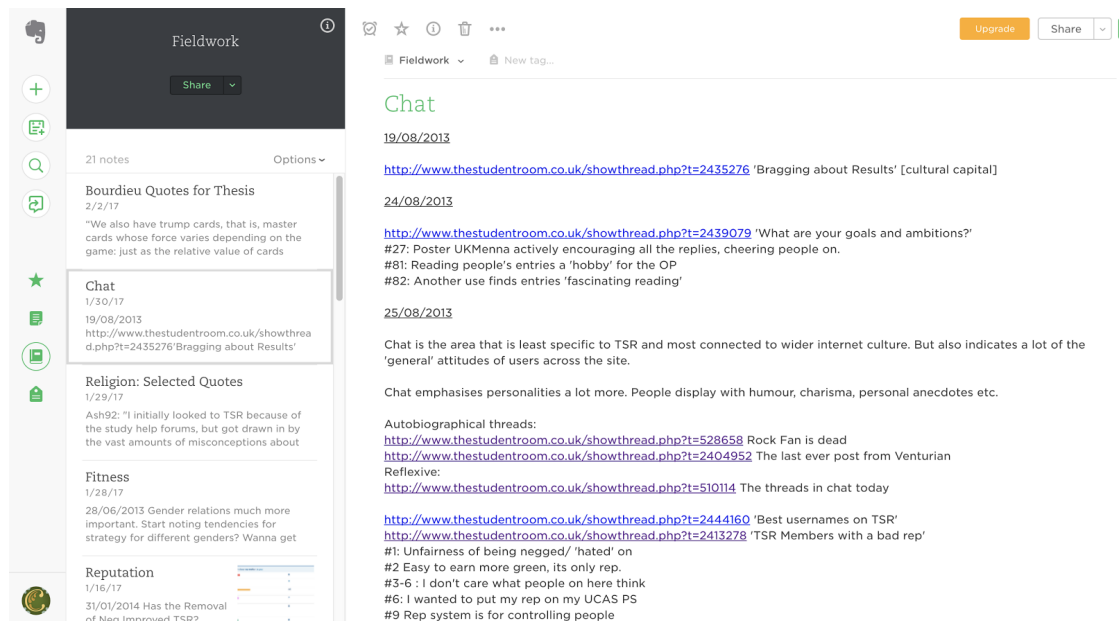
Which features *disadvantage* users?

To the best of my knowledge, what to users *want* in this situation, and which things are determining whether or not they obtain their wishes?

What attitudes, behaviours, opinions or connections are 'typical' of this forum?

What do you do to earn rep in this forum, and which things earn you neg?

When I came across material or users who provided answers to these questions I made a note. My field-notes were kept in Evernote, which is a popular free online note taking application. The visual layout of Evernote arranged my notes so that I could see a top level summary of each category I was using in a rough tree structure. Here is a screen shot of the note I kept on the Chat forum. To the left you see a longer list of other notes I was using for Fieldwork. The Chat note includes links to threads I was observing closely. Each post of interest in a thread was marked down using the post number, and a brief comment to myself regarding what it was I had found interesting about the example.



The second phase of fieldwork was less exploratory. The exploratory phase had allowed me to establish a general sense of power dynamics on a micro and macro level (with respect to TSR). This allowed me to verify that targeted research on reputation would be appropriate, and indicative of power dynamics on the forum.

As I was already familiar through personal experience with what major changes and discussions had taken place surrounding reputation, and where to find them, doing this was a sensible starting point. I began by visiting the 'News and Feedback' forum (hitherto 'About the Student Room'). Guided by memory, I dug down into old threads based on the years that significant changes had been introduced or discussed. For each of these significant moments in the history of the reputation system, I cast a 6 month net around the event, and read each thread title in the forum during that period. I selected the most lengthy and highly used threads connected to the changes. The 'About' forum had its own dynamic in that a high number of very new users posted in it. This meant that the forum had a long list of threads that would only have one or two responses. Often these were very simple questions such as 'how do I delete a thread'. This made it easier to pin down threads that were of strong interest to the community. The threads surrounding reputation that I analysed

for this study were usually over 100 pages (25 threads per page) in length. Given that in this phase I was not particularly focused on the 'logic' of the 'About' or 'News and Feedback' forum, but more focused on constructing a history of the reputation system, my strategy was to devote attention to reading each substantial thread on reputation that I could find, and to take broad notes.

Where in the first phase of research, I was asking general questions about forms of capital, in this phase I took note of anything which told me about how users felt about reputation, what their beliefs were regarding how reputation should be used or understood, and displayed affect connected to reputation.

Interviews

I aimed to interview ten users from each section, although I was only partially successful in this aim. Interviews involved asynchronous exchanging of private messages between myself and the participants concerned. I wrote a list of questions which I used to guide each interview, regardless of the section concerned, but I sought to be open and flexible by following the natural direction of conversations, and picking up on any prompts or leads I perceived in the replies I received. Many internet ethnographers interview users in person, or via different media such as video calls (Hine, 2000). I chose to keep all research internal to TSR. In the case of interviews, this is because the majority of users hold accounts under pseudonyms rather than their real names. Many users are concerned about privacy, and I preferred not to ask of people the additional burden of divulging their identity in addition to agreeing to be interviewed. A further reason I made this choice, was that I believe the dynamic of the environment is lost when interaction is removed from its context. While my participants knew that I was researching them, many of them knew me as 'Craggy' or as a moderator of The Student Room. So long as I continued to interact with them within that space, I hoped that conversations might be seen – and experienced – as continuations of our ordinary daily activity within the site. Had we moved off-site, I believe that my identity as researcher would immediately have become more salient, while my identity as moderator and fellow user would have been dramatically undermined. In particular, I predicted that the visual elements associated with my online account would be important. On The Student Room, each user has an avatar (a profile picture) which appears everywhere they post on the site. Details that also appear wherever they post include their join date, their post count, their reputation, and any signature they might have added. Users also have different usertitles based on the nature of their position on the site. Regular users who access the site for free all have plain usertitles of the same uniform colour. Those who pay for a monthly subscription received the ability to edit the colour of their usernames and insert a custom phrase underneath their names. Moderators and other forum assistants (like personal statement helpers) receive uniform descriptions of their role under their usernames, and moderators have bold usernames in the colour pertaining to their position (area moderators are purple, super moderators are pale blue, administrators are red, and paid TSR Group staff are green). These details combine to designate a user's identity, and other contextually pertinent

information about them. Effectively, I believed, the relationship between myself and my participants would fundamentally transform were we to interact off of The Student Room, and – in a sense – we would also become different people. Any benefits from speaking to people in person would be lost, in my view, by forfeiting access to the frame of mind and sensibility that participants would be operating within while interacting on The Student Room.

As the fieldwork progressed, it became apparent that qualitative interviews were less successful than I had initially hoped, though observational work remained fruitful. By the end of the fieldwork process, 20 interviews had been conducted, rather than the intended 40.

I deemed the interviews to be ineffectual because of the difficulty I experienced in getting some of my participants to open up or engage with core research questions. I also experienced difficulty in identifying and attracting participation from a suitably diverse sample. In particular, my interview sample was overrepresented by acquaintances, friends or users I had ‘seen around’ on TSR. Interview responses were most strongly predicted by my level of connection with the user in question.

It was no surprise that members who already knew me, or who had been active in the forum for longer (and therefore were more likely to recognise my name from a moderation context) were more eager to engage. We can reasonably assume that an element of trust accompanies name recognition, even if the trust only amounts to the belief that a person has shared common experiences and invested in TSR to a similar extent. I had assumed that my moderation position would afford some trust (and there is no reason to assume that it did not), however if this were the critical factor determining response behaviour, I would not have expected such a sharp difference between members of mutual acquaintance and those unknown to me.

For illustrative purposes, merely four of the twenty users in my sample were entirely unknown to me prior to fieldwork. To my perception, this introduced a pattern where most of my feedback would come to me through existing networks, which could undermine the veracity of my findings.

This pattern was reflected in the duration and quality of responses I received from participants. Although it was not unilaterally the case, the tendency among my interviews was for the lengthiest and most detailed responses to cluster around respondents with whom I had some prior connection.

It is not strictly clear that this sampling issue could have been avoided. My strategy for selecting people to interview was based on a heuristic of honing in on members who stood out, during fieldwork, and who seemed to be invested in the site section I was recruiting within. In practice, this goal smuggled in an additional filter by default. To clarify, for a user to have ‘stood out’ to me during fieldwork, they would normally have needed to submit enough posts for me to make a connection with their username, and to perceive them as a person of

interest. This is significant because it means that I was selecting for activity level, unintentionally. Post count and activity level automatically determines a good deal on a forum because of the question of visibility. Highly invested 'lurkers' are silent and unseen, which rendered them inaccessible to me while using my chosen recruitment strategy. Meanwhile, less active users with lower post counts were not only less noticeable, but also seemed less invested in the stakes of that particular site section. I assumed that they would therefore be less well placed to inform my focal questions, and I also presumed that they would be less likely to respond to an invitation, and to log in frequently enough to respond to private messages promptly. It should be stressed that I was not unaware of this dynamic while I observed my target sections and considered regular users for possible recruitment. In fact I found myself often deselecting would-be candidates out of a concern that I knew them too well, and that they might be 'too obvious' as choices. This experience made me more conscious of the extent to which categories of perception on the site are internalised. As an embedded user, I could see my choices reflecting and reproducing site wide perceptions of quality, status and worth, despite conscious efforts to avoid doing so. The same dynamic struck me after a handful of individuals that had 'stood out' to me during fieldwork were promoted to the moderation team during the course of the fieldwork phase.

Altogether, I am satisfied that my sampling strategy was carefully reflected upon and logically designed. However, it clearly brought with it the cost of narrowing my source pool.

Taking for granted, then, that more highly active users would populate my sample in contrast to quieter and less active users for a range of practical reasons, it is unsurprising that the majority of those that I recruited were recognisable figures. TSR is no different to other forums in that the most strongly invested users form a fairly compact and mutually familiar group (Lampe, 2011). Given this fact, it may be tempting to question the parent choice to conduct research using my 'real' TSR account, complete with its moderation rank, name recognition, high post count and high reputation score. Arguably this strategy was bound to yield uneven connections to different kinds of users. I am confident, however, that this was the right approach to take in embarking on this research. Significant barriers confront aspiring researchers of TSR who are not yet established in the community. Not only do site rules forbid any posts or threads recruiting participants in all areas of the site other than a dusty, obscure forum labelled 'Media and Research Opportunities', but users are hostile and suspicious towards new accounts that appear to have an agenda.

It is true that I could have invested a few weeks in fleshing out a dupe account, building up a post count, some reputation and adding aesthetic markers such as a signature and custom profile picture in order to present myself as a 'regular' user with a stake in the community itself. However, a significant amount of time needs to be invested in order to transcend the 'newbie' box. Very new accounts with relatively high post counts and evident familiarity with 'the ropes' are often quickly outed as dupes by observant members. Furthermore, conducting

research from a dupe account would have been highly dubious on ethical grounds, and would have reasonably constituted a breach of the trust I was seeking to solicit from interviewees. The dishonesty would not have been restricted to the duplicity in passing myself off as a 'real' member, when my goal was actually research. More grave than this, I believe, would be hiding my identity as a moderator and as an established member. Any participants who knew me, however remotely, would almost certainly have felt humiliated to learn that they had been talking to somebody that they knew without realising it. Those that did not know me might have divulged information that they would have concealed from a moderator, if they'd been given the choice. In any case, deceit of this kind would have denied participants the informed choice to frame their behaviour towards me in line with their preferences. Therefore, this would have been a transparently poor decision. Overall, the interviews were the component of my research design which most dramatically highlighted the doubled edge of conducting ethnographic research as an insider.

However, it was not only sampling filters which affected the success of my interviews. The format and context of my interviews are likely to have also been culpable. My choice to conduct the interviews on TSR itself was risky. Not only did I choose not to invite users to meet me in the flesh, but I decided not to ask them to connect with me via a different social media platform, such as Skype, WhatsApp or Facebook. It was a benefit that I was able to sidestep the cost of asking users to divulge personal information, and in doing so it removed the barrier that I reasonably expected would exist when it came to asking users to reroute me from one controlled and bounded context in their personal lives to another. Zimmer and Hoffman draw upon Nissenbaum's concept of "contextual integrity" (2004, p. 137) to identify harm of this kind, which arises from "leakage of personal data outside of a particular informational context" (Zimmer & Hoffman, 2011, p. 178). Finally, by interacting with respondents within the familiar interface of TSR itself, I was capitalising on the gains available to me through being perceived as a fellow user with similar investment and experiences. Both my interview and observational data confirmed that many users felt tangible insecurity and status anxiety towards their level of social and emotional connection to TSR. My limited success in the interviews in no way alters my conviction that interacting with users on TSR itself would have been more reassuring and non-threatening than would interaction elsewhere. By ensuring that markers such as our avatars, reputation bars, post counts, and the familiar site design were ever present, the context emphasised our commonality rather than inviting respondents to notice and reflect upon differences between us. I assume it is far more inviting to divulge sensitive experiences, regarding attachment to reputation and investment in TSR, with a person who is visibly equally 'sad'.

Despite these solid strategic reasons, however, my approach certainly came at a cost. The most important of these was the loss of synchronicity. TSR hosts no private instant messaging service, which means that interviews took place via a chain of asynchronous private messages. On the one hand, asynchronicity gives respondents more control over the dialogue by allowing them to respond in their

own time, and to consider their answers. However, this also meant that several respondents answered one or two messages readily but then dropped out. Not only would a real time conversation have provided more motivation and momentum to our interaction, but it would have allowed me to be more spontaneous in following leads, and to limit excessive predetermination from my chosen brief of questions and talking points. As a central goal in my research strategy was to optimise for exploratory, grounded findings, this space for more fluidity in the interviews would have been highly beneficial.

In hindsight, was the choice to interview on TSR mistaken? Despite the clear observed impact on the success of the interviews, I don't believe that the answer is clear cut. A possible middle ground, however, might have involved finding a third party instant messaging service with minimal registration barriers and high anonymity catered for. While this would have required my respondents to converse off of TSR, they would still have had significant control over their self disclosure and we could have eliminated threatening or distracting social cues. The clear gain would have been the user-motivation, flexibility and immediacy that would most likely accompany a real time conversation.

A final but by no means minimal difficulty was that of getting respondents to state the obvious and reflect on the taken for granted. Of course, this applies to almost any social research context. However, I only sometimes succeeded in getting respondents to reflect in this way at interview. There was the sense that answers were more carefully curated during interview than 'off the record' attitudes and opinions visible in posts around the site. By contrast, evidence of this kind connecting to reputation was very apparent in observational data.

All in all, concerns about the quality and representativeness of my interview samples, and significant patchiness in the length, detail and quality of answers provided led me to withdraw from placing interviews in a central position within my research strategy. I chose not to ignore interview responses entirely, but rather elected to place less weight on the findings derived through this method. The responses were useful as a reference to accompany reasonably strong tendencies and patterns observed through observational fieldwork, and occasional quotes from interview transcripts were included in the data presented. The source of these quotes was clearly labelled in each instance.

While it was disappointing to fail in my ambition to gather personal reflections on the affective and motivational dynamics drawing users to invest in each section, and shaping the success and enjoyment resulting from that investment, the quality of data available via observation ensured that this did not critically weaken the strength or originality of the findings ultimately gained.

Analysis

While a rich tradition exists when it comes to textual analysis technique, I did not attempt to strictly adhere to any named form of textual analysis. Although most of the information conveyed on a forum like The Student Room is comprised of text, it would be an error to analyse these data in isolation. Users exercise every

means available to them to construct and convey their identity. Features such as avatars, signatures, text colour or font, and emoticons all serve to enhance the character and meaning of communication, as well as to differentiate users from one another. Prior researchers have argued that details like these constitute social signals, and as such, they bear functional similarities to embodied, face-to-face signaling such as accent, posture, mannerism and tone (Walther, 2002). The use of punctuation, caps, spelling and slang convey important clues about users' identities, and serve to situate them in relation to the cultural structure of their field of practice. The presence of these signals means that exclusive reliance upon a textual analysis method such as discourse analysis, would carry with it the cost of flexibility and freedom in terms of incorporating social signals and mediated behaviours into the interpretation of posts.

This decision is in keeping with the ethnographic principles that guide my methodology. The performance of ethnography necessarily intertwines the processes of eliciting data, and its analysis. In many different social science disciplines, these steps are distinct from one another. For instance, qualitative sociologists frequently use interviews as their chief method. Their empirical research follows a clear linear path, from a stage of eliciting the data – usually verbally – from interviewees, the process of transcribing the interviews into a text based transcript, and finally, the analysis of these transcripts using textual analysis such as discourse or conversation analysis. By contrast, the ethnographer performs each of these steps together, all the time. Many ethnographers write daily notes summarizing their thoughts and experiences, as well as recording details that were observed and conversations that were held. Moreover, their observation of communities does not restrict itself to the communicative activity of participants, but also pays attention to material and environmental features that define and influence the cultures under consideration. In the same way, while I have analysed a great many posts on The Student Room, my interpretation and analysis of their content is combined with an eye for 'objective' contextual information, such as the age of the account, the reputation of the user, whether or not they subscribe, wider political issues in the forums they are posting, and so forth.

Kozinets has commented on the significant practical challenge that faces social researchers of the Internet (2009, p. 161). Faced with an excess of data, we are obliged to pioneer new techniques for effective and appropriate data retrieval and storage. This pragmatic necessity acts in company with my ethnographic commitments to influence the choice I made not to log the data that I analysed. Instead I recorded my data through saving links to conversation threads of interest, and writing notes about particular posts within these threads, using the post ID numbers for reference. Aside from the time this saves, this approach requires me to visit the original discussion thread on The Student Room each and every time I want to revisit my data. In revisiting, I must view all of the contextual visual information surrounding the posts. The status of those who made the posts, their online comportment, the grammar the post was written in, and visual elements such as GIFs, memes and emoticons. Furthermore, I revisit non-particular contextual cues, such as whether the thread has been locked or

subjected to other moderation, and whether it has died or attracted further responses. Each instance of revisiting my material improves my ability to spot relevant details that might have been missed beforehand.

In short, while I have incorporated elements of good practice from textual analysis tradition, such as rereading my material many times over, and aiming to be reflexive in the themes and interpretations that I derive through this reading, it would not be accurate to describe this as textual analysis, combined as it is with simultaneous consideration of visual and environmental details.

My decision in this regard also reflects a certain ontological position I take towards the Internet. A truly interdisciplinary discipline, Internet Studies encompasses perspectives that view the Internet as a great many different things: a text, a medium, a network, a technology, an information (Cavanagh, 2007) conduit. Each of these metaphors reflects the research objectives and interests of the researcher who embraces it, while also rendering certain methodological approaches more attractive to the researcher than others. Drawing as I do upon Bourdieu's theory, I approach online communities such as The Student Room as sites of practice. The mediation of communication does not diminish its status as a form of practice. This assumption leads me to disregard perspectives that view posts in forums through the lens of a text that is created by users, but rather as manifestations of users' online actions and behaviour. Of course, there are many post-structuralists who suggest that practices are texts (Harvey, 1990). Bourdieu, though, views practice as comprising both embodied and unconscious elements as well as purposive and conscious action. What users do and say online cannot be exclusively explained through language, because non-linguistic factors -encapsulated in the social signals previously described - are also essential ingredients of the means through which humans exert their will upon their environment. Accordingly, when we observe the activity of users in online communities, it is vital to consider those signals and material features that are displayed in addition to the content of their communication. Moreover, this is also an essential means through which a researcher can disentangle the doxa that individuals hold towards the world around them from influences and meanings that they cannot or will not consciously access. It is certainly not impossible to achieve this through a method such as discourse analysis, which explores both the action orientation that utterances bear, in addition to their substantive content. However, there are more clues to the different meanings, influences and motivations shaping a speech act or a behavioural choice, that are anticipated and considered as a matter of course, when approaching posts as practice rather than text.

Overall, then, my analysis of data took place not as a distinct step in the research process, but rather as an ongoing and repeated component to conducting my fieldwork. My approach to my data was guided by principles of best practice such as the goal of reflexivity and the ideal of revisiting data, and reconsidering my working conclusions. However, there is fluidity in my research between the actions of participation, observation, sampling choice, reflection, and theorization.

Chapter 6: TSR Reputation: Context and History

Introduction

This chapter provides a contextual backdrop to TSR and its reputation system, and simultaneously explores this context in order to highlight tendencies which shape the meaning, use and significance of reputation on the site today. I begin by positioning the site with relation to the political and economic developments affecting UK higher education. Next I provide an overview of the structure, design, administration and history of TSR, going on to describe the technical specifics of the TSR reputation, and how it has developed over time. In and amongst this description, I refer to the narration of TSR users in order to demonstrate both the extent and nature of users' engagement with these specifics.

TSR and the Field of Power

TSR's emergence as "the largest [online] student community in the world" might not seem like an immediately obvious development from a worldwide perspective. The education focused content on TSR is strongly tied to the UK system, and to learners based in the nation. While it is a useful resource for international applicants who wish to become students in the UK, TSR is not able to offer comparable value to prospective students hoping to study abroad. TSR can therefore hardly be considered a global student community. In fact, the success of TSR is strongly contingent upon historical and political factors particular to the UK and to its global position.

In 2001, by the time TSR (then UKL) was founded, the UK had already been subject to a number of substantial economic shifts, such as substantial dismantlement of British industry under Thatcher's government, dramatic internationalisation of capital, information and labour, and a pronounced emphasis on financial and informational services, and the 'human capital' needed to support them (Castells, 1996). This broad agenda was often referred to among policy makers in terms of "the knowledge economy" (Powell and Snellman, 2004), as illustrated quite clearly in this extract from the OECD's 1996 document, *The Knowledge-Based Economy*:

"Employment in the knowledge based economy is characterised by increasing demand for more highly-skilled workers. The knowledge-intensive and high-technology parts of OECD economies tend to be the most dynamic in terms of output and employment growth. Changes in technology, particularly the advent of information technologies, are making educated and skilled labour more valuable and unskilled labour less so" (1996, p. 7).

This shift was accompanied by a dramatic expansion of Higher Education in the UK, which saw 40% of British young adults formally participating in Higher

Education by the time TSR began. This figure had increased to 50% by 2012. In raw numbers, there were 2.3 million students in the UK in 2012, compared to 1.6 million in 1994 (Universities UK, 2014).

A parallel but situated development was the policy-driven, strategic marketisation of British education, which was first and foremost enabled by the 1988 Education Reform Act, under Thatcher's government. The Act instituted a national curriculum, and laid the foundation for standardised assessments of schools and learners (Bathmaker, 2003). Assessment of this kind supported comparison and competition between schools and Universities; a process which was amplified by the introduction by Labour of performance thresholds and pupil attainment targets in 2000.

The first UK University league table was published by The Times in 1992 (Bowden, 2010), the same year that the distinction between polytechnic institutions and Universities was abolished by the Further and Higher Education Act, significantly increasing the number of degree awarding bodies in the market. The marketisation of Higher Education was further advanced by the introduction of the first tuition fees in 1998, as part of New Labour's Teaching and Higher Education Act. Tuition had been free, hitherto, but maintenance grants had been suspended in 1990 and replaced with loans. New Labour introduced means testing for these loans, and later (in 2000) rolled out 'Access' bursaries, designed to encourage disadvantaged students to enter Higher Education. The first tuition fees, amounting to £1000 per annum, were also waived for the poorest students (Bathmaker, 2003, p. 182). Means adjusted support of this kind was also targeted at the school level, through programmes such as Educational Maintenance Allowance (EMA) which was designed to incentivise disadvantaged 16-18 year olds to remain in full time education. On the one hand, therefore, the Labour government succeeded in opening up Higher Education to school leavers from non-traditional backgrounds, and substantially boosting the national rates of University educational attainment. At the same time, however, Labour policy also intensified and deepened the commodification and marketisation of Higher Education, by repositioning students as consumers through the introduction of tuition fees. Subsequent hikes in tuition fees took place in 2004, under the Higher Education Act of Labour's second term in office, and in 2010, following the formation of the Liberal Democrat and Conservative coalition government. Finally, between 2014 and 2016, the cap which restricted the numbers of home students Universities were permitted to admit was lifted. This further amplified the role of student as consumer, by placing Universities in more extreme competition with one another for the (now substantial) funding that followed each student in the form of their counterfactual tuition fees (Gibbons, et al. 2015).

What is most relevant about these developments is firstly the fact that University education became an economic necessity for school leavers in the UK. Labour market changes meant that employment prospects were significantly diminished for unskilled workers (Bathmaker, 2003, p. 174). At the same time, the number of University places rapidly increased, and financing increased for those who

needed it most. Altogether it was more necessary and also more easy than ever before to attend University. 2001 was therefore a propitious and intuitive moment for a student forum to take shape.

Not only was the demand for University education rising, but prospective applicants were also being positioned, by policy and circumstance, as consumers (Nixon, et al. 2016). Competition between Universities increased, even as the inflation of University credentials increased competition between graduates in the labour market. Together these tendencies amplified the stratification of Universities, and the importance of institutional prestige (Whitehead et al, 2006; Drydakis, 2016). TSR was therefore not only perfectly positioned to support the various interests of students in general, but additionally to fill the tangible and increasing needs of this group, not only to acquire and dispense the information needed to make appropriate choices and successfully compete for the optimal kinds of credentials (Oliver & Kettley, 2010), but also to participate in defining how distinct choices are valued in the market, and to thus reinforce their own relative position (Bourdieu and Passeron, 1990).

While the demographic profile of the TSR member base diversified, in line with the steady growth of the site, TSR continues to be defined by and reproducing of the elite tastes and distinctions of advantaged students. Old user generated content indicates that the earliest membership of the site was overrepresented by students of Oxbridge and of competitive courses such as medicine and law (The Student Room Wiki, 2010). TSR therefore occupies a non-trivial position in relation to the field of power. This field, according to Bourdieu, is an overarching symbolic terrain in which agents struggle to determine the exact relative weighting of various forms of capital, and the power and influence that they correspond to. "Within these different gaming spaces," according to Bourdieu, "there arise characteristic forms of capital that function both as trumps and stakes. These different forms of capital are themselves stakes in the struggles whose objective is no longer the accumulation of or even the monopoly on a particular form of capital (or power), economic, religious, artistic, etc., as it is in the struggles that play out within each field, but rather the determination of the relative value and magnitude of the different forms of power that can be wielded in the different fields or, if you will, power over the different forms of power or the capital granting power over capital" (Bourdieu, 1996, p. 265). Applying this notion to French society in the 80s and 90s, Bourdieu observed that economic and cultural capital tend to vie with one another as the most influential principles structuring power in each domain. The most powerful institutions and individuals in society occupy positions characterised either by high economic capital, high cultural capital, or a blend of the two. The existence of the field of power allows for conversion between comparatively valued capitals, and possession of high capital in one of these kinds is redeemable within certain areas of all specialised fields because of the conversion rates that are determined within the field of power. This pattern is clearly visible in British society when we look at the institutional credentials of those in the most powerful positions. A 2010 study found that half of the youngest front-bench politicians had studied Politics, Philosophy and Economics (PPE) at Oxford (Davis, 2010). Furthermore,

a report by Alan Milburn MP, for The Social Mobility and Child Poverty Commission, found that 75 per cent of senior judges, 59 per cent of the Cabinet, 57 per cent of Permanent Secretaries, 50 per cent of diplomats, 47 per cent of newspaper columnists, 44 per cent of public body chairs, 38 per cent of members of the House of Lords, 33 per cent of BBC executives, 33 per cent of the Shadow Cabinet, 24 per cent of MPs and 12 per cent of the Sunday Times Rich List attended Oxbridge compared to less than 1 per cent of the public as a whole (2014). I also illustrate examples of conversions across different sections of the TSR site in chapter 8, where users are able to leverage their existing capital as a shortcut to securing legitimacy and respect in niche fora.

