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Social media infrastructure and social media life: A critical discourse approach
to Facebook groups

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For my sister

How these papers have been placed in sequence will be made manifest in the reading of them. All needless matters have been eliminated, so that a history almost at variance with the possibilities of later-day belief may stand forth as simple fact.

Bram Stoker (1897, prefatory note) *Dracula*

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CHAPTER 1

INTRODUCTION: SOCIAL MEDIA INFRASTRUCTURE AND SOCIAL MEDIA LIFE

I created a Facebook account in 2009. To put this in a way that implicitly represents Facebook as a social space, I *joined Facebook* in that year. Yet, the oldest post that appears on my profile today is the following:



Figure 1.1. My Facebook “birth post”. Screenshot captured on August 24, 2024

The norms of Facebook’s user interface dictate that the date on which a post was made appears right below the poster’s username. This would put the creation of the post seen in Figure 1.1 on November 24, 1996, a date on which Facebook did not yet exist and I was busy crying myself into the world. Clearly, this post cannot have been made in the nineties, but I might have made it later – I (“Vin Ntouvlis”) appear to be the poster, after all. This is also not the case. The post in question was automatically generated by the platform and retroactively dated so that its apparent time of creation coincided with my birth date.

In Eisenlauer’s (2013) terms, this post can be called a “non-intended automated text action”. I, the human agent apparently involved in posts made in my name, am uncertain as to what action I performed to generate this post. Presumably, that action was to share my date of birth with Facebook. Yet, the creation of this post was an involuntary effect, which I can only hypothesize resulted from something I did, and even then, things remain unclear: Was this post made when I created my account? Was it when a new platform feature was rolled out? Eisenlauer (2013; 2014) problematizes such functions of Facebook’s software, characterizing Facebook as a “third author”, whereby the platform “shapes the structure and, in some cases, even the content of the discourse while simultaneously controlling the contexts in which the texts are presented” (Eisenlauer 2014, 78). My “birth post” seen above is a case in point: I had no control over the content or the presentation of this text that Facebook generated in the context of my user profile. The intransparency we can thus observe surrounding the generation of this post exemplifies the

active role that social media platforms like Facebook play in what texts result from our actions mediated by such platforms.

Another interesting aspect of Figure 1.1 is that, in the posting it depicts, my birth has become a “life event” (cf. Meta 2024b), which is a particular kind of Facebook post that differs from a run-of-the-mill status update. Right off the bat, then, the fact of my birth on November 24, 1996 gets repackaged here into a particular Facebook feature, by being made into platform-generated text. Similarly to apps made for the tracking of food intake or exercise routines, Facebook in this example functions as a “technology of entextualization” (Jones 2015; 2020); i.e., a piece of software mediating aspects of human life by drawing on them as data and making them into text – entextualizing them. In these terms, what is going on in my birth post is an act of “entextualization of the self” (Jones 2015), which in this case is largely involuntary. Being born on November 24, 1996 is one thing; having a Facebook “life event” on your profile that says you were born on that date is quite another. The existence of this post constructs the fact of my birth through a stand-in for it: the birth post, a Facebook-based text which – impossibly – suggests that something happened involving Facebook (a post was made, *its user* was born) on that day, in 1996. This is all a result of a kind of technological mediation which cannot be accurately captured by a simplistic understanding of social media as mere transparently functioning tools.

Headscratchers like the one illustrated through the example of my birth post call for a more nuanced understanding of social media platforms as tools. As Jones (2020, 204) observes, “[t]ools don’t just allow us to do certain things; they also channel us into particular *ways of being*, particular *ways of thinking* and *particular ways of relating* to other people” (original emphasis). This is the angle from which I approach *Facebook groups* in this dissertation. I am interested in problematizing Facebook groups as semiotic software (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017), or software used for meaning making. If users’ actions involving this software do not necessarily have straightforward effects that can be reduced only to what users do, the role of technological mediation is clearly not that of a simple facilitator for human actions. In fact, there is an interplay between technology users and the technology itself, which needs to be examined in a way that hones in on the role of the software at hand.

The present project offers an investigation into such issues of platform mediation and users’ communicative practices. This chapter introduces this endeavor, in the words of this text’s title, as a study of “social media infrastructure and social media life”. I first present the wider conceptual frame in which this examination of social media technology is embedded (Section 1.1), effectively sketching out what my interest in “social media infrastructure” entails. Next, in Section 1.2, I outline the project’s scope as an investigation of Facebook groups as semiotic software used for playful practices, explaining how the concept of play

informs my conception of “social media life”. Finally, Section 1.3 introduces the project’s specific empirical foci articulated in three research questions and Section 1.4 provides an overview of the dissertation’s structure.

1.1. Research context: Critical perspectives on social media technologies

The view of technology as an important player that actively shapes mediatized social action has long been of interest across various social scientific fields, including communication, media, cultural, and science and technology studies (Siles and Boczkowski 2012; Jansson 2014; Lievrouw 2014; Bollmer 2015). Approaching media as more than simple tools, such research problematizes the complex role of *materiality* in co-shaping social practices, materiality being “the physical character and existence of objects and artifacts that makes them useful and usable for certain purposes under particular conditions” (Lievrouw 2014, 25).

At first glance, this focus on how technology shapes our activities may be read as a move away from examining people’s agentic practices and as a step towards technological determinism, whereby (new) technologies are understood as unilaterally shaping social phenomena (Jansson 2014; Lievrouw 2014; Bollmer 2015). Yet, these traditions of materialist research recognize technology itself as socially constructed and seek to stress the *interdependency* of “the human/cultural” and “the technological/material” (Siles and Boczkowski 2012; Lievrouw 2014; Bollmer 2015). This treatment of materiality and human actions as interconnected is especially relevant for examining social media and their use.

1.1.1. A materialist view of social media platforms

A materialist perspective has been applied to the study of social media platforms in the work of media scholar José van Dijck and her colleagues (van Dijck 2013a; 2013b; 2013c; van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018). According to this view, social media platforms are “techno-socio-cultural” artifacts (van Dijck 2013a, 141), meaning that they are socially constructed technologies in which we see a convergence of platform owners’ (financial) interests, users’ social practices, and cultural content that is produced by the users’ actions on one level and reconfigured on another level by platform technologies, which “standardize” it, algorithmically shaping its form and presentation (van Dijck 2013b). As seen in the example in Figure 1.1, user input is recast by the platform’s infrastructure into medium-specific text forms: my date of birth becomes a Facebook “life event” post. This is a pervasive aspect of platform mediation. For instance, if anyone wanted to express any sort of sentiment towards the post in Figure 1.1, they would necessarily have that

repackaged, be it as one of Facebook's "reactions" ("like", "love", etc.; cf. Paolillo 2023) or in the form of a comment (cf. Jovanovic and van Leeuwen 2018).

Theoretically, the view of platforms presented by van Dijck is partly rooted in the materialist approach of Actor-Network Theory, or ANT (Latour 2005). By drawing attention to the role of material elements (objects, technologies, artifacts) in the construction of "the social", an ANT perspective on platforms examines the shaping of meanings thereon as an interactive process involving both users and the technologies at hand (van Dijck 2013b). On an ontological level, ANT rejects a dichotomy between user agency and technologies as artifacts (*ibid.*), instead focusing on their interconnectedness and co-determination, going so far as to ascribe agency not only to humans but also to the material. While this theoretical premise that the material can be an actor is controversial among other materialist perspectives (cf. Lievrouw 2014), ANT is illuminating in that, following it, platform software can be seen as a "mediator" instead of a simple "intermediary" (Latour 2005). An intermediary "transports meaning or force without transformation", while mediators "transform, translate, distort, and modify the meaning or the elements they are supposed to carry", so that their output does not result straightforwardly from their input (Latour 2005, 39). Again, we have seen this latter phenomenon exemplified for Facebook's software in my birth post from Figure 1.1, in which the transformation that my birth date underwent as input data was such that the process leading from input to output was unclear.

While inspired by this perspective, van Dijck's (2013b) treatment of social media platforms still reifies them as artifacts in order to examine how they function within larger economical systems. As businesses, social media platforms are profit-oriented enterprises, and their financial interests come to be embedded in their make-up, which seeks to maximize user engagement, promote commodities (*viz.* sell "connectivity"), and create consumer niches for the products offered (van Dijck 2013b). The latter goal is partly served by the diverse architectures of individual social media platforms, as these define different normative frameworks within which users can exercise their autonomy and construct identities (Papacharissi and Gibson 2011; van Dijck 2013b; 2013c). For example, different platforms may prioritize more public or more private space configurations, or they may cultivate different aesthetics around which taste cultures can emerge (Papacharissi 2009).

According to van Dijck (2013b, 41), on a socio-economic level this has created an ecosystem of interdependent platforms-as-businesses, which continually implement changes to their infrastructure and business models in order "to carve out a niche vis-à-vis competing platforms". As these platforms-as-businesses become primary hosts of users' social interactions, algorithmically reconfiguring them to their ends, this amounts to a commercialization of online social activity (cf. Fisher 2012). In this context, Fuchs (2011)

has questioned celebratory views of the “social web” as a fundamentally cooperative and participatory space, stressing that in fact “corporate interests dominate the contemporary web” (Fuchs 2011, 218; cf. Fuchs 2021). This state of affairs has resulted in an oligopolistic setup rooted in the dominance of a handful of powerful tech multinationals known by the acronym GAFAM: Google, Apple, Facebook (now Meta), Amazon, and Microsoft (Smyrniotis 2018). Corporate interests thus drive the syphoning of our day-to-day practices into algorithms, with significant social ramifications. As van Dijck (2013b, 37) wrote in 2013:

even as little as ten years ago, the coding of social actions into proprietary algorithms, let alone the branding and patenting of these processes, would have been unthinkable. Today, Facebook, Google, Amazon, and Twitter all own algorithms that increasingly determine what we like, want, know, or find.

Informed by these perspectives, my focus on Facebook’s infrastructure in the present project cannot be seen as separating said infrastructure from the larger politico-economical context in which it is developed and offered by its parent company Meta – a conglomerate that owns multiple social media services besides Facebook, including Instagram, WhatsApp, and Threads.

All in all, the materialist view of social media platforms sketched out above has influenced this project particularly with regard to the question of how the features of platforms-as-businesses are imbued with meaning (also) by the users who create content on these platforms. This is close to what Siles and Boczkowski (2012, 227–28) call “a text-material perspective on the use of media technologies”, which “combines a focus on users’ content creation and interpretation practices with a consideration of how they appropriate and shape artifacts”. I adopt such an approach in the present discourse analytical study of Facebook groups in order to consider both the role of materiality and that of users’ agency, capturing the tension between the two as theorized in materialist treatments of technology.

1.1.2. Social media in critical discourse studies

Coming to my project’s narrower research context, its empirical undertaking is best situated within the field of critical discourse studies (henceforth CDS). In drawing inspiration from work on social media as “techno-cultural constructs” (van Dijck 2013b, 29), I follow Bouvier’s (2015) suggestion that (critical) discourse analytical work on social media should be in touch with insights from other fields in order to achieve a more fruitful framing of salient research foci (cf. also KhosraviNik 2017, 586). For example, the rudimentary insights into the political economy of platforms-as-businesses presented above work towards “positioning social media within broader sociopolitical and media contexts”

(KhosraviNik and Unger 2015, 214), which is a key step in critical discursive approaches to social media data.

At its core, the field of CDS deals in analysis of discourse (i.e., “stretches of meaning making”, or “semiosis”) that takes a critical interest in “the content produced and the way textual nuances of power and manipulation are manifested *in the materiality of communication*” (KhosraviNik 2022, 119, my emphasis). Materiality is paramount here too because CDS views semiosis as social practice, which manifests in concrete settings and is analytically approached within them. The underlying idea is that there is “a dialectal relationship between a particular discursive event and all the diverse elements of the situation(s), institutions(s), [sic] and social structure(s) which frame it” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011, 357). In other words, discourse (i.e., semiosis) and its materially configured social context are mutually constitutive. This means that an approach to social media discourse in this vein cannot be naïve vis-à-vis the particularities of social media as the structures that host and distribute discourse.

For this reason, faced with analyzing social media data, CDS scholars are tasked with unpacking how social media platforms reconfigure participation and hence discourse production in comparison to “traditional” media (KhosraviNik and Unger 2015; KhosraviNik 2017; Bouvier and Machin 2018). On the one hand, this has resulted in a need to articulate new methodological strategies that allow achieving an appropriately nuanced, socially committed understanding of these emergent media contexts and their role in shaping discourse flows (cf. Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik 2016; Brock 2018). On the other, a number of conceptual and empirical questions have also opened up, for example with regard to identity construction in these new media environments (Bouvier 2012; 2015).