The economic and political developments previously outlined point to a significant alteration in the weighting of cultural capital and its interrelation to economic capital in modern Britain. In short, TSR comes into being within a temporal and national space in which University credentials are of unprecedented significance for unprecedented proportions of British young adults. By positioning itself at the centre of this essential transitional process, TSR becomes a platform not only for facilitating the acquisition of academic credentials, but also for the collective ranking and reordering of these assets. People do not merely acquire and share neutral information on TSR. They actively shape attitudes and values surrounding the value of different pathways, courses, Universities and lifestyles. In doing so, they influence the fortunes of all those who are tied to these paths and identities. TSR therefore functions partly as a subsection of the field of power, by embodying the context in which a substantial cohort of British young persons deploy their symbolic powers and are subject to the symbolic dominance of others. Furthermore, the reputation system is a critical vehicle through which this power is channeled.

All told, while my research does not focus upon educational trajectories and attainment among the users of TSR, it is by no means arbitrary that the online space in which cohorts of British young adults practice their lives happens to centre around educational pathways and cultural capital. The socio-political context specific to the UK makes it especially true that the student career is a critical juncture, not only for education but for numerous other personal domains.

Site History

The history of TSR and its reputation system is especially compelling, thanks to the longevity of the community, the presence of many long-term users, and the evident affect and (at times) drama that has surrounded the management and direction of the site. Its history holds enduring value and significance to users of TSR, a fact evinced most demonstrably by the existence of an official “History of TSR”, which currently resides on the TSR wiki. During 3-4 years prior to and including 2009, a tongue-in-cheek recap of significant changes and dramas was written by active users of the site. After the first two such entries, a contest was arranged for members to submit accounts of the preceding year in question, and these accounts were submitted to a site wide popular vote. Although ‘official’

history of this kind was no longer organized or solicited after 2009, there are still clear signals on TSR, today, that history is an important component of TSR's identity. For instance, during national History week 2016, the Debate and Current Affairs moderation team published a multiple choice quiz focused on site history, which included these questions:

1. What year was The Student Room founded?
2. Which current Support Team member has been on the team the longest?
3. Before being renamed TSR, what was the site known as?
4. When was negative reputation removed from the site?
5. Which user created the millionth TSR account?
6. Which user was the first to reach 50,000 posts?
7. Who currently has the highest reputation level?
8. What year did the TSR Awards begin?
9. Who was the first site moderator?
10. When was the millionth thread created?

These questions give a clear indication of some of the themes that the moderators and active users feel to be significant and memorable when thinking about the past.

Additionally, in July 2016, Captain Jack (Community Manager) posted a thread in N&A (News and Announcements) asking "*What do you think about all the really old threads on TSR*", alluding, in his opening post, to a concern among management that the site should appear to be relevant and contemporary to potential visitors. The replies he received pointed to the pride and fondness that "TSRers" hold for the site and its past:

Pocket Watch [High+, 2008-Present]: "Rather than creating the impression that TSR is out of date, to me old threads create a nice sense of continuity and community."

Lipgloss [Medium+, 2008-Present]: "I love reading threads from 2004-2005."

Pandora [High+, 2013-Present]: "I sometimes wish TSR was even older, it would be intriguing to read posts from 20 years ago. "We just found this thing called the Internet, heh, let's see what it does."

Tudor [Medium+, 2009-Present]: "It's awesome. Mine from 2014 still get replies."

Beethoven [High+, 2016-Present]: "I like old threads"

Famous Five [High+, 2008-Present]: "I think it's wonderful. There are some truly wonderful threads from the past, packed with awesome and useful information for others to find and explore. It definitely helps in terms of the search facility too. Plenty of memories there as well. It just

shows how TSR is constantly changing and evolving to adapt to the online community.”

Overall, then, it is clear that the longevity and gradual evolution of TSR holds sustained affective significance to its members. Because of this fact, I can use this history not only to provide context to my case study, but also as an indicator of the values, narratives and distinctions that shape TSR’s culture, and its appropriation of reputation. The sequence of events, the specific stakeholders, actors of influence, and the precise struggles that have shaped TSR’s history are important pointers to the logic that shapes the fields I am analysing, and also to the particular mechanisms that have been used to construct and maintain the status quo (Bourdieu, 2002, p. viii).

Constructing the History

More so than in any other chapters, this narrative draws heavily on personal experiences and memories. I joined TSR in May of 2005. Although I was not acquainted with moderators or many subscribers at the time, I remember the shock waves that ran through the community the day we logged on to find the reputation plugin removed, and our user profiles visibly altered. I remember the initial presence of Acumen PI, and their presentation of changes in the ‘About TSR forum’. In 2007 I briefly joined the moderation team as Secretary General of the TSR Model United Nations. This role afforded me basic administrative powers within the MUN forum, but no authority on the site. From 2006 until the suspension of the service, I volunteered as a Personal Statement Helper; reviewing hundreds of personal statements on behalf of University applicants. Similar to the MUN role, this position allowed me certain functional tools but did not involve my inclusion in the moderation team. In 2009 I was appointed as a mini-moderator for the Universities forums. Initially I was responsible for the Oxbridge forums, but later moved on to support ‘General University Discussion’ and the Postgraduate forums.

This trajectory is important, because it means that I watched many of the changes and developments first hand as they unfolded, and I was even directly involved in some of the events and changes described. For instance, I was in the team when ‘Official Representative’ accounts were opened up to Universities, and have been involved in monitoring and policing their use in the University forums. I also travelled to Brighton every August for 6 years on Results Day in order to join a team of volunteers at TSR HQ in providing support, information and advice to thousands of applicants on the specifics of the UCAS system, and schemes such as Clearing and Adjustment. I was in the office personally when tensions would build up between UCAS and TSR over the public disclosure of sensitive information. And I was an active member of the moderation team as our procedures became increasingly bureaucratic and as our role and relationship to the TSR Group in Brighton and to users of the site evolved.

These experiences also mean that I *know where to look*. While a researcher coming from outside would need to invest a great many hours and scrape

through an impossible number of threads and posts, in a significant number of different places. I know where and roughly when things happened: who posted what, which forums things happened in, and what forums things used to happen in before they started to happen in other places instead. This is at once a huge advantage and a huge handicap.

To corroborate this narrative, I draw on the History of TSR, a collaboratively written record in the TSR wiki. While this narrative is similarly situated, being written almost exclusively by moderators and subscribers, it does offer a degree of triangulation. I have also returned to official announcements released by significant figures in The Student Room Group, and to discussion threads surrounding significant changes as they took place (most significantly, the transition of ownership from D to Acumen PI/The Student Room Group Ltd).

Many of the details mentioned, though, arose subtly and without conspicuous fanfare. For these contextual details, my account rests squarely on my own memory and perspective.

About TSR⁸

Purpose and Community

TSR was founded by a sixth former named Charles Delingpole, in 2001 (Startup Bootcamp, 2016). Originally named “UK-Learning (UKL)”, the site was rebranded “The Student Room” in 2004. UKL initially served as a venue for listing and sharing learning resources. By 2003, however, it began to rapidly increase in membership and activity. The first author of the official ‘History of TSR’ (“History of TSR”, 2010) uses fanciful terms to characterize UKL in 2001-2002, as dominated by a tiny ‘academic elite’, whereas in 2003:

Mr White: “the forum ceased to be a small, localised discussion board, with few members, but began to grow into a community, a metropolis, where exchange of ideas flowed freely across the world. The number of members is accepted to have been in the 3-figures at this point, but, for an unknown reason, this number began to increase at a drastic rate at the end of the ‘Pre-History’, so, a new era was born, the ‘Old Era’” (Mr White, 2004, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

Mr White goes on to observe that the year 2003:

“...can be remembered as a time of development, being the transition stage between the ‘Old Era’ traditions of elitism and low-posting, and the approaching establishment of the forum as an epitome of sociability, not just a place of academia... Indeed, in this era, ‘culture’ began to establish, with many individuals making their mark on the forum, and an almost familial camaraderie developing. Many distinct personalities emerged

⁸ Now relabeled “News and Announcements”, “About The Student Room” was, for many years, the name of a forum in which a great deal of debate and discussion took place surrounding the development and administration of the site.

from the 'Early Middle Era', some more memorable than others, and a large increase in the popularity and usage of the forum was apparent "(*ibid*, 2004).

The distinctions introduced by Mr White carry significance. For instance, he associates 'elitism' with low posting, low membership and an academic focus. By contrast, the growth and substantive diversification are characterised in terms of 'masses' that post "spam" in order to compete for high post counts:

"...it is the true beginning of what we see as 'today's' forum, away from the vagaries and close-knit nature of the Old and Middle Eras, and into the hectic world of high post per day rates and genial competitiveness... With the ever-growing number of members reaching meteoric highs, and spam becoming increasingly commonplace" (*ibid*, 2004).

This opposition is something that is reiterated frequently throughout the History of TSR, as well as my other data sources. For example, the second author of the History wrote the following:

"TSR subforums were splitting just about as quickly as British boy bands when the money dries up. The chat threads spawned entire spin off forums: Health and Relationships gave 13 year-old girls nationwide an opportunity to announce their impending motherhood to a student audience, while Debate and Discussion gave Tory nut-jobs a chance to moan about the imminent disintegration of society. General Chat remained much the same as ever, albeit possibly with a few extra "OMGWTF!!!!???"s. On the other side of the proverbial coin, each and every possible topic of student academia found a forum of its own (2 + 2 = 5, 2004, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

Later additions to the History included these examples:

"In terms of regular posting activity TSR is regularly ranked in the top 50 forums in the world. Some people attribute this increase in growth to TSR's addictive nature and community spirit, but it could equally well be explained by the huge amount of spam in the Chat forum" (Pig, 2005, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

"The Student Room has continued to grow at an impressive rate - reaching the dizzy height of 81st on bigboards.com. Yet more pointless spam and emo questions from horny teenagers. Your humble chronicler must wonder whether TSR is providing a valuable public service by containing all this nonsense in one place away from society at large" (Acaila, 2007, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

The described growth and diversification led Delingpole ('D') to introduce subforums in 2004. 12 years later, TSR is divided into 11 sections, and 74

forums, with a great many more subforums. To give a brief indication of this breadth, the 8 sections available to all members⁹ are presently:

- TSR Community
- Life and Style
- Entertainment
- Debate and Current Affairs
- Study Help
- University and University Courses
- Universities and HE Colleges
- Careers and Jobs

Similarly, while TSR initially targeted 16-21 year old UK students doing GCSEs, A levels and undergraduate degrees, the site is now used by international applicants, mature students, postgraduates, those pursuing vocational diplomas and apprenticeships and many teachers, parents and University Admissions Tutors. A few years ago, for instance, TSR opened a subforum named “The Parent Room” in the Applications and UCAS forum, in order to cater for the growing number of parents on the site.

You are Here: My TSR > Forums > University and university courses > Applications and UCAS

The Parent Room ★ watch Share 0 Tweet

A little chunk of The Student Room that's just for parents...

[start new discussion](#) | 1 2 3 | Skip to page: [forum tools](#) | [search forum](#)

[moderator tools](#) | [inline mod](#)

Threads in Forum: The Parent Room	Last Post
Sticky: Qualification reform in the UK & UCAS tariff changes by She-Ra	by She-Ra 29-09-2015 replies: 0 views: 4,140
Sticky: Parent Chat Thread (Pgs: 1 2 3 4) by F1 fanatic	by parentlurker 15-06-2015 replies: 78 views: 19,696
Sticky: The TSR Parents' Guide to Student Finance by oxymoronic	by parentlurker 24-03-2014 replies: 5 views: 8,956
Uni 2017 by JoanneG	by JoanneG 1 week ago replies: 4 views: 178
School predictions wrong by vrm99	by threepordrift 1 week ago replies: 3 views: 149
replies: 53 views: 2,930	

Presently, TSR identifies as “the UK’s biggest and most popular education website, used by over 70% of all students every year (The Student Room, 2016).” TSR begins its “About the Student Room” guide with this description:

“TSR is a student community that exists for every student to use to support each other – whatever your background. From GCSEs to

⁹ “HyperSecret Subscriptions Area”, “Private Forums” and “Support Team Area” are restricted to paid subscribers, administrators and moderators respectively.

University, to landing a job and everything else life decides to throw at you.”

Overall, therefore, TSR is now much more than solely an educational resource, a fact that is embraced by the staff in Brighton HQ, even while this continues to be an ambivalent and fraught trait to many of its users.

Layout and Functionality

In style, structure and substance, TSR is first and foremost a forum. That is to say, it is a website primarily designed to facilitate text-based, asynchronous discussions. These are arranged by substantive theme, and displayed as a threaded chain of replies in response to opening posts (colloquially dubbed OPs by users), which are themselves arranged by date within specific forums. The majority of content posted on TSR is visible to the public, without any registration required. Consequently, the most common motivation for registering for membership is the locating of relevant content housed within TSR, as a result of a Google search. The majority of users are attracted to TSR by academic content particularly; for instance, when seeking support for exams or coursework, or when embarking on the University application process. Prior to 2003, the public was free to post on ‘UKL’ without registering. As the site began to expand, D introduced compulsory registration in response to rising spam and trolling. From this point onwards, basic membership and functionality has been available free of charge. Added features were made available, however, via a monthly subscription package. Features available to ‘Subs’ included the ability to conceal whether one is online or offline, the ability to see the identity of those who ‘rep’ or ‘neg’ you, the freedom to change the colour of one’s username and to write a custom usertitle under one’s username, a larger avatar resolution, a larger private messaging inbox, freedom from site advertisements, and exclusive use of a designated hidden forum, with its own ‘shoutbox’ (instant-messaging stream).

Predictably, ‘subs’ enjoy social status in the community, as humorously alluded to in the History entry describing the earliest days of TSR subscriptions:

“...forums [were included] for the few who chose to line d’s pockets with their hard-earned pennies: they were left free to discuss their hatred of the plebs below in their dedicated Moaning Thread... The subscriber forums are now bustling with business, complete with “The Moaning Thread Mk II”, and a forum designed entirely for sex and swearing. If you have not already joined them, you are scum. Get off this forum, you freeloading, bloodsucking scum. Ahem” (2 + 2 = 5, 2005, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

In recent years, the TSR Group has begun a process of retiring the subscription model. While it still exists, it does so in a reduced form, no longer offering the Shoutbox (which eventually became a source of bullying and extreme conflict between ‘subs’) or full freedom from ads. The model has also become ineffectual as a revenue source for a site as large as TSR, which relies mostly upon advertising revenue.

On a basic level, each TSR user interacts with TSR via a personal account, which will afford them the following powers:

- The ability to post new threads and to respond to the posts and threads created by others
- The ability to 'watch' a forum and particular thread, which involves receiving updates of any new content in the aforementioned, both in one's homepage on TSR and via email if preferred
- The ability to send and receive private messages
- A personal 'wall' by which other users can post personal messages away from any forum, but still visible to all users of the site
- The ability to use the report system to flag problems to the moderation team
- The ability to give and receive personal reputation, otherwise known as 'rep' (more to follow)
- The ability to rep posts and to see a record of rep points received, and the post to which the rep was awarded. (Only subs may see the identity of the rep donor)
- A customization area where users may create 'signatures' that will appear at the foot of their posts across the site, and 'avatars' which are personalised images or gifs displayed on a user's postbit¹⁰
- Navigation tools such as notifications, followed threads and forums, the 'who quoted me' widget, and widgets listing recent and popular threads around the site.

Paltry limitations exist for very new users. For example, if a new user has less than ten posts, any submission including a link will automatically be filtered for pre-moderation, as a measure to weed out advertisers and spambots. Some opportunities on the site are limited to those who have exceeded a 250 post threshold. Examples include the freedom to nominate and vote in the Annual TSR Awards, and in the General Election of the Model House of Commons. Finally, new users begin with 0 reputation points. This means that the rep they give is worth 0 until they have been given reputation by other users who do have reputation points.

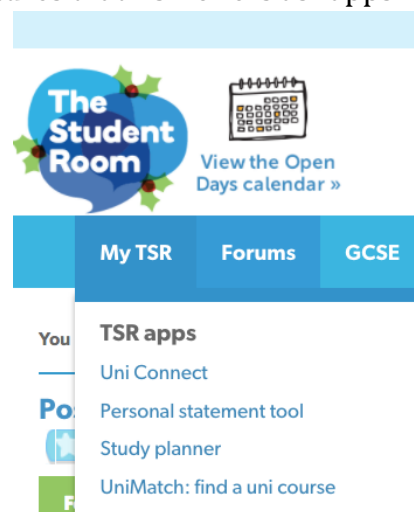
In addition to the basic forum features that make up the majority of TSR's content and activity (that is, posts, threads and forums), TSR has introduced additional features over the years that one would not necessarily find on other forum-styled websites. One example is the TSR wiki, referred to by musicbloke in his 2008 winning submission to the History:

"One of the main points of this redesign was to move TSR away from being "just a forum". The wiki, which began its life as a small set of

¹⁰ A postbit describes everything other than the text of a post. For example username, reputation, avatar and post-count are typical elements of the postbit on most forums.


articles, became greatly expanded, particularly with the help of the WST¹¹ ("We're Special" Troupe). The home page, for example, no longer showed all of the subforums, and all of the activity that was going on around the site, and instead, with the implementation of "tabs" at the top of the page, directed users towards portals, which in turn led to wiki and forum pages. Regardless of this, the wiki remains far less popular than the forums, even though it has a rather excellent page on tight foreskins, and a superb cheese toasty recipe" (musicbloke, 2008, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

Another is the Personal Statement Help facility. The latter is a feature within the University and University Courses section, which allows members to post drafts of their personal statements in a hidden forum, only visible to the PS Help team. A PS Helper then reviews the personal statement and provides suggestions for improvements. PS Help is coordinated by the moderation team, but staffed by volunteers who must prove to the PS Help moderators that they are presently University students. For a time, TSR offered a similar CV Help facility. TSR also recently launched a University Course Matching tool. Below is an image of some of the additional features that TSR offers as "apps":



In recent years it has made increasing use of 'Official Representative' accounts, which can be bought by institutions or professionals, and used to interact with TSR users. Many Universities make use of this feature, which they use most actively during the peak of the University admissions cycle, to promote their institutions but also to provide practical support to applicants with concerns or questions. For example, here is the OP of a thread by the Cambridge Murray Edwards College Official Representative, in the University of Cambridge forum:

¹¹ WST is an abbreviation for 'Wiki Support Team'. Like PS (Personal Statement) Helpers, these volunteers are part of the TSR Support Team, but do not have any authority or disciplinary power.



Murray Edwards Admissions
Official TSR Representative
Thread Starter

Community record
Add card
Notes (0)

[Report post](#) 3 weeks ago 08-11-2016 12:40


Hello all. Having discussed things with other colleges involved in TSR, we agreed that it would be a good idea to run a thread like this to try to offer reassurance and general advice to candidates between the admissions assessments and the interviews.

I can't discuss the content of the Admissions Assessments so please don't ask nor can I say for certain how colleges are going to be using them in their decision making.

The purpose of the thread is to provide general advice and reassurance about the process between now and the start of the interviews in early December, so if you have a query please do send it. I will try to answer as quickly as possible but please bear in mind that things are busy at the moment in Cambridge admissions offices so have patience and I promise to get back to you. I can't answer on behalf of colleges other than Murray Edwards but I can provide some advice or at least a window into the way colleges behave so don;t feel you have to be Murray Edwards applicant in order to ask. A lot of the time, though, the answer will be 'email your college and ask!' 😊

Good luck to everyone involved and do please ask away...

Last edited by Murray Edwards Admissions; 3 weeks ago at 12:41.

 2

[edit](#) [reply](#) [+](#) [👍](#) [👎](#)

For many years, TSR has functioned as a significant competitor to UCAS during August and September in the area of providing support, information and advice to University applicants on Results Day. Not only has TSR succeeded in securing adequate server space during years where the UCAS Track service would crash for lack thereof, but TSR has also benefited from the expertise and commitment of many volunteers who are active on TSR on an ongoing basis. Over the years this was an important contrast to cycles where UCAS would employ temporary workers to manage calls on Results Day.

TSR has also invited professionals in other areas to provide temporary support or information in other sections, such as the Samaritans in the mental health forums, and health professionals in 'Health and Relationships'. During the 2010 UK General Election, Nick Clegg, David Cameron, Caroline Lucas and Gordon Brown each held Q&As on TSR.



Election 2010

Specialist Advisor

Thread Starter



Community record

Add card

Notes (0)

Report post 15-04-2010 16:47

In our 'Student Question Time' series all the main party leaders will answer questions posed by Student Room members:

- * [Nick Clegg's answers are live here](#)
- * [Caroline Lucas' answers are live here](#)
- * [Gordon Brown's answers are live here](#)

Today, following his appearance on the second of the live TV leader debates, we have **leader of The Conservative Party**.

Thank you to Mr Cameron for taking the time to respond personally to young voters and thank you to the members who [submitted such excellent questions](#).



From 2009 onwards, The Student Room Group Ltd. attempted to introduce Web 2.0 features to the site such as message boards on personal profiles, resembling Facebook timelines, the increasing use of the option to 'follow' other users, and the option to 'tag' other users in posts. In 2016 TSR introduced a live notifications alert. For the most part, these changes have done very little to alter the fundamental logic of interaction and activity on TSR. It remains a forum, and the introduction of social networking elements has done nothing to alter the fact that a user navigates TSR by frequenting specific threads and forums, clustered around particular themes of activity or categories of people to interact with, as distinct from social network sites, which structure content around individuals and personal connections. TSR users make heavy use of a personal messaging feature for private interaction. Within threads¹², users do 'tag' each other in order to alert a person's attention to a particular post. Prior to the 'tag' feature, however, 'quoting' another user performed the same function, and it continues to be more heavily used than tagging. Each post on TSR has a quoting feature, which will pre-format your post with a copy of the post you wish to reply to. Doing so sends a notification¹³ to the quoted person, as well as making it visible to all readers of the thread, that your comment was a particular response to the quoted post, rather than a response to the thread topic in general.

¹² Linear chains of replies made in response to an 'OP' (opening post) and housed within a forum or subforum.

¹³ Prior to the notification feature, TSR users visited a 'who quoted me' area of their home page to keep track of quotes.

Although TSR's attempts to incorporate social networking features have had limited impact on the nature of behaviour and activity on TSR, there are some forums in which threads are used as 'blogs'. The most successful example of this tendency is the 'Fitness Blogs' subforum in which users start threads to log their personal fitness goals and achievements, and to read those of others. This practice has also been used in Travel and Universities forums, most successfully in the case of Fresher's Blogs. In addition to blogs, the last three years have seen the emergence of 'AMA' (Ask Me Anything) threads. These are threads in which a user introduces themselves by laying claim to some pertinent experience, skill or identity and solicits questions about that characteristic from other users. While it is not implausible that each of these examples may have been inspired by the patterns of usage that students have grown accustomed to via social networking sites such as Facebook and Twitter (in this case the interest in broadcasting personal information), the practice is still characterized in important ways by the structure of TSR's forum design. For instance, an individual posting an AMA or blog has no control over their audience, given that TSR is visible to the world at large. Additionally, where a social networking site such as Facebook will deploy algorithms in order to filter what content is shown to a user, based on which individuals they are close to, TSR employs no such algorithms. Content is ordered by date and time. Excessive 'bumping' of one's thread to the top of a forum is prohibited by moderators, and there is often fierce competition for visibility and attention by those who post such threads.

Having said all of this, there is one change that dramatically impacted interaction on TSR. This was the introduction of 'most popular' and 'most recent' widgets, which provide users with a short list of the most recent and most active threads from around the site on their home page. This change increased activity and posting levels by bringing a greater number and range of thread topics into view for each user. It also, however, resulted in a significant change in the nature of replies that threads could expect to receive. As many users did not know which section or forum a thread title was housed in, there was an increase in the number of replies that failed to grasp the context of a thread, accompanied by an increase in the severity of reactions to particularly salient or inflammatory thread titles. In short, the thrust of this change was to attract many more users to hitherto quiet or overlooked threads and forums from the front page.

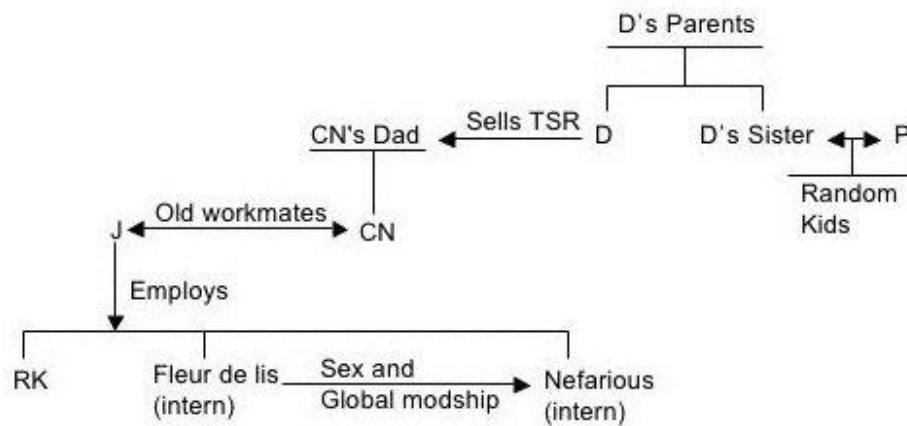
Administration

For the vast majority of TSR's history, day-to-day management and administration has been provided by voluntary moderators. Between 2001 and 2002, everything was handled by D personally. Once the site began to expand, he recruited moderators from the existing userbase. The History records 8 moderators in 2003. As the team expanded, ranks were introduced for the moderation team. The most senior position was 'Administrator' followed by 'Super moderator', 'Moderator' and 'Sub-Moderator'. Later on the lower tiers were replaced with 'Global Moderator' and 'Mini Moderator'. Within this delineation, 'mini-mods' held powers within specific forums or sections, in which they held local expertise. Global Moderators had the same set of powers and privileges as mini-moderators, but held them across the site. Super Moderators

held site wide power, with additional administrative permissions and abilities to that possessed by Globals. Administrators held full powers.