In the end, both the issues of method and the empirical questions arising in social media-focused CDS are a result of a (particular kind of) preoccupation with materiality, which certainly does not have the same goals as those of fields like, say, science and technology studies, but still sees the environment and hence the material make-up of discourse as something that cannot be left unexamined. Basically, if the task of CDS is to engage in critical research that traces power and ideology in meaning making, CDS scholars working with social media data have to consider how to achieve this in environments where “communication takes place through software and hardware owned by and used in the interests of huge corporations—software that shapes what can and cannot be done, which steers what we see and do not see” (Bouvier and Machin 2018, 179). This echoes key postulates of materialist social scientific approaches, which hold that “social media platforms are never neutral “tools”: they make certain things visible, while hiding others” (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018, 32) as “they come with specific norms and values

inscribed in their architectures” (ibid., 3). These fundamental ideas about social media platforms are shared across disciplines but are implemented in the pursuit of different research goals. Adopting a CDS approach in this dissertation, I am interested in meaning making on Facebook with a particular emphasis on Facebook functioning as a “semiotic surface” that users draw on.

This comes from a perspective originating in the tradition of social semiotics (van Leeuwen 2005a; Kress 2010), which scrutinizes social media as “semiotic technology” (Poulsen and Kvåle 2018; Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018). Based on an explicit framing of meaning making as multimodal (i.e., involving multiple semiotic systems – “modes” – alongside and beyond the linguistic), this approach treats social media infrastructure not merely as an important but ultimately auxiliary preoccupation in discourse analysis. Instead, social media technology becomes one of the key objects that get problematized, along with semiosis (manifesting in multimodal texts) and its concomitant social practices:

The notion of semiotic technology [...] signals an interest in technology as integral to multimodal meaning making and as an integrated part of social practices. Digital technologies, including social media, are therefore treated not merely as “tools”, or as technological “carriers” of semiotic displays, but as social and semiotic artefacts in themselves. *A combined interest for multimodal texts, digital technology, and social practices* is thus at the core of a semiotic technology perspective.

(Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018, 596, my emphasis)

A central aspect of the view outlined here is that social media platforms are viewed themselves as “social and semiotic artefacts”. As semiotic software, platforms offer particular material resources that users can avail themselves of for meaning making (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017). For example, consider the features of “reacting” or commenting on Facebook, and how they are embedded on the platform’s surface, providing different opportunities for semiosis (e.g., inputting written text in the case of commenting). At the same time, because this semiotic software has been constructed in line with particular interests, this constellation of opportunities for meaning making constitutes a “semiotic regime” built into the software (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017), which carries normative views vis-à-vis how the software *should* be used. Focusing particularly on Facebook groups as (elements of Facebook’s) semiotic software, this dissertation explores how this material infrastructure is put to use by Facebook users, giving rise to practices that may or may not align with the normative assumptions inscribed in the software. Once again, then, my interest lies at the intersection of human agency on the one hand and technological mediation – as a transformative force in a materialist sense – on the other.

This is the conceptual context in which this project can be situated, and it can be summarized as follows. Influenced by materialist views on the role of technology in

transforming social practices, this dissertation comprises a critical discursive approach to Facebook groups as a case of social media technology. It thus takes Facebook groups as a piece of semiotic software that comes with its own design, which is in turn intrinsically linked to the profit-driven interests of the platform's owners. In adopting this perspective, the project addresses an open issue in CDS that relates to improving our understanding of social media platforms as privately owned environments that reconfigure the forms and flows of discourse articulated through them.

Yet, because the design of technological tools like social media platforms influences but does not determine human action with any finality, the project examines concrete ways in which Facebook users take up Facebook groups in their communicative practices. In what follows, I want to qualify the empirical scope of the project in this regard. After problematizing the idea of “studying Facebook”, I will present my rationale for choosing Facebook groups as an object of analysis in the context of the relevant literature (Section 1.2.1), and then clarify what sort of practices I am particularly interested in – namely, ludic ones – and why (Section 1.2.2).

1.2. Research scope: Facebook, Facebook groups, and ludic practices

Over the years, Facebook has attracted a vast amount of academic attention, with researchers across the social sciences reifying the social media site in varied ways to pursue diverse research ends (see, e.g., Wilson, Gosling, and Graham 2012). Early works in sociology, for instance, have examined Facebook as a communicational tool that is amenable to shifting uses for the maintenance of social ties (Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield 2008) and hence social capital (Ellison, Steinfield, and Lampe 2007), while also supporting new forms of identity construction that are online yet “anchored” in offline realities (Zhao, Grasmuck, and Martin 2008). In educational research, Facebook has been explored in terms of its potential as an educational environment (for an overview, see Aydin 2012). Psychologists have been concerned with who uses Facebook and the psychosocial effects its use can be seen as having in people's lives (see, e.g., Anderson et al. 2012). Facebook has also been a popular research object in communication studies, where in fact the focus on Facebook as a specific brand of social media has been argued to have dominated the research landscape at the expense of more diversified examinations of social media that view them as integrated in people's media repertoires (Rains and Brunner 2015; Stoycheff et al. 2017). In this context, varied areas of empirical interest have emerged, including Facebook's use in political and corporate communication strategies (Soukup 2018).

Linguists and discourse analysts, in turn, have approached Facebook use in line with their interest in computer-mediated communication, again branching out in various research

directions. Eisenlauer (2017, 228) has surveyed the relevance of social networking sites – and Facebook in particular – for pragmatics and discourse analysis, treating such platforms as infrastructures that foster emergent ‘forms of communication’ (*Kommunikationsformen*) with distinct “situational and medial characteristics”. His work on Facebook from the angle of critical hypertext analysis (Eisenlauer 2013; 2014), briefly mentioned earlier, has highlighted the intricacies of text creation on the platform that result from intransparent mediation. Other empirical pursuits have included the problematization of discursive processes of identity construction on Facebook from a discourse analytical angle (e.g., Bouvier 2012; Georgalou 2017) as well as investigations of the systematics of interaction in Facebook comments from the perspective of Conversation Analysis (Frobenius and Harper 2015; Farina 2018).

Evidently, “studying Facebook” can mean any number of things given the popularity and pronounced diversity of research pursuits that center on this platform and what people do on it. It is thus imperative for any study that focuses on Facebook to carefully carve out its empirical scope as shaped by its background, while also setting clear goals that go beyond seeking to contribute to (and thereby construct) some cohesive body of research on this particular social media brand. Given its sheer breadth and diversity, cohesion in this putative body of research may understandably be hard to come by. The brief sketch of widely different takes on Facebook I have provided above illustrates that identifying one’s research focus simply as “a study of Facebook” is problematic given that not only is Facebook an ever-shifting commercial product but also the definition of “Facebook” – i.e., what Facebook is taken to be – in the context any one study is always an artifact of said study’s goals and theoretical underpinnings. That said, the role of Facebook as privately owned digital infrastructure still needs to be scrutinized in a way that reflexively considers the material and socio-politically relevant nature of platforms like it (cf. Section 1.1). This point is also stressed by Soukup (2018) in the conclusions he draws from his systematic review of research on Facebook in communication studies and adjacent fields:

[...] Facebook itself seems to have become transparent or disappeared from the research. Very few studies examine the company. Very few studies look at the infrastructure that lies behind Facebook and the structured use of the platform’s affordances. Instead, for many researchers, Facebook seems to become simply another communication medium. Few people question the nature of that medium or how the various affordances of the medium may interact to create particular attitudes and approaches, even among researchers. One looks for research that makes Facebook itself much more visible.

(Soukup 2018, 27)

To follow precisely these goals within the CDS frame I presented earlier, this project hones in on *Facebook groups as an element of Facebook’s infrastructure*, to examine “the structured use of the platform’s affordances”, as put in the above quote. Thus, in the broader

context of “Facebook research”, focusing on Facebook groups is an empirical decision made on my part that provides a way into “making Facebook visible”. But most importantly, this decision is motivated by a need to recast Facebook groups in a critical light against the backdrop of extant research on Facebook-based communication and Facebook groups in particular. In the following section, I will explain how my examination of Facebook groups breaks with a generalized “profile-centric” approach to studying communication on Facebook, and in doing so, also addresses a gap in existing research on Facebook groups, which tends to conceptualize them as “spaces” or “groups of people”, rather than as infrastructure.

1.2.1. Studying Facebook groups: Beyond profile-centeredness and groupism

By taking Facebook groups as its central object of inquiry, the present project presents, at a first level, a novel angle for the analytical treatment of Facebook-based communication. Specifically, this orientation constitutes a departure from studies of communication on Facebook (and other social media) wherein the researchers’ explorations center around the user profile.

An understanding of the user’s profile as the core piece of infrastructure around which social media activity revolves has long been established in social media scholarship, as reflected in early definitions of “social network sites”, like the following very influential one by boyd and Ellison (2007, 211):

We define social network sites as web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within this system.

Such views exist for good reason, considering that user profiles (or avatars of other forms) are a prerequisite for interacting with other users in digital environments that lack embodied representations of participants (Baym 2010). It thus follows that the bulk of discourse analytical research on Facebook-based communication has been characterized by “profile-centeredness”, taking individual users’ profiles as a point of departure (e.g., Bouvier 2012; Georgalou 2017; Farina 2018; but cf. Procházka 2020, which focuses on a Facebook meme page).

This profile-centeredness is clearly evidenced in studies that explore context construction on Facebook. Social media environments are seen as characterized by “context collapse”, a process whereby “commonly distinct audiences” are found interacting within the same perceptual space (Marwick and boyd 2011, 2). Individual users are thus called upon to design their postings for an “imagined audience” that – despite potentially sharing

platform-based traits such as that of being Facebook “friends” – is bound to be diverse (e.g., socio-demographically) in ways that are remarkable and intransparent when compared to most common face-to-face communication settings (Marwick and boyd 2011; Androutsopoulos 2014). In an empirical study of multilingual Facebook data drawing on this idea, Androutsopoulos (2014, 63) argues that social media platforms like Facebook foster “the formation of ego-centered, translocal networks” by design. This phrasing, “ego-centered” (cf. also Eisenlauer 2017 and his adoption of a view of Facebook as an “egocentric network”), explicitly casts the individual user profile as the axis around which the translocal connection of diverse actors occurs. Tagg and Seargeant’s research on audience design on Facebook expands on this logic (Tagg and Seargeant 2016; 2017; Seargeant and Tagg 2019). These authors introduce the concept of “intradiversity” to capture the way in which diverse translocal networks of users are “centered around one individual’s personal connections” (Seargeant and Tagg 2019, 43). These observations are of great sociolinguistic relevance as they form the backdrop against which to examine how users employ semiotic resources in highly reflexive ways, in a process of *context design* (Seargeant and Tagg 2019). “Context design” is seen as a term preferable to “audience design” as it refers not only to the interactants one considers as the potential audience of a posting, but also to an awareness of broader aspects of the social media setting, including its technological constraints and omnipresent algorithmic mediation (ibid.).

However, while these treatments are insightful in that they problematize the algorithmic make-up of social media platforms and the role it plays for the shaping of communication thereon, they also promote a particular view of Facebook as a platform, which constructs the user’s profile as the nexus of activity. This undeniably reflects the material reality of navigating Facebook: every user needs a profile, and their algorithmically configured experience of the platform starts with and is tailored to that profile. Yet, this state of affairs does not entail that studies should adopt the same profile-centered perspective. By reflexively acknowledging this angle as a researcher “attitude” in Soukup’s (2018) terms, this project breaks with profile-centeredness and examines the use of a Facebook feature that is relatively undertheorized as a setting compared to the Facebook profile.

It is in this context that the study sheds light specifically on Facebook groups from the angle of semiotic technology, by viewing them as yet another platform resource that users draw on in their semiotic practices. Most importantly, this angle also comprises a hitherto unexplored perspective on Facebook groups.

Despite not being nearly as established as profile-centric treatments, studies of Facebook-based communication involving Facebook groups still exist and in fact exhibit a conceptual trend, whereby Facebook groups are linked to notions of “space” and “community”. Tagg and Seargeant’s (2016, 345) sociolinguistic view of Facebook-based networking via

structures like Facebook groups describes emergent networks of users through the concept of “affinity spaces”; i.e., spaces in which people with common interests or experiences develop social ties around them (Gee 2004). Such online affinity spaces engender a subcultural know-how on the basis of which semiotic practices such as memeing can come to foster feelings of groupness (cf. Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023). Even when Gee’s (2004) concept of affinity spaces is not invoked, extant linguistic studies of Facebook groups still conceptualize them as spaces or de facto communities. Maíz-Arévalo (2019), for example, looks at strategies of face repair in a Spanish-language Facebook group and frames said group as a “community”, a “common interest group”, or simply a “group”. The technical term “Facebook group” only comes up in the last section of her paper to designate the kind of digital infrastructure involved, with the phrasing “a concrete Facebook group” (Maíz-Arévalo 2019, 304). In another pragmatics study, Mullan (2024) examines how various forms of context-dependent jocular communication are cultivated within a Facebook group in which neighbors humorously praise a local plumber. In this case, the Facebook group is again approached as a community, specifically as a “community of practice” (Mullan 2024, 64; cf. Angouri 2016). Chau and Lee (2017, 31) explore discursive practices of identity construction within a Facebook group set up for a linguistics course, calling the group a “social network-educational space” (cf. also Chau and Lee 2021). Finally, Facebook groups have been approached across disciplines as spaces for learning and knowledge sharing (e.g., Pi, Chou, and Liao 2013; Lantz-Andersson et al. 2017; Awidi, Paynter, and Vujosevic 2019), including in the study of foreign language learning (e.g., Ekoç 2014; Mykytiuk, Lysytska, and Melnikova 2020; Santoso 2021). Again, the understanding of Facebook groups as spaces is pervasive in these research endeavors, with Mykytiuk, Lysytska, and Melnikova (2020, 131), for instance, conceptualizing Facebook groups as “an educational platform for foreign language acquisition”.

Overall, there is a dearth of studies in linguistics and adjacent disciplines that actively consider groups as pieces of infrastructure which can be drawn on as resources for semiotic practices. This gap stems from the fact that the understanding of Facebook groups in the extant literature, by relying on metaphors of “space” and “community”, implicitly aligns and starts with the prescribed assumption that Facebook groups as a piece of software are *for* group formation. The present project aims to question such built-in assumptions of semiotic software, and therefore does not examine Facebook groups for their commonsensical “groupness”.

Specifically, in the present study my interest does not lie in Facebook groups as collections of people/users, or as spaces in which users congregate forming communities. Instead, as established earlier, I am interested in Facebook groups as a platform feature that is creatively taken up in particular semiotic practices. As their name suggests, Facebook groups are of course the prototypical “group feature” of Facebook, group features being

common tools offered by platforms that “allow participants to gather around shared interests” (boyd 2011, 45). Nevertheless, my goal is not to describe people groupings as defined by this infrastructure. In this sense, this project also breaks with the tradition of studying “online communities”, a very popular research subject since the Internet’s earlier days (e.g., Baym 1998; for overviews of relevant research, see Fernback 2007; Graham 2016).

Approaches to Facebook groups as collections of users coming together online may be seen as epistemologically relying on what Brubaker (2004) calls “groupism”, a view that reifies groups by commonsensically treating them as “putative things-in-the-world” (Brubaker 2004, 7). By contrast, this project’s understanding of group formations does not take these formations as a priori postulates, but as *results* of patterns of semiotic (and hence social) behavior (Blommaert 2019a; Procházka 2020). This does not mean that I shun Facebook groups as data collection sites altogether; much of this study’s data has been collected within Facebook groups, which comprise platform-enforced boundaries that I entertain due to my interest in their use (cf. Chapter 3, in which I present my choice of data collection sites). However, my epistemological stance does mean that, unlike in extant (linguistic) treatments of Facebook groups, I am not interested in describing semiotic practices *within certain groups*, or analyzing the semiotic practices of given Facebook users *as members of particular (Facebook-based) groups*. Rather, I start by analyzing users’ communicative practices (e.g., in comment-based interactions) and then trace how these practices come about in relation to a particular piece of infrastructure that is labelled “groups” by the platform that offers it (cf. Chapter 4). It is after this stage of the analysis that an argument could be made as to whether the patterns of semiotic practices I have observed may constitute an immanent group formation – which would still be understood loosely on the basis of convivial ties (Blommaert 2018). In a nutshell, this view of groups treats them not as defined by platform features or as “collections of human beings but [as] patterned sets of communicative behaviors and the relationships with which they are dialectically related” (Blommaert 2019b, 3, emphasis removed).

What this means practically for the present study is that its main priority is to analyze semiotic activity rooted in the software of Facebook groups, as well as the normative views that regiment said activity (cf. Chapter 5). Despite the software at hand (Facebook groups) being the main group feature of the platform, I do not take its implied normative idea of “groupness” as a point of departure. Rather, I treat the notion that the Facebook groups software is for or about “groups of people” as an assumption embedded in the platform, and in accordance with my critical view of social media as semiotic technology, I attempt to unpack and problematize it (cf. Chapter 6).

Finally, it must be noted that another approach to Facebook groups in studies of digitally mediated communication has consisted in them being used as methodological tools. KhosraviNik and Unger (2015) present a case study for which they set up a Facebook group as a focus group in order to explore political resistance practices and the debate that emerges on them. A related goal was to examine “the potential of a Facebook group as a site for data collection and [the potential of] a social media-based focus group of this kind as a research instrument” (KhosraviNik and Unger 2015, 218). Vik, DeGroot, and Lanterman (2022) also created a Facebook group explicitly for research purposes; namely, to allow participants (specifically, researchers who were also mothers in the Covid-19 pandemic) to interact amongst themselves in a private online setting for a collective (auto)ethnographic project. These treatments of the Facebook groups software still embrace an idea of Facebook groups as spaces for interaction, but they also actively put this idea to use in order to reflect on research instruments. This perspective is closer to my own *modus operandi vis-à-vis* data collection (cf. Chapter 3). I may be interested in Facebook groups as platform-based semiotic resources, but uses thereof, I argue, still need to be sought out – at least at an initial stage – within Facebook groups. This idea was the first step in conducting ethnographic work for this project, as I explain in Chapter 3.

To summarize, this study addresses a gap in the extant literature on Facebook groups-based communication by not treating relevant communicative phenomena as unfolding within – and thus, to some extent, owing their systematicity to – Facebook groups as given “spaces”. That is, the study rejects a programmatic view of Facebook groups as spaces or *de facto* communities. At the same time, by taking Facebook groups as an empirical starting point, the project also explicitly moves away from established profile-centric treatments of Facebook-mediated communication, which theorize Facebook as a dynamic, algorithmically configured context that has the user profile as its central point of reference. This course of action allows a more critical look at Facebook groups as platform features used in semiotic practices, which consciously does not align with assumptions built into Facebook’s software (namely, that Facebook groups are for “groups of people”, or that researchers should explore communication on the platform as centered around the user profile).

Still, a more practical delineation of this project’s scope is necessary: What *kind of* semiotic practices involving Facebook groups does this study focus on? The answer is: playful – or ludic – ones.

1.2.2. Facebook groups and ludic online practices

The present study is concerned with the deployment of Facebook groups in “fun-oriented” semiotic practices. This idea of “fun-oriented”-ness is theorized here as a matter of *play*, informed by Huizinga’s (1949) view on the cultural importance of play, or the *ludic*

elements of culture. According to his definition, play consists in structured activities that are spatiotemporally bound and “not serious”, seen as being “outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life” (Huizinga 1949, 26; Blommaert 2017). Ludic activities are, further, voluntarily engaged in, have community-building potential, and are “connected with no material interests” or profit (Huizinga 1949, 13).

Apart from its foundational influence for the field of game studies (cf. Mäyrä 2022), Huizinga’s (1949) theory and its uptake have also figured in studies of communication, and particularly communication on the Internet. Some early works in this vein made the case that many forms of online communication are intrinsically characterized by playfulness (e.g., Chayko 2008), for instance due to their interactive aspect, or the material dimension of mediatization that invites people to “fiddle” with tools (Danet 2001). As these examples suggest, this understanding of playfulness is not restricted to bona fide games. Rao (2008), for instance, has further argued that many Facebook applications which could not be categorized as games function to cultivate a “playful mood” on the platform, configuring it as a kind of (digital) “third place”. The concept of third places was introduced by Oldenburg (1999) to describe spaces which exist in addition to the “first” and “second” places in one’s life (the home and work, respectively) and constitute “socialization areas that allow the expression of the playful spirit proper to human nature” (Rao 2008, 10). More recently, Deumert (2014, 27) has argued that users on social media enact playful identities, geared towards fun or “creative enjoyment” through the construction of “a particular type of self, as well as a particular set of social relations: light-hearted and creative, enjoyable and full of possibilities”.

Against this research backdrop, this project approaches Facebook groups-based semiotic practices by scrutinizing things people do with Facebook groups for the purposes of “pure fun” or “interactive silliness” (Follett 2007, cited in Deumert 2014). That is, I am interested in what comes down to Facebook users “hanging out” (cf. Chayko 2008) on Facebook, and specifically relying on Facebook groups to do so. Below, I further specify what this focus entails by elaborating on the components of Huizinga’s (1949) definition of play introduced above. I discuss them in the following order: (a) play’s community-constructing function, (b) its structuredness, (c) people’s voluntary involvement in it, (d) the lack of material (i.e., profit-driven) motivations, (e) “unseriousness” (which, however, involves serious affective investment), and (f) the spatiotemporal boundedness of (online) play.

As regards community-building potential, virtually any activity involving Facebook groups can be argued to fulfil this criterion considering not only (or not so much) that Facebook groups are a group feature of their platform but, more generally, that participation in social media interactions fosters phatic attachments with other users (Blommaert 2017): People are (digitally) co-present, using the same medium (maybe the same exact resources from

it, too), and they ratify each other's semiotic conduct by accepting it and expanding on it (cf. Goodwin 2013). Procházka's (2020) study of a Facebook meme page elaborates on this aspect of community formation through playfulness by explicitly relating Internet memes to Huizinga's notion of play. This also aligns with the epistemological view on group formation adopted here (cf. Section 1.2.1): We can point to groups forming only around patterns of social practices.

Speaking of patterns, ludic activities are also structured, in that there is order to them, as also shown by Procházka (2020) for Facebook-based practices in his study of ludic normativity on a Facebook meme page. Further, voluntary engagement in Facebook groups-based activities – another aspect of Huizinga's definition – can also be presumed, particularly when no profit motives are attached.

It is this lack of profit-related motivations in ludic activities that makes them of particular relevance in this project's wider context. On a practical level, focusing on ludic uses of Facebook groups means not focusing on any practices by actors that seek material gain from them (e.g., businesses self-promoting through Facebook groups). More importantly, however, this is a choice to explore things that people do for fun and for free (i.e., without being paid), using the software of a platform that offers it for profit. This fundamental disalignment between the interests of the platform's owners and those of the platform's avid users is at the core of this study's critical angle. My project involves very active Facebook users, who spend and have spent considerable amounts of time interacting through and with the infrastructure of Facebook groups, building strong affective backgrounds to their semiotic practices. Yet, while their socialization on Facebook, and possibly the cultural capital that it nets them, does not translate to monetary gain for them, it does so for the platform whose engagement they are boosting. Users' affect – broadly, the *fun* that comes from their investment in play – is both the driving force behind their actions (cf. Dean 2010) and what maintains the platform they are using.

As far as users' investment is concerned, it must also be noted that Huizinga's idea of play does not diminish this aspect. His definition of ludic practices may frame them as “not serious”; yet, as Blommaert (2017, 4) notes, “ludic practice is *serious* practice” (original emphasis). For one, ludic practices involve some form of learning, which is related to people's dedication. In this sense, the group formations that obtain on social media as a result of play

do not prevent intense and profoundly focused forms of attachment. The experience of freedom and authenticity, and the absence of obvious “normal” forms of usefulness and efficiency might, on the contrary, precisely contribute to the sometimes phenomenal investments made by members in their attachments to such groups.

(Blommaert 2017, 4)

According to Frissen and her colleagues (2015), the characterization of ludic activities as “not serious” in the English version of Huizinga’s text (cf. Huizinga 1949, 13) – and its potential misunderstandings – may be owed to a mistranslation of the original Dutch phrasing “niet gemeend”, which literally translates to ‘not meant’ (Frissen et al. 2015, 41). What is actually *gemeend* in that passage is that ludic activities are not meant in earnest (ibid.). That is, ludic practices involve a layer of pretending, an “as-if” quality, which can also be understood through the Goffmanian notion of keying (Goffman 1986, 45–52) as a “play frame” (cf. Bauman and Briggs 1990; Procházka 2020). It is in this sense that play is “outside and above the necessities and seriousness of everyday life” (Huizinga 1949, 26).

Even if it were to be argued that ludic practices involve, on the level of affect, some sort of “unseriousness” or frivolity (which some may well do), this would not pose a challenge for my aims here. Indeed, many of the uses of Facebook groups I have observed seem to have some kind of comedic value for the users who favor them (cf. Chapter 5, Example 5.1). Two points must be made in this regard. First, while joking can play a large role in play, this project does not analytically approach the humorous nature of the communicative practices observed. The practices that are viewed here as ludic may also incidentally be humorous, but their jocular function is not under investigation. In other words, my goal is to examine practices that are undertaken *for fun*, not practices that are *funny*, although some “for-fun” practices may very well be funny too. Second, my focus on apparently frivolous semiotic conduct is not at odds with my critical orientation, as CDS can concern itself with virtually any subject, regardless of its serious appearance or lack thereof, as any topic is amenable to critical examination (Unger, Wodak, and KhosraviNik 2016).

The final point that remains to be discussed from Huizinga’s definition of playful practices is their spatiotemporal boundedness. Blommaert (2017, 3) illustrates this boundedness with contemporary examples, such as the concept of “me time” as “a segment of time spent on ludic, non-work activities”. Applied to the use of Facebook groups, I operationalize this notion as a focus on groups that do not have “offline” antecedents. This is not to suggest a strict division between online and offline life, or “digital dualism” (Jurgenson 2012), whereby the offline would also be seen as having some sort of primacy over the online. In fact, this project is steeped in an understanding of contemporary social life as unfolding in an online-offline nexus (Blommaert 2018) with porous boundaries between the online and the offline “plane”. For example, it must be recognized that the permeability of the spatiotemporal boundedness of online play is undermined by the availability of portable devices that afford translocal access to the ludic online environments at any time (Chayko 2008). So, any division between the online and the offline in this project is made purely for practical purposes.