The specifics of the moderation structure, and the identity of those who assumed these positions strongly features in each of the entries to the History, indicating the status that the role has reliably afforded over the years. A humorous example from the History is a ‘family tree’ purporting to disclose nepotism underpinning the appointment of moderators at the time:

“Something that has sadly been omitted in previous histories has been the nepotistic element of the running of TSR, and this lack will hopefully be rectified by publishing the following diagram (which may or may not be entirely truthful):”



(musicbloke, 2008, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

Also included in the History are notable ‘personalities’, some of who held positions as group or party leaders, and some of who won honorifics in the annual site awards.

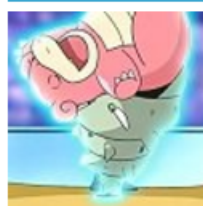
Together, these emphases point to the major institutions in the community, which are responsible for consecrating different activities and qualities as bearing legitimate value and worth on TSR. Bourdieu talks at length about the role of ‘consecration’ in determining whether different works of art or literature attain success in the field of cultural production. Here:

“the fundamental stake in literary struggles is the monopoly of literary legitimacy, i.e. *inter alia*, the monopoly of the power to say with authority who are authorised to call themselves writers; or, to put it another way, it is the monopoly of the power to consecrate producers or products” (Bourdieu P. , 1993, p. 42).

On TSR, legitimacy is also monopolised, and it is those with socially instituted positions and roles that enjoy this monopoly, and use it in their actions to consecrate people or things, or their abstention. An explicit example of this was the ‘Mod’s Member of the Month Award’ with which the moderation team would

honour and reward a user each month, for positive contributions such as helpful posts and post reporting.

In 2004 a warning system was introduced, allowing moderators to keep better records of individuals' past behaviour, and to be systematic to modify the penalties they imposed. The ultimate penalty is a permanent ban. Lesser punishments include a temporary ban (the user may not log in for a set period of time), a section ban (user is only prohibited from using certain areas of the site), a rep ban (user is no longer to receive or give reputation, and may have their existing reputation points reset), the publicly visible display of warning points upon one's userbit around the site, and for new offenders, a privately visible 'alert' detailing the nature of the wrongdoing). To give examples of the different kinds of actions that moderators of different ranks would conduct, 'minimods' and globals would be responsible for keeping forums tidy (moving misplaced threads), removing inappropriate content, and being helpful presences within the forums. Super moderators would be responsible for activities such as IP address searching in order to apprehend troublemaking dupe accounts, and tasks such as the creation or amendment of the forum layout and structure. For all of the moderation team's history, Administrators have been recognisable by their bold bright red usernames, Supermods by their cyan usernames, Globals by royal blue and Minimods by purple. Each member of the moderation team also displayed specific usertitles under their usernames. For example, here is the relevant section of a Supermoderator's postbit, sporting the cyan, bolded username, and the 'Section Leader' usertitle:



Slowbro93

Section Leader

PS Reviewer

Thread Starter



The administrator Pig reflected on his own changes to the moderation structure on TSR, which were instrumental in making the team and its operations more professionalised and bureaucratic:

"It's my opinion that moderation of TSR has greatly improved over the last 18 months. 'Well you would say that' I hear you cry, but really, it has. Some mods have left, yet more mods have arrived. There are codes of conduct, procedures, queues, leaflets and application forms. Think of a job centre without the fake Burberry and you've got the mod forum right there" (Pig, 2005, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

Changes introduced included standardization and strict policies for the moderation team, in order to limit excessive discretionary freedom and arbitrary actions by moderators. One of his improvements, for instance, was the introduction of the AAM (Ask A Moderator) forum, in which users could privately discuss complaints or concerns with the moderation team. Another was his publication of a list of site rules.

By 2005, D was no longer actively involved in managing TSR, and Pig assumed responsibility for the majority of the strategic and technical administration, until the site was bought out by Acumen PI in 2006 (later to be rebranded The Student Room Group Ltd.). After TSR's ownership transition, Pig was also the main liaison between Acumen PI's 'C' and 'J' over strategic and technical changes, and their implementation. These amendments invited strong reactions from the userbase, thanks to resulting impairment of site functionality. Eventually a dramatic dispute between Pig and Acumen PI technical staff led to his sudden walkout from the site, along with most of the existing moderation team. On leaving, Pig demanded the removal of his custom improvements (plugins).

As it happened, one of these plugins acted to enhance the default reputation function of Vbulletin. With Pig's reputation plugin in place, users with the highest rep exhibited a higher number of reputation gems on their post-bit, which were displayed in gold and 'flashing disco' colours in addition to merely two different shades of green. The loss of custom TSR hacks reverted the reputation of all users to an older system, which resulted in the reputation of high rep users being compressed to a lower number of, exclusively green, gems.

A global moderator observed, in her entry for the first TSR History contest:

“Much has been written about this - much of it being utter tripe - and very little without some sort of bias. Or indeed attempts at turning it into a Shakespearean tragedy... The basics seem to be: search gets messed up, pig isn't happy and says so, J not happy with pig saying so and makes noises to that effect, pig says “tata” and demods himself, followed later by a request for all of his plugins to be removed from the site. Much chaos, confusion and anarchy results, especially as many other staff members follow. Prophecies of doom abound as many members wonder how TSR will ever cope without so many of its prominent staff and the legendary admin” (Acala, 2007, *History of TSR*, The TSR Wiki).

Acumen PI was able, however, to quickly recruit replacements for those who had resigned. After the Pig saga, this new moderation team advanced the bureaucratisation and professionalization of the moderation process even further. As the moderation force grew, procedures and definitions surrounding seniority, authority and duties were introduced and tightened, and the main moderation forum was restructured in order to include subforums for area specific moderation. Presently, each section on TSR has its own moderation team and at least one Section Leader.

In 2007 a new kind of moderation position organically and unofficially emerged. This was the role of community manager. An unusually active, productive and popular moderator named fleur de lis joined the team. Fleur very promptly accelerated through the moderation ranks, until she was eventually appointed as an admin. Until her departure a few years later, Fleur acted as liaison between Acumen PI and the moderation team. The purchase and takeover of TSR by Acumen PI brought with it a number of changes, which caused no small level of friction between the new owners and the userbase, as well as the moderation team. By the time Fleur stepped down, it was extremely apparent to the (now) TSR Group, as well as to the moderation team, that a dedicated, paid community manager was a functional necessity. Over the last five years, The Student Room Group has employed two professional, full time community managers. Their first hire served for about a year in the role. The second (She-Ra) has remained, and she is now one amongst a larger paid Community Management team, headed up by Jack Wallington (Captain Jack).

The direct involvement of a full time community management team has run parallel to further changes to moderation. While the position of 'global' moderator had already been subsumed into the 'Super Moderator' role, prior to 2013, the label of 'moderator' was replaced in 2013. Supermoderators are now Section Leaders. Administrators have become the 'Community Team', and Mini Moderators are now 'Support Team members'. The Community Team felt that the monicker of 'moderator' was archaic, and not suitably transparent to new members of the site. The original warning system was replaced with a football style carding system, using blue, yellow, red and black card categories. While the particular card given to an offender is no longer publicly displayed as it was in the original system, posts that have received punitive attention do carry the flag 'warned post' to reassure the community that moderators have taken action. By this point in time, the 'Support Team' had grown to 60-70 moderators in size. If volunteers such as community assistants, PS Helpers and the wiki support team are included, this number grows to 150. The latter group has no leadership or disciplinary responsibility on TSR.

The final and most significant change to moderation took place a year ago. The Community Team decided to bring the majority of discipline in-house, removing the Support Team of the functional tools to view post reports. While support team members may still use the carding system in emergencies (such as the posting of very extreme content on the public forums), their main role has evolved into one of pastoral support, and content creation. Ostensibly this change was made because the volume of reports were becoming unmanageable, leading to backlogs in some sections of the site. Additionally, the community team had concerns about the wellbeing of volunteers, who often had to tolerate abuse from site users over their regulatory actions. Despite the change, Support Team members are still visible and active presences in the public forums, and there is little indication of any loss in status within the wider community.

The Student Room is run by a large collection of people, ranging from the paid members of staff (The Community Team) to the voluntary helpers (Support Team). The Community Team work for the company that owns TSR, The Student Room Group, and are based at the company's head office in Brighton, in the UK, and are generally responsible for the behind-the-scenes running of the site. The Support Team are varied bunch, who dedicate much of their time to helping students on a day-to-day basis. Read on for a break down of what each role consists of.

Community Team

The Community Team's raison d'être is the continued growth of The Student Room. Working with the Support Team and all site users they plan the direction TSR should take and then work to get us there.

Section Leader

Section Leaders are long standing members handpicked for their understanding of TSR and their leadership skills. They specialise in and oversee a specific section of TSR and work closely with the Support Team in that section.

The majority of a Section Leader's time is taken up providing support and leadership to their Support Team and working closely with the Community Team.

Support Team

The Support Team are active and respected members within a specific forum or group of forums. They are selected for their keen interest and positive contributions within that area of TSR.

The Support Team members are responsible for facilitating discussion, nurturing community and keeping things tidy and friendly in their area(s).

In addition, the Support Team also work with members in their specific forums to make recommendations to the Community Team on improvements that could enhance their sub community on TSR. This could be updates to the forum; but also wider resources such as articles, blogs, photos, partnership suggestions etc.

Community Assistants

Community Assistants are responsible for keeping their specific forum area orderly, by moving posts, merging threads and tagging threads appropriately.

TSR Group Staff

Those known as TSR Group Staff are employed by The Student Room's parent company, The Student Room Group Ltd. They may interact with the site from time to time, but on the whole their job doesn't require them to be on TSR most of the time, unlike The Community Team.

Those in the TSR Group Staff may work in different departments within the company such as sales, development and finance. Because most TSR Group Staff members aren't consistently on the site, we ask that any questions on the site be made to either our Community Team or Support Team.

Ownership and Commercial Status

Once Delingpole moved on from his role as founder and CEO of TSR, the site was bought in 2006 by Acumen PI (its owner was now Chris Newson, a.k.a. CN). Acumen PI were significantly more proactive in their development and commercialization of TSR than Delingpole had been. Commenting at the time, Pig described the initial introduction of advertisements on TSR:

“In a startlingly short period of time in mid 2006 TSR went from looking like a pristine showroom model forum to a Michael Schumacher's jumpsuit forum, rather like someone had filled up a sawn-off shotgun with arbitrarily selected advertisements and given TSR both barrels right between the eyes” (Pig, 2006, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

In the decade that has since passed, TSR has undergone enough changes and developments to render the site almost unrecognisable. Below are screen captures of TSR taken from the 'Way Back Machine' (2016) for dates in 2005, 2007 and 2010 respectively:

The Student Room

Welcome to the The Student Room.
 If this is your first visit, be sure to check out the [FAQ](#) by clicking the link above. You may have to [register](#) before you can post: click the register link above to proceed. To start viewing messages, select the forum that you want to visit from the selection below.

Forum	Last Post	Threads	Posts
TSR Chat			
Welcome Lounge If you are new to the forum start a thread and introduce yourself.	HELLO!! and help. by HearTheThunder 2 Hours Ago	742	7,050
Chat Chat about whatever you want.	Chain Letters by HearTheThunder 2 Hours Ago	128	9,381
Discussion Lounges			
General Discussion Informal discussion on any topic (within reason). Sub-Forums: International Lounge , The Gallery , TSR Articles	Which country has the most... by Physics lover 11 Minutes Ago	32,165	840,369
Careers Jobs, job interviews, CV's, qualifications Sub-Forums: Teaching , Investment and Finance , Armed Forces	is £6 a hour good? by hk_1_kinobi 1 Hour Ago	1,399	22,118
Health & Relationships Discuss matters related to personal health and relationships in this forum. However, please keep it sensible and remember that people of all ages can view these forums. Remember all advice is unprofessional.	Emulating a good mood by ~**PinkTeaCov~** 1 Hour Ago	1,930	68,655
Technology Computing, programming, games and electronic stuff Sub-Forums: Gaming , Dev , Mobile Computing	Game that you are currently... by Alicia 5 Hours Ago	4,428	59,798
Sport Watching sport, stag hunting, becoming obsessed about something over which we have no control or influence and David Beckham.	Bolton sign Oman keeper Ali by Physics lover	1,151	49,841

About The Student Room | Site Rules
 Be part of the UK's largest student community [Register](#) Advanced Search

Current Features

Latest Discussions	Latest	Most popular (in the last 1 hours)
Thread/Thread starter	Last Post	Replies Forum
OK, lets turn things around, help! > started by Athlon	Athlon 1 Minute Ago	6 Fitness
Need your advice, want to get toned - Pic included for accurate advice > started by Akido	Akido 1 Minute Ago	2 Fitness
'Corporate Whore' (1 2) > started by white_haired_wizard	Joanna May 1 Minute Ago	25 Debate & Discussion
STEP 2005 qn 8 need help on diff eqns > started by mrt	mrt 2 Minutes Ago	0 Maths
What type of school did you go to? (1 2 3 4 5 ... Last Page) > started by fake plastic love	Joanna May 2 Minutes Ago	103 General Discussion
Past paper help... > started by kellywellydoodle	Ancient Runes 4 Minutes Ago	12 Maths
Free 3gp converter?! > started by Jacinta	Jacinta 4 Minutes Ago	0 Dev
Applying For Transfer Through UCAS > started by linkdapink	linkdapink 4 Minutes Ago	0 Applications, UCAS etc.
MMS Trouble > started by welshguy20	snu 4 Minutes Ago	1 Mobile Phones

Welcome to the New Look Student Room!
 The Student Room is where students share academic and social knowledge and experience. We're here for help with the big decisions and the fun stuff.
 See a video intro to the new site.
[Register](#) [Sign In](#)

Latest Wiki Updates

Log in Sign up for free Search all






The Student Room

Home Forums Articles Study & revision Personal statements University Health & relationships TV & Sport Careers Finance

Chat with Becky Adlington
Add your question now to join in

International Baccalaureate
Chat about your IB results here

The perks of a creative degree
Making a career from what you love

Latest discussions	Most popular	Editor's picks
thread / started by	last post/replies	forum
 Non-Muslim boyfriend, parents emotionally blackmailing me by Noor90	Noor90 1 Minute Ago Replies: 191	Relationships
 The result of democracy in the Islamic World by Dinghy	scrotrot 1 Minute Ago Replies: 9	News and Current Affairs
 The GCSE to AS German bridging summer class '13 *updated* by Octopus_Garden	thalitootoo 1 Minute Ago Replies: 31	Foreign Languages
 High paid job for undergraduates? by claire.j	claire.j 2 Minutes Ago Replies: 0	Part-Time and Temporary Employment
 Indian Religions on this forum by ZazDogg	FailedMyExams 3 Minutes Ago Replies: 252	Religion

Article updates

Cambridge Applicants Stalking Page 2014 Entry
edited by: UnknownError, 4 Hours Ago

Dentistry Entry Requirements
edited by: orange.bananna, 11 Hours Ago

Geography Degree
edited by: Freckles94, 11 Hours Ago

The UKCAT for Dentistry
edited by: orange.bananna, 12 Hours Ago

Dentistry at University
edited by: orange.bananna, 12 Hours Ago

Help Choosing a Subject
edited by: returnmigrant, 17 Hours Ago

York Applicants Stalking Page 2013 Entry
edited by: ellenne, 18 Hours Ago

Freshers Week Tips
edited by: returnmigrant, 1 Day Ago

As my focus is TSR's reputation system specifically, I will not go into any further details about the many changes and developments that TSR has undergone. What is relevant and important, however, is to understand the nature of The Student Room Group Ltd as a company, the business model it operates on, and the way in which its interests and those of the users conflict and harmonize in the use, design and understanding of reputation.

The Student Room Group not only owns and manages TSR, but two other educational sites: Marked By Teachers (formerly courseworkinfo.com) and Get Revising. Marked By Teachers sells access to a database of school and University coursework samples, which have been written, marked and reviewed by top students, academics, postgraduate teaching assistants and school teachers.

How Marked by Teachers works

It's simple really: we're a resource created for students, by students. Marked by Teachers combines the best of the UK's essay-writing talent with some seriously sound advice to help you do your own thing – really, really well.

- 1 Choose from 1000s of essays**
Search our database of over 171,950 student essays, assignments and papers
- 2 Reviews by peers**
Read work reviewed by A* students for insight into essays that get the grades
- 3 Marked by real teachers!**
Read teacher-critiqued essays for helpful comments, summaries and notes
- 4 No download limit!**
Download as many essays as you like, keep them for as long as you need
- 5 Get inspired!**
Use the new ideas, inspiration and advice to write your own really awesome essays!

Get Revising, meanwhile, is a free learning resource that provides “interactive tools to plan revision and make revision notes. It also provides a resource bank where notes and resources can be shared. (“About Get Revising”, 2016)” Separate accounts are needed for each of these sites, but The Student Room Group promotes each trading name on each of its sites.

The Student Room Group’s revenue is primarily earned through advertising. The group targets commercial advertisers by offering to deliver ‘the student voice’, and through claiming an impressive participation level among UK and A level and University students, in contrast to its competitors. It also targets Higher Education Institutions, through offering promotion opportunities and a platform with which to directly engage, through Official Representative accounts, as previously mentioned. The Student Room Group’s website includes the following statement:

“The Student Room is the largest online student community in the world – with a reach of over 75% of UK students visiting us each year. We’re unique. No-one else covers all aspects of students’ lives like we do, and we’re the primary place students go to ask questions and find information about education pathways, life around learning and study help. No other student site offers the best content, peer-to-peer advice and the ability to talk directly to brand and university advisers. That’s why The Student Room is THE place for advertisers who want to reach more students, more effectively – at the point they’re making decisions (“Engaging With Our Members”, 2016).”

In addition to this pitch, the group also presents itself as an advocate of students’ interests. “How we fight for students” is one of the sections on the group’s client facing website (“How We Fight For Our Students”, 2016).

The Student Room Group employs approximately fifty five members of staff in its headquarters in Brighton. The staff are divided amongst management, marketing, human resources, finance, sales, technology, “TSR Learning” and “Product” teams (“Meet the Team”, 2016).

While I will not elaborate on conflicts of interest between users and site management in this chapter, this contextual information will become important in chapters 7 and 8.

To sum up, TSR is a highly successful forum, which has expanded from its origins as a niche study resource to become a significant player in the market for online educational traffic. As the site has grown, its demographic makeup has transformed. Not only is the site used by educators, admissions tutors, parents and international students, but it has also been diversifying in the socio-economic demographic it attracts, with increasing participation from minorities and under-privileged groups (ComCors, 2014).

This success has tracked the substantial developments that The Student Room Group Ltd have implemented in the last decade. The site has consequently taken on a more commercial flavor during this time, with the introduction of advertising, the forging of partnerships, and measures such as the widgets on 'trending' and 'most popular' content, which successfully increased activity. TSR now produces its own, featured articles to supplement user-generated content.

Don't miss...

<p>Calling all stars Could you become a VIP? »</p>	<p>Get blogging! Write a blog on TSR and be seen by thousands »</p>	<p>No-revision exam tips How to improve your grades without learning anything new »</p>	<p>Ultimate essay guide How to research and write utterly amazing essays »</p>

The reputation system has been an important component of TSR practice for all of this time, and its development reflects this wider evolution in important ways.


About Reputation

Presently TSR's reputation system operates via a thumbs-up icon visible at the bottom of posts in almost every forum on TSR (reputation is disabled in unusual forums, such as Ask A Moderator). The icon appears grey and bears no number when a post has not received any reputation. When it has been 'repped' it will become green and display a number that represents the number of people that have 'repped' it. The following screen captures illustrate each of these states:

Canadians will be made to listen to Nickelback if caught drink driving ☆ ⚙

[moderation tools](#) [inline mod](#)

Moderation: [go \(0\)](#)



Rock Fan
TSR Support Team
Thread Starter

[Report post](#) 1 day ago 02-12-2016 02:18 1

Only thing is what if the person arrested is a big fan of Nickelback, just bizarre from the Canadian police
<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016...ck-punishment/>

Community record
[Add card](#)

Villa till I die

[edit](#) [reply](#) [quote](#)



Rock Fan
TSR Support Team
Thread Starter

Community record
Add card

Report post 1 day ago 02-12-2016 02:18 1

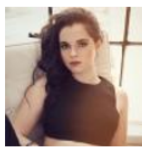
Only thing is what if the person arrested is a big fan of Nickelback, just bizarre from the Canadian police

<http://www.telegraph.co.uk/news/2016...ck-punishment/>

Villa till I die



edit reply quote



Goaded
■■■■■■■ ?

Community record
Add card
Notes (0)

Report post 1 day ago 02-12-2016 13:09 7

Why use nickelback when Justin Biebers first few albums exist?!



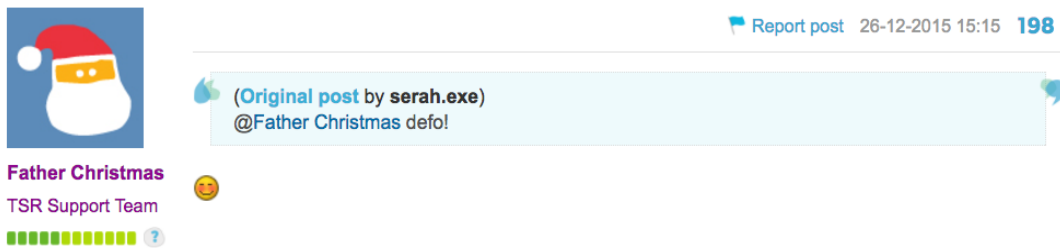
edit reply quote

The user whose post receives rep, receives a notification and may view a log of where the rep was given in their reputation widget. Subscribers and moderators can see the identity of the users that repped them, and how many reputation points were received. Subscribers and moderators have the freedom to hide their reputation gems from their postbit.

Different users have different “reputation power”. This is the amount of points that a user gives to another when they rep a post or person. This number is determined by an algorithm, which combines the amount of reputation points a user has earned with their activity level. After a significant bout of inactivity, a multiplier of 0.98 kicks in on a daily basis, leading to a gradual decrease in the user’s retained reputation points. New users’ reputation is worth 0 points.

Reputation Level	Reputation points required
12	50000
11	25000
10	12800
9	6400
8	3200
7	1600
6	800
5	400
4	200
3	100
2	50
1	1
0	0

As illustrated in previous images, differences in the value of rep received are not visible to public viewers. Those reading a post that has been repped only see that another user has repped it, not who that user is or how much their rep was worth. What TSRers can see, however, is the total of reputation that a poster has accrued. This is displayed on all posts, sitewide, in the form of a bar of green gems. New users start with one green gem. The highest number of gems currently held is 12. The first five gems are dark green in colour. The sixth gem and those that follow are pale green.



Limitations are in place to prevent excessive repping. Ordinary users may give reputation to five posts per day. Subscribers and mods may rep up to ten posts in a day. All users are limited to giving one personal rep each day. Users may also not repeatedly rep the same users. They must give rep to ten other users before being permitted to rep the same person once again. Attempting to prematurely rep a user, cues the error message “Please Rate Some Other Member”. This has led to the widespread adoption of the acronym “PRSOM” in posts, to express frustration at not being able to rep a worthy post.

Since 2010, a feature called ‘personal rating’ has also existed. This provides a way for users to rep others directly via their accounts rather than through repping a particular post in the forums.

My Profile



iEthan ● Invisible ♂ 

Casually clumsy.

TSR Support Team

★ following

Last Activity 2 minutes ago [view community record ▶](#)

Give Rep

What is rep?



Age 17

Location London

Join Date 05-05-2013

Total Posts 13,907

Message

About Me
Badges
My Stats
Infractions (old)
»

Like post specific rep, personal rep also adds points to the recipient’s total reputation, in proportion to the reputation amount possessed by the giver. Unlike post-related rep, personal reputation offers the opportunity to leave a brief (and private) message along with the rep. Neither the personal rep nor the message that accompanies it are viewable to the wider community. Personal rep appears in the recipient’s ‘received reputation’ widget along with their post-related rep:






	0	New 5 dimensional...	09-09-2016 18:44	Orbital_Rising	Your post has been given a positive rating.
	10	GOGSoc Episode VII:...	09-09-2016 17:37	The_Lonely_Goatherd	Your post has been given a positive rating.
	11	Personal Rating	09-09-2016 15:55	iEthan	Omg are you back? 🐼
	9	Do you think lecturers...	09-09-2016 08:24	Klix88	Your post has been given a positive rating.

The Transformation of TSR Reputation

TSR’s reputation system has not always worked in quite this way. What has always been true of this system is that reputation has been given by users to others via their posts. A user’s reputation has always been visible on postbits around the site, other than for the handful of subscribers able to hide it, and an even smaller number of rule breakers who fell victim to rep bans. Reputation has always operated via a points system that corresponded to green gems. It has always been the case that there are differences between users in rep power, and that users have been able to see a summary of received reputation points in their home page. However, most of the other specifics earlier described, have changed.

In TSR’s original layout, users interacted with plus and minus symbols on postbits, rather than a thumb icon. Most significantly, TSR’s reputation system initially included the ability to give ‘neg’ or negative reputation to other users. Selecting the minus icon, would result in the user losing points, related to the rep power of the person giving neg. Unlike rep, however, the number of points a user could detract from another was half of what they could give in rep. Later on, the plus and minus symbols were replaced with thumbs up and down. In 2013, however, negative reputation was disabled entirely across the site. This change was significantly controversial, and three years later members still frequently raise the issue. I will share data from these discussions in later sections. Prior to

the change, if a user lost enough reputation points through attracting negs, they would lose each of their green gems, but begin to accrue red gems. Red gems were added via a similar scale to that which determined the number of green gems. Some of the users who earned the highest number of red gems can still be seen on TSR, over three years since the negative reputation feature was disabled. Below is a screen capture displaying some of the members ranked by the highest amount of negative reputation. Please note that The Grinch is a fictional account created by TSR Staff, and fitted with red gems artificially:

The Student Room: Members List				Search Members
Username	Posts	Reputation	Avatar	
The Grinch I hate Christmas	53	■■■■■■■■■■		
Lord Trollington Junior Member	16	■■■■■■■■		
Otkem Exalted and Worshipped Member	979	■■■■■■■■		
mangoh Exalted and Worshipped Member	1,021	■■■■■■■■		
DYKWIA Vengeful, Imperial Overlord of The Student Room	3,694	■■■■■■■■		
Perseveranze Overlord in Training	2,441	■■■■■■■■		
Jimbo1234 TSR Idol	8,914	■■■■■■■■		
dj1015 Overlord in Training	2,350	■■■■■■■■		
Zangoose Benevolent Member	650	■■■■■■■■		

In addition to the existence of negative reputation, TSR’s original reputation system differed in that it allowed users to leave comments when they gave neg or rep to other users. The significant abuse of these comments, which were visible only to reputation recipients (in the same way that personal rep comments are now displayed) led to The Student Room Group disabling this feature fairly early on after taking over management of the site. The algorithm that reputation points were based on was also quite different to that in use today. Originally rep was worth more points, and those with the highest reputation held points in the tens and hundreds of thousands. Concerns over ‘repflation’ were a factor in the administrative choice to pare down the value and range of reputation value substantially.