In this case, despite Facebook being a platform on which relationships are often rooted in “offline” personal connections (Tagg and Seargeant 2016, 345), networking with virtual strangers has always been understood as an additional opportunity provided by social media (boyd and Ellison 2007, 211; cf. Deumert 2014, 42–43). Focusing on this latter phenomenon, I am interested in Facebook groups that are not grounded in users’ social ties outside of Facebook, and I have chosen this focus in order to increase the sense of boundedness that goes hand-in-hand with ludic practices. The avid users of Facebook groups that I spoke to in this project’s interviews have various terms that capture the kind of groups I am interested in, including “meme groups” (cf. Chapter 6) – which also further supports the connection between playfulness and Internet memes noted by Procházka (2020).

In the end, the view of play I have presented here is meant to capture what I refer to in my dissertation’s title as users’ “social media life”. The term covers the diverse assemblage of people’s ludic practices in which social media play a central role, and which, by virtue of being ludic, are seen as somehow separate from other mundane aspects of one’s online-offline socialization. The personal significance that ludic activities have for those engaged in them additionally forms an affect-based bedrock for the concept of social media life, which I approach here with a focus on semiosis.

All in all, this dissertation hones in on Facebook groups-based semiotic practices which have a playful, or ludic, dimension. This choice serves both a practical goal – to narrow the study’s focus – and a more conceptually relevant one. It allows the problematization of social media engagement as a profit-generating enterprise for the purveyors of social media technologies, while considering user practices that are explicitly not for profit, but still highly meaningful as an aspect of people’s socialization. This can be rearticulated into a more general question that the project critically engages with: How is social media infrastructure imbued with meaning by users who use it avidly “just for fun” and thus have no material gains from it but simultaneously generate profit for the platform owners through their engagement? This question comes full circle to the beginning of this chapter, which stressed the importance of social media technologies as mediators of human actions that embody the business interests of megacorporations.

Having now sketched both the research context and the scope of this project’s investigations, one thing remains for this introduction to do, and that is, to present the concrete empirical phenomena I will be examining within the frame outlined above. In the following section, I thus outline the project’s three main research questions, introduced with the help of pre-theoretical descriptions of the concrete phenomena that they set out to explore.

1.3. Empirical focus and research questions

This dissertation tries to solve three empirical puzzles: (a) understand a type of semiotic artifacts called “tag groups” by users, which represent a creative repurposing of the Facebook groups infrastructure; (b) explore users’ views on the practice that gives rise to these artifacts, which I call “group tagging”; (c) interrogate Meta’s publically endorsed perspectives on Facebook groups’ nature and purpose juxtaposed to the perception of Facebook groups by users who engage in group tagging. Each of the study’s research questions relate to one of points (a)–(c).

Beginning with tag groups, to understand what they are and why they are relevant to my study, some preliminary clarifications on the mechanics of using Facebook groups in general are in order. Facebook’s user interface allows one to create a new Facebook group within a few clicks. A Facebook group is a structure that other users can join by visiting its landing page and requesting to join through a dedicated button. Group creators – who become the group’s administrators (or admins) – effectively are the users with most authority over running the group. For example, they can formalize gatekeeping mechanisms by setting membership questions that prospective members will have to answer if they want to be admitted. (Of course, groups may also be less selective given that the privileges that group membership affords vary across “private” and “public” groups, as I explain in Chapter 3.) Having become members, users typically can make posts to the group’s audience and, in general, interact within this space. Admins can enlist the help of other users for running the group – by making them fellow admins or moderators (mods) – if the group gets too populous and hence it becomes laborious to enforce group-specific norms. All of these functions point to the platform’s standard conception of Facebook groups as its “group feature” (boyd 2011) in which people can come together if they have something in common – and thus build “communities”.

Tag groups seem to shake up these assumptions. A tag group is a Facebook group that has been created not primarily in order to be joined so that users can establish connections with other users by interacting *within a space*. Instead, the *raison d’être* of tag groups seemingly is – as the term suggests – to be *tagged* in interactions on the platform. When a group is tagged using Facebook’s tagging function, this creates a hyperlink redirecting to the tagged content (in this case, the group’s landing page). The name of the group thus appears in this hypertextual format that makes it stand out among other utterances typed in plain text. In the Facebook app, this consists in the group’s name appearing in blue font; in Facebook’s browser version, the name appears in bold. So, in creating tag groups, users seem to be availing themselves of the Facebook groups infrastructure in order to use it as a distinct interactional resource. This has observable consequences. The name of tag groups, for instance, is not supposed to first and foremost inform users about what the space that these

Facebook groups create is thematically focused on, as would presumably be the case for bona fide groups. It is instead primarily made for functioning as an utterance, a “line” that can be used in interactions by tagging the group.

An obvious question that arises then – as with many playful online practices that require subcultural knowledge to understand – is: Why do users go through all this trouble? Why create Facebook groups in order to use them in a way that is not the “standard” one? Why take an infrastructure made for creating spaces that people can congregate in and use it primarily *not* for this purpose? These questions fundamentally relate to the issue of users’ agency seemingly clashing with the assumptions embedded within the semiotic software they are using – which, as established, serve the platform owners’ interests.

To explore these wider concerns, I begin this dissertation’s empirical analyses by examining how users’ actions lead to Facebook groups being made into tag groups and being used interactively to produce coherent conversations. I articulate this concern more formally in my first research question (RQ1), which I address in Chapter 4:

RQ1: *How do users’ actions figure in the playful mobilization of the Facebook groups software as a communicative resource for coherent interactions on the platform?*

Because tag groups represent a telling case of users’ agency applied to the creative appropriation of platform infrastructure, my next analytical step pertains to examining agency as constructed in the users’ accounts of tag groups. I thus turn my attention to the practice from which tag groups result as artifacts. I call this practice “group tagging”, and I examine it through the users’ words by drawing on interviews I conducted with Facebook group aficionados, many of whom also administrate or moderate Facebook groups, and all of whom have experience with tag groups. My underlying interest, in line with my more general critical view of social media platforms, is to explore whether users view group tagging – i.e., a kind of Facebook group usage that is apparently not what platform developers intended – as an activity in which the users themselves are the main agentive parties. I specifically investigate the ways in which users articulate their agentivity at a discursive level. This interest is formulated in my second research question (RQ2), which I deal with in Chapter 5:

RQ2: *How do users seem to perceive and discursively construct their agency vis-à-vis practices that arise through the playful creative mobilization of Facebook groups?*

After examining group tagging and its products as an instance of semiotic practices that actively draw on the Facebook groups infrastructure, I turn to a broader interrogation of how this infrastructure is discursively imbued with meaning first by Meta, the company that owns it, and then by the avid Facebook group users I interviewed, who were all well-versed in group tagging. I do this by juxtaposing an analysis of public promotional texts on

Facebook groups from an official Meta website with an analysis of interview data illustrating the perspectives of interviewed administrators and moderators. The focus lies again on agency as a central issue that encapsulates the dynamics of platform mediation: In their engagement with Facebook groups, do users perceive the platform as an agentive party with particular interests? What seems to be the platform owners' official position on who "calls the shots" when interacting through and with this infrastructure? My analysis in Chapter 6 engages with these topics by addressing the project's third and final research question, articulated as follows:

RQ3: *How do users' discursive constructions of agency (theirs and the platform's) surrounding the routine use of Facebook groups compare with the discourse that Facebook's parent company Meta publically endorses for their product?*

The three questions presented here were developed over the course of my research engagement on Facebook in line with my broader critical interest in the interplay between platform mediation and user agency. In the next section, I provide a roadmap of the dissertation as a whole, illustrating how the structuring of the text presents my project's findings in an integrated way.

1.4. Overview of the dissertation

The main body of this dissertation begins with Chapter 2, which outlines the theoretical underpinnings of the project's analyses. This theoretical background involves a combination of concepts from (Digital) Conversation Analysis, approaches to multimodal discourse analysis, and a critical orientation informed by Critical Discourse Analysis. The chapter aims to reconcile these diverse theoretical strands and showcase their relation to the three stages in which my analysis unfolds, presented in Chapters 4, 5, and 6. Before delving into these empirical chapters, Chapter 3 presents the methodological framing of the study, which is understood as a digital ethnographic endeavor. The view of digital ethnography employed is discussed along with the main conceptual, practical, and ethical considerations that drove the data collection process in this project. Then, Chapters 4 through 6 represent the dissertation's three analytical units, and each includes further methodological notes on the diverse data sources that every individual analysis is based on.

As established above, Chapter 4 deals with tag groups, addressing RQ1. It firstly involves a micro-analytical treatment of an interaction that involves extensive use of tag groups, aiming to elucidate how coherence is established in "tag group conversations". Secondly, the chapter explores the semiotic principles that drive the construction of tag groups by drawing on an ad hoc corpus of tag group titles that display discernible patterns of form and content design.

Next, Chapter 5 introduces participants' perspectives on group tagging – i.e., the practice of creating and using tag groups. The analysis draws on the in-depth interviews I conducted with ludic Facebook group administrators, moderators, and aficionados. The main aim is to explore how users construct their own agency vis-à-vis group tagging, thereby addressing RQ2. My interviewees' explanations of tag groups are analytically approached through a combination of discourse analytical tools, which allow me to shed light on the discursive construction of users' involvement in the practice.

Having analyzed participants' views, in Chapter 6 I also introduce Facebook's (or Meta's) perspective on the imagined use and significance of the Facebook groups software. A multimodal discourse analysis of an official Meta website presenting Facebook groups to (prospective) administrators reveals a discursive framing of Facebook groups as a means for "community building", which involves a particular vision of users' agentive role in the implementation of said community building. This company-endorsed perspective is then juxtaposed to that of interviewed administrators and moderators in order to generate a comparative account responding to my third research question (RQ3 above). The comparison focuses in particular on how the function of *reporting*, which is used for content moderation in Facebook groups, is perceived.

Lastly, the implications of my analyses are cumulatively discussed in Chapter 7. In it, I summarize my findings and relate them to larger questions vis-à-vis the appropriation of social media technologies by users, user understandings of agency in their platform-based playful practices, and views of social media as businesses whose interests mediate users' fun on social media platforms. Chapter 8 concludes the dissertation with a reflection on the study's limitations and avenues for future research.

CHAPTER 2

THEORETICAL BACKGROUND: SOCIAL (INTER)ACTIONS, AFFORDANCES, AND CRITIQUE

We may like to imagine our theories as dispassionate statements evaluated through critical assessment, identifying false dichotomies and invented binaries in a gradual uncovering of something that may resemble ‘truth’. Yet they often also serve as identities that carry with them affective investments. Theory does more than theorise; theory is an abstraction that labels a way of acting and intervening in the world.

(Bollmer 2015, 97)

This chapter sketches out the theoretical backbone of this project, which integrates a number of perspectives on computer-mediated communication (henceforth CMC), or in a more socially situated sense “computer-mediated discourse” (Androutsopoulos 2006; cf. Akkaya 2014). A necessary starting point in presenting the theoretical views that inform my take on this subject is an acknowledgement of the problem-oriented conception of the present project. As a digital ethnographic study interested in both technological mediation and social practices involving digital infrastructure, this project has *people doing things with social media features* at its center. Stated broadly, within the wider conceptual framing introduced in Chapter 1, the “problem” in this regard is: How do people imbue a piece of semiotic technology with meaning, while the piece in question, Facebook groups, is owned, developed, and distributed by a megacorporation for profit?

Putting the problem first, the theoretical background that informs the study emerges as subservient to shedding light on this conundrum. This, in turn, de-prioritizes the choice of a particular discipline or distinct theoretical framework to inform the work. Situated in the inherently interdisciplinary space of critical discourse studies, this approach could be described as akin to what van Leeuwen (2005b) calls an “integrationist model” of interdisciplinarity. Accepting that “no single discipline can satisfactorily address any given problem on its own” (ibid., 8), this model suggests a view of particular disciplinary perspectives as *skills* that researchers can bring to bear on their empirical investigations. In this dissertation, for example, as I will present below, I draw on perspectives from (Digital) Conversation Analysis, approaches to multimodal discourse analysis (social semiotics and multimodal mediated theory) as well as Critical Discourse Analysis, all in a larger ethnographic frame. Each of these perspectives has been chosen in accordance with the analytical goals I set for this study as the ethnographic process unfolded, the underlying idea being that I could thus choose the best-suited approaches for the analytical tasks I was faced with.

Still, a few caveats are in order when conceptualizing one's study as interdisciplinary in this way. For decades now, interdisciplinarity has been a buzzword in fields like applied linguistics – in its German academia-centered sense (cf. Menz and Gruber 2001) – as well as in linguistic ethnography (Tusting and Maybin 2007). This openness to blurring boundaries between disciplines is not without its pitfalls. Particularly in studies run by one researcher alone rather than a team, there is the danger of adopting an “anything goes” attitude, which amounts to incorporating any perspectives that seem helpful, without serious regard for their onto- and epistemological compatibility (Weiss and Wodak 2003; van Leeuwen 2005b). This chapter is thus tasked with bringing together in an informed way the seemingly disparate threads that form my project's theoretical background.