A further important change over the years has been the introduction of a public reputation counter on individual posts. TSR users today can see whether a post has been repped, and how many reps it has received. In the past, users had no idea whether the posts of others had received positive or negative reputation, unless the recipient or the donor chose to mention it explicitly in the thread. The introduction of a public rep counter on posts was itself a source of controversy, as users quickly criticized the emergence of ‘bandwagon rep’. This refers to

instances where a user repped or negged a post after seeing that many others had done the same. The assumption is that people would not have given rep or neg, had they not been influenced by the public rep counter.

The gradual development and revision of reputation over the years on TSR has consistently drawn a considerable volume of posts from users, both in the 'About The Student Room' forum (now renamed News and Feedback), and in unrelated threads around the site in which members socialized. The strong reactions attracted by the reputation system reveal significant details about how different stakeholders of TSR understand reputation and utilise it, and about the value and meaning that it holds for users. As a result, these discussions form an important component of the data I explore in this case study.

The Specificity of TSR Reputation

Some aspects about this reputation system stand out when contrasted to those used on other platforms. Firstly, reputation is not connected to moderation. Many forums, such as SlashDot¹⁴, tie the reputation rank of a post or thread to its position on the site. For example, the default view of product reviews on Amazon¹⁵ displays an example of a favourable review and an unfavourable review, based on measures of which reviews were rated as the most helpful by viewers. A similar approach is used on SlashDot and Stack Exchange¹⁶, where the replies deemed the most helpful are marked out as top answers. Those asking questions may also receive less prominent thread placement, if their questions don't score well on criteria such as levels of specificity, and whether the asker first checked the archives to be sure no answers were already available. Many communities also combine metrics such as the number of posts made, the length of activity on the site in their reputational markers. While TSR places a widget in the home pages of TSR users that lists the most recent threads around the site, and the 'trending' threads (those that receive the most attention), within forums themselves, threads are listed in date order regardless of their reputation. If moderation wishes to remove or alter content, they do this manually in response to post reports by users. Content that breaks rules is usually spotted quickly and removed. Moderators also proactively browse the forums and move misplaced threads. The reputation received by a post or by a user, therefore, brings about no official weight or consequence for the privileges and opportunities of users. While TSR does provide automated means to recognise post counts and other kinds of activities (user titles and badges) these are entirely independent from reputation.

The second specific feature of this system is the fact that reputation is solely generated by purposive user input (as opposed to passive input such as the number of views received), and that they enjoy significant discretion when it comes to how they use this system. While moderation and official information about reputation endorses a specific ideal of how and why a user should give rep, there is little restriction or systematic monitoring in place to constrain the

¹⁴ <https://slashdot.org/>

¹⁵ www.amazon.co.uk

¹⁶ www.stackexchange.com

preferences of users in terms of how they rep and why. This is a contrast to many other systems where reputation is solicited in very targeted and predefined ways. For instance, Amazon invites both product and seller reviews from customers, but has filters in place to demand that the reviewer first respond to a likert scale measure of different features of a seller's performance before being allowed to post a review (e.g. how fast was the delivery, was the item as described, etc.). TSR therefore affords its members a relative degree of freedom when it comes to appropriating reputation for their own needs, and cultivating a culture around it. An interesting counter-example is the 'Like' feature of Facebook. For years Facebook has allowed users to 'like' content posted by others, through use of a thumbs up icon. In 2016, Facebook introduced a range of different 'reactions' to select in addition to the 'like' (Stinson, 2016). Users can now select one from a range of reactions such as love, sadness, anger and shock. What is interesting about the Facebook case is the fact that, for many years, users have explicitly expressed a desire for more sophistication and accuracy in the rating opportunity allowed them. However, since the introduction of the reactions feature, concerns have been expressed with respect to the privacy implications, given the increase in highly specific data this system will generate for Facebook, and the growth of techniques such as sentiment analysis (Williams, 2016). While 'likes' on Facebook are entirely user generated, as TSR's reputation system is, the label and description of 'likes' elicited a specific kind of response to content, and carried with it constraints in the possible meaning and interpretations users could associate with the giving or receiving of 'likes'. While TSR's reputation system has faced a lot of criticism from users, and many reforms, it has tended to impose less predefinition in terms of the function and associations it favours. This makes TSR's reputation system unusual and, by virtue of this, an especially good example to explore. Of particular interest is the pronounced extent to which the intentions, wishes and interpretations of users towards reputation find expression in this system.

Conclusion

This chapter has charted the transformation of TSR from a small hub for a young academic elite, to a terrifically successful commercial enterprise, which enjoys success because of its ability to coordinate the interests of several significant stakeholders, including educators, institutions and advertisers, in addition to students.

Within TSR itself, a cultural core has sustained and reproduced itself in spite of the rapid expansion and transformation of interface, size, structure and administration. The community continues to deploy a distinction between legitimate content and activity that is academic in nature, and 'useless' content which functions purely for the purpose of entertainment or social interaction. In this respect, their identity and values diverge from those of The Student Room Group, who view non-academic activity as a marketable strength. In later chapters I will share examples that demonstrate the significance of this distinction for power, and for the attitudes of users surrounding reputation.

Reflecting on the entries in the *History of TSR*, we gain a sense of the significance of reputation over time, by focusing on which features were deemed sufficiently significant to canonise. While the reputation system was not alluded to in the earliest entries to the History, a great store was set by post-count. Some reputation researchers (Lampe, 2011) deem post counts to be a kind of reputation. That is to say, it is an objective metric, collated by an automated site feature, and difficult or impossible to fake by would-be duplicitous users. The competition engaged in by users to inflate their post-counts reveal the desirability and value that this form of reputation held to users at the time. Mr White's attention to the first user to reach 1000 posts additionally suggests that post-count was deemed a status-marker, at least by Mr. White, but most likely also by the audience he held in mind (in other words, the user-base). The concern expressed regarding 'spam' or 'general chit-chat' is an indicator that the value of post-count as a form of reputation was not straightforward. Evidently one could have a high post-count that was comprised mostly of academic or 'serious' posts, but one could equally have one comprised of 'spam' or 'chit-chat'. Mr White's account implied that the first example was more worthy than the second. However, the fact that the 'masses' on TSR in 2003 were enthusiastically competing for high post-counts by spamming suggests that post-count was valuable to users even if the measure was widely understood not to provide reliable evidence of the quality of a user's contributions. This may be because post-count bestowed status on users independently of their reputation, as in their demonstrated 'quality'. However, it may also be because, if post count did not measure post quality, it did measure something else, such as commitment to the site, the degree to which a user is established in the community, and their experience and familiarity with that space. Post count might well have held both of these meanings to users. Whichever the case, this lays groundwork for beginning to question the sociological significance of online reputation.

Later entries to the History affirmed the prominence and salience of reputation, by referring to each of the changes to the reputation system, and through references to the sustained preoccupation of users with this system:

"The other way that good members are acknowledged, the reputation system, has been rather more controversial over the last year. The trouble is that a few users just won't shut up about it, however boring it is" (musicbloke, 2008, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

"No matter what drama the next year brings, your humble chronicler would wager there will always be someone asking 'What are those green gems beside my username?'" (Acala, 2007, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

"Who knows what we'll see in the next year of TSR: Who will be next to get 65535 PM¹⁷s? Who will leave in a strop? Who will moan about rep? Who will complain about the moderation? Will any new members ever be

¹⁷ Users abbreviate 'private message' with the acronym 'PM'.

funny? Will gossamerthreads ever reach the bottom of the devlist?" (musicbloke, 2008, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki)

"Other proposed upgrades include the addition of the much desired multiquote function as well as the ability to "thumb up and down" posts, rather than repping the user" (Jangrafess, 2008, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

"Sometimes there can be seemingly unintelligent discussions on the site, where the person with those grades is never going to achieve their goal, or where so and so is never going to achieve the feat of having a yellow rep gem, or where an H&R poster has only a few teenage spots rather than a nasty case of leprosy, for goodness' sake" (Wildebeest, 2009, *History of TSR*, The Student Room Wiki).

Interestingly in these accounts, contributors go to self-conscious efforts to dismiss reputation as unimportant and trivial, but at the same time acknowledge it as a source of continual preoccupation to the community.

History contributions are uninhibited in their description and analysis of the moderation system and its representatives. In this respect, the History proactively cements the status and importance of moderators, and of other institutional practices such as the TSR Awards. This suggests that active labour is invested in the consecration and reproduction of the status held by moderators, subs and other prominent persons on TSR. Meanwhile, reputation appears to exert influence in spite of its rhetorical dismissal in these accounts. The significance of this will be further discussed.

For now, it is important to remark on the resilience of these social patterns in the face of significant development and evolution in the governance, economic status, structure and size of the site. This points to the serious importance that culture and values have in mediating the use and effects of tools such as reputation systems. This chapter detailed the transformation of the TSR reputation system, and in doing so demonstrated that reputation on TSR in 2016 is not the same as reputation in 2003. Users can no longer leave comments with their rep. They respond to thumbs up icons rather than + and - signs, they earn a reduced range of reputation gems, and they are withheld the ability to deduct from the reputation of others. Finally, users are given insight into the reaction of the community, through being shown the number of reps particular posts receive. Not only has the action of giving and receiving rep significantly changed for users, but the strategic deployment and refinement of this system has evolved in line with the commercial and pastoral concerns of The Student Room Group. In spite of this transformation, the attitudes, actions and affect evinced by users towards reputation has remained remarkably consistent and powerful. This begs two questions: *why* and *how*?

Why are users of TSR so preoccupied with reputation, as suggested by the History?

How is reputation used, understood, experienced and constructed? *How* are these details connected to the needs and goals of TSR users and other stakeholders?

These concerns make up the focus of the remaining chapters.

Chapter 7: “Just A Bit of Fun”: Taking Rep Seriously

About Reputation

Having pieced together the history, development and functional specifics of TSR as a space and community, we can begin to directly explore the observable attitudes, reactions and practices that TSR users display in relation to reputation. In this chapter I focus specifically on discussions that took place in the ‘About The Student Room’ (later News and Announcements) forum, explicitly focusing on reputation. Most of this data is taken from threads that arose in response to announcements from The Student Room Group Ltd regarding changes to the reputation system. The data informing this chapter therefore spans more than a decade.

Given that my concerns are sociological and theoretical rather than pragmatic, I do not dwell on every iteration of the proposed and implemented changes to the TSR reputation system, some of which are quite small (for instance, the difference between a reputation system that requires a 28 day wait before repping the same person twice and one that allows 14 days). Nevertheless, it is worth noting that the fact that the reputation system, and the forum itself, were structurally different at varying points in time, *does* afford this case study a degree of comparative value that usually would not be available in a study focusing on a single site in the way that I do. Despite changes in the function and layout of the TSR reputation system, the experiences and responses displayed in relation to reputation remained remarkably consistent. This suggests that these findings hold relevance for our understanding of the sociological dimensions of other reputation systems.

The chapter progresses through five further sections. In the first, I present examples of the affective responses that users evince in relation to their engagement with reputation, arguing that reputation invites strong emotional responses and attachment in TSR users. In the second section, I explore the conflicted relationship that users have to their investment in reputation. I demonstrate that users are incentivized to hide or to play down their emotional responses, and I suggest that reputation might function as symbolic capital, which relies on misrecognition for its transmission and efficacy. The third section delves into users’ reflections on what reputation reflects about other users and posts. I also explore their beliefs about what reputation should reflect, incentivize and reward. I show that a variety of different attitudes and interpretations are held with respect to both concerns. The fourth section presents experiences, observations and assessments of reputation that deem it

to constitute a form of power. Not only do users relate reputation to degrees of status, distinction and legitimacy, but they also deem it to facilitate domination and coercion. I conclude that my findings demonstrate that reputation warrants significant reconceptualization. I also suggest that Bourdieu's concept of symbolic capital is an especially fruitful means by which to do this.

As was the case in the previous chapter, the data sample presented here benefits from my prior familiarity of TSR, and its history and geography. It is the fact that I knew which changes had occurred, and that I could remember when they happened, and how the community reacted that made it possible for me to locate discussions at particularly pivotal points. The major threads responding to changes or announcements associated with reputation take place at transitional moments for the community. Change is provocative, and imposes both threat and insecurity while affording hope and opportunity. Moments of change drew out from users, heated and affected responses. I believe it also provoked stronger and more conscious reflection on what reputation was, and what it should be.

Were I instead to have conducted a basic content analysis of the reel of threads that pass through the 'About' forum each day, I would have gathered a great number of repetitive threads asking how reputation works, what it is, and voicing basic affective reactions to the system. This would have been far from useless, but these attitudes and many more are expressed or repeated in the threads I chose to focus on in this chapter. For this reason, threads including reactions and reflections during times of change are prioritised in this chapter. Having said this, I have sampled a number of relatively mundane threads, even though most of the examples presented come from transitional threads.

The following table summarises the most significant reputation threads sampled, in terms of transitional historical moments relating to the reputation system. Omitted from this table are threads included in the findings I present, which sample more typical and mundane discussions that reliably and regularly take place on TSR. The title and date of threads absent in this table are displayed alongside any posts I share taken from them. I believe that the titles of omitted threads offer enough context in isolation, whereas the threads included in the table are related to historical and political moments that require further contextualization in order to be interpreted with optimal depth.

Thread Title	Month and Year	Significance
Should the reputation system be scrapped?	October 2004	Included as one of the earliest discussions it was possible to find regarding reputation
Rep gems gone mad	April 2007	Contains reactions of users the week that Pig left TSR, and all of the plugins (including rep) were removed.

Updating the rep system	October 2009	Announcement by Acumen PI's 'J' (and subsequent community discussion) of plans and possibilities for a major overhaul to the reputation system
Why we've switched off neg rep	October 2013	Announcement by 'Captain Jack' (Community Team Manager for The Student Room Group) of decision to disable negative reputation, and reactions from the community
Badges are live... Beta rollout	December 2014	Announcement by 'She-Ra' (TSR Group Community Management team) of introduction of a badges system to run alongside reputation, followed by community discussion

Posts shared will be labeled with the title of the thread in which they were found, followed by their year of origin. I have shortened many of the thread titles for brevity. In addition to the thread of origin, each post is labeled with a pseudonym of its author in order to protect anonymity. For example:

Lion King: "God, 5 pages about rep... If only you muppets used your time for more valuable and productive means..." *New Rep Rules*, 2008

Finally, I include brief markers of the age of authors' accounts and the reputation level they have accrued. Over the years, the range of reputation gems, and the value of the points associated with them have been altered (at least twice). For this reason, it would be useless to represent the specific number of gems each author has amassed. For instance, a post made by a high rep user last active in 2009 would presently display only a small number of gems (e.g. four or five) under the influence of new reputation algorithms. Furthermore, the decay function results in a cumulative depreciative multiplier of reputation points which is triggered by inactivity. To resolve this issue, I refer to a user's reputation as low, medium or high, using my own contextual estimation of the value of an account's reputation points, and my memory of the identities of former moderators, subscribers and other well known figures in the community. Plus and minus symbols indicate whether a user has green (net positive) or red (net negative) reputation. For example, in square brackets:

CBA [Medium+, 2006-2015]: “Was so tempted to neg rep you – however I have already repped today and will forget by tomorrow” *Negged for NO Reason!*, 2008

Inevitably, this choice leaves me vulnerable to error. Nevertheless, I believe that the standing of posters on TSR changes how their posts are understood, and also provides us with important context with which to critique the attitudes and reactions that they display towards the reputation system. I am convinced that forgoing this observational information would hinder the accuracy of my representation more gravely than occasionally flawed estimation of individual users' status would do.

“Cheers to the utter ***** who negged me”: Affective Responses to Reputation

The first resoundingly clear detail from this data is the affect that users exhibit towards reputation. This is first visible in the attention that is given to reputation, and the investment that is revealed in discussions about reputation, and reactions to it:

Millenial [Medium+, 2005-2014]: “As much as it causes arguments, people like it. Religion causes arguments, does that mean it should be gotten rid of?” *New Rep Rules*, 2008

Gentry [Medium+, 2005-2015]: “I would pay a large amount of money to have one of those gems! It looks so out of place. I want it.” *New Disco Gem*, 2007

Minnie [High+, 2008-Present]: “I can remember when the rep system changed there were endless posts with posters moaning about the loss of said flashing gems. Unfortunately I wasn't worthy enough to have them.” *How Many Rep Gems Are You On?* 2013

Caro [Medium+, 2009-Present]: “Not sure overall, but for me, no neg rep has been hugely beneficial. I used to be scared of posting (so I posted less), and when I did post I felt slight anxiety. TSR feels MUCH less intimidating to use now, so I enjoy it more.” *Has Removing Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

The fact that users value acquiring rep, and disprefer receiving neg is clear in their open attention to and discussion of how much reputation they and others in the community possess. This is corroborated by the existence of “rep whoring”; the practice of asking or hinting for reputation points.

Metronome [High+, 2015-Present]: “TSR's funniest user has made it to 12 gems, he now joins an elite crew of top users who have achieved this top achievement and we can only go and congratulate him and may he bring us funny witty posts in the future for us all.” *UWS has made it to 12 Gems*, 2017

Rjorth [High+, 2012-Present]: "Just wow! I never see you post. Do you have a few rep mines?" *How Many Rep Gems Are You On?* 2013

Swansea [Low+, 2006-2007] "i never ever had pos rep, iv had neg rep basically because sum idiot thought i looked like a chav in my profile pic so neg rep me, now im in the red, i wanna be back in green lol. P.S, I aint no Chav" *How Much Does Rep Matter To You?* 2006

Violet [Low+, 2008-2014] "Over 2000 (reputation points) a pop he can give out!" *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Until the negative reputation feature was disabled in 2013, posters frequently included 'disclaimers' in their posts in the hopes of avoiding negative reputation:

Kingfisher [High+, 2008-Present]: "I prefer the new system. I see a lot less "disclaimers" at the end of people's posts/people toning down their opinions to avoid neg. I prefer people to be more open." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Furthermore, they reported altering their posting behaviour out of fear of receiving neg:

Marathon [High+, 2010-2016] "I will be the first to admit I am a vain and self-obsessed individual and I previously used to dumb down or outright hide a lot of my opinions simply to avoid the red-storm that they would undoubtedly generate... Now I find that I can properly present and state all my opinions (highly dislikeable though they are) on all the issues, and don't have to worry about "losing face" unduly or being dismissed before being engaged..." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Rolo [Medium+, 2006-2014]: "Its a bit demoralising to have 5/6 positive reps torn down by one powerful neg repper just because of a difference of opinion in a D&D (Debate and Discussion Section) thread. What is there to debate if everyone agrees on something? Cause of this, I know I'm going to be a lot more reserved with my ideas or opinions in there now. Petty negging is a crappy, yet unavoidable problem. And I know people will say they don't care about how much rep they have, but it will always be nice to just not see red next to your name." *Does Rep Encourage Fakeness?* 2007

They also displayed open anger and frustration in discussions when they received neg, as displayed in these reactions to a specific person who negged:

James Bond [Low+, 2009-2010]: "Negging me for such a pathetic reason backs up the fact that the rep system needs to be overhauled. I really don't give a **** about rep, I just feel annoyed when silly baboons like you think it warrants some sort of respect (lol)" *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Australia [Medium+, 2008-Present]: “You are exactly one of the reasons that the current rep system is flawed. The guy made a perfectly valid point and you negged him for it. Congratulations on proving it for him.”
Updating the Rep System, 2009

And in this post:

Veto [Low+, 2008-2010]: “Anyway, I found out today that someone neg repped me for it saying that it was an annoying bio - WHO DID THIS? WHY? One of the most annoying things on TSR are people who give you a negative reputation without giving you the courtesy of letting you know who they are - bloody COWARDS.” *Negged For No Reason! 2008*

Users also expressed positive emotions in response to receiving positive rep:

Pterodactyl [Medium+, 2004-2014]: “Whenever I get some positive rep, it's a nice feeling because I know I've said something someone's agreed with or whatever... You know if someone does rep you that it's likely they consider it the best/worst thing they've read all day, whereas you can send millions of PMs a day. You would be one of many, rather than that special one. It just wouldn't be the same...” *Should the Rep System Be Scrapped? 2004*

Not only did users express positive and negative emotional responses to receiving pos or neg, they also demonstrated strategic interest in maximizing their reputation points. This was evident in the savvy they displayed with regard to the ‘right’ and ‘wrong’ places to post, and what kind of content to aim for, as illustrated in these posts:

Coal [Low+, 2005-2012]: “...the best places to post are in a D&D argument where you agree with the forum heavyweight who is losing an argument. H & R can sometimes have a high yield. Of course the ultimate best is in Chat. Whenever I go in there I see people who I have never seen in the main forum with insanely large reputations. I would recommend it.”
How Much Does Reputation Matter to You? 2006

Zephyr [Medium+, 2005-Present]: “Parts of the forum are already considered good or bad rep areas. Chat tends to be known for good rep while D&D for negative. Out of personal experience I find H&R to be good rep, which is fine since it's a help forum. The gaming forum seems to be a bad area, especially if you're not a fan boy because then you have two sets of fan boys getting upset.” *Does the Rep System Encourage Fakeness? 2007*

And also in this exchange:

Lord Nelson [Banned, 2007-2008]: “Hi, IM new to this forum, What is a neg rep and how do people give them?” *NEG repping, 2007*

Explosive [Low+, 2005-2009]: "Go on 'Debate and Discussion', disagree with someone and you'll find out." *NEG repping*, 2007

Atomic [Hidden+, 2005-2014]: "Or hang out in the music sub-forum and disagree with an angsty HIM fan" *NEG repping*, 2007

Finally, users evinced moral and ethical stances towards practices surrounding the giving and soliciting of positive and negative reputation:

Gillyweed [Low+, 2007-2008]: "I never neg-rep for an opinion - that's utterly absurd. It's only people who make bold assertions without bothering to back them up, and people who are rude or obnoxious, that I neg." *Does Rep Encourage Fakeness?* 2007

Serendipity [Medium+, 2012-Present]: "Hmmm I think this is probably a good thing. No more drive-by-negging! Hopefully they'll stop to say what bothered them now." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Bloke [Low+, 2003-2009]: "you should rep people for making good posts, not because you are friends with that person and know that if you rep your friend, they will rep you back." *New Rep Rules*, 2008

Many of the specific terms such as 'rep whoring', 'rep circles', 'donning' (in which a group conspires to negatively rep a particular user), 'drive-by neg' (the action of leaving neg without posting in a thread), and 'bandwagon neg/rep' (in which a post accumulates high amounts of rep or neg because viewers are influenced by seeing the amount the post has already accrued) allude to the existence of widespread beliefs about ways in which the reputation system ought not to be used. Some of these are officially institutionalized in the rules (e.g. those prohibiting the coordination of 'rep circles', and the action of 'donning', where individuals collude in order to swap rep, or inflict reputational damage), while others exist as oft-mentioned norms. Whether official or unofficial, though, both strongly suggest that the reputation system is emotionally and morally significant to users. This affective response continues to manifest even in instances where users explicitly and reflexively analyse reputation in terms of its normative and moral dimensions:

Billygoat [High+, 2004-2012]: "****ing hell. Every so often someone or other comes along and starts airing their ridiculous political views towards neg rep when it's an entirely unpolitical matter. Why should everyone have equal rep / equal rep power / comparable rep power / less gems / more gems / whatever the ****? Arguably (though I don't wish to argue so), the best feature of rep is that you can give it out for whatever you want for posts you agree or disagree with. So why all the ridiculous limitations? No, not everyone should have the same rep power. Some people are ***** and don't deserve rep power.

Some people blatantly know the site inside out and should have plenty of rep power.” *Rep Clarification*, 2008

In short, there is no doubt that for users on TSR, across a spectrum of different activity and status levels, reputation is something significant and meaningful, which exerts direct influence on the satisfaction and wellbeing that users are able to leverage from their engagement. This needs to be emphasized, because it is a fact that goes unremarked in existing empirical responses to digital reputation. Closer inspection is warranted, however, in order to progress from recognizing that digital reputation is emotionally significant, to an appreciation of exactly how and why it is, and to what effect.

“At the end of the day, it’s pixels on an Internet forum”: Disclaimers and Disavowals

The transparent investment that users have in reputation is accompanied by widespread defensiveness. This is reliably demonstrated throughout discussions in the form of disclaimers, disavowals, and attacks on users who are too brazen in their emotional responses to reputation. Comments such as these are typical:

Nutella [Low+, 2008-2014]: “Everyone gets negged for saying opinions, it sucks, but get over it! It's only an internet forum.” *Negged for NO reason!* 2008

Skywalker [Low+, 2006-2013]: “The only people who care about rep are idiots who have no lives outside of the internet.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Dust [Low+, 2007-2010]: “It's more people who feel the need to say things like 'you're gettin pos rep for that!'/'negged!' Christ Almighty do you care that much and do you need to tell everyone?” *Negged for NO reason!* 2008

Users go to great lengths to display their detachment from reputation. Examples like the following are not untypical:

Tonic [High+, 2004-2015]: “I quite enjoy getting quality neg rep like this classic:

22-10-2009 00:24 ‘You premissconceptions of the BNP are nausiating. Please leave and Die, I bet your an immigrant too. Erghhh’ -AnthonyH91

Reasons for LULZ TO BE HAD

- a) I'm not an immigrant
- b) His spelling and grammar
- c) What is a “premissconception”? Is it something I had before my supposed misconception moment? Maybe it is a word but I'm not entirely sure, and I doubt he knows either given the rest of his attempt to type.

d) While I don't vote for or support the BNP I did actually put forward a rational defence of their right to campaign and be heard. He was unable to fathom this sort of thinking and therefore thought it was actually a hostile post against his beloved BNP.

e) It was one of those comical 0 power reps. What's the point? At least he signed it. A somewhat redeeming feature of the text. I think I'll go find a post of his and positive rep him... just for the laughs." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Pave [Medium+, 2008-2014]: "i quite like it when people neg rep me when i am right as a matter of FACT - thats always a laugh
*waits for people with a sorely underdeveloped sense of irony to neg rep
*" *Negged for NO reason!*, 2008

These posts show that it is important to both Pave and Tonic to be seen as indifferent to reputation. The most effective way to signal this indifference is through expressing amusement rather than concern or anger in response to instances of receiving neg rep. Other users deployed sarcasm, satire and self-deprecation to mock excessive attachment to reputation:

Kraken [Medium+, 2004-2010]: "Unveiling the new flavour rep gem for those with too much time on their hands (and pig). Something we can all aspire too, I'm sure." *New Disco Gem*, 2007

Kronenberg [Low+, 2008-2010]: "Didn't everyone know? Rep is very important in University Admissions". *Negged for NO reason!*, 2008

Lord Sugar [Medium+, 2015-Present]: "After the kiss the TSR user would think whether it was worthy of rep." *This is What Kissing a TSR User Would Be Like*, 2017

Here Kraken implies that only users with too much time on their hands would strive for high rep, and the implication that those who don't care are invested in more important, respectable and valuable pursuits. Meanwhile Kronenberg and Lord Sugar both use deprecating humour to allude to the extent of TSRers' interest in reputation, by contrasting it to other pursuits conventionally accepted to be desirable and important.