Further, because theoretical perspectives were incorporated in relation to the project's particular empirical aims, a case can be made that there is a conflation here between “theory” and “methods”. I adopt Bal's (2002, 5) stance in this regard, whereby “interdisciplinarity in the humanities, necessary, exciting, serious, must seek its heuristic and methodological bases in *concepts* rather than *methods*” (original emphasis). In other words, by adopting an interdisciplinary, concept-driven mode of analysis, the theory presented here in many respects *is* methods. Further, it can be argued that the ethnographic framing of my study is a matter of theory as much as one of method under a conception of ethnography as a paradigm rather than a set of tools (Blommaert and Dong 2020). Acknowledging these caveats, I have chosen a more pragmatic way to present the conceptual foundations of my project by using this chapter to present the theoretical directions that drove my empirical work in each of the main analytical chapters of the dissertation (Chapters 4, 5, and 6). I will then introduce my conception of the ethnographic ethos that pervades this study in Chapter 3 as a matter of “methodology”.

Considering all this, the present chapter is structured with reference to the three main research questions that my dissertation deals with empirically, presented as RQ1–RQ3 in Chapter 1 and reproduced below for convenience, including in brackets the chapter devoted to each question:

- RQ1: *How do users' actions figure in the playful mobilization of the Facebook groups software as a communicative resource for coherent interactions on the platform?*
(Chapter 4)
- RQ2: *How do users seem to perceive and discursively construct their agency vis-à-vis practices that arise through the playful creative mobilization of Facebook groups?*
(Chapter 5)

RQ3: *How do users' discursive constructions of agency (theirs and the platform's) surrounding the routine use of Facebook groups compare with the discourse that Facebook's parent company Meta publically endorses for their product?* (Chapter 6)

A through line in these questions are the notions of the platform's *affordances* and the users' *practices* involving them. In what follows, I will track my adoption of these concepts through the different theoretical lenses that became salient over the course of my project. This presentation will ultimately lead to a gradual theoretical "fleshing out" of the backgrounds to RQ1–RQ3.

Starting with Section 2.1, I will first present Digital Conversation Analysis and its understanding of computer-mediated interactions as contingent on technological affordances, with special attention given to the notion of *coherence* in conversations as conceptualized for my empirical interests (i.e., analyzing interactions in which tag groups are used). I will then examine how I reconcile the framework of Digital Conversation Analysis with my interest in multimodal meaning making – which is informed by social semiotics (primarily) and multimodal mediated theory (complementarily) – especially with regard to a dynamic understanding of *multimodality* (Section 2.1.1) and a focus on *social actions* (Section 2.1.2). Next, in Section 2.2, I will introduce this project's notion of *practice*, which is informed by mediated discourse theory and regiments my understanding of social actions. Section 2.2.2 will present in particular my discourse analytical interest in the *recontextualization* of social practices. Finally, Section 2.3 will specify what makes my study "a *critical* discourse approach to Facebook groups", introducing this project's take on Critical Discourse Analysis with a particular focus on the notion of critique and what it means for the present study.

2.1. Affordances by way of Digital Conversation Analysis

Though developed for analyzing face-to-face interactions, Conversation Analysis (henceforth CA) has been applied to the study of CMC for decades, often aiming to examine the role of CMC in language learning (Negretti 1999; González-Lloret 2011; Tudini and Liddicoat 2017). Early studies adopted a deficiency paradigm for approaching technologically mediated interactions, which was a common tendency among early work on CMC more broadly (see, e.g., Reid 1993). CA treatments of CMC thereby focused on traits that differentiated digitally mediated exchanges from face-to-face conversations (e.g., coherence achieved without strict turn adjacency; Herring 1999), thereby implicitly conceptualizing face-to-face interactions as communication par excellence (Giles, Stommel, and Paulus 2017).

Over the years, CA research has moved away from this view, problematizing instead the appropriateness of using CA tools to analyze CMC (e.g., González-Lloret 2011; see Paulus, Warren, and Lester 2016; Meredith 2019). “Digital Conversation Analysis” (DCA) has thus been proposed as an emergent paradigm which relies on CA principles to examine the interactional organization of CMC, while acknowledging and overcoming relevant challenges by rethinking CA’s analytical tools (Giles et al. 2015; Giles, Stommel, and Paulus 2017; Paulus, Warren, and Lester 2016; Jucker 2021). For example, key concepts such as “turns” as analytical units have been problematized, particularly in light of the fact that many forms of digitally mediated communication come with their own units (e.g., posts, comments; Androutsopoulos 2013, 234).

Among the research foci that have emerged in the burgeoning field of DCA (for an overview, see Paulus, Warren, and Lester 2016), the establishment of coherence in digitally mediated conversation has also attracted some attention (e.g., Herring 1999), and is of particular interest for this study’s aims, as the first question my project poses concerns the utilization of Facebook groups (as tag groups) for the establishment of coherent interactions (see RQ1). Still, it must be noted that the notion of coherence – its definition and examination – is not the prerogative of any one framework (say, CA), but has been diversely theorized across studies in the (broadly conceived) field of pragmatics (for a collection of different perspectives, see the volume edited by Gruber and Redeker 2014).

In this project, I approach coherence as an intersubjectively established communicational achievement. That is, coherence is treated here as a user-based concept: “a general process of sense-making in which individuals engage whenever they communicate” (Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Blitvich 2012, 502). Coherence is thus collaborative, it is *something interactants do together*, and thereby differs from cohesion, which constitutes a textual property (Tanskanen 2006). In this sense, coherence is “more subjective, and communicators may perceive it in different ways” (ibid., 21). This user-based understanding of coherence is adopted here as it aligns both with this study’s ethnographic orientation (cf. Chapter 3) and with CA’s epistemological tenets rooted in ethnomethodology (Heritage 2001). In the wider context of this project’s focus, framing coherence as something interactants *do* together allows me, at a first level, to hone in on users’ *agency*, which is one of the two main parameters of social media communication problematized in the present study, the other being the material make-up of platforms, or their *affordances*.

This framing of coherence is related (though not identical) to the view of coherence adopted by Adami (2014), who also studied the use of platform affordances (YouTube video responses) for staging (in)coherent interaction. Adami’s (2014) understanding of coherence seems to lie closer to the notion of relatedness, but user-based considerations remain an

important heuristic for coherence in her analysis, too; for example, in cases where relatedness is inferred by users, so that “coherence is not sought for, except by those viewers who insist in finding clues for coherence, *if* interested in doing so” (Adami 2014, 253, original emphasis). My treatment of coherence rests principally on this idea of users’ interest in recognizing and thereby constructing coherent interaction. However, in an effort to strike a balance in exploring agency and platform structure both, I trace the establishment of coherence through users’ demonstrable actions taken to this effect while also viewing these actions as inescapably mediated by platform infrastructure.

This view, which I apply to interactions through Facebook comments, also aligns with the concerns of DCA treatments of Facebook comment-based conversation. Although most studies of how interactants maintain coherence in CMC have focused on chats, which are a form of quasi-synchronous communication (e.g., Garcia and Baker Jacobs 1999; Berglund 2009; Meredith and Stokoe 2014), asynchronous communication of the kind found in comment sections has also been studied in a CA vein. Frobenius and Harper (2015) and Farina (2018) in particular have analyzed such interactions on Facebook, showcasing that conversation-organizing mechanisms in Facebook comments “need to accommodate different systematic properties – or affordances if you prefer – to those available in, say, the context of verbal communication” (Frobenius and Harper 2015, 141). This is something users seem adept at, with Farina (2018, 179) noting that “patterns of organization [in responses to existing comments] align well with the affordances and limitations of the FB [i.e., Facebook] system”.

What statements like these show is that, even with a focus on users’ actions, the technological infrastructure mediating conversations can never be overlooked in CA treatments of digital talk-in-interaction. Indeed, the infrastructure’s role in the shaping of communicative practices has emerged as a key DCA concern in recent years (Hutchby 2014; Giles et al. 2015; Giles, Stommel, and Paulus 2017; Meredith 2017; Jucker 2021). Such research heavily leans on the notion of *affordances*, a term coined by psychologist James J. Gibson (1986), and popularized in CA scholarship through the work of sociologist Ian Hutchby (e.g., Hutchby 2001). Meredith (2017), for instance, shows how the concept of affordances can meaningfully complement DCA approaches to interactions on platforms like Facebook. She adopts a definition of affordances which is, in Hutchby’s (2014, 87) terms, “both *functional* and *relational*” (original emphasis): affordances allow or hinder particular user actions, but their functionality is not static or a given; rather, users’ actions in particular contexts co-determine what affordances come into play and how. This conception of affordances allows an examination of the “interplay between technologies and their users” (Giles, Stommel, and Paulus 2017, 5). It thereby avoids a technologically deterministic view of “media shaping language” (cf. Meredith 2017), which had underlain much early work in the study of Internet-based communication (Squires 2010). At the same

time, according to Meredith (2017), this view undercuts pure social constructionism by introducing considerations of materiality as a key component of the analysis.

Another aspect of the material make-up of communication rooted in what has been called “new media” for quite a while now is its multimodality. While all communication is multimodal, the digital technologies supporting online communication render multimodality ever harder to ignore (Kress 2015). Multimodal considerations are not absent from DCA treatments of CMC, though their articulation requires closer examination before it can be reconciled with the view of multimodality I adopt in this project.

2.1.1. Towards a view of multimodality

CA research has historically ventured into treatments of interaction as multimodal (see Deppermann 2013). Charles Goodwin’s work has been particularly influential in introducing multimodal concerns to CA by putting forth an understanding of human interaction as involving a variety of semiotic resources besides “talk”, including gesture, gaze, and posture, which are brought to bear in situated ways (e.g., Goodwin 2000). However, when considering the relevance of CA treatments of multimodality to the present study’s broader theoretical conception, two issues arise: (a) CA lacks a committed, integrative framework for multimodal analysis, and (b) the typical CA approach to multimodality focuses heavily on embodied semiotic work in a way that ontologically prioritizes face-to-face conversation.

Firstly, multimodal analysis in a CA vein takes language as “the departure point” for analysis (Geenen, Norris, and Makboon 2015, 12). Conversation analysts have historically tended to prioritize the examination of speech isolated from its multimodal context, for example in early studies of telephone calls, wherein the data “was designed to eliminate the complexities of non-vocal behavior from the analysis of interaction” (Heritage 1984, 240). In more recent CA work, the idea of the primacy of the linguistic has seemingly remained embedded in the approach, as evident in the use of terms like “paralanguage” in DCA, or the characterization of contemporary digital communication as “increasingly multimodal”, implying that there is novelty to the multimodal nature of human interactions in digital environments (Meredith 2019, 252). According to Deppermann (2013), the great variety of existing approaches to multimodality can render the accommodation of multimodal analysis in CA challenging, while CA itself lacks its own precise criteria for what may or should (not) count as a distinct “modality” or “mode”. As this project programmatically puts forth a view of human communication as inherently multimodal, a more theoretically informed treatment of multimodality must supplement the CA view as adopted here. The existence of varied approaches to multimodal discourse analysis is seen not as a problem but as an opportunity in this regard.

Secondly, CA's focus on multimodal semiotic work as primarily embodied presents a challenge for analyzing digital communication. On the one hand, beyond the study of face-to-face interaction as a multimodal affair within CA (e.g., Goodwin 2013), the multimodal nature of digital communicative practices has also drawn interest in DCA (Giles et al. 2015; Paulus, Warren, and Lester 2016; Jucker 2021). Even when studies are not multimodally oriented (or indeed, do not mention multimodality as a concept at all), acknowledgements of how digital communicative data are ostensibly more than merely "linguistic" are common. Herring (1999), for example, argues that CMC is both "less" and "*more*" than *speech*, while Farina (2018) acknowledges that Facebook posts and comments may have "different formats" by virtue of including not only linguistic texts but also (or sometimes exclusively) images or hyperlinks. On the other hand, DCA approaches appear to treat multimodal semiosis in digital environments as necessarily reflecting embodiment rooted in face-to-face communicative practices. In their study of GIFs, for example, Tolins and Samermit (2016, 75) analyze these moving images as "depictions of the embodied actions of others as stand-ins", based on an idea of face-to-face embodied conduct being "transferred" to the digital plane (cf. Jucker 2021). Without disputing the merit of this approach to GIFs in particular, it must be acknowledged that this angle makes it challenging to address the phenomenological complexity of multimodal semiosis as observed in digital spaces, where the relationship of semiotic practices to patterns of embodied conduct tied to face-to-face interactions is mostly blurred, if at all relevant (Meredith 2019). Jucker (2021, 2) calls such challenging phenomena a "new multimodality" that is emerging on digital media.

This project treats such phenomena as regular multimodality, which may however require analytical tools that are extraneous to DCA. To be more precise, an account is necessary for communicative resources and concomitant practices that are found in CMC and *have a digital origin*, rather than being adapted or transferred ("recontextualized" sensu Jucker 2021, 4) from face-to-face interaction to CMC. The lack of tools for this is an important limitation of DCA considering my study's empirical foci. For example, the use of Facebook groups technology in Facebook comment-based interactions (cf. RQ1) cannot plausibly be traced back to conversational practices rooted in embodied conduct. Digital communicative practices are, of course, also embodied, and can be approached beyond the level of the screen, in the physical settings in which they unfold (cf. Jones 2004). However, this particular angle is not one I adopt here (cf. Section 2.2.1) – nor is it indeed an angle that DCA would facilitate adopting.

Considering the challenges presented above, my project requires that DCA be complemented with a multimodal discursive approach that (a) has a programmatic view of communication as inherently multimodal, also providing clear definitions, and (b) allows a focus on multimodality in digital communication that is not framed primarily as a matter

of transferring face-to-face embodied communication strategies online. For such an approach, I rely on a combination of multimodal mediated theory (Norris 2004) and social semiotics, the latter of which also allows for a deeper dive into matters of materiality.

In multimodal mediated theory (henceforth MMT), “modes” are defined as “systems of mediated action” (Norris 2013a, 278). While a social semiotic view of modes would see them as semiotic resources which materially exist and have a primarily representational function (Kress 2010), MMT views modes as purely heuristic concepts (Norris 2013a; 2013b). From a social semiotic standpoint, we would classify written language, images, music, and layout as modes by virtue of them being socially shaped material resources for meaning-making that social actors avail themselves of. In MMT, these “things” comprise modes only insofar as they are being interacted with or acted through by social actors in ways that exhibit regularities. Given its roots in mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 1998), for MMT a mode is found in “the tension” between social actor and the mediational means they use (Norris 2013b, 155). As a result, in the MMT conception of modes we find a powerful heuristic for analyzing social action – a goal that is shared with more recent (offline) multimodal CA approaches (Goodwin 2013).

Further, concerning embodiment, rather than discarding the notion altogether when it would be admittedly easy to (e.g., when dealing with digital written conversation), MMT claims that even things that might have been considered “disembodied modes” (Norris 2004) like the writing or images found on a webpage, still bear some connection to the human body as modes (Norris 2013b). This is because, following the definition given above, written language on a webpage only becomes meaningful as a mode for analysis insofar as we see it as being interacted with or acted through by social actors, and that includes embodied actions: say, gaze direction and head movement for reading. The crucial difference from DCA here, and the opportunity that MMT offers, is that the actions that lead to the production and deciphering of written text for communication in digital spaces need not be defined as something rooted in how we communicate in face-to-face conversation.

Instead, when dealing with communicative practices clearly reliant on the affordances of a particular social media platform (e.g., Facebook’s group and tagging infrastructure), what the analysis needs to prioritize is a more careful multimodal discursive treatment of affordances, which remains in line with DCA’s principles.

2.1.2. Back to affordances: Between technology and social action

As introduced earlier, the “dual” view of affordances that DCA provides (as allowing/restricting action, but also being co-shaped by users in context) is in line with this study’s aim to avoid a technologically deterministic account, but at the same time also bring

to light the role of material, technological mediation. A combination of MMT and social semiotics as multimodal discursive approaches presents a promising direction for attempting such a balanced account.

Despite its primary focus on social action, MMT holds that different modes still have different affordances and it is vital that they be analytically considered (Norris 2013a, 284). Modes may be defined in “the tension” between social actor and mediational means, but the mediational means and/or representational systems at play in this tension still materially limit or enable action in particular ways. At the same time, by putting the spotlight on actions, MMT effectively underlines that affordances are not static, like DCA’s dynamic view of affordances does. In the example of using Facebook groups in conversation, one first observes that it is Facebook’s software itself that allows users access to these semiotic resources, but users themselves are in charge of the choices they make to use them. The resulting practice thereby results from users *doing things in context*, (inter)acting with the software.

The notion of different modes sporting different affordances is a staple also in social semiotics (Kress 2010), which indeed pays increased attention to this idea. Specifically, social semiotics

strives to connect *the material resources available to people* with what *they are used to signify* in social contexts. Changes to these resources and how they are configured are therefore understood as significant for communication. Digital technologies are of particular interest to multimodality because *they make available* a wide range of modes, often in new inter-semiotic relationships with one another. They unsettle and re-make genres, and *they often reshape practices and interaction*.

(Jewitt 2016, 70, my emphasis)

So, where MMT focuses more on actions, social semiotics focuses on the material “stuff” that makes actions possible, leaning on the importance of material mediators, and effectively telling a story not of actors acting by using resources, but of *resources being used* in various contexts. This angle is advantageous for approaching digital technological infrastructure since, as Jewitt points out above, in a social semiotic view, it is (new) infrastructure that (re)shapes communication. In fact, the social semiotic study of semiotic technology explores exactly this view (Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018; Poulsen and Kvåle 2018) by examining “the possibilities and constraints of the technologies themselves and the semiotic work they allow for and invite” (Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018, 594).

This is not at odds with MMT’s views. The key difference here (apart from terminological, e.g., surrounding the concept of modes) is one of focus. Social semiotics stresses material “possibilities and constraints” (Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018, 594) and “how they

are used to signify in social contexts” (Jewitt 2016, 70), where MMT stresses actions taken through mediational means, still acknowledging that acting is subject to material constraints. Both ends of the spectrum (technology shaping action and actors acting with technology) are recognized as valid in both approaches; the difference is which end of the spectrum each approach sets up its camp closer to, so to speak. As a result, a principled combination of analytical tools from these approaches is well-suited for an account that tries to shed light on both sides of the issue while maintaining a balance. If social semiotics were not taken on board, the role of technology could not be adequately interrogated, which is one of the main goals of this project. If, in turn, MMT were not part of the approach, the unpacking of users’ actions that go into the use of semiotic software would lack a consistent terminological apparatus.

Finally, an important commonality between social semiotics and MMT, which is germane to the present treatment of technological affordances, is the recognition that material constraints are themselves socially shaped. MMT holds that modes (as systems of mediated actions) and the cultural tools or mediational means involved in them are “made by social actors for social actors’ use” (Norris 2013a, 278). Likewise, technological infrastructure is seen in social semiotics as itself a product of design (Poulsen and Kvåle 2018). As also explained in Chapter 1, social media platforms like Facebook are themselves designed by social actors with particular *interests* (Kress 2010) and their subsequent use by other social actors is not divorced from that design. This means that social media are critically viewed as techno-cultural constructs imbued with ideology. For this reason, the incorporation of a social semiotic approach to the study of digital infrastructure here is essential to more clearly attain the study’s critical angle by framing technological infrastructure as socio-historically shaped.

In the end, the theoretical background sketched out so far, starting from DCA and ending in multimodal discourse analysis, informs the way I approach my project’s first research question:

RQ1: *How do users’ actions figure in the playful mobilization of the Facebook groups software as a communicative resource for coherent interactions on the platform?*

On the one hand, DCA provides an adequate framework for approaching what “coherent interactions” might mean while taking into account how the platform’s affordances play into the establishment of these interactions. On the other, social semiotics allows a more informed approach to Facebook groups as semiotic resources, and MMT enables a closer look into the actions that go into the mobilization of these resources.

Next, I will be providing additional qualifications to the notion of “mobilization of resources” by introducing the notion of practice and its dynamic relationship to materiality as examined in this project.

2.2. Mediation means and (recontextualized) practices

It all starts with affordances again. In Hutchby’s (2001) take on the concept introduced above, the role of technological mediation is framed less as a static matter of possibilities and constraints and more as a dynamic affair that involves the users and the choices they make in mobilizing techno-cultural tools. The underlying idea is phrased by Jones (2020, 205) as follows:

as much as our tools shape us, this shaping is not determinative. It’s not determinative first because human beings have the ability to be reflective about their tool use and to imagine different kinds of outcomes under different circumstances, and second, because we almost always have more than one tool available to us, and are able to combine different tools in ways that allow us to play the constraints of one tool off against the affordances of another. [...] affordances come not just from what tools allow us to do but also from what we are able to do with those tools.

This suggests that an active consideration of users’ agency is required when examining how platform-specific practices like those surrounding Facebook groups are rendered meaningful. In what follows, I outline how users’ agency in using communicational tools can be actively considered through the lens of mediated discourse analysis.

2.2.1. Appropriating mediational means

Mediated discourse analysis (Scollon 2001), the central theoretical precursor to MMT, captures the involvement of social agents with cultural tools through the concept of *mediational means*. Drawing on Wertsch’s (1998) work in psychology, mediated discourse analysis (henceforth MDA) approaches discourse as “*a matter of social actions*” (Scollon 2001, 6, original emphasis), and treats all actions as *mediated* actions in order “to highlight the unresolvable dialectic between action and the material means which mediate [it]” (Scollon 2001, 4). The term “mediational means” is therefore coined to refer not simply to the “material means” (ibid.) involved in mediated actions (physical objects, bodies, etc.) but rather to the psychological representations of cultural tools, as integrated in the actor’s *habitus* (Jones and Norris 2005). Cultural tools (such as pen and paper, a coffee mug, or indeed Facebook groups infrastructure) generally predate their users, and they come with their own histories, which shape their meaning potentials in Halliday’s sense (Scollon 2001); yet, they develop into mediational means proper only when they are picked up and used by social actors in certain circumstances, and thereby come to be understood in particular ways. In technical terms, we call a cultural tool a mediational means “when it is

appropriated within a specific *practice* by being used in a concrete social *action*” (Scollon 2001, 138, my emphasis).

Some clarifications concerning the highlighted terms in that quote are in order here. The term “action” in MDA refers to one-off events, things people do in real time, always through some cultural tools (as all social actions are mediated). For example, me typing this text by hitting keys on my keyboard right now, at 4:03 PM on this particular Thursday in my office, is an action. A “practice” is “an action with a history” (Norris 2013a, 276). That is, the concept of practice is used to bring the aspect of social structure into our account of social actions: repeated actions make up recognizable, historically solidified, practices. Social actions, then, are “only interpretable within practices” (Scollon 2001, 4): my typing on this keyboard right now, as a concrete one-off action, “makes sense” as an instantiation of the practice of writing one’s dissertation. The action of typing on a computer keyboard would mean something fundamentally different if I was doing it in different circumstances: in my job as a secretary at a doctor’s office, my typing would perhaps acquire meaning within the practice of me doing a new patient intake; while playing an intense multiplayer video game, typing on my keyboard could be instantiating the practice of “flaming” teammates.

So, one cannot study material “stuff” – e.g., a keyboard or a function of Facebook’s platform – as mediational means in a decontextualized manner; because the stuff only is a mediational means insofar as people make use of it in concrete events (in *actions*), which are materializations of historically established “things one does” (*practices*). In Scollon’s (2001, 138) words, “the analysis of mediational means as isolated entities is an absurdity. It is very difficult to imagine what might be the result of positing crayons [Scollon’s example in that text] as a mediational means in some *a priori* fashion and then setting about to find out just how and when they might be used” (original italics). Instead, one has to look at how social actors develop the material stuff into mediational means “over time within the habitus as an aspect of practice” (Scollon 2001, 116). In technical terms, this process is called *appropriation* of cultural tools.

All in all, the theoretical conception of mediational means in MDA as presented above provides an illuminating theoretical framing for examining social platform infrastructure in its historicized use by people in locally meaningful ways – i.e., its appropriation. While I adopt this angle in my account, the empirical focus of my study breaks with the tradition of MDA in one major way.

To do mediated discourse analysis, one has to look at social actors engaging in mediated actions in a contextualized manner, as MDA integrates context into our accounts of social actions (the things people fleetingly do in particular settings) through the notion of practices (Scollon 2001, 4). Studies in this tradition therefore involve data that amount to

observations of people doing things *in real time*, taking “real-time mediated action” as the unit of analysis (Johnston 2004, 119, emphasis removed). For example, Johnston (2004) relied on videotaped data to examine mediational means as contributing to the production of identities in a face-to-face adversarial interview with the US Immigration and Naturalization Service. Studies concerned specifically with digitally mediated communication involve similar empirical decisions. Jones (2005) examined the mode-switching practices of users in a gay chat room by involving “participant-researchers” and their computer records, thereby gaining insight into aspects such as the temporal flow of users’ interactions with multiple chat partners simultaneously. In another example, Geenen’s (2017) study of video-conferencing practices included screen-recording data as well as video recordings of the interactants, made in the physical space in which they were video-calling from. Using a term that Jones (2004, 25) adopts from Goffman, Geenen thereby also examined the *Umwelt*, i.e., the environment “beyond the screen”, which can be a vital empirical pursuit for understanding digital communicative practices in discourse analytical work, too.

This study, however, comprises no similar real-time data, working instead with screen-based observations in the form of screenshots and (online) interview data. From a MDA perspective, this suggests that my treatment of users appropriating platform tools cannot take “real-time mediated actions” as an empirical object of inquiry. In the language of MMT, observations from my screenshots could be treated as *frozen actions* instead (Norris 2013a). Ntouvlis and Geenen (2023) indicate that a treatment of digital texts as bundles of frozen actions combined with interview data can be revealing of the texts’ identity-constructing dimension in the context of digital literacies and their concomitant Discourses (Gee 2008b). However, this angle has its limitations. Namely, while it provides a way to approach semiotic practices crystallized in textual products, thereby reflecting identity work in which the performance of a “literate” persona plays a key role (Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023), it only partially allows illuminating the media ideologies (Gershon 2010) surrounding the practices examined. Media ideologies are best identified in metasemiotic narratives, which the semistructured interviews I have used in this project were designed to elicit. I thereby focus on these interviews more closely. In other words, given this study’s design, I find the most revealing course of action here to be the examination of *the ways in which interviewees speak about* their experiences appropriating the tools provided by Facebook.