These tendencies were crystallised in discussions following the 2013 decision to disable negative reputation, which was and still is unpopular among many. This decision was presented explicitly as motivated by staff concerns over bullying, a notion that has stimulated strong interest and debate ever since:

Jackal [High+, 2013-Present]: "If people get so offended by a little thumbs down, then frankly I don't think they're fit to use the internet. God forbid they get confronted on Youtube or something." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Julian [Medium-, 2012-2015]: “Intimidated are you serious...!?” *Why We Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Archbishop [High+, 2010-Present]: “Are you serious? People are such pussies these days that red gems can put them off from being sincere? What kind of an idiotic society do we live in?” *Why We Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Basoon [High+, 2004-2015]: “Ok, this is just namby-pamby liberal-lefty "lets all be nice and happy and dance round in a big circle singing anti-war songs" rubbish. If you get upset by neg then you're not mature enough to use the site. If you get neg and you want it back, you post decent material that users like and get it back. If you really have a problem then you start a duplicate account. I don't think that there are children crying into their pillows because big nasty Basoon or whoever else thought that they were trolling.” *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Murdoch [Medium+, 2014-Present] “That's* the politics of the left for you! Killjoys!” *Should Neg Rep Be Reinstated?* 2017
(*The removal of neg rep)

What is made clear in examples like these is that users are strongly incentivized to suppress or disguise their investment in digital reputation. Those who appear to take reputation “too seriously” receive public censure, and when users do directly engage with the meaning and value of reputation, they feel compelled to distance themselves and to signal trivial attachment to it.

Connected to this normative pressure was the emphasis that many users placed on the game-like and playful elements of reputation. These users were keen to distinguish that reputation is a celebrated distinguishing feature of TSR as a site, while also stressing that it wasn't a sufficiently serious matter to warrant reassessment or concern:

Tango [High+, 2013-2016]: “...neg rep was a nice perk of TSR and made it a bit different; it's getting a bit too vanilla now.” *Has The Removal Of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Mask [Medium+, 2004-2013]: “Rep adds color to the forum. It adds interest.” *Should the Reputation System be Scrapped?* 2004

Lenin [Medium+, 2003-Present]: “TSR was known for its coolness and functions and that's what made it different. Now it's a regular vBulletin forum which could be setup in a matter of minutes.” *Rep Gems Gone Mad*, 2007

Kakapo [Hidden+ (formerly among top ranked), 2006-2016]: “It sounds like it's making rep too important a part of the site too. At the moment it's a little quirk that's a bit of fun, which a minority of people take way too

seriously. Adding it in for post reporting, wiki updates, etc, just seems to make it the be all and end all of TSR usage." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

For many TSR users, its reputation system is a central appealing element distinguishing TSR from other forums. Rep is a perk of TSR, and it is also part of its identity (especially as it stood prior to the removal of neg). Taking this into account, it is easy to see how those who criticized the system might be seen as spoilsports. If rep was just a bit of harmless fun, any faults or adverse consequences were not indicators of the nature of rep, but rather of the failure of its critics to adjust and to adopt appropriate dispositions towards it.

Overall, then, while the affective attachment that users have towards reputation is apparent, it is tempered with a collective concern and pressure to evince a measured amount of nonchalance towards it. This balance allows users to engage in open normative consideration of what reputation is, and what it should be, while metaphorically holding it at arm's length.

We need to ask, though, why these distancing measures are necessary to users, and why they are uncomfortable with acknowledging and embracing their attachment to reputation. There are a few interpretations that might explain this culture. The first points to the wider societal stigma that continues to prevail when it comes to interaction on the Internet. Interaction online is frequently derided as ersatz and shallow, and stereotypes are perpetuated which link commitment to online sociality with inadequacy in face-to-face interaction and poor social skill. Users on TSR internalize this perception, and it manifests as insecurity on TSR, and the need to engage in deflection and impression management when discussing reputation. The influence of this particular stigma is also suggested in the opposition between 'useful' academic activity and 'useless' social interaction and 'chit chat' that I shared in the last chapter. The fact that activity that is directed solely at interaction and entertainment is deemed to be inferior to activity focused on information sharing and education suggests that users need a respectable 'alibi' in order to openly invest time on TSR without losing face.

A second consideration is that users might be anxious to conceal vulnerability. This is especially likely given the unusual transparency and visibility that accompanies digital reputation. While in conventional, face to face environments, we also possess symbolic markers that inform strangers of the likely social standing of an individual, boosts to a person's status, and attacks on their character are rarely direct and widely broadcasted. If the competition for status is typically conducted less directly and more subtly elsewhere, it is understandable that TSR users would experience discomfort at the transparency of this process as it is mediated by the reputation system.

Not only is it possible that users may feel personally vulnerable about this transparency, but the worth and function of reputation may also rely on invisibility in order to be effective. This would compel its stakeholders to engage

in efforts to disguise and protect it. This mechanism is elucidated clearly in Bourdieu's account of symbolic capital, which relies on misrecognition for efficacy. Using the reproduction of cultural capital and the status quo in education as an example, Bourdieu argues that:

“every reproduction strategy is at the same time a legitimacy strategy aimed at consecrating both an exclusive appropriation and its reproduction” (Bourdieu, 1986, p. 20).

He believes this to be true because:

“when the subversive critique which aims to weaken the dominant class through the principle of its perpetuation by bringing to light the arbitrariness of the entitlements transmitted and of their transmission... is incorporated in institutionalized mechanisms aimed at controlling the official, direct transfer of power and privileges, the holders of capital have an ever greater interest in resorting to reproductive strategies capable of ensuring better disguised transmission... Thus the more the official transmission of capital is prevented or hindered, the more the effects of the clandestine circulation of capital... become determinant in the reproduction of the social structure” (*ibid*, 1986, p. 20).

In other words, Bourdieu believes that types of power exist which may be subverted or undermined if they are revealed to be held and exercised through arbitrary means of acquisition, as opposed to means publicly seen as legitimate. This vulnerability means that individuals who benefit from any form of power that might be seen as illegitimate or inappropriate if subjected to public scrutiny, are likely to engage in efforts to disguise their power. In the case of reputation on TSR, an effective way to do this is to dismiss the efficacy and influence that reputation might hold, and to present reputation as disconnected from anything of real value. So long as users on TSR believe that reputation is trivial, and that its use and pursuit carry little weight, they can continue to deploy and accrue this form of capital without its legitimacy, credence and influence being weakened.

While we have established that TSRers demonstrate attachment to reputation, we can still go further in piecing together what exactly reputation is perceived to represent. If reputation does act as symbolic capital on TSR, then we can expect to see this reflected in users' assessments of what reputation is and how it functions. These data will therefore allow me to revisit Bourdieu's theory, and reassess its value in accounting for users' practices and experiences surrounding digital reputation.

“I get so much more rep for being funny than nice”: What Rep Is and What it Should Be

When it comes to TSRers' conscious perceptions regarding what reputation is, and what it should be, there exists a degree of consensus, both between the community and administration, but also between these and the reputation

literature. Specifically, it is broadly accepted that the purpose of reputation is to act as a quality indicator of content and or of the users who post this content.

Nevertheless, this shared expectation is complicated by a diversity of views, preferences and experiences regarding what reputation actually reflects, how it is used, and how it should be used, among discussions of the reputation system.

The first difference lay in whether users believed that reputation 'worked', that is, whether in its present form, it reliably indicated some kind of merit (or lack thereof) corresponding to the users or posts that accrue it. Some confidently endorsed its reliability:

Campbell [Medium+, 2006-2016]: "Generally speaking, higher-repped users make better quality posts. This isn't invalidated simply because they get rep for non-specific posts. A TSR user is the sum of their posts... so actually rep is quite a good way of judging the quality of the post... I don't think there are many users with high rep who post a complete load of nonsense. I suppose what I'm getting at is that rep is actually quite a good predictor of post quality." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Folder [High+, 2011-2016]: "The rep system, whilst problematic was an automatic indicator of a particular member or post, by which a relatively uninformed member could assess a post quickly without having to read a 30 page thread. For example, if someone were to post asking an information-seeking question - maybe if a particular area was generally safe to live in, or what a particular type of letter from a university means; if the first reply was complete nonsense or misinformation, neg rep was a very quick way of assessing this. Similarly, some members are notorious for posting poor advice (as opposed to unpopular opinions). It will be difficult to moderate this if the advice isn't offensive or blatantly criminal. Previously, a big line of red would be a tell that people have a track record of - essentially - spouting rubbish." *Why We Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Others expressed skepticism or outright disbelief in reputation's correspondence to user or post quality:

Pleb [Low+, 2009-2012]: "The rep system should be abolished altogether. It's stupid to count on human beings to use it responsibly. I've seen a countless idiotic and retarded posts from people with many green gems, and vice versa." *Updating The Rep System*, 2009

Peanuts [Medium+, 2007-Present]: "In principle the idea of neg rep is fine but I don't think it ever worked properly in practice. It was meant to be there to stop trolls and to show posters who make either factually incorrect posts or purposely rude or offensive posts for the sake of being rude/offensive. However, trolls don't care about getting neg rep. So that purpose is void. And personally, having seen TSR before post rep, during

and since the changes, I have not noticed any change in the number of troll posts. There always have been and always will be troll posts. And someone's post having a negative reputation, or indeed the poster having an overall negative reputation, is no indication of any of the above (troll, incorrect or purposely rude). I found neg rep was more often used for simple disagreement with the opinion of the poster. For example, anyone who posted anything positive about the Twilight books or films was immediately massively neg repped. How is that a useful system?! ...Due to the kind of rep described above neg rep couldn't be used as an indicator anyway, as you never know if the person is just a fan of Twilight, or posted an innocent thread asking about the rep system, and just got a neg storm. You have to take the post on face value anyway, so the neg rep contributed nothing." *Has The Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

While many were positioned between these stances, believing that reputation did point to something about content and posters, but not necessarily to properties that it purported to measure. For instance, several users opined that reputation tracks activity and popularity:

Conifer [Low+, 2009-2011]: "But it is broken. Having a huge amount of rep doesn't mean that your posts are "valuable". It just means that you have been on this website for a long time." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Stealth [High+, 2011-Present]: "I do miss the old rep system somewhat, but lets be honest, it was fundamentally flawed, far too many people used neg as an "I disagree with you" or a "I don't particularly like you" button rather than it being useful to help identify useful/good posts." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Kakapo [Hidden+, 2006-2016]: "If anyone is bothered to spend as much time addicted to TSR as I have been, they're going to get gems... Saying that newbies find it harder to get gems is only dependent on their activeness basically." *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Clutter [High+, 2010-Present]: "Positive reputation has problems too, such as the potential for group sycophancy that leads to some members receiving huge amounts of positive reputation, leading to the potential delusion that these members are repositories of sagacity, rather than simply good at courting popularity." *Has The Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Users also asserted that trolling and humorous posts often attracted more rep than helpful, informative posts:

Pistachio [Low+, 2012-Present]: "Helping people with maths isn't the most effective way of getting points. Making sarcastic and witty comments seems to be much more rewarding in terms of gems." *How Many Rep Gems Are You On?* 2013

Tube [High+, 2006-2016]: “I don't think that being super-nice grants rep. I posted a sarcastic reply slating some fool in GD and got two lots of pos rep for it!” *Does The Rep System Encourage Fakeness?* 2007

Subwoofer [High+, 2007-2016]: “People will rep the posts they want to rep. This tends to be the silly, funny posts rather than the actually helpful ones. Changing the system won't rectify this. You can't 'systemise' against human nature. I got a lot more rep (and a lot more warnings) back in the day when I was spamming H&R (Health and Relationships section) for cheap laughs; now that my posting is restricted to 'helpful' posts, either in the English subforums or PS help, I rarely get rep.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Therefore, not only do we see significant differences in perception over whether reputation functions as a reliable indicator on TSR, but we also see that – when it does indicate something - it can signal a diverse range of different attributes and qualities in addition to those that it is designed to reflect.

This gives rise to yet another varying element, in that users differed in the qualities they perceived as deserving of reputation, and in the behaviour that they wished to see incentivized. While some users endorse relatively strict criteria for what reputation should reward and measure, others are more pluralistic and flexible in the criteria they accept. Users of the stricter category feel that reputation should reflect post quality and/or user reliability. They tend to understand this ‘quality’ in terms of how helpful a user is, and the extent and accuracy of information they are able to provide:

Franklin [Low+, 2006-2008]: “Frankly, by allowing users to rep for anything, you're completely taking away the meaning of rep, and that's when the whole thing becomes a farce, and that's why I suggested that if TSR really wanted to, they could choose to create a rep system either in place of, or along side, the current system, which rewards members for being helpful and informative.” *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Melodean [Medium+, 2006-Present]: “Personally I think that it would be a lot better were there a less popularity-based way of measuring how valuable to the site a user is.” *New Rep Rules*, 2008

Pikachu [High+, 2003-Present]: “...in the A level forum every summer/autumn there are a ton of threads from GCSE students asking for advice on which A levels to choose. In the main the people answering these threads are A level students - often offering insight on what they *think* admissions staff for various subjects prefer. The quality of this advice varies massively and there is a lot of classic TSR subject snobbery repeated without any evidence. Students following this advice aren't likely to realise the quality of the advice until 18 months later when they apply/get offers/rejections. There's a good chance they'll rep whoever

gave them the advice at the time though. And that that person will get a badge of some sort lending credibility to their answers in future." *Badges are Live – Beta Rollout*, 2014

Drone [High+, 2004-2016]: "...it's not the time period that matters, it's rep being about popularity or just repping in order to get repped back that's the problem. The rules are just designed to make rep closer to how it was intended - a way for rewarding good posts, so the higher the rep someone has, generally the more their responses have been considered helpful and can be trusted." *New Rep Rules*, 2008

Meanwhile users with more relaxed attitudes about reputation believe that attributes such as sarcasm, humour and even skillful trolling could be eligible for reward because of the enjoyment they provide. Alternatively, they viewed a variety of different uses and meanings as inevitable and unavoidable:

Basoon [High+, 2004-2015]: "I don't see why it should just be based on being helpful anyway. I mean most of the people who are "helpful" all the time are utter retards who don't deserve decent rep." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Billygoat [High+, 2004-2012]: "Given that we're allowed to rep for anything, it makes sense that the things that make people enjoy others' posts the most (i.e. spam, chat, jokey crap) will get the most rep. If people want no spammy rep, they should turn off rep in chat and make the rules stricter about what rep can be given out for, not suddenly restrict us to one repworthy post per month." *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Millennial [Medium+, 2005-2014]: "(It's) not so dissimilar to real life. The popular guy who makes people laugh down the pub, will be seen to have a higher reputation than the helpful geek who helps people with their computer problems." *Rep Clarification*, 2008

We know, then, that users interpret reputation in different ways. They also differ in their normative expectations of the system.

These details are vitally important for understanding the representative component of reputation. There was, however, another important dimension to reputation that became evident in the experiences and sentiments shared in relation to reputation. This consisted in reputation's function as a form of power.

"Bang! And the Gem is Gone": Status, Dominance and Influence

Users directly described reputation in terms of power on several occasions:

Quartz [Low+, 2005-2013]: "The only reason people get obsessed with rep is because they like the power they appear to have." *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Assam [Low+, 2007-2013]: "I think it's unfair that someone can accumulate lots of small pos reps and it can so easily be ruined by one person with lots of power." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Fractal [Medium+, 2005-2015]: "In all honesty it's like a big power, I like people finding me links and stuff in the hope that I'll rep them, and I like being able to catapult a new member on 6 gems. Oddly enough I haven't seen a single page 1¹⁸ member wanting to change it yet..." *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Basoon [High+, 2004-2015]: "The reason why rep superpowers are bad is not because they can give people rep, but rather because a single person can make another member look reputable (or disreputable) to other members." *Rep Clarification*, 2008

These reflexive perceptions of reputation as power were given weight by observations and experiences that highlighted the influence that users' reputation held on how their posts and behaviour were perceived by the community:

Marathon [High+, 2010-2016]: "The problem with those who were deep in Red was that they were judged instantly by those gems, even when they made statements or arguments that were cogent, rational and debatable they were pounced upon in ways that those in the Green who made the same statements would never have been... you saw someone in the Red and you judged them out of hand, and geared yourself into "Battle the idiot" mode before you had even read the first line of whatever it was they were saying." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Bacchus [Medium+, 2006-2014]: "Let's be honest - however good intentioned your remarks, it's unlikely you'll be taken seriously with two red gems next to your name." *New Rep Rules*, 2008

This influence was also visible in the self-regulation that users perceived the reputation system to motivate:

Lucy [Low+, 2006-2014]: "okay let's assume it does make people "nicer", so? It avoids conflict doesn't it? Certainly would make the mod's job easier... And let's assume people don't speak their minds... I mean if they did, most of it won't be understood because it will be taken off by the swear filter... or will end up giving you warning points for being "harsh", so no point of "stating your opinion" unless you will do it in a reasonable manner, which will end up getting you rep... hence the system works really" *Does the Rep System Encourage Fakeness?* 2007

¹⁸ Page one of the TSR Member list, ordered by reputation points.

That reputation confers power was also indirectly apparent in instances where users emphasized themes of inequality and division when reflecting on the reputation system:

Zephyr [Medium+, 2005-Present]: “I think it creates a form of elitism. The more gems you get, the more open you can be with your opinions. I'm sure some would say they wouldn't fear negging someone with half a dozen gems more than them, but the reality is most won't even if they feel the post is deserving.” *Does Rep Encourage Fakeness?* 2007

Pleb [Low+, 2009-2012]: “I also dislike the idea of higher rep leading to greater privileges on the site. I don't understand the benefit of this and I thought the whole point was to make everyone more equal.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Hadron [High+, 2007-2014]: “Surely those people who have more rep should have a greater affect than those with less rep. Much like the rich people in the world have more power than the poor people. Either way, it's the frigging internet, who cares!” *Everyone's Rep Power Should Be the Same*, 2008

Wraith [Hidden+, 2015-Present]: “Personally my experience of negative reputation on forums is that all it serves to do is generate conflict and adversity. I've witnessed an entire community falter due to poor use of the system.” *Should Neg Rep Be Reinstated?* 2016

It is unambiguous, therefore, not only that users see reputation as affording power, but also that they discern sizeable differences in the distribution of this power on TSR, and that this difference generates tension. In articulating the specific privileges that this power afforded, users explicitly recognized reputation as pertaining to status and prestige:

Werewolf [Medium+, 2004-2016]: “Rep is also a measure of respect. A user who doesn't know the person who made a particular post could see their rep, and if it's high, then they will know that the poster is respected for their opinions etc.” *Should the Rep System Be Scrapped?* 2004

Delirium [Hidden+, 2007-2016]: “People generally like to separate themselves in life from the rest of the crowd and rep provides that tool. You will never be one of the TSR minions if you have a goldy or shiny (reputation gem), which is why rep is one of the most debated topics and people get very heated about a negging they got or whatever.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Ninevah [Hidden+ (previously a top ranked user), 2004-Present]: “Look at the number of people with 2, 3 and 4 golds, indeed some of these not having been around for that long: there was a stage when it was just one or two people who had golds at all. Now that was impressive. Now it's got

to the stage where so many people have them they're not as impressive, do you see what I'm trying to say?" *Rep Clarification*, 2008

Pebble [Medium+, 2009-2016]: "your abundance of green gems seems to have bloated your ego quite a bit." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR*, 2013

Clear in these posts is not only the fact that high reputation conferred respect on its bearers, but also that it was intrinsically desirable and noteworthy for its ability to set users apart. In other words, reputation holds value as a means of distinction. However, reputation was also seen as a form of power because of its facilitation of dominance and force:

Vinyl [Medium+, 2003-2014]: "Members with a large rep count use their rep to influence the forum and use it to threaten members, by threatening neg rep." *Should the Rep System be Scrapped?* 2004

Pebble [Medium+, 2009-2016]: "Sometimes, users don't know what is best for them. In this case, most users are probably butthurt by the fact that they have less power to negate others in an 'official' way." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

James Bond [Low+, 2009-2010]: "It is ironic that all the highly repped people are against it because then their rep power wouldn't be so dominant... And then you have people like you who go around negging people for posting their opinions, assuming some kind of power of authority that you don't really have. This is why the rep system is flawed my friends." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

This dimension to reputation was also tangible in users' reflections on what it was they missed about negative reputation:

Scientist [Medium+, 2009-2016]: "But *now* how will I vent my murderous rage?!" *Why We've Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Hailstorm [High+, 2005-Present]: "I miss being able to give someone a whole gem on my own from one rep." *Badges are Live... Beta Rollout*, 2014

Odysseus [High+, 2009-Present]: "we need a simple way of expressing our pleasure/displeasure towards comments and the pos/neg rep worked great in my opinion." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

Marmalade [High+, 2010-Present]: "Personally I liked it when I negged people as they usually took a hit and they start crying. Now we have to be all serious and ****, then say 'I disagree' when somebody posts absolute bull**** that shouldn't even warrant a response." *Why We've Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Seltzer [High+, 2012-Present]: "...there was something deeply satisfying about hitting the neg button for a post you found ridiculous or offensive." *Has the Removal of Neg Improved TSR?* 2013

It was also telling when users responded to the introduction of a badge system with calls for a badge to mark out disreputable users:

Noah [High+, 2013-Present]: "Can we have a badge of shame for certain posters on chat who repeatedly post spam or nonsense, or give out bad advice?" *Badges are Live... Beta Rollout*, 2014

Waterfowl [High+, 2011-Present]: "Concerning trolls, maybe a Dumb rating should be introduced? On the one hand, it does deter people from behaving stupidly but on the other hand, it can be harsher than neg rep." *Badges are Live... Beta Rollout*, 2014

What is interesting in these examples, is the sense that there is more going on in users' engagement with the reputation system, than a concern for user and post reliability. The possession of high reputation instead holds intrinsic value to users, partly because of the prestige it affords, but also because of the direct power and influence that accompany it. Users with high reputation are able to speak their minds more freely, and they are also able to build up, and, in the past, to diminish the standing and power of other users at their own discretion. The influence that reputation affords, provides evident catharsis, as users are able to bring about a visible, tangible and material difference to their environment by negging or repping other users in reaction to their behaviour.

This catharsis is not exclusively about self-expression, though, but also a moral affair. Users express strongly moral sentiments about the behaviour and words of other users. The reputation system allows users to act on these concerns, by exacting retribution on wrongdoers, and by rewarding deserving users, by their own preferred measure. This is reflected in the following post, which expresses concern at the inability of users with lower rep to punish higher rep users who warrant sanction:

Mayhem [High+, 2008-2015]: "One other thing you've got to somehow get rid of is revenge repping. If someone should be rightly negged, they should be rightly negged, regardless of whether they are a sub with over 100k rep points or a noob with 100 rep points just starting out. People shouldn't feel afraid of negging users with high rep just because they will have to suffer 10 times worse." *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

It is also reflected in the satisfaction this user expresses, in seeing behaviour she disapproves of punished:

Pandora [High+, 2013-Present]: "Am I the only one who rather liked the rep system as it was? There was something reassuring about seeing rows

of red gems on the headboards of annoying people.” *Why We’ve Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Finally, though TSRers did not explicitly link it to power, reputation was also identified as reflecting and bestowing recognition:

Tassel [Low+, 2009-2010]: “If people insist on being recognised for their posts then maybe have awards that are displayed in their post-bit/profile when they achieve so many +vely rated posts..” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Lucius [Low+, 2007-2009]: “It's meant to recognise users who have a positive impact on the community, unfortunately people take it too seriously.” *Negged for NO reason!* 2008

Oscar [Medium+, 2008-Present]: “The truth is that a minority of forum addicts who this isn't aimed at anyway, people with self-esteem issues, will aim to get all the badges by postwhoring and spamming the forum until they reach the numbers required. Then they can go 'yay my life isn't a complete failure', then chase some more Achievements on their video games, craving more recognition and pats on the back that don't exist.” *Badges are Live... Beta Rollout*, 2014

Deadline [Medium+, 2014-2016]: “I understand the whole 'rep' idea, in which people can receive recognition-I like that. However, the idea of 'badges' is odd. It's not a gaming website, its not call of duty where I want to rank up.” *Badges are Live... Beta Rollout*, 2014

Looks like symbolic capital, smells like symbolic capital...

With this context to hand, we can reconsider whether or not reputation on TSR conforms to the patterns and mechanisms that Bourdieu ascribed to symbolic capital. Earlier attention was drawn to the labour invested in disguising the significance of reputation; which is a practice consistent with the mechanisms that tend to motor symbolic forms of capital according to Bourdieu. It is now additionally clear that reputation does afford users concrete advantages. Not only does reputation directly impact users emotionally, by conveying social approval and disapproval, but it also acts to signal and confer status and distinction. It affords users direct power, in enabling them to exert material changes on their environment, including the means to influence the behaviour, and social fortune of others. Reputation also allows users to enforce moral standards, through the ability to reward and to punish. Reputation affords users protection, intimidating would be assailants, and lending an appearance of legitimacy and social approval to the posts of those who hold high reputation. These features might reasonably motivate the cultivation and maintenance of misrecognition by those who are invested in the reputation system, which provides further reason for believing that reputation is a symbolic capital.

The observation of users with lower quantities of reputation lends weight to this hypothesis. In threads proposing significant reform to the system, some expressed the view that it was primarily users with higher reputation that were most averse to changes:

Ceci [Low+, 2009-2010]: “love how all the people with masses of pos rep are against.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Conifer [Low+, 2009-2010]: “Interesting how people with high reputation are against changes. Scared of losing your shiny gems?” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Rifle [Low+, 2009-2010]: “High reppers are butthurt.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Also of interest was the observation by some users that the inequality and differentiation inherent in the reputation system were features that users actively preferred:

Marmalade [High+, 2010-Present]: “It’s a balance. What’s the point if you can only get highs (like green gems) for what you do? It’s just boring... like when I win loads of matches in FIFA.” *Why We Switched Off Neg*, 2013

Campbell [Medium+, 2006-2016]: In response to “*Members with lots of rep have an unfair authority over other members to whom they can award or take away massive rep value.*” “I agree with this to some extent, but I think it's also a massive part of the attraction of the reputation system, and I think it would significantly impact usage if it was removed.” *Updating the Rep System*, 2009

Fractal [Medium+, 2005-2015]: “Surely the point of rep is that some members are superpowers while others aren't?” *Rep Clarification*, 2008

This attitude is consistent with reputation’s quality as a form of capital. Capitals, as understood by Bourdieu, are positional goods. For a particular resource or attribute to act as power, it needs to be prized by actors in the field as especially valuable and desirable. Logically, this entails a degree of scarcity. It is true by definition that if all users held ‘high’ reputation, their reputation level would no longer be high. It is only to be expected, then, that those who stand to gain from the reputation system would hold a preference for the existence of disparities in the distribution of reputation points. If this disparity were to be eliminated, so too would the advantage and value of reputation.