This empirical endeavor is, thus, less of an examination of practices in a *contextualized* manner (which would require some real-time data from a mediated discourse perspective), and more of a study of practices *recontextualized* in people’s accounts of them.

2.2.2. Practices, recontextualized: A critical discursive approach

While a study closely sticking to the agenda of MDA would approach Facebook groups-based practices as they unfold through actions (i.e., examining people *doing the thing*), this study approaches such practices through the way in which they are described by their doers (i.e., examining people *talking about the thing*). The theoretical contribution of MDA remains vital for capturing how techno-cultural tools can be understood as meaningful due to their appropriation by people who are socialized using them. However, the way in which this appropriation is empirically approached in this project relies on analyzing people's *accounts of* "socialized tool use", which are telling when it comes to uncovering the discursive underpinnings of tool appropriation. Tapping into this potential of users' accounts to reveal ideological undercurrents is possible through a view of discourse as "the recontextualization of social practice", as put forth by van Leeuwen (2008).

This practice-oriented view of discourse relies on the foundational assumption that "all texts, all representations of the world and what is going on in it, however abstract, should be interpreted as representations of social practices", so that we can analyze those representations "for the way they draw on, and transform, social practices" (van Leeuwen 2008, 5). The term "discourse" is used in this approach in a Foucauldian sense to mean not "longer stretches of language", but "'a socially constructed knowledge of some social practice,' developed in specific social contexts" (ibid., 6). On this basis, the approach examines *texts* to uncover *discourses*. At its core, van Leeuwen's (2008, 6) central argument is this:

As discourses are social cognitions, socially specific ways of knowing social practices, they can be, and are, used as resources for representing social practices in text. This means that it is possible to reconstruct discourses from the texts that draw on them.

At first glance, van Leeuwen's framework seems like what Carpentier (2017, 15–16) would call a "macro-textual" approach to discourse that takes a "discourse-as-ideology" route, whereby "the focus is placed on the meanings, representations, or ideologies embedded in the text, and not so much on the language used". The latter would be the focal point of "micro-textual" discursive approaches, which adopt a view of "discourse-as-language" (Carpentier 2015, 15). Yet, van Leeuwen's approach retains a focus on language (and semiosis, more generally)¹ albeit less strongly than other linguistic traditions of Critical Discourse Analysis and other approaches to discourse studies that adopt the concept of recontextualization, as I explain below.

¹ The approach and its analytical tools are explicitly conceived as "pan-semiotic" (van Leeuwen 2008, 25) and have been developed also for the analysis of, for example, visual meaning making (see, e.g., van Leeuwen 2008, chap. 8; 2017). The programmatic acknowledgement of communication as a multimodal affair is also present in MDA (Scollon 2001).

Namely, van Leeuwen's framework does not take linguistic categories or processes (e.g., transitivity, passive agent deletion) as a starting point, but instead presents "critical, sociosemantic categories" for describing representations, which may in turn be connected to particular linguistic (and more broadly, semiotic) "realizations" (van Leeuwen 2008, 56). For example, the framework draws attention to the *deagentialization* of social actions (a sociosemantic category introduced), whereby actions are represented as if "impervious to human agency" (van Leeuwen 2008, 66). A subcategory of deagentialization is *existentialization*, which involves an action being represented as a thing that "simply exists". Existentialization can, in turn, be linguistically realized in English through existential clauses beginning with "there" (e.g., "there is"). The applicability of van Leeuwen's approach, then, lies in these sociosemantic analytical inventories with concepts like deagentialization and existentialization, which phenomenologically boil down to linguistic forms that we can point to, such as existential clauses. All things considered, this discourse analytical framework's interest in discourse-as-ideology realized through semiosis and examined by way of sociosemantic categories may render the approach better qualifiable as "meso-textual" (Carpentier 2017) in its level of granularity.

Such a meso-textual discursive approach allows us to trace the media ideologies regimenting practices that involve Facebook groups by examining how these practices are represented in the interviewees' words (treated as "texts"). I have previously argued for an understanding of the term "practice" in Scollon's (2001) tradition, so that my account can retain MDA's focus on mediation and its agent-centric view of mediational means, which is useful for my analysis of platform infrastructure in non-deterministic terms. As van Leeuwen's (2008) discourse analytical framework is now brought to the fore due its relevance for my empirical approach, the question of the onto- and epistemological compatibility of the two frameworks unavoidably arises.

At the ontological level, the understandings of "practice" in the two frameworks share a common intellectual origin and therefore have an actionable similarity at the ontic level. Among other theoretical influences, both approaches rely on Bourdieu's sociological tradition "taking practice, not theory, as the milieu of social action" (Scollon 2001, 6), whereby social structure is legitimized by a view of history as a *fait accompli* (van Leeuwen 2008, 20–21). Practically, van Leeuwen's "social practices" are made up of sequences of actions, much like Scollon's, and are ultimately defined as "socially regulated ways of doing things" (van Leeuwen 2008, 6) in that social norms govern their execution. This underlines practices' social dimension as their defining property, which echoes the definition of practices in MDA as "actions with a history". In other words, in both approaches, saying "practice" is a way of saying "actions, but make it social".

From an epistemological standpoint, MDA tackles real-time social actions in context with a key portion of its interest devoted to the issue of learning as a phenomenon on the “intramental plane”, aiming to “theorize more clearly the relationship between human psychological process and social structure through the focus on mediated social action” (Scollon 2001, 9). These concerns fall beyond the scope of my study, a fact which is programmatically recognized in my choice of data that do not qualify as “real-time” data fit for MDA. Van Leeuwen’s (2008) critical discursive approach grants a more social orientation to my analysis. While MDA’s key tenets are taken on to inform my understanding of digital platform features as mediational means, the bulk of my analytical aims is more socially geared, looking at semiosis to make claims about social phenomena. Tweaking my approach’s orientation towards the social by bringing in appropriate tools does not fundamentally contradict the theoretical interests and insights of MDA, which serve here as a complementary piece in the study’s theoretical backdrop.

Finally, some qualifications are in order concerning the levels by which the object of my analysis (interview data) is removed from the practices involving Facebook’s semiotic software that I am interested in. Following van Leeuwen’s (2008) discursive approach, I treat people’s talk about these practices as *recontextualizations* of them. The term originates in Bernstein’s concept of recontextualization, which is viewed as a *transformative, recursive process* (van Leeuwen 2008, 12ff.). This can be explained as follows.

Starting from the element of transformativeness, I have already hinted at the fact that van Leeuwen takes recontextualizations as involving discursive understandings. This can be traced back to Bernstein’s original conception of recontextualization applied to pedagogic discourse (“discourse” meant here in a narrower, discourse-as-language sense), according to which “transformation takes place because every time a discourse moves from one position to another, there is a space in which ideology can play. No discourse ever moves without ideology at play. As this discourse moves, it is ideologically transformed: it is not the same discourse any longer” (Bernstein 1996, 47). In this sense, recontextualization is a transformative process because as things get recontextualized, ideology becomes a key component shaping their (re)representation.

Notice, however, how Bernstein refers to the recontextualization of “discourse” in a discourse-as-language sense – which I would now like to start calling *texts* or *semiotic actions* to avoid confusion – whereas I write of “things”. The concept of recontextualization has been adopted in various approaches to discourse studies, which according to Gruber (2024a) have consistently focused on the recontextualization specifically of texts (i.e., semiotic actions in various forms), problematizing formal and socio-pragmatic aspects (Gruber, Haugh, and Xie 2023). The term also crops up in relation to entextualization and decontextualization (Bauman and Briggs 1990), where its parallels to Goffmanian frame

analysis (cf. “reframing”) have also been noted (cf. also Linell 1998). An understanding of the transformative aspect of recontextualization is retained in these treatments, but always in relation to recontextualizing *semiotic* actions, often with notes on how they are contextually organized (e.g., in genres). Consider, for instance, Linell’s definition:

Recontextualization may be defined as the dynamic transfer-and-transformation of something from one discourse/text-in-context (the context being in reality a matrix or field of contexts) to another. Recontextualization involves the extrication of some part or aspect from a text or discourse, or from a genre of texts or discourses, and the fitting of this part or aspect into another context, i.e., another text or discourse (or discourse genre) and its use and environment.

(Linell 1998, 144–45, original emphasis)

By contrast, van Leeuwen’s understanding of recontextualization may refer to a transformation of not only semiotic but also *material, non-representational* actions. So, in this view, a practice (e.g., joining a Facebook group, doing the dishes) always involves actions, whether semiotic (e.g., reading, typing) or not (e.g., grabbing the sponge). Once it is talked about (or otherwise represented), the practice gets recontextualized via another, *recontextualizing* practice, which necessarily is a semiotic one. In this process, the recontextualized practice passes “through the filter of” the recontextualizing practice, which is replete with “tacit know-how” that communicators have (van Leeuwen 2008, 12–13). In this sense, if I tell my supervisor about how I did my dishes instead of writing up this chapter of my dissertation, the recontextualizing practice (the narration of me doing the dishes) contains embedded within it the (non-representational) recontextualized practice (the doing of the dishes) *transformed* in some way. For example, I may say “and then the dishes needed doing”. This would amount to a *deagentialization* of the action of doing the dishes, which downplays my agency by *backgrounding* my involvement as an actor (I may be present elsewhere in my narration, but nowhere in relation to the act of doing the dishes). It is in this sense that recontextualization is a transformative process of not only semiotic actions in van Leeuwen’s framework.

Briefly returning to ontological considerations, it may be noted that, under a strong reading, this framework could be seen as assuming a pre-discursive reality for actions. That is, by stressing that we can examine discourse *once social actions have been recontextualized*, we may effectively be assuming a pre-discursive ontology for actions themselves, whereby actions are “just” done, carried out materially “out there”, and discourse only comes into play in our recontextualizing practices. I do not follow this strong reading, instead viewing actions – even material, non-representational actions – as rendered meaningful through discourse. This is in line with the MDA perspective I adopt, whereby “social action and discourse are inextricably linked”, though not in obvious ways – which is precisely what requires unpacking in MDA (Scollon 2001, 1). In Scollon’s view, as explained earlier,

actions acquire social meaning as practices – a concept which brings the actions’ social history into the equation. On a deeper level, I adopt here the materialist ontological position that all material actions as well as material “stuff” only become meaningful through discourse (Carpentier 2017). This intrinsic link between the material and the discursive is termed “the discursive-material knot” by Carpentier (2017), who goes on to qualify the relationship between the two as a messy, non-hierarchical one (cf. also Carpentier 2022). This view from “pure theory” – rooted in Laclau and Mouffe’s (1985) Discourse Theory in Carpentier’s case – could be argued *ad infinitum* for anything material. This is why it is necessary to posit some stability at the ontic level by starting with “social actions” that one does not deconstruct further in the same breath that one analyzes their recontextualization. This is what van Leeuwen’s (2008) framework allows me to do. Examining, say, how an interviewed user represents their action of joining a Facebook group thus does not entail that I view said action as a pre-discursive fact. In fact, both a social semiotic view of semiotic technology (Poulsen and Kvåle 2018) and an MDA perspective would point – in complementary ways – to how “joining a Facebook group” is highly mediated and fraught with discursive understandings regarding how the technology in question has been designed, how the social actor at hand has integrated its use into their habitus, and so on.

It is in these terms that I engage with users’ practices as “transformed” through recontextualization. A final point that remains to be made in this regard is that recontextualization is also a recursive process (van Leeuwen 2008). If we take the practice of creating a Facebook group as an example, we can say that some of my participants in this project have recontextualized the practice by telling me about it in interviews. In this dissertation’s text, I am, in turn, recontextualizing their recontextualizations. This twice-removed recontextualization may then be recontextualized again in a comment by my supervisor on the dissertation’s text that deals with interviewees’ statements on creating Facebook groups. In fact, the very practice of creating Facebook groups, by involving semiotic actions like giving the groups a title, can itself constitute a recontextualizing practice in the first place. (This latter observation would apply to the group titles I analyze in Chapter 4.)

In the end, the combination of insights from MDA with a view of discourse as recontextualized social practice allows me to study Facebook groups-related practices through participants’ accounts of them in a way that can provide answers to this project’s second research question, as introduced earlier:

RQ2: How do users seem to perceive and discursively construct their agency vis-à-vis practices that arise through the playful creative mobilization of Facebook groups?

Since the recontextualization of practices involves “tacit know-how” that the recontextualizing parties are not actively aware of, an examination of interviewed users’ statements concerning their Facebook practices can bring relevant discourses to light,

particularly with regard to how they construct agency for themselves – my specific empirical focus. By combining this discourse analytical view of recontextualization with views from MDA, I am also able to understand the practices at hand as part of the users’ social experiences with the platform’s infrastructure, which lead them to appropriate features like Facebook groups in creative ways for fun.