In summary, this chapter demonstrates several important dimensions to digital reputation. Firstly, we see that users are emotionally affected, both positively and negatively, by their experiences of reputation. In relation to this, we see that they invest time and attention into the pursuit of reputation, and the reputational standing of others in the community. This is worth noting because

the experiential dimension of reputation is overlooked in the literature on reputation, as demonstrated in Chapter 2. While existing research considers strategic motivations for users to cultivate good digital reputation, it neglects to take into account the emotional motivations that users are likely to experience. This also has important consequences for digital inequality, suggesting that the satisfaction and wellbeing that users can enjoy in their online activity will be affected by any reputation systems they are involved in.

The interpretation and meaning of TSR reputation also offers a useful challenge to existing literature on reputation. In this chapter we see that while users broadly confirm that factors like trust and decision support are functions that are desired and expected from the reputation system, they can't be seen to describe the totality of reputation's meaning and role. On TSR, reputation is understood to signal a range of possible truths about a poster and the content they share, such as popularity, activity, humour or deviance, in addition to the intended qualities of helpfulness and reliability.

We also see that users ask more of the reputation system than quality control. Instead, they imbue it with moral significance in addition to the descriptive. The giving and receiving of reputation is understood in terms of just desert. Reputation can be a reward, and an affirmation of a user's worth. Prior to 2013, neg was used for punishment and retribution. As a result of this component, TSR users hold a variety of norms and expectations with respect to how and when others rep or neg, that go beyond the question of whether a post is correct and trustworthy. On a simple level, this suggests that researchers of reputation might need to engage in more exploratory social research in order to ensure that their interpretation of what a reputation system means and what it is being used for lines up with the reality as experienced by site users. While the clicking of a button may appear deceptively binary, there is potential for this action to become appropriated for a variety of meanings and purposes.

Finally, this chapter demonstrated that digital reputation is imbricated in relations of power on TSR. Its possession confers on users status and legitimacy and distinction. In addition to intrinsic affective advantages these bring, such as self-esteem, these also amplify the voices of some TSR users over those of others. TSR users with high reputation have greater freedom of self-expression, and face less opposition to their claims than do their less highly ranked peers. Those with higher rep enjoyed a degree of immunity from neg prior to 2013. Both before the removal of neg and after, rep heavyweights are kingmakers on TSR, in that they possess the direct ability to elevate the social standing of other users at will. The higher the reputation a user possesses, the greater their power will be to materially alter their environment. This is deeply important because it suggests that reputation cannot be fully understood in isolation from the local struggles and power relations in which it is appropriated and deployed. This also makes explicit the fact that digital reputation is a matter of concern for researchers of digital inequality. So long as digital reputation is yielding unequal experiences and opportunities to different users, it must be a matter of concern for anyone interested in digital inclusion.

Of course, it must be acknowledged that the TSR reputation is distinct in important ways. Reputation is bestowed via the discretion of users, rather than via moderators or automation. The reputation given and received is not uniform in weight, but instead varies in power and influence in correspondence to the reputation level attained by the donor. Finally, TSR users enjoy a good deal of discretion in how they may use the reputation system. Although settings are in place to prevent repeatedly repping the same person, and to restrict how frequently rep may be given, users have near complete control. They aren't restricted by, for instance, guiding prompts or questions soliciting feedback on a particular dimension. This means that there is more fluidity and scope encompassed within the TSR reputation system than may be found in reputation systems elsewhere. It is almost certain that this flexibility binds it more strongly to locally generated culture and values. On the other hand, it isn't unique in this regard. Which means that these findings do raise valuable questions for the direction of reputation research at large.

While this chapter included some provisional examples of how Bourdieu's theory might offer explanatory insight, for the most part, the findings addressed here consist of insights that are amenable to any researcher who should choose to employ exploratory and qualitative strategies for the purpose of understanding digital reputation. Instead it is in the following chapter that I present findings that directly relate to the Bourdieuan heuristics underlying my research.

8: The Social Space of TSR

Bourdieu mentions both social and symbolic space (2001). The former constitutes the material and objective structures in which the realities of individuals' social positions are experienced and lived out. Symbolic space, however, consists in the ideological space in which representations and beliefs are defined and fought over. In *The State Nobility*, Bourdieu outlines a field of power in which many of these symbolic struggles take place. He illustrates how many more local and specific power struggles often have a double quality, at once exerting effect in the specific fields in which agents are pursuing capitals, but at the same time in the symbolic space, where what is at stake is which of those capitals are valued, and in what priority:

“The different forms of capital are specific forms of power that are active in one or another of the fields (of forces and struggles) born of the process of differentiation and autonomization. Within these different gaming spaces, there arise characteristic forms of capital that function both as trumps and stakes. These different forms of capital are themselves stakes in the struggles of whose objective is no longer the accumulation of or even the monopoly on a particular form of capital (or power), economic, religious, artistic, etc., as it is in the struggles that play out within each field, but rather the determination of the relative value and magnitude of

the different forms of power that can be wielded in the different fields or, if you will, power over the different forms of power or the capital granting power over capital” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 265).

This insight into the topography of power is very useful for understanding symbolic capital as it is used on TSR, for it clearly illustrates how seemingly trivial pursuits surrounding mere “pixels on the Internet” can be interrelated with overarching struggles and outcomes. In a different work, Bourdieu describes this slightly differently:

“We also have trump cards, that is, master cards whose force varies depending on the game: just as the relative value of cards changes with each game, the hierarchy of the different species of capital (economic, social, cultural, symbolic) varies across the various fields. In other words, there are cards that are valid, efficacious in all fields – these are the fundamental species of capital – but their relative value as trump cards is determined by each field and even by the successive states of the same field” (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 98).

This chapter presents observational and interview data that do not explicitly address digital reputation, as the data in Chapter 7 did. Instead, this component of my research was focused on understanding the schemes of classifications upon which TSR, and its distinct sections were shaped. These classifications are important because they define and govern how TSR users are able to use their ‘cards’. Bourdieu describes classificatory schemes as a “strange cognitive machine” (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 36), discussing how ‘principles of vision and division’ shape what actions, choices and attributes are deemed valuable, and thus rewarded with capital, and which are not:

“we must accept, without the least contradiction, both that practices always include acts of reality construction that engage complex cognitive structures, and that this cognitive activity bears no relation to a self-conscious intellectual operation. Practical knowledge implements generative schemata that organize perception and structure practice through reference to practical functions” (*ibid*, 1998, p. 53).

I incorporate this theoretical principle into my research design, by actively pinning down some of the distinctions that shape TSR users’ evaluative attitudes and practices, across the site, but also in local forums. We saw in Chapter 7 that users discerned significant differences in how reputation was used in different sections of the site. I also knew from experience that different sections of TSR had distinct norms and flavours to them. As I could not study each section on TSR in depth, I focused on four of the most popular sections of TSR, basing my choice on those that would contrast each other the most, and on my own eligibility to participate in them. These were: Religion, Fitness, Chat and Universities.

Some summaries in this chapter dwell more heavily on interview data, while some emphasise posts and threads logged during participatory observation.

Although interviews and observations were conducted at the same level of depth for each section, I focus here on items that most effectively resolve my research questions. My technique throughout was to identify what motivated users to engage in the forum, and to narrow down particular skills, behaviours and characteristics that afforded users status, respect and influence.

After summarizing my findings from each section, I conclude with an explanation of how the classificatory logic in each section of the site differentiates them from the site at large, but also ways in which this logic was consistent across sections. I then conclude by illustrating the repercussions that this has for how reputation is used, and the meaning that it corresponds to.

Fitness: “Forget that pear, apple, hourglass nonsense!”

The TSR Fitness forum is defined by common pursuit for physical capital. As this is a strongly visceral form of capital, users have to engage in explicit performance in order to signal their mastery. This they do through sharing body shots and videos of their exercises in the gym. They also do this through sharing details of their workout routines and metrics such as weight lifted and ‘reps’ (repetitions of a particular exercise). For example, see this typical post in a thread soliciting comparisons:

Querty [Medium+, 2013-2016]:

“What is your:

Plank time: 30 seconds

Maximum non-stop sit ups: 50

Maximum non-stop press ups: 10

Age: 18

Gender: male

Weight: 9 stone 10 pounds (optional)

I am really interested to see what everyone can do. I am at a good healthy weight and do regular exercise but I can't do much press ups, sit ups and my plank time is awful.” *Sit ups, Press ups and Plank Stats*, 2013

A number of users also run Fitness blogs, which are dedicated threads where an individual logs their goals and posts regularly about their efforts and progress. Some current Fitness blog titles include:

“Tom Gets Big or Dies Trying”

“Scrooge Lifts a Weight Off His Shoulders”

“GumiBear’s Path to a Healthy Wellbeing”

The precise goals and ideals that are embraced in this forum are susceptible to high degrees of social regulation, and they often engender fierce debate. These struggles tend to orbit two central distinctions, namely “bro science” versus real science, and masculinity versus femininity.

Gendered oppositions are evident in what expectations are imposed on Fitness users of each sex, and in the opportunities that are available to them.

For men, physical strength is the main determinant of status and respect in the forum. It is also the goal that is expected of men. This is evident in the negative reactions invited by men who aim for less muscular builds:

Deity [Low+, 2012-2014]: "So you want to get ripped but not stocky? So you want to have skinny abs and definition? Like all the doucheturds around the gym these days?" *Wanna Get Ripped But Not Stocky*, 2013

KungFu [Low+, 2013-2013]: "this guy (that the OP wanted to emulate) is a skinny biatch, you quite sure?" *Wanna Get Ripped But Not Stocky*, 2013

Bench [Low-, 2011-2014]: "Why don't you aim higher? As a former skinny person, I can tell you having a six-pack isn't all that And let's be honest, being ripped is just another word for: Ribs visible, 12 inch arms and visible vertebrae when your top is off Don't be a poor excuse for a human being, reach the absolute best you can become with your body, Socrates said it best: 'No citizen has a right to be an amateur in the matter of physical training... what a disgrace it is for a man to grow old without ever seeing the beauty and strength of which his body is capable.'" *Wanna Get Ripped But Not Stocky*, 2013

Similarly, debates frequently broke out over what kind of build was most attractive to women:

Headgear [High+, 2011-2016]: "stop belittling OP's achievements. If it's not your thing just don't comment. But in all seriousness, do you think WOMEN like her in your sig go for skinny runts or strong muscular guys like OP's after photo. There is nothing normal about being weak and pathetic." *20 Year Old, 4 Years of Lifting Progress*, 2013

Conversely, Fitness users were also highly invested in influencing which goals and ideals were appropriate for women. Male users were highly authoritative in threads started by female posters, in terms of what goals women should embrace, and which methods they should use to reach them:

Silver [High+, 2011-2014]: "In my opinion glute bridges are more effective since squats are an all round lower body exercise and you'll develop muscley quads which isn't very attractive on a girl tbh. Bridges isolate your bum more. And don't change your diet, a phat round ass is much nicer than a "toned" slim one. Just give it some foundation with muscle and it will take shape." *If I Just Do Squats Is That Enough to Tone Bum?* 2013

Deity [Low+, 2012-2014]: "You've read too many womans mags. Your diet needs to be decent at least to see differences over time. Your fat reserves need to be burned off and this requires deficit eating. The squats

you should be doing need to have weight on them." *If I Just Do Squats Is That Enough to Tone Bum?* 2013

Male posters also reacted negatively if women took interest in strength for strength's sake. They felt the need to make sense of the anomaly, for instance by interpreting it as originating in self-defence motives:

Stray [Medium+, 2011-2016]: "Why stronger? Do you mean you want to be able to lift heavier weights? Or do you want to be able to defend yourself?" *I Want To Become Stronger Than the Average Guy*, 2013

Biro [High+, 2009-Present]: "Why? Honestly, I can't figure out a single reason why you would be driven by such a goal." *I Want To Become Stronger Than the Average Guy*, 2013

Finally, in addition to active emphases on what goals and strategies were appropriate for men and women, Fitness users maintained several biases when it came to traits that they associated with different genders, and their relationship to fitness. For example, women were assumed to be focused on weight loss. "Toning" in particular, was often characterized as a feminine concern, and one that was based on ignorance:

KungFu [Low+, 2013]: "No, you don't need to build up your quads etc this is a myth dim P.Ts tell clueless girlies in your local gym. Just eat properly and have a cardio routine i.e. regular jogging, you butt will be nice and toned as will the rest of your body because you will lose overall bodyfat." *If I Just Do Squats Is That Enough to Tone Bum?* 2013

Xerox [Medium+, 2010-2016]: "Why do people still use the term "toning"... There's no such thing as toning! There's only losing fat, building muscle, and body recomposition." *If I Just Do Squats Is That Enough to Tone Bum?* 2013

Daydream [Low+, 2013]: "Strange goal...to say the least. Just work hard and go gym loads. You sure you don't just wanna be more 'toned' as opposed to stronger than most men?" *I Want To Become Stronger Than the Average Guy*, 2013

Whereas for men, weight loss or 'cutting' was dismissed as an 'easy' activity, that held no honour, 'bulking', or strength building, was seen to be the hardest and most important pursuit:

Lebanon [High+, 2011-2016]: "It takes a lot of mental strength and dedication and consistency. It's almost impossible to explain to someone who doesn't lift, but when you're standing under the bar and it feels really heavy, but you've still gotta get another four reps in... That's where it becomes difficult and where the average person can't do it. The average person doesn't possess the mental strength or discipline to go against

their senses like that and finish the set. Most people give up." *20 Year Old, 4 Years of Lifting Progress*, 2013

Headgear [High+, 2011-2016]: "Lol - anyone can bulk up? I can tell you don't even lift." *20 Year Old, 4 Years of Lifting Progress*, 2013

Blind Mouse [Medium+, 2009-Present]: "Depending on the size we are talking about, not everyone can bulk up. Not everyone can become an IFBB pro even if they train all day, eat right and take lots of drugs. Genetics is really, really important. In the same way that some people pick up playing an instrument better (or sing better) than other people. Even with the same training etc. Some people just 'get it' and other just don't." *20 Year Old, 4 Years of Lifting Progress*, 2013

In practice what this meant was that women were largely denied honour in this forum. It is consistent with this tendency that, on occasion explicit sexism broke out:

Bench [Low-, 2011-2014]: "Do squats, but for the love of god don't do them in the squat rack, we don't want to wait 10 minutes for you to squat the bar for 100 sets. Do bodyweight squats first, then work on form and use the more compact weighted barbells, unless you go heavy on squats, you have permission to use the squat rack. Be prepared for guys looking your way though, and don't wear leggings or anything tight, because that suggests you just want guys to look at your ass rather than you to workout." *If I Just Do Squats Is That Enough to Tone Bum?* 2013

While open sexism of this kind was usually suppressed in the forum, more tacit sexism in the form of taken for granted stereotypes went unchallenged. This was clear in threads and posts explicitly targeted at women, and the assumptions that were expressed in these. A clear example was the guide written by one of the most respected (male) regulars of the forum, labeled: "*For the Girls – Toning, Diet and Exercise – A Very Basic Guide, please read!*" Aside from the implicit suggestions in the thread title, that women needed their own guide separate to those available for men, and that this guide needed to be 'very basic', several more patronizing assumptions were reiterated in the guide's content. For example, the opening line:

"Some basic mistakes to your thinking and a guideline to follow."

And comments such as these:

"This is a horrible fail word. What the 'toned' look actually is is a lower bf level coupled with higher levels of muscle mass creating the taught skin appearance."

"...fat is very easy to loose if you listen to several on here and not to womens' mags and stupid fad diets."

“...get these things into your head and you will be on a much better track than ‘Help me, I want to tone my eyelid’ type comments.”

This gender division vied with distinctions in cultural capital in defining the forum’s structure. Advice on nutrition and exercise regimes is sharply monitored, and widespread hostility is leveled at recommendations that are not deemed suitably scientific. This is evident in the common reference to “bro science”; a term used to dismiss truth claims that are perceived as misinformed, or based on urban myth. For example:

Hilton [Medium+, 2010-2016]: “Tbh the main things I would say are: keep it simple (lifting weights doesn't need to be hard at all; way too many people overthink it), and understand what is broscience and what is legit science.” *20 Years Old – 4 Years of Lifting Progress*, 2013

Negative [Medium+, 2013-2014]: “Did you get your Bhd from the University of Broscience?” *What’s the best HITT workout ever?* 2013

Meanwhile, cultural capital was often used to add weight and legitimacy to truth claims, as visible in the following post where Biro explicitly refers to competencies such as “verbal reasoning” and logic in order to undermine the assertions of his opponent:

Biro [High+, 2009-Present]: “You are yet to offer any point to the table other than “I don't believe you” “you are ignorant” “you are arrogant” “I can't argue against this”. There is no verbal reasoning in your post at all. Full disclosure I'm just finishing my third year of medical school. I've trained for about a year and a half. I have no idea why you think I look down on others who train differently to me. I've never mentioned anything about individual training mentalities other than you are point blank wrong if you load a bar on your neck to squat. I have no problem with people who think differently than me as long as they are able to convey it with logical reasoning other than just I don't think they can. Please, next time, take one of my points and refute it. Don't add in asinine unrelated bull**** just because you don't have anything else to add to the discussion.” *If I Just Do Squats is That Enough to Tone Bum?* 2013

Appeals to academic qualifications and scientific research are also common in these disputes, as displayed in the following exchange:

Hydrolysis [Medium+, 2013-2014]: “Where did you hear this? Some quack on Channel 4? You expend less cals at night time SOMETIMES just because you are not doing much as opposed to when you are awake during the day and going out etc. And that assumption would have to be made. With that, my argument which can't even be debated as it is just fact, still stands that at the end of the day, if the person consumes less calories (whether they be consumed day or night it doesn't matter) than they expend (whether they be expended day or night it doesn't matter)

that person would lose weight." *Fasting 8 Hours a Day for Ramadan. How to Lose Weight?* 2013

Anonymous [Hidden+, 2012-2016]: "You haven't proved a single thing nor have you even bothered reading the research journals or the article based on research. You have however decided to be petulant and throw "LOL" and "haha". Thanks for showing me how ignorant you are and proving to be a waste of my time." *Fasting 8 Hours a Day for Ramadan. How to Lose Weight?* 2013

Headgear [High+, 2011-2016]: "Seriously ignore this joker, he has no idea what he is talking about. Apparently we should listen to him though because he can bench 125 and sprint under 12s. He's also a medic supposedly. E-stats, lol..." *Fasting 8 Hours a Day for Ramadan. How to Lose Weight?* 2013

Here Hydrolysis' initial appeal to scientific credibility (implying his rivals are influenced by a 'quack') is undermined by demands that he reveal his sources, and an attack on his honesty.

In short, the Fitness forum is structured around the pursuit of physical capital. However, this pursuit engenders two layers of struggle, as Bourdieu alluded to in the extracts introducing this chapter. Not only do users invest in the cultivation and performance of physical strength, but they also engage in symbolic struggles that are designed to sustain a logic that conserves the power of those already dominant in the forum. This struggle takes the form of ongoing labour to trivialize and diminish the knowledge, accomplishments and values of women (weight loss is 'easy', 'toning' is a 'fail word', etc.), and it also manifests in the regulation of which modes of expertise are deemed legitimate.

I explore the 'logic' of other TSR forums before addressing the significance of this finding for digital reputation.

Religion: "I just wanna correct people and shut them up with their bullshit lies"

As the demographic of TSR users gradually expanded and diversified, the Religion forum has substantially increased in activity, growing to become one of the busiest forums on TSR. Interviewees active in this forum felt that this development reflected wider political and cultural processes, such as the international growth of right wing populism, and angst with respect to cultural shift and the impact of globalization:

Aurelius [High+, 2012-Present]: "The state of debaters and debate on TSR is probably just a reflection of society... It's current. It's a hot topic what with the troubles in Muslim populated countries and with Muslim immigration to the UK..." *Religion Forum Interviews*, 2013

Substantively, the most recurrent discussion themes in Religion are first and foremost challenges to and defences of Islam. Second to this are atheist threads, questioning the bases of religious belief. While adversarial debate constitutes most of the activity in Religion, the forum also shelters a few popular religious society threads, such as I-Soc and X-Soc (the Islam Society and Christian Society). In these threads, strict rules apply, prohibiting debate. Instead these threads are focused on ecumenical interaction, socializing and support.

The ferocity of debates in this forum suggest that users are highly invested in the topics they engage in. Although the forum is a notorious trolling hotbed, logically trolls would not find any reward in the forum were there not users there to wind up. In the eyes of one interviewee, much of the hostility to Islam amounted to:

Alder [High+, 2010-Present]: "...more than just trolling. It is completely intentional, persistent and done with a clear purpose to propagate hate/misconception. These people are more passionate than ordinary trolls, they wholeheartedly set out on their missions and devote much time to them." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

Interviews with other active Religion posters confirmed that the engagement most users displayed was sincere, and they provided useful insight into exactly what led users to invest in these debates, and what they stood to gain by them.

For two interviewees, concern over the misrepresentation of their faith was the driving motivation. For instance, a Catholic regular of the X-Soc said:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: "I... like posting in some threads in the Religion subforum, mainly to correct stupid assumptions about Catholicism that are just blatantly false. This makes me feel like a more virtuous Catholic¹⁹ and I just like to defend my (right to a) belief." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

She went onto explain that:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: "I suppose it's because Catholicism is a huge part of my identity. Like I tend to identify myself more by religion than by gender, nationality, sexuality or race/ethnicity. So when people say awful things about Catholicism, it feels like an attack on me as a person and my identity. Especially because of the way people word things, or the general disdain on the forum for Catholics who continue to identify as such despite the child abuse scandals." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

Her experience was not dissimilar from the motivations driving Alder, who is Muslim:

Alder [High+, 2010-Present]: "I soon became passionate about dispelling distortions, and eventually got addicted to this place - the religion forum

¹⁹ She included an ironic emoticon here.

in particular. I realised that some people have a strange mindset, seeking to go out of their way just to twist things in order to make other beliefs look bad, Examples of these can be seen in various users of the forum. They seem to cherish an experience of superiority over another religious group, presenting themselves as well-learned people on the matter but then falling apart at the fundamental basis of logic. Alas, my purpose was never to show superiority, rather it was to dispel blatant falsehood."
Religion Forum Interviews, 2013

Meanwhile, those users actively engaged in attacking and undermining a particular belief were no less heartfelt, and also perceived their engagement in terms of a moral obligation or cause:

Shaman [Medium+, 2011-Present]: "The reason why I engage in debates/discussions concerning religion online is because I am concerned for peoples well being. Some religious ideologies are very dangerous and need to be confronted and exposed for the good of all of us. I mean, if certain people had their way and became dominant there would be no such thing as TSR." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

An interviewee without allegiance to any particular religion also characterized his goals in terms of outcomes he deemed to be morally important:

Marathon [Medium, 2010-2015]: I think I contribute an ability to look at religions fairly from a wide-range of angles and opinions, with the exception of my negative opinion of Islam I tend to be able to both present and deride views from many faiths and sects and as such balance out discussion." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

What was important in each instance was the belief posters held in the potential wider influence of these interactions. For instance, Shaman was forthcoming with a rewarding example of an instance where he felt that his efforts had influenced another's life for the better:

Shaman [Medium+, 2011-Present]: "For example, I made my argument about what the koran teaches with clear evidence provided, about 1 day later a Muslim made a thread and said they were thinking about leaving Islam for a particular reason, this is the same point a was making the day before" *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

This perception is vitally important to appreciating and understanding the critical significance of users' online engagement. Whether or not religious discussions on TSR effect significant changes beyond the bounds of the forum, it is manifestly clear that users belief that they do, or that they may do. Given that what is at stake in these discussions is the power and influence of norms that users feel passionate about, it has to be accepted that the experiences that they have of these encounters has significant personal affective impact. Eidelweiss

even suggested that debates on TSR could have exaggerated and pronounced affective impact because of specific unique properties to the medium:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: “I think the thing about TSR is the anonymity the Internet provides. It makes people feel they can say things they would never dare say IRL to someone. So people can be incredibly rude and stupid on TSR and being the hypersensitive type, I do take it quite personally. And having it in writing there for everyone to see means you can go back to it and pick it apart and analyse it for hours/days afterwards.” *Religion Forum Interviews*, 2013

These examples suggest that users in Religion are directly motivated by the pursuit of symbolic capital. Not only is it important to many users to secure respect and recognition on a deeply personal level, as articulated by Honneth, but it is also of concomitant importance that these users to exert *influence*. What stands in the way of the acceptance, respect and recognition that they perceive as insufficient is the dominance of contrary influences, such as misconceptions about Islam or Catholicism. For Shaman and Marathon, a similar dynamic applied, only the opposing influences perceived to be dominant were purportedly dangerous religious beliefs, or norms and practices that acted to undermine liberal and rationalist ideals.

As was the case in Fitness, cultural capital was a central strategic tool in struggles within the Religion forum. Also comparable is the fact that the kind of cultural capital circulated in the forum took on a general and a specific form. Specific cultural capital in Religion involves expertise and knowledge on the specifics of Scripture and Holy Texts, and mastery of substantively relevant arguments and theories. For anybody wishing to debate Islam, mastery of Arabic is highly desirable, and dismissal of misinterpretations of Scripture arising from dependence on translation is standard. A typical example is this exchange at the beginning of a thread initiated by a non-Muslim (Aurelius) who decided to read through the Qur’an:

Telly [High+, 2010-2015]: “It's kind of pointless to be honest. Once you've read the Quran, you'll only be told that you haven't read it in Arabic and that to truly understand it you have to have read it in Arabic. This coming from someone who has been told that countless times, and yes, I have read the Quran and much of the Hadith. You'll also be told that you are 'interpreting' verses wrong, and that you need a scholar to tell you what they say. More power to you, it's good that you want to read it, but in the long run it really wont do you much good in terms of legitimacy in the eyes of many Muslims you debate.” *Exploring Islam Part 1: So I am an Islamophobe?* 2013

Alder [High+, 2010-Present]: Scholars study classical Arabic extensively, as well as ahadeeth, fiqh, etc. They also study the contextual revelation. They innately have a better grounding of knowledge than your common Sheikh Google. I used to assume the same - that reading multiple

translations will resolve this issue. In a few cases, it does. But in many, it is still very lacking. Believe me when I say it is not nonsense. Before attempting to learn Arabic, I was bamboozled at Surah al-Adiyat. I wondered why it seemed so confusing and irrelevant and inconsistent. Now that I understand the concept of this surah, I don't hold the same opinion at all." *Exploring Islam Part 1: So I am an Islamophobe?* 2013

Peasant [Low-, 2013-2014]: "That is a problem that people face when they read the Qur'an, especially when they have already formed the type of opinions you have. Even us Muslims require the knowledge of scholars to explain things, it is not like we have great knowledge of the seerah and lots of the hadeeths and lots of the books. I just suggested that you will need help in understanding the Qur'an... There is some saying: Reading a Qur'an without reference and guidance is like reading a physics book without any knowledge of maths. All I am trying to tell you is learn the basics and understand them." *Exploring Islam Part 1: So I am an Islamophobe?* 2013

However, mainstream cultural capital of the kind prevalent across TSR also holds significant, if not superior sway in this forum. Appeals to the ideals of 'reason', 'evidence', 'logic', 'balance' and 'rationality' in debate are ubiquitous. These ideals are also institutionalized in the forum specific posting guidelines, and upheld by its moderators. When asked to identify features and traits that marked Religion users out as deserving of respect, interviewees were unanimous in emphasising virtues such as intelligence, neutrality, knowledge, and reasoning. This was true regardless of the religion or positions that users embraced. For example:

Magna Carta [High+ (top ranked), 2012-Present]: "Oh (I respect) loads, mainly for their coherent arguments, knowledge and their eloquence in getting their ideas across." *Religion Forum Interviews*, 2013

Similarly, even when interviewees disliked other users, or disagreed with their ideology, they still expressed respect for their cultural capital. For example:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: "I try not to talk to him tbh²⁰ coz he seems to be a shit-stirrer like you say, and just a bit of a knob. That said, his points are always made eloquently and there's def food for thought in them." *Religion Forum Interviews*, 2013

Users fared most poorly in terms of their reception in the forum when they were unable to clearly articulate their reasoning, when they evinced excessive emotional attachment to their positions and when they committed known fallacies such as reverting to *ad hominems*. This came through in Aurelius' description of posts that he would deem poor quality in Religion:

Aurelius [High+, 2012-Present]: "They're the typical threads you see newbies making, like giving awful proofs for God, the sky and the phrase

²⁰ TBH: "To be honest".

'look around you' being one of my personal favourites, completely misinterpreting evolution and speaking about it when they don't have a clue what it is, confusing faith with evidence etc etc " *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

Marathon also remarked on the extent to which this mode of cultural capital was expected in the forum:

Marathon [Medium, 2010-2015]: "I find TSR Religion regulars are uptight, overly legalistic and obsessed with dry logic, technicalities and pedantry. I eventually got so annoyed with this (and also realized I was a prime example) that I stressed out and flipped it, and since I did I have been a lot happier...It's contextual if you are debating scripture or theological issues with the context of a faith, obviously knowledge and appeals to legalism and proof is vital. But on other issues such as the reasons for belief or just in general discussion, if you make a mistake or confuse a term or dare to give an answer from "personal experience" you're set upon." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

He also appeared to be frustrated by the dominance of the scientific paradigm over personal forms of knowledge such as intuition or spiritual experience:

Marathon [Medium, 2010-2015]: "The TSR community demands "evidence" if it's not testable, repeatable and logical they dismiss it and any appeal to gnosis or experience is dismissed as one or more of a host of mental or psychological defects." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

His observation was shared by Alder:

Alder [High+, 2010-Present]: "Personal experience certainly is important. But the staunch opposition are very dismissive to such posts. In the world of the TSR religion forum, personal experience, subjectivity and anecdotes are but fluffy waffle (with the exception of Society threads)." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

It also resonated with Eidelweiss' account, as she described the value of Society threads to the forum as havens:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: "In general, I suppose it is to create a safe space in which Christians can post without interference from what I call noobface atheists. It's a safe place where we can post things that seem ridiculous to outsiders, e.g. prayer requests. And I guess it's just nice for people to have that space. Especially on a student forum, where being a practicing Christian is not cool and could be a bit isolating... it's also a place to get support and advice, like if you're trying to find a new church or something like that... I think we're seen as a soft target and a laughing stock I think the general attitude towards religion is very negative because apparently it's all cool to be "logical" and "intelligent" and

"informed" and "questioning" coz apparently if you are a theist, you can't be those things." *Religion Forum Interviews, 2013*

Overall, then, Religion is defined by various oppositions, such as theism versus atheism, and pro versus anti-Islam. But within these affiliations, users are further differentiated by the kind of cultural capital they possess, and its volume. Those with specific religious cultural capital are able to secure respect amongst those who share compatible religiosity. But throughout the forum, academic and scientific cultural capital continues to act as a cross-boundary prerequisite for respect and influence among all users in the forum. Within this environment, society threads act as pockets where individuals are granted reprieve from the struggles defining the wider community. However, this reprieve comes at the cost of holding symbolic power within debates.

Chat: "Make up a TSR troll thread title"

Of all the sections on TSR, Chat can probably boast the strongest degree of independence from the traditional cultural capital that so strongly governs interaction elsewhere on the site. Nonetheless, this autonomy has bounds, which I will demonstrate as this narrative progresses.

Chat's supposed independence is firstly signaled in the absence of any consistent discussion focal points within the forum. Every other forum on TSR has an express substantive focus. These forums attract users who seek either to elicit or to impart information and interaction relevant to that focus. This basic process, in conjunction with the asynchronicity and archival nature of the forum, allow sections to become repositories and incubators of expertise. Without foci of these kinds, Chat is categorically unable to function through the same dynamic. Instead of subjects and themes, focus is trained on personalities. Considerable attention is paid in this forum to those who stand out; trolls, moderators, award winners, and those who accrue the highest reputation points, and celebrated active regulars. For example, see these thread titles which are entirely typical of the Chat forum:

- Favourite trolls on TSR
- Count to a hundred before a mod, supermod or admin posts
- UWS has made it to 12 gems
- Rock Fan is dead
- Happy TSR Anniversary to Soliloquy!

In addition to this personal and specific attention to individuals and roles, the focus includes an ongoing preoccupation with TSR as a community. Users in Chat constantly reflect on the nature, status and quality of TSR, through threads such as these:

- Honest TSR Thread Titles
- TSR's best thread of all time
- Which TSR user was first to rep you?
- The threads in Chat today
- Best usernames on TSR

- Whose the hottest TSRer?

Aside from passing time, this practice acts to bestow value on the community and its better known members. Regulars of Chat strive to receive mentions in threads such as these, which further solidifies the community's value. When asked what made a good thread in Chat, an interviewee specified:

Cocktail [Medium+, 2013-2014]: "If it's a personal thread... if the question is directed at you. By personal, I meant personal to us - the repliers... e.g. threads such as "what's your fav colour/drink etc" are the ones that grab people's attentions! I always tend to comment on other people's personal stories/experiences, and find few return the favour." *Chat Forum Interviews, 2013/14*

Cocktail's experience reflects that Chat members want to be included in the collective discussion. Focusing on TSR tendencies and trends, on known TSR users, and on simple personal questions applicable to everybody, thread creators actively construct and maintain a collective identity. In doing so, local knowledge and expertise becomes valuable. Users can signal their expertise through references to events, persons and moments central to the community and its past in order to signal belonging and to become valuable co-constructors and maintainers of the community. Thus, a thread like "Why is TSR so awful" acts as a platform for users to allude to the "good old days" when such and such renowned user was still around. A thread such as "Which TSRer was the first to rep you" affords opportunities for users to tag their friends and reminisce about past interactions, and in doing so, to idealise them. In other words, regulars in Chat pursue and foster social capital above others, even though local competencies and distinctions such as knowing gossip and relevant history play a part.

However Chat regulars also deploy a "lowbrow" form of cultural capital, which consists in humour, the use of gifs and memes, and mastery of appropriate cultural references. When talking about what they want from threads and users in Chat, emphasized the need to be entertained:

Gangnam Style [High+, 2012-Present]: "A topic that's innovative/original or at least something that hasn't been done in a while. Like the 'Ask me Anything' threads was great initially because it was new and helped posters around the site understand the person behind the username a little more." *Chat Forum Interviews, 2013/14*

Cocktail [Medium+, 2013-2014]: "Users gain popularity on chat if they tend to be sarcastic/post funny gifs, memes...posts in general." *Chat Forum Interviews, 2013/14*

The ability to create threads that are entertaining and funny relies on a combination of these two competencies. A successful thread taps into social capital by finding ways to speak to the community and draw it in. However it also anticipates the particular references and gambits that will be entertaining, which

requires a certain kind of cultural capital. This seems to be reflected in Taz's experience of becoming active on TSR. He 'lurked' for some time before building up instinct needed to engage:

Taz [High+, 2008-Present]: "I think originally it was me passing my time on the train, just looking at TSR on my phone, and I guess given the discussion topics, I got a "feel" for the forum." *Chat Forum Interviews*, 2013/14

The necessity of fostering social capital was also reflected in Serendipity's perspective on what features granted popularity in Chat:

Serendipity [Medium+, 2012-Present]: "I think the people who become popular mostly post a great deal, but they also seem to be willing to talk to a lot of people about a lot of different things." *Chat Forum Interviews*, 2013/14

Her depiction emphasized two services that the popular in Chat were providing. The first was their time, and in investing on TSR as highly active members, this time commitment acted to reinforce the status of TSR's community collectively. The second service lay in directing that social capital to individuals, and personally drawing them in.

The endeavor of generating value and using it to foster community was also apparent in the posting habits of members of "WnS". "WnS" abbreviates the "I'm Wonderful and I'm Single" Society thread, which resides in the Chat forum. A common convention for popular threads on TSR (which most Societies are), is for the regulars of that thread to start a new one, once the initial thread becomes full and is closed²¹. The new thread bears the name of its predecessor, but is usually suffixed with a number such as "Part II". I observed WnS over a period of time in which the Society burned through versions 19 through 21 of the Society. During the transition points from the expired thread to the new one, regulars observed a charming informal tradition. A King and Queen of the society would be coronated, and these individuals were entrusted with the initiation of the new thread (affectionately nicknamed "Fred"). Traditionally the initiation involves an opening post that pays homage to the active members of the older thread, via the composition of short bios. For example, one such opening post is shown below:

Gangnam Style [High+, 2012-Present]: I am your host Gangnam Style and welcome ladies, gentleman, boys, girls and trans to 'The wonderful and single' thread. This where we talk about absolutely everything for about 2 weeks before a new thread is made...standard. If you managed to arrive in grand fashion into the realm of a relationship on a golden pumpkin whilst posting in this thread, then you'd be classified as "graduated" (weird huh?) and we'll celebrate that bada\$\$ achievement in the OP of next thread!! Exciting right?!? If you can't find your soulmate or fountain

²¹ Moderation closes threads after they reach 10,000 posts. This policy has something to do with limiting drain on the site's servers.

of love, the consolation prize is being a top 3 poster in this thread for which you'll be highlighted for your achievement like I've done below. Anyway with out further ado, let me bring to you the stars of the last thread along with my insanely accurate interpretation of them..." *I'm Wonderful and I'm Single XX*, 2013

By referring to the speed at which the society's threads usually turnover, Gangnam signals to readers how especially popular and active this particular thread is (many Society or chat threads on TSR take many months to reach the 10,000 post mark that triggers their closure and the need for a new one). His presentation is also inclusive, suggesting that there are means of distinction available to diverse individuals, just as personal bios are written to celebrate the most active regulars of the past thread. In the first few pages following the opening of a thread, regulars participate by laboring to generate further hype, excitement and praise about the society and its success.

However, the work of elevating the community in Chat, and TSR at large, suffers from the visible vulnerability and insecurity that many Chat regulars feel about their activity. As I followed the daily banter of WnS regulars, I found their interactions to be interspersed with moments of insecurity, in which members would allude to the perceived superficiality of their TSR social pursuits:

General Tom [Medium+, 2013-2016]: "I didn't know I was liked that much. How come I'm not this popular irl²²?" *I'm Wonderful and I'm Single XX*, 2013

Serendipity [Medium+, 2012-Present]: "I've no idea, I seem to be much more popular on here than irl too" *I'm Wonderful and I'm Single XX*, 2013

General Tom [Medium+, 2013-2016]: "If people on here met me, my popularity level would drop so low." *I'm Wonderful and I'm Single XX*, 2013

This was echoed in other interactions. For instance, when I interviewed Serendipity about her engagement in the Chat forum, she confided that:

Serendipity [Medium+, 2012-Present]: The things I've got out of Chat are the couple of friends I now talk to outside of TSR. I don't know what I contribute though, I try to help people when I can, but mostly I just chat to people." *Chat Forum Interviews*, 2013/14

Put otherwise, while she immediately recognized the value that online friendships and a support network in the TSR LGBT society had given her, she was unable to recognise her own activity as similarly valuable. Instead it was written off as "just chat".

²² "IRL" abbreviates In Real Life.

On another occasion, a fellow moderator private messaged me to introduce himself. In doing so he mentioned:

Microcosm [High+, 2013-Present]: “I mod TSR Community; the cesspit of the site, but it's an active cesspit, so it's good fun.” *TSR Fieldnotes*, 2016

When asked for an elaboration, he went on to explain:

Microcosm [High+, 2013-Present]: “Tbh²³, a lot of fellow mods feel the same. Chat's a complicated one. It's getting better though, new SLs²⁴ and all that. I dislike the cliques in there and it is very difficult to mod but out of all of the rubbish, there's some great people there. That's what I enjoy about it. Students get bored really quickly, so I suppose mundane AMA²⁵s are the best way to cure the boredom.” *TSR Fieldnotes*, 2016

Microcosm's inadvertent sizing up of Chat echoed similar assessments that came up time and time again across TSR during fieldwork. From the opposition of 'chit chat' to solid academic advice in Chapter 6 to the disclaimers and dismissals of reputation in Chapter 7, to the apologies and disclaimers that always followed a user's admission to frequenting Chat; the underlying principle is resoundingly persistent:

It is acceptable to be on a forum to give advice or to seek information. It is ok, though less distinguished, to be on a forum to muck around and have a laugh. But it is irredeemably sad and pathetic to be emotionally invested in online social ties. This is the symbolic fault-line that defines the entire website. And Chat lies at its centre. Any TSR social investment, therefore, has to assume an alibi. To users in Fitness, or Religion, an honourable alibi is readily available. But users of Chat only have tomfoolery to turn to for camouflage. And the concrete, academic, traditional cultural capital underpinning other sections of TSR trumps the flippancy and irreverence of Chat every time.

Universities: “Rejected by Cambridge but got into LSE – How should I feel?”

Where Chat, Religion and Fitness are each individual forums with clear boundaries and cohesive communities, Universities is – in fact – a section, comprising a vast number of forums. Along with the Study Help forums, Universities is treated as the beating heart of TSR. The majority of sign ups join TSR in order to post in these forums, before discovering the wider options. ‘The student voice’ is the unique selling point that TSR offers to advertisers, and it is the section that has received the most attention and development over the years. There are designated forums for the majority of UK higher education institutions, and dedicated forums for each subject area. There are also designated forums for mature students, international students, postgraduates and disabled students.

²³ “TBH” abbreviates To Be Honest.

²⁴ “SL” abbreviates Section Leader.

²⁵ “AMA” abbreviates Ask Me Anything. A typical format for autobiographical threads in Chat.

Universities is superficially more tame than other areas of TSR because of the subject matter to hand. It tends to attract less trolls than other sections like Health and Relationships. Nevertheless, these forums are still host to significant symbolic struggles.

The most explicit and transparent of these is the widespread obsession that is displayed towards University ranking, and the pursuit of the grades needed to gain admission to the country's best. Pages are devoted to analyzing the league tables or agonizing over the relative merits of Cardiff and Kent Universities. Many of the objectives and motivations making up activity in these forums are straightforward and direct; namely, the soliciting of advice and information about every practical dimension pertaining to University study. Not to mention the attainment of "success", which TSR defines somewhat simply as gaining entry to an elite institution, and getting rich.

However, supposedly neutral and practical engagement with these goals can still be deployed for social positioning; which is hard to miss when many TSR users list their University application choices (and outcomes) in their signatures. Moreover snobbery based on academic credentials and knowledge is not uncommon:

Headgear [High+, 2011-2016]: "It's not an ability. It takes hard work, like learning your guitar piece would take hard work. You study at Kingston Uni - that explains a lot."

Meanwhile, the evaluation and weighting of different institutions, courses, subject areas and career trajectories, are constant and pervasive arenas for fierce competition between users. This is the case even when the discussions are based solely on hypotheticals. For example, consider the thread "London Met 1st or Oxford 2.2". The poster is neither an employer trying to make a difficult decision, nor a struggling Oxford student trying to judge whether he might be better placed to move to an easier University. Yet this has no bearing on the fervor and enthusiasm with which the matter is debated:

Elmer [Medium+, 2016-Present]: "Are you guys being serious? Oxford is so highly regarded even with a 2:2 they would overlook the grade. Forgot all this filtering out. The person who went Oxford will be more likely to get a job and better paid. Some schemes require 2:1 but still he could apply for 2:2 jobs and be highly likely to be accepted." *London Met 1st or Oxford 2.2*, 2017

Nate [High+, 2015-Present]: "A lot of grad jobs are 2:1 minimum. That Desmond could be from Oxbridge on a gold leaf diamond encrusted certificate but it ain't getting you in the front door." *London Met 1st or Oxford 2.2*, 2017

Camelot [Medium+, 2017]: "Oxford 2:2. Anyone who says Lon Met 1st is incredibly ignorant or short-sighted." *London Met 1st or Oxford 2.2*, 2017

In a hypothetical discussion of which subjects and institutions are superior, the payoffs for those involved may not be immediately apparent. But if these battles determine the status quo on TSR, if not beyond, then this has direct consequences for posters' standing on the site, and therefore provides enough of an incentive for people to engage.

Of course, posts in Universities are not always concerned with shaping the ranking of degrees and institutions. For many, the main interest in participating is derived from providing support and advice to users. This can also be a source of competition, though, as credibility and reliability are often called into question.

Familiarity with the finer print of official University related guides and sources often allows a user greater influence and respect. The personal experiences of the advice giver are also frequently used as qualification of their insight, when they lay claim to any sufficiently respected or envied experience, most especially having gained admission to a competitive University or course. In the following post, for example, a user puts down a the post of another by questioning their experience:

Pragmatist [High+, 2016-Present]: "Helpful... Did you go to Oxford or Cambridge? Because nearly everyone who has commented on the OP's post has, and they don't seem to feel that the OP is 'self -pitying' or feels the need to give such a dismissive response." *To all those who got rejected from Oxbridge – from a current student, 2017*

Given the way that anecdotes and personal experiences are so quickly disregarded in other site sections such as Religion, this may seem counter-intuitive. It clearly speaks, however, to the degree of symbolic power that those with elite academic cultural capital possess on TSR.

Some of the struggles taking place in academic threads are non combative, though. For instance:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: "I get warm fuzzies from TSR and a sense of achievement in knowing that I help people through my posts. I like to think I correct misconceptions about Oxford... something I am especially passionate about, having come from a disadvantaged background when applying to Oxford myself." *Universities Interviews, 2014*

Users such as Eidelweiss are not combative in their efforts, but the fact that they are motivated by a cause, such as accuracy or truth, charges their actions as helpful posters with normative weight. This, in turn, feeds into a state of symbolic struggle. In a relatively closed system, seemingly isolated instances of stakeholders pushing for or against one or another perspective, can only mean the existence of struggle. Despite defining as shy, Eidelweiss went on to share:

Eidelweiss [High+, 2008-Present]: “As for Oxford, I just get SO frustrated by the things that are said on the forum and how they can be taken by potential prospective applicants and used to make the decision that “Oxford is full of toffs - they won't like me coz I'm from a state comp” or whatever. It just really grates on me and I feel the need to speak out.”
Universities Interviews, 2014

More than any other section on TSR, Universities offers a multiplicity of ways to receive institutional recognition for expertise and helpful posting. The Personal Statement Help service is housed within Universities. Helpers receive a label under their usernames visible across the site as a reward. Many of the subforums exclusive to particular Universities or colleges have their own forum assistant. Forum assistants are helpful users who have expertise or experience connecting them to the forum that they look after. They are awarded with some simple moderation tools, such as the ability to edit and move content. They are not permitted to view the main moderation forums, or to participate in any strategic or disciplinary choices. Nevertheless, they also receive public userlabels, and their positions hold more status than does that of Personal Statement Helper. A year ago, the TSR Group Launched a ‘Very Important Poster’ scheme, which offered a userlabel of that description to users who responded to unanswered threads. Retaining new recruits is a common issue for online communities, and this scheme recruits the community to tackle the problem. Finally, those users who happen to have especially good knowledge and experience are occasionally included with the Universities moderation team in receiving a “Clearing and UCAS Advisor” usertag under their names over August and September. The tags indicate those users with especial expertise pertaining to Results Day. Many of these are invited to Brighton HQ and accommodated for two nights in order to work together in situ in order to respond to the high volume of queries and requests for help that flood the UCAS and Applications forum each summer. Each of these gestures serves to consolidate the status of “useful” academic and administrative knowledge.

The two themes that struggles tend to take both correspond to the different demographics that tend to post in Universities. Applicants and younger students are often more engaged with explicit struggle for either academic or economic recognition and distinction. This is reliably and repeatedly conveyed through the remarkably precise consensus among this group over what life choices are ‘right’ and ‘wrong’. In aligning with different goals and aspirations, these users signal their capital and attain respect. Honourable goals include professions such as law, medicine and anything financial. Dishonourable goals include the social sciences, creative arts, and any new discipline or University without much historical prestige. Attendance at a low status University (as decreed by the league tables and whether or not the University is Post-1992) can be salvaged or somewhat mitigated by an honourable degree choice. Likewise my scandalous association with Sociology was largely forgiven because of my affiliation with Cambridge. Although it did not grant me total immunity. The described tendency is counter-intuitive in some ways. There is a very strong obsession with stable

career choices, and degree paths with concrete employment links. This preference has been associated by education researchers with a working class habitus (Pugsley, 1998). Since we know that the TSR demographic is disproportionately privileged, we might expect this bias to be absent or less pronounced. However, this tendency may have diminished post-recession.

The second community in Universities is made up of older students, adults, educators and parents. Many of these no longer need to compete for or aggressively display their capital with respect to attainment, as most have met or are on their way to meeting their chosen path. Competition among this group tends to revolve around the dispensing of advice. These two distinct groups have an interesting co-existence, as the older group is there solely to pass on knowledge and support to the first group. Yet the second, advising group also hold philosophies and attitude - which amongst each other are also signals of the right kind of common sense - that run head on against the codes of the younger group. Frequent debates arise around scenarios such as older users trying to convince younger users that the League tables are 'rubbish', that it's ok to go to a mid range University and that there is nothing wrong with Media Studies.

Overall then, it is evident that forums on TSR can vary and differ by surprising margins with respect to the norms, perspectives and strategies that one must deploy to earn status; and indeed, reputation.

9: The Social Alchemy of Digital Reputation

The Co-Construction of Value

What is most striking about TSR practice is the role that users' values have in structuring its social space. Users possess the ability to imbue arbitrary details or qualities with value through their investment of time and attention. For example, the annual TSR Histories written by the community acted to solidify and enhance the perceived importance of the community, and of notable events and personalities in its past. Similarly, users of Chat invest time and attention in each other and in the status and daily events characterizing The Student Room. This is a collaborative pursuit, which cannot be accomplished individually. Because a sufficient number of users invest in pursuing the reward of inclusion and participation in Chat, they necessarily *recognise* its rules and its profits. In Bourdieu's words, "everywhere they are observed, these consecration cycles perform the fundamental operation of social alchemy, the transformation of arbitrary relations into legitimate relations, *de facto* differences into officially recognised distinctions" (Bourdieu, 1980, p. 125).

They value humour, entertainment, and the building and maintenance of social capital. Their investment grants Chat specific forms of expertise, such as familiarity with scandalous events, cultural competency or insight into the patterns and quirks of the site as a whole, value and influence. In return for this

collaborative co-construction of value, regulars enjoy status, popularity, camaraderie and inclusion. These are experiences of affective value to them.

But however constructed, or arbitrary this value may appear, the creation and exercise of capital is not a free for all. A critical mass of recognition is required to consecrate any person, resource or quality, and to attract investment and recognition from others. Investment is a risky enterprise, and prospective investors are only likely to engage if guarantors apply. In practice this means that the value in question needs to be guaranteed by some kind of wider, more universally dominant and robust source of power. In Religion, appeals to reason and argumentation could not exert such critical influence in discussions if it was not underscored by a wider, overarching discourse that is already sufficiently dominant so as to be taken for granted and deferred to by most users raised in modern social democracies. The taken for granted quality to this form of cultural capital was evinced in the way that religious interviewees would hasten to demonstrate their respect for qualities such as intelligence and open mindedness when expressing grievances about other members. This demonstrated these goods to be widely and deeply influential, even to individuals whose identities were rooted in fundamentally opposed verification systems, such as faith and intuition. Regardless of which position or interest Religion posters embraced, they all signalled cultural capital in order to secure legitimacy. Religious and non-religious users jointly recognized the persuasiveness of good argumentation, and of evidence (whether empirical or Scriptural). And so, as users debated and wrestled over the status of different beliefs, they also collectively consolidated and entrenched the power of cultural capital, through the regular and repetitive investment of recognition for it.

This overarching influence of scientific cultural capital also accounts for the plight of Christians on TSR. Eidelweiss reported on the timidity of TSR Christians and their need for a 'safe space' in which they were not dismissed as 'ridiculous'. As British Christians are thoroughly embedded in a secular society in which this cultural capital is dominant, they find themselves disadvantaged in terms of their symbolic power, because their participation and inclusion in society is reliant upon recognizing scientific cultural capital. It also explains why Muslim members of TSR enjoyed more freedom to endorse their religious views. Their offline social communities provide some immunization from the dominance of Western values. While spiritual cultural capital affords them some influence and standing on TSR, however, it is ultimately insufficiently dominant to overpower secular, academic cultural capital. This could be a reflection on the balance of power in British society. It may be, for instance, that Islamic values are powerful enough to pose a cultural threat, but – within Britain – traditional Western secular and liberal ideals retain the upper hand, reflecting the numeric distribution of allegiances within the population.

What this means is that TSR users have some ability to shape their social context to their advantage, their success in achieving this influence will depend on what kinds of capitals they are using, and how strongly secured these forms of capital are in overarching socio-historical power profiles.

For example, this is the reason that the stability of users' social and cultural capital in Chat is volatile. While users are able to secure a modicum of recognition and autonomy from the principles of cultural capital so pervasive elsewhere on the site, this resistance is undermined by the absence of any stronger source of symbolic power to undershore their collaborate effort. They are stuck between a rock and a hard place because of the sustained legitimacy of the "online versus offline" classification, which only recognizes face-to-face interaction as authentic, meaningful, and estimable. TSR users are prohibited from unrestrained recognition of their own social investment. And so they are never able to fully enjoy the profits of social capital online. They are plagued by nagging doxic angst about its value, and their own doubt weakens the value and power of this particular capital. Bourdieu describes the situation of being dominated in such a way thusly:

"Symbolic violence is that particular form of constraint that can only be implemented with the active complicity – which does not mean that it is conscious and voluntary – of those who submit to it and are determined only insofar as they deprive themselves of the possibility of a freedom founded on the awakening of consciousness. This tacitly accepted constraint is necessarily implemented whenever objective structures encounter the mental structures that are in agreement with them. It is on the basis of the originary complicity between cognitive structures and the objective structures of which they are the product that the absolute and immediate submission which characterizes the doxic experience of the native world is established" (Bourdieu, 1998, p. 4).

In short, it is the unconscious submission to the symbolic distinction that deems online interaction to be worthwhile that renders Chat users vulnerable. Chat users who possess sufficient cultural or specific capitals in other areas of TSR, may attain honour through associating with those activities while holding Chat at an arm's length. But those without suitable capital disrespected and demeaned classifications available to them. And this is why Microcosm was compelled to disown Chat as a 'cesspit' when he introduced himself to me as one of its mods.

Implications for Digital Inequality

TSR reputation has very interesting repercussions for this balance of capitals, values and representations. But first we need to reflect on the significance of this situation for existing approaches to researching digital inequality. Firstly it is abundantly clear that the interactions, practices and experiences that users have on the Internet are in no way isolated from their traditional social positions. While I was not able to explore complete personal trajectories of the users that I spoke to, it is transparently clear that attributes that TSR users had or did not have, reflected truths about their situations and personalities prior to joining TSR. Degrees of eloquence, confidence and expertise were not allocated to users all of a sudden via some lottery, but rather capitals that they had come by independently of their activity on TSR. Of course, users also build their capital

stock through their practices and experiences on the site. But prior to enrollment there will be differences in the attributes that different users possess. This simple observation requires emphasis because a logical consequence of this fact is that researchers need to anticipate, with considerably greater nuance and detail, the vast range of strengths, weaknesses, values, perceptions and desires that each person brings with them into every new social domain that they visit, *including* interactive online environments. It is also imperative that researchers recognise that details as broad and varied as strengths, weaknesses, values, perceptions and desires hold the potential to be exploited for distinction and stratification in online social contexts. Without sensitivity to, and awareness of this universe of possibilities, no researcher can expect to fully capture and identify the substance and the totality of digital inequalities.

On TSR, institutions such as the TSR Awards and History, as well as the daily practices of Chat users, each reveal the ability of humans to create capital through different techniques of investment. The human propensity for “social alchemy”, as Bourdieu would describe it, should alert any researcher of digital inequality to the possibility that any distinguishing feature has the potential to be consecrated and used as power. This means that researchers cannot afford to rely on prior assumptions regarding the nature of inequalities that are operative in a given situation. It also means that, going forward, more exploratory and qualitative research designs should be exploited to identify the oppositions and classifications at work in a given situation.

Secondly, this human proclivity towards ‘alchemy’ should encourage researchers to anticipate the dynamic and charged nature of online social environments. The differences that characterize users from their initial entry into an online environment will furnish them with advantages and disadvantages in acquiring their desires within that specific space. Where there are opportunities for change, as there always are, there will be agents striving to secure it, and they will deploy differences as distinctions through which to exert influence. This means that research into digital inequality must be wary of metaphors and ontologies that ‘flatten’ online environments, and must be ready for the possibility that the struggle and competition that inevitably follows any social context, may be of explanatory significance.

Reputation’s Role

Into this malleable but deeply competitive environment comes digital reputation. We now know that users intrinsically value reputation, and that they desire it for the derivative status, influence and dominance that it affords. We furthermore know that reputation on TSR has a polysemic nature, supporting different interpretations and functions as needed. But in addition to the insight afforded by analysis of users’ reflections on reputation, it needs to be considered in light of the wider processes operating on TSR. Users recognized that practices surrounding reputation varied between forums and sections. Chapter 7 also illustrated the importance of specific, contextual values and distinctions for determining the norms, culture and practices of users within those spaces. If we accept that users are invested in situated struggles for status, influence and

legitimacy, and that contextual distinctions - such as atheist versus theist, and scientific versus fad - are amenable to appropriation for strategic use in such struggles, then we must reasonably accept that digital reputation is similarly amenable to cooption as a strategic social asset.

TSR reputation, however, becomes symbolic capital because of the flexibility and unilateral compatibility that it offers. It is the fact that users have so much leeway to deploy and interpret reputation in multiple ways that makes it an ideal vehicle for the deployment, distribution and acquisition of symbolic power. Even though, on reflection, users know that reputation is not reliable as an objective and authentic measure of any 'quality' or 'reliability', and even though they know that users can accrue high reputation for one kind of activity while being entirely unqualified to inform on others, they are still influenced by it. On a basic level they reported perceiving users with negative reputation as suspect, and responding more positively and optimistically to those with high reputations. Knowingly or unknowingly, users actively attributed reputation with weight and power each time they *recognized* its value in others, and each time they pursued it; and in doing so, signaling its worth. This makes reputation an especially effective mask. It is influential enough in its own right to legitimate the behaviour and choices of users, but at the same time it is suitably opaque in its origins to escape scrutiny and attack. Users have no idea whether a person received reputation for witty trolling or for helping newbies.

A striking and contradictory feature of TSR reputation, though, is its naked transparency. Bourdieu held that economic capital was an exception when contrasted to immaterial and symbolic forms of capital, such as cultural and social. The exception lay in the transparent function and quality of economic capital. There is no disguising the worth or the function of a banknote. There is also no disguising of the self interest that it satisfies. The economic field accordingly displayed a logic divergent from that of every other social field, in that naked pursuit of profit and financial gain was explicit and conducted in the open, with no loss to the fortunes of the players. By contrast, Bourdieu argued that all symbolic, immaterial capitals rely upon misrecognition for efficacy. Accordingly, their value and social function is usually masked in favour of a more neutral cover. For example, cultural capital is a power that serves self-interest, but the misrecognition supporting it grants it the alibi of meritocratic virtue. Unlike cultural and social capital, reputation is hard to disguise. TSR publishes a member list ranking users in order of their accrued reputation, and the reputation level of most users is displayed publicly wherever they post. The reputational power of a user can be traced all the way down to a numeric value (the sum total of reputation points amassed). As discussed in Chapter 7, we know that reputation does, indeed, rely upon misrecognition. This is evident in the disclaimers and performances of indifference that users express around it. But this explicit and transparent quality to reputation does impose upon TSRers a stronger burden of labour when it comes to the denial and dismissal of reputation's function as a mechanism for consolidating power. The symbolic efficacy of TSR reputation is reliant upon constant collective labour to maintain misrecognition.

However, whether or not the transformation of reputation into symbolic capital requires more labour than needed offline, the predicament remains consistent with Bourdieu's observation of the means by which symbolic power is created. For:

"the transformation of any given kind of capital into symbolic capital, a legitimate possession grounded in the nature of its possessor, is the fundamental operation of social alchemy (the paradigm of which is gift exchange). It always presupposes a form of labour, a visible (if not necessarily conspicuous) expenditure of time, money and energy, a redistribution that is necessary in order to secure recognition of the prevailing distribution, in the form of recognition granted by the person who receives to the person who, being better placed in the distribution is in a position to give, a recognition of a debt which is also a recognition of value." (Bourdieu, [1980] 1982, p. 129)

A Theory of Digital Reputation

In Chapter 3 I explored three theoretical perspectives pertaining to recognition and esteem with the intent of laying the ground for a reconceptualization of digital reputation. In Chapter 2 we saw that reputation scholars worked through relatively functionalist theories as to the role and nature of digital reputation. They assumed that, in designing reputation systems in order to simulate traditional trust, this was the function that digital reputation should be analysed and understood in relation to. But I questioned this assumption, with reference to empirical studies suggesting that status pursuit was a universal human trait, and illustrating the extent to which people were found to attend to and exploit subtle and arbitrary differences as part of this pursuit. Therefore, I evaluated the perspectives of Brennan and Pettit (2005), Honneth (2005a) and Bourdieu with the aim of teasing out components to agency that might serve as explanatory foundations for digital reputation.

Pettit and Brennan's "Economy of Esteem" (2005) provided a compelling analysis of the reasons humans are driven to secure esteem, and to avoid disesteem. Using economic principles they also identified a range of practices and behaviours that the desire for esteem would likely elicit. Their analysis accounted for mechanisms by which agents might act to maximize their esteem while sustaining unrelated but sincere internal narratives as to the 'real' purpose for their actions. Their account was analytically powerful, but it sidestepped speculation about the affective and psychological repercussions to esteem, preferring to emphasise the actions and choices that individuals made in consequence of their desire for esteem. As I had set out to identify the meanings, experiences and interpretations that individuals held towards reputation, Brennan and Pettit's model could only speak to some of the elements I felt necessary for a sociological assessment of digital reputation.

Honneth's theory of recognition offered considerable psychological depth when it came to understanding the affective repercussions that digital reputation might effect. Working on principles originally laid down by G. H. Mead, his insight into the role of social recognition in facilitating subject formation, offers fresh perspective and depth when it comes to theorizing the social significance that digital reputation can have. In particular for reinforcing vital capacities such as self-efficacy, confidence and security. Honneth is exemplary in his descriptive vocalization of the substantive, affective experiences that accompany actors' bids for recognition, and the character of humiliation and despair that likely accompanies defeat. Honneth's theory could not, however, furnish a complete analysis of both the experiential qualities and experiences associated with reputation, and also the practices and social patterns that might govern its distribution. In his choice to deploy a psychoanalytic model of agency, his account gave too much primacy to the mother-child dyad, and insufficient attention to the wider social web of relations that might play a part in the acquisition of recognition. Recognition was also construed as a somewhat binary quality that one either had, and held adequately, or one was without. Closer to affirmation than to esteem, recognition for Honneth concerns acknowledging the capacity and power innate to a person, and in doing so, enabling self realization; a goal that Honneth deemed crucial to well being, and to accounting for the value of recognition. Furthermore, where Honneth referred to a 'Struggle for Recognition', few principles were provided with respect to what these struggles might look like, and what repercussions they would have for the acquisition, use and distribution of recognition.

Finally I turned to Bourdieu's theory, and to symbolic capital in particular. Bourdieu offers many of the strengths of Brennan and Pettit's theory. For Bourdieu, a good such as recognition or esteem is always sought after within a field, which he sometimes compares to a market, or within a symbolic space of struggle. As field occupants are differentiated in their position and access to capital, the specifics of their relations to each other determine how and in what way the good is distributed, and what practices are likely to follow it.

However, Bourdieu is more interested than they, in the experiential and doxic domain in which people experience a need for reputation or for esteem. He therefore uses the concept of habitus, with its tacit and unconscious influences and its conscious, strategic dimensions, to account for both of these dimensions in a person's orientation towards esteem, or recognition.

The way in which Bourdieu deploys the related attitudes of recognition and misrecognition is sharply distinct from its use under Honneth. Recognition for Bourdieu, refers to the acquiescence of people to a particular form of symbolic capital, based on a belief in that capital's value and worth. But there is an element in Bourdieu's perspective of how recognition and misrecognition function that could signal a common insight between him and Honneth. Self actualization and self expression are desires and affective needs that are seldom explicitly discussed by Bourdieu. This does not signal incompatibility, as clearly demonstrated by Atkinson's articulation of the field of family relations, and the

function of love as a form of recognition. Self-actualization is plausibly an experience that is brought about when the 'powers' unique to a person are 'recognised' as valuable. Within Bourdieu's thought, the action or attitude of 'recognition' could be seen as a form of surrender, submission or acknowledgement akin to the role of 'alignment' required by nodes for power to disperse, within a Foucauldian conception of power. In Bourdieu's words, "the miracle of symbolic efficacy evaporates when we realise that this truly magical action of influence or – the word is not too strong – possession succeeds only insofar as the one who submits to it contributes to its efficacy; and that it does not constrain her unless she is predisposed by prior experience to recognise it" (1998, p. 3). It is therefore clear that, to Bourdieu's mind, the particular capital in question cannot be imbued with symbolic power (and thus influence) without recognition. And so, if self-actualization as an experience can be framed as 'power', instead, then Bourdieu's position is consistent with that of Honneth, in this one respect.

Outside of the individual and dyadic contexts in which recognition and esteem are shared, Bourdieu is able to incorporate other highly useful tools that make it possible to track how an individual's concern for recognition can relate to a dynamic, collective symbolic struggle. Bourdieu's critical depiction of social practice and experience as something that is always positionally defined, and always affected by and constitutive of a dynamic space, adds necessary explanatory power to Honneth's psychological insight. Using a Bourdieuan model we can, at one moment, empathise with the meaning and affect that individuals will experience in response to reputation, but simultaneously follow how that affective experience will position and orient that individual in relation to others invested in reputation around them, and what actions that position will afford its occupant in the mutual struggle for reputation. In other words, Bourdieu is able to relate power and inequality, and the social dynamics that these engender, to the affective and personal experience of what reputation means. Of course, this is deeply important, as Honneth is rightly criticised by McNay for overlooking the existence of societal power struggles, and how these have a bearing on practices and experiences relating to recognition. She correctly links Honneth's idealism in this regard to his preservation of a Habermasian ideal of the communicative 'life world' (1987). Because Honneth sees relations of recognition as communicative, he expects them to be protected from strategic and instrumental interests. Instead it is a strength in Bourdieu's account that he is able to clarify how deeply emotional experiences such as the desire for recognition, or for self actualization, are forces that go on to shape how an individual will act, and what things they will then feel disposed to preserve and to transform about the symbolic space they negotiate with others. As described at the beginning of Chapter 7, Bourdieu illustrates how some capitals or goods can hold dual meanings in different domains. This assessment allows us to acknowledge that reputation can be an end in itself, as an intrinsically desirable and rewarding good, while simultaneously acting as a tool with which to exert influence in a symbolic struggle. In this view, a TSR user would pursue reputation both because of the 'warm fuzzy' feeling it offered them, as an expression of social validation, but also

because of the increase in status and influence that they might now hold in debates around the site.

Accordingly, Bourdieu's theoretical structure is the most useful for grounding a sociological reconceptualization of digital reputation. It is its ability to acknowledge the affective and personal meaning of reputation, while pinpointing the map of social struggles in which the individual is embedded. It is also the comprehension of how these two dimensions combine. Together, these components would allow a complete analysis of the meaning and impact of digital reputation for individuals and also for the distribution of power that orders their social world.

However, the wealth in Honneth's exposition of the psychological role of reputation for subjectivity is still highly illuminating. There is room to supplement Bourdieu's framework, then, with Honneth's insights, without needing to retain the limitations.

Reflecting on the TSR reputation data, this judgement is supported. The interest and participation attracted by threads on reputation illustrate the struggles that users invest in, in order to define what reputation is, and what it should be. The reason that reputation's function and use is worth debating is because reputation is a finite, unequally distributed form of power on TSR. Users stand to lose or to gain when changes are made, and struggles over how to define reputation may allow them to secure the outcomes they prefer. The concept of symbolic capital captures the function of reputation on TSR, because it draws attention to the power, legitimacy and influence that are accessed via the possession of high reputation. Bourdieu's wider theoretical apparatus also acts as a fruitful support to the concept of reputation-as-symbolic-capital. This is because it provides effective heuristic tools for identifying the mechanisms and techniques with which users will deploy this capital. It also offers a persuasive and coherent means with which to connect this process to the social structures of the macro level, and the subjective experiences of the micro.

My data clearly showed that reputation holds further functions and values beyond its intrinsic, affective profits. Examples include the ability to confer authority and influence, and the access it provides to dominance. For this reason, Bourdieu's notion of symbolic capital in conjunction with his supporting theoretical framework combine to offer the most useful explanatory strategy for appreciating the complex and multi-faceted meaning and use of digital reputation.

10: A Small Beginning

This project began with two ambitions.

One goal was to ascertain whether digital reputation was adequately explained through and represented by the themes and concepts hitherto employed in

research of digital reputation. I found that existing scholarship accepted a characterization of reputation that dwelt solely upon its ability to deliver the functional support for which it was designed. As the field progressed, so too did the concerns and perspectives of researchers in this area. Yet even as important critical questions were raised about the externalities of digital reputation, the dangers of contextual drift, of convergence, of privacy, surveillance and unprecedented possibilities for good and evil: the central premise was never surrendered. I wanted to ascertain if reputation really was about trust, cooperation, and decision support alone. And if there was more to it, what did that entail?

This question was satisfactorily answered. The thoughts, feelings, observations, reactions and reflections of many TSR users (around 150 distinct voices are included in this document, though many more lie silent in the Cloud) overwhelmingly demonstrate that TSR rep (and neg) have served many more functions and interpretations than trust and quality assurance alone. Rep has built up and torn down self-esteem, it has been used to punish and to reward. It is used to publicly broadcast approval and disapproval, and thus to define the moral standards and ideals of the community. It has been the source of irritation, frustration, anger, humiliation, pride and revelry. It is used to distinguish, to dominate, and also to simply communicate. It is used to bully and persuade, for play and entertainment²⁶. There were also uses and meanings that I was not able to include; at least a handful of users intentionally sought negative reputation as a means to stand out, and what would we make of those with very high reputation who choose to hide it from view?

In addition to the original empirical data used to address this question, I also appealed to social theory and to existing research on the anthropological desire for status. Anderson *et al.* collated the interdisciplinary evidence of relevant tendencies, such as the general propensity to attend to apparently trivial distinctions (the child with slightly less orange juice in her tumbler; the executive with the inferior office stationery), and to coopt them for status (2015). Brennan and Pettit flesh out an analytical model of how the pursuit for esteem – which shares with status and symbolic capital, the fact that it is positional – might feasibly function via a subtle economy. This provided us with a plausible model of how collective and cultural situations such as online communities could sustain the supply and demand of esteem, alongside other pursuits. Honneth wrestled with the deep, affective influence that recognition offers to subjects. His development of Mead’s intersubjective pragmatism provided a compelling mechanism for describing how humans come to know themselves, and to be able to relate to those around them. From the developmental procedure he proposes, it is hard to see how feedback from generalized others - even those that constitute remote and virtual Internet communities - could fail to hold significance and importance to us. Finally,

²⁶ TSR’s most notorious troll won “Most Missed Member” in the annual TSR Awards for two consecutive years after “her” departure from the community. She amassed a significant reputation score before she left.

Bourdieu provided an account which married elements of each of these sources. Bourdieu conceives of every social space as positionally defined; which emphasizes the significance of status, esteem and recognition. He posits that the majority of social action has historically conformed to tacit market patterns, that are widely and persistently misrecognized, with the rise of capitalism constituting a historically contingent anomaly. Although Bourdieu's reflections on the affective and emotional features of our social position are scattered across his works rather than concentrated into the richly descriptive, and evocative account supplied by Honneth, he concurs with Honneth that our status, virtue, honour and social position are of paramount sociological importance. What Bourdieu contributes is a heuristic system that is able to bring the experiential *doxa* of agency into harmony with the structural and objective mechanics of social practice and collectivity.

In short, there are four compelling arguments, blending philosophy and research, which reinforce the likeliness that digital reputations hold social significance and functionality over and above that which is currently conceptualized in the designated literature. However this is not to say that all digital reputation will be served by the analysis that I have built here. The Student Room is particular, and it utilizes a custom designed reputation system with an unusually colourful history. There are many reputation systems that share structural similarities to that on TSR. However there are also systems that are quite dissimilar. What I submit, instead, is that reputation researchers should take seriously the possibility that significant social processes are implicated which may not be fully, or even partially represented within existing conceptual tendencies. We therefore need more research of this kind to establish the extent to which differently designed reputation systems are implicated in similar social dynamics.

I also propose that we can reasonably assume that there is explanatory value in researching the experiences, behaviours and perspectives of users when it comes to the technical systems and environments in which they act. TSR users conform to Bourdieu's depiction of humans as alchemists. Arbitrary tools and symbols are always at risk of cooption for unforeseen (and should have been foreseen) human purposes. For this reason, it is important to commit to a research strategy that is both suitably social and exploratory. Not only is a great deal of Internet research quantitative, but in the era of 'Big Data', there is a significant overemphasis of techniques which harvest existing, 'objective' user metrics from websites, over social research techniques which attend to the complex and reflexive perspectives of users.

This brings me to the next research aim, which consisted in the broad aim of exploiting traditional sociological theory in order to compliment and enhance existing understanding of digital inequalities. This thesis utilized the methodological, theoretical and empirical heritage of Bourdieu's work in order to analyse the connection between TSR reputation and online inequalities. There is no doubt, of course, that Bourdieu's ideas have been summarized, that his terminology has been deployed, and his texts mined for sources. However, the

defining condition for success is whether this work benefited from insights, strategies or techniques that would have been absent had I neglected Bourdieu's conceptual approach. Elements of my research design and focus, which were generated in direct reference to Bourdieuan principles. Bourdieu's social ontology of social space, defined, as it is, by overlapping spheres of hierarchical power relations, definitely offers a unique conceptual tool with which to theorise. As Cavanagh, Livingstone, Postill and Benson recognise, research of the Internet has hitherto been shaped by a selection of dominant metaphors, each with their own epistemological and theoretical affordances and constraints. Internet as network is arguably the most dominant of these, but Internet as text, tool, medium, public sphere and community are each represented (Cavanagh, 2007; Livingstone, 2010; Postill, 2011; Benson, 2015). Of these perspectives, networks, public spheres and communities are most metaphorically similar to Bourdieu's perspective of 'fields' and social/symbolic space. Yet there is already recognition that each of these models act in ways that *flatten* social relations, rather than serving to analyse and illuminate the internal composition of these spaces. On the contrary, Bourdieu's heuristic happens to excel in this particular regard.

One important way in which this is true is his suggestion that social spaces should be thought of in terms of configurations of *power relations* rather than *communicative ties* (Bourdieu & Wacquant, 1992, p. 97). The former emphasizes competition and positional distinctions. The latter focuses on interactions, cooperation and communication (which rules out non-discursive experiences and impacts). In practice what this meant was that a Bourdieuan heuristic equipped me to approach TSR with different questions than I might have asked had I adopted a different conceptual approach. All of the data presented in Chapter 8 was based on asking questions inspired by this heuristic:

What things mark users out from one another?

What things allow a person to get ahead in this space?

What things is this community actively dismissing and discouraging in people? What are the things that individuals want and are motivated by?

What things do they need to do or to be if they want to achieve those goals?

What things from their past are they advantaged and disadvantaged by in this context?

What patterns are there in the answers to these questions?

It is Bourdieu's illustration of how seemingly arbitrary things can become sources of capital, which inspires questions of this kind. Doubtless Bourdieu is not the first or last person to ask such a question about a social situation. Yet the particular ontological principles of his heuristic act to throw certain tendencies, practices and mechanisms into focus. And these happen to be those which produce and maintain inequalities and stratification.

Bourdieu's insight into the specificity and the importance of local field logic was also the inspiration for contrasting distinct sections of TSR, rather than seeking

to generalize about reputation across TSR. This emphasis brought to light the importance of reputation's role in facilitating the conversion of capital across different domains on TSR. It also made it possible to identify the importance of the attitudinal divide that strongly divides TSR's value system; that is, the opposition between 'useful, productive, academic' online activity, and 'useless, 'sad', social' online practice. It is by comparing different TSR subfields and their structures that the extent of the significance of this distinction became clear. Bourdieu's principles of the semi-autonomy of fields and the function of habitus are also particularly useful in the context of Internet research. Habitus is a system that brings harmony and coherence while facilitating individuals in struggling towards their goals. It provides a plausible account of how the experiences continue to exert influence on practice, and to have a bearing on an individual's instinctive means of orienting themselves to novel situations. The underlying mechanisms of habitus and social spaces prohibit clean divides between online and offline/virtual and real, because it always illustrates how individuals are bringing resources, experiences of fields from one context to another, and in doing so, humanly connecting online spaces with the offline. It discourages any reification of online space as special, if only because – within a Bourdieuan analysis – every social context is special; exhibiting as they do, local struggles, distinctions and logics. This emphasis encourages exploratory and grounded principles of research design, which this thesis sought to apply.

To conclude, Bourdieu offers a set of heuristic procedures that are especially effective when it comes to honing in on specific social struggles, the strategies used within them, and the connection of these struggles to wider domains of activity. This will not always be the component of digital experience and practice that researchers feel the need to document. Researchers may wish to emphasise different tendencies such as cooperation. Bourdieu also offers an unashamedly *social* perspective. While habitus, hexis and the social significance of embodiment (1977, p. 93) are important material elements to his philosophy, the heuristic is ultimately concerned with human needs, meanings, motives and culture. This necessarily produces a different account than one might construct through applying Latour's concepts. Yet it is a perspective that is absolutely essential for the study of digital inequality. Altogether, there are features in Bourdieu's thought and his methodological strategies which raise fresh questions and fresh strategies for researching digital inequality. This study illustrated some of these strategies; most particularly the explanatory power of symbolic capital, symbolic space, and mechanisms such as misrecognition. The theory was by no means exhausted, however, and there are more aspects to Bourdieu's thought that require further research and different research designs to my own in order to assess. For instance, while I would have liked to have operationalized habitus more fully in my work. I opted to focus on field, social space and habitus, which was a fruitful strategy. However it left little room to explore the personal trajectories of my (mostly anonymous) participants.

The third major question concerned digital inequalities, and whether a Bourdieuan study of digital reputation might contribute to how we understand this kind of inequality. We have seen that researchers of reputation are becoming

increasingly attuned to the potential inequalities that reputation could instigate. On a basic level, there is already a concern that ratings and recommender systems work to everyone's benefit, and that these tools should not be exploited. However, growing concerns over data privacy are also becoming an aspect from which to contemplate the implications of reputation for all users' wellbeing.

What my research demonstrated, however, was the fact that a reputation system seen to be functioning successfully (as designed) was simultaneously an instigator and facilitator of significant inequalities among TSR users. The success that different users had in securing reputation had demonstrative effects for their standing, influence, power, and often for their self esteem and comfort in that environment. This was identified by intentionally choosing a different research strategy to that which characterizes much existing work on digital reputation and also digital inequality. Seeking out the qualitative and subjective reports, feelings and experiences of users was paramount in this. The use of exploratory principles was also essential. As some of the distinctions that operated to divide users, were specific and arbitrary, it would be considerably harder to notice that this inequality was in operation, if another method had been used. Finally, through incorporating Bourdieu's sociology, my research was holistic social in its scope and perspective. Much digital inequality research focuses on the fates of individuals and what they are able to 'leverage' from Internet use. If the field exclusively progresses by such means, many subtle cultural processes and experiences will be ignored and unrepresented within this field. We need many more qualitative investigations of digital inequality. In addition to this, we need studies which recognise and reflect on the fact that forums like TSR, or social network sites like Facebook, are *social environments*, not vending machines. This means that websites, forums and social network sites are not static, predefined entities which uniformly deliver the same treats if the users are taught how to punch the right buttons and are given the correct change. Instead they are dynamic, fluid, *co-produced* and co-defined arenas where fierce and passionate social practices take place, whether people are seeking friendship and support, debating the comparative merits of smartphone models, or waging textual war against that darned gluten-free fad.

This connects to the final ambition of this project. This was my aspiration to convey the fact that: online social life *matters*. Experiences that take place online are just as real and affecting as those that take place elsewhere. If Honneth's belief in the formative power of recognition, the positive and negative social encounters that we have online may have significant consequences for self-esteem, confidence, self-efficacy and thereby; agency.

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