At this point, given that the theoretical angle presented above is framed as a *critical* discourse analytical one, a salient issue remains to be elaborated. Namely, in what sense is my study’s approach is “critical”?

2.3. Critical Discourse Analysis: “Critical” how?

To explain why this dissertation is subtitled “a *critical* discourse approach to Facebook groups”, a first step would be to go over two main research directions that this project can be said to be informed by; namely, a critical discourse-oriented view of social media, and the field of Critical Discourse Analysis.

A purposely broader term than “Critical Discourse Analysis”, critical discourse studies, or CDS, as introduced in Chapter 1, constitute problem-oriented research, focusing on various forms of power imbalances and socio-political injustices that manifest and are constructed and reproduced in linguistic (or more broadly semiotic) conduct (Langer, Nonhoff, and Reisigl 2019b). Critical discourse approaches to social media in particular have taken shape in recent years with a variety of foci, such as: text diffusion trajectories and their uptake by various interpretive subjects, for example journalists (Jones and Li 2016; Bouvier 2019), practices of self-stylization and concomitant discourses purveyed through social media genres (Page 2012; 2019) or the provision and use of templates for semiotic activity in the form of social media features (Jovanovic and van Leeuwen 2018; Georgakopoulou 2021). As established in Chapter 1, an undercurrent of these diverse empirical pursuits is an understanding that social media platforms are not neutral facilitators of our communicative activities but must themselves be scrutinized in terms of how they reconfigure our semiotic practices (cf. KhosraviNik 2017; Bouvier and Machin 2018; Jones 2023). This understanding is inherently critical in the sense that it questions a view of constructs (in this case, social media) as “neutral”, reframing them as socio-historically shaped phenomena, which are therefore fraught with power relations.

This idea also forms the backbone of the present project, which empirically delves deeper into the matter by drawing – among other tools – on Critical Discourse Analysis (henceforth CDA). This term with this capitalization describes a broad field of linguistic and social scientific inquiry, which by and large originates in linguistics, though its subdisciplinary status therewithin has historically been (re)constructed in various ways (for a discussion of this, see Reisigl 2013). CDA being inherently interdisciplinary, its status as a brainchild of

linguistics is only mentioned here to the extent that it helps in understanding CDA as one of many traditions in the critical study of language.

At the same time, this bundling together of CDA into a unit is also a somewhat flattening shorthand (Nonhoff 2019, 16) in that it reifies the diverse and constantly evolving body of work done by a network of scholars, who agree on much but also bring different things to the table in terms of methods, goals, and theoretical inclinations (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011). As Blommaert (2005, 22) puts it, “there is always a danger of objectification when we discuss a dynamic and developing movement such as CDA as a ‘school’, locked in time and space”. Further critiquing the tendency to reduce CDA to a single, “marketable” thing, Billig (2003) has suggested potentially doing away with an adherence to the CDA acronym altogether. In fact, the term “CDS”, which I have used more so far (see above; Chapter 1), has been developed – and established through the foundation of a homonymous journal – as a broader alternative to “CDA” in response to this and other critiques (Waugh et al. 2016).

Ultimately, the internal diversity of CDA creates conceptual trouble in terms of concisely defining CDA as a concrete, singular field without sacrificing some of its complexity. Attempts to schematically distinguish between different CDA approaches can lead to identifying various numbers of categories (themselves not seen as exhaustive). Waugh and her colleagues (2016, 76ff.), for example, name five: the dialectal-relational approach (associated with Norman Fairclough), the socio-cognitive approach (associated with Teun van Dijk), the discourse-historical approach (associated with Ruth Wodak), the social actors approach (of Theo van Leeuwen), and dispositive analysis (tied to the work of Siegfried Jäger and Florentine Maier). In a different categorization, Reisigl (2013, 67) mentions

at least six variants: (1) Fairclough’s approach, which is strongly social theoretically embedded, and informed by systemic functional linguistics; (2) van Leeuwen’s and Kress’s social semiotic and systemic functional approach; (3) van Dijk’s socio-cognitive approach; (4) the form of CDA promoted by the Duisburg Group around S. and M. Jäger [...]; (5) the Oldenburg approach, which is upheld by Gloy, Januschek, and others; (6) and finally the “Viennese” and “Lancaster” tradition of CDA, which is often termed the “discourse-historical approach” and sometimes “discourse sociolinguistics,” and which, among many others, Wodak and [Reisigl] align with.

In a lemma for a reference work, Reisigl (2014) sticks to the same division, while elsewhere (Reisigl 2018, 187) he adds a seventh distinct approach, ‘Critical Feminist Discourse Analysis’ (*Kritische Feministische Diskursanalyse*). Consensus around most categories is evident when the categorizations sketched out here are compared, as names and headings recur, and undoubtedly, more schematic presentations can be found in the literature (e.g., see Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011). However, my aim here is not to survey all

possible schemata, but to illustrate the variety of definitions vis-à-vis what CDA consists in (in the sense of what approaches it is made up of). This variety is a product of the field's historical development and the self-reflexive debates it is home to.

At its core, CDA is a “movement” (Blommaert 2005; Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011) of scholars doing avowedly “critical” work which they find similar and interconnected enough to subsume under a common umbrella. For this reason, I have chosen to provide below not a detailed coverage of different types of CDA, but some essential clarifications on what my particular approach is, with an emphasis on what is meant by its characterization as “critical”. In fact, a unitary definition of what being critical actually means is also difficult to come by in CDA, and opinions also vary based on the academic context in which the question comes up (Chilton, Tian, and Wodak 2010).

All in all, acknowledging its inherent messiness and limitations, I will keep using the term “CDA” as a shorthand – as opposed to something broader, such as “CDS” – because my chosen approach to critical analysis can be situated within the space that this acronym carves out, albeit through varied terms. Namely, I adopt what Reisigl (2013, 67) describes above as “van Leeuwen’s and Kress’s social semiotic and systemic functional approach”, which holds that discourses are socially contingent forms of conceptualizing reality, which materialize in semiosis. In Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak’s (2011, 361) overview of CDA approaches, mine would fall under the heading of “[c]ritical linguistics and social semiotics”. These authors’ framing of the approach stresses its roots in Hallidayan systemic functional linguistics (Halliday 1978), presenting social semiotics as a later development in this tradition, which “highlights the multi-semiotic and potentially ideological character of most texts in contemporary society” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011, 362). Following Waugh and her colleagues’ (2016, 83) classification, my chosen approach corresponds firstly with what they term the “Social Actors Approach” developed by Theo van Leeuwen, which is rooted in the view of discourses as recontextualizations of social practices (cf. Section 2.2.2 above), and secondly with “multimodal social semiotics” (Waugh et al. 2016, 97), framed as an approach bringing multimodal concerns into CDA, which the authors identify as a CDA “trend” (cf. van Leeuwen 2013).

In my own words, I would qualify my critical take on semiosis as a social semiotic approach, originating in systemic functional linguistics (henceforth SFL). Perhaps the most fundamental notion here is an understanding of language as a resource, or “language as social semiotic” (Halliday 1978), in the context of a wider socially oriented view of meaning making. What has come to be definitively known as social semiotics (presented, e.g., in van Leeuwen 2005a; Kress 2010) has worked with this same foundational idea and expanded it into a systematic theoretical and analytical preoccupation with multimodality.

While the social orientation of social semiotics is evident also in its name, its critical angle is also a programmatic aspect of the approach: “Social semiotics is not an end in itself. It is meant as a tool for use in critical research” (Jewitt and Oyama 2001, 136). Viewing social semiotics as a tool, its concepts can be seen as lenses through which to examine the minutiae of multimodal communication in socially conscious ways. Perhaps the most relevant social semiotic concept for this dissertation is that of semiotic software. As introduced earlier (cf. Chapter 1), this notion allows us to scrutinize software used for meaning making, for example by conceptualizing it as a product of multimodal design which encompasses normative expectations about how it should be used (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017). Social media platforms being themselves semiotic software (Poulsen, Kvåle, and van Leeuwen 2018), I have chosen this nomenclature for my critical discourse approach to Facebook groups.

All in all, the broader theoretical framing that I have presented here explicitly in relation to the field of CDA names my approach as a social semiotic take on social media software. However, this positioning of my project within the bracketing of a main framework does little to explain the terms in which this approach is critical – a defining property of all CDA approaches. To the best of my knowledge, with the exception of van Leeuwen (2018), the notion of critique is not systematically scrutinized in social semiotic literature (cf. Reisigl 2018, 191). Yet, the relationship of discourse analysis to critique is the topic of considerable debate in CDA more broadly (see, e.g., Langer, Nonhoff, and Reisigl 2019a) as it opens up important questions regarding the normative undercurrents of one’s analyses and the researcher’s reflexivity and positionality. In the following sections, I will exploit the polysemy of the term “critique” to cover three essential questions for my project:

- a) How does my critical stance arise? (Section 2.3.1)
- b) What are the premises from which I operate in my critical approach? (Section 2.3.2)
- c) How do I incorporate participants’ critical perspectives? (Section 2.3.3)

I will close this section by relating its discussion to my last research question (RQ3).

2.3.1. Critique as an attitude

Critique is to a large extent the *raison d’être* of CDA given that the field’s delineation has partly come about as a differentiation from “not critical” or “just linguistic” discourse analysis (Fairclough 1992; Billig 2000; Nonhoff 2019, 18). This suggests a decisive juxtaposition between critical and solely “descriptive” approaches to discourse, which has been the object of some controversy (Dreesen 2013; Reisigl 2013). For example, Reisigl (2013; 2018) argues that this is a false dichotomy based on misconceptions on both sides of the debate. A key point is that “descriptive” approaches also bring forth arguments and explanations, which necessitate decision-making and judgement calls in the research

process. These are essentially *evaluative* practices, so that the researcher cannot be said to be “just describing” over the course of their study (Reisigl 2018). Besides, it is possible for approaches that do not describe themselves explicitly as critical to articulate critique in their analyses (Dreesen 2013). With this in mind, it is insufficient to define a critical approach as “not just descriptive”, while it is also essential to problematize in what terms one’s critical approach is evaluative.

This brings me to the definition of “critique” adopted here, which I treat as equivalent to the German term *Kritik*. It centres around this idea of evaluation, or subjective assessment, on the part of the researcher:

Critique is a polysemous term for the *examination and appraisal* of people, objects, doings (including linguistic actions) and social systems with regard to norms and goals.

(Reisigl 2018, 175, my translation and italics)²

So, any critically oriented research pursuit involves appraisal and is thus inherently “biased”. The idea of unbiased or objective research is indeed not seen as a possibility in the field of CDA, which programmatically adopts an anti- (or at least non-) positivist epistemological stance (Reisigl 2013). This underlies the self-image of CDA, whereby “CDA sees itself not as a dispassionate and objective social science, but as engaged and committed” (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011, 358). Van Dijk (2015) argues that the main unifying characteristic of CDA is this “biased” – and specifically, critical – perspective towards discourse, which leads him to succinctly define CDA as “discourse study *with an attitude*” (van Dijk 2015, 466, original emphasis). Similarly, van Leeuwen (2018, 147) also points out that CDA necessarily involves the moral evaluations of the discursive patterns the analyst uncovers, and hence requires “some kind of moral commitment from the analyst”.

In what follows, I want to explore this moral commitment and take apart what my critical “attitude”, in van Dijk’s (2015) terms, entails for my project. My argument is that insofar as critique manifests as an attitude here, it is neither entirely separate from or *pre-dating* the analysis nor is it solely *a product of* the analysis. As a first step, I illustrate below how these two modes of critique have been described as being antithetical. I exemplify this by discussing how these two ways of being critical frame the matter of making methodological choices differently.

Whether it is treated as a “school” or “movement” (Blommaert 2005) or as any approach to discourse with an “attitude” (van Dijk 2015), CDA is not considered a method. That is,

² For all longer passages translated from German, the original German text is provided in a footnote. In this case, the original is: „Kritik ist eine vieldeutige Bezeichnung für die Prüfung und Bewertung von Personen, Objekten, Taten (einschließlich sprachlicher Handlungen) und Gesellschaftssystemen auf Normen und Zielen hin“ (Reisigl 2018, 175).

it does not consist in a cohesive pack of strategies for doing discourse analysis. In fact, CDA's eclectic choice of analytical tools and its transdisciplinary orientation are seen as one of its central characteristics (e.g., Reisigl 2013, 76). Because of its problem-oriented nature, CDA research does not pre-determine the methods which will empirically construct its topic (Fairclough, Mulderrig, and Wodak 2011). In this project, I have adhered to this spirit by drawing on systemic functional linguistics and social semiotics, but also on notions from Conversation Analysis, mediated discourse analysis, and multimodal mediated theory, as explained above.

If we view the doing of discourse analysis itself as a discursive process, producing Foucauldian “statements” about the nature of discourse analysis as scientific practice, this methodological openness of one's discursive approach can be seen as a transgressive characteristic that itself renders one's discourse analysis “critical” in that it becomes a dissident form of research (Nonhoff 2019). Namely, the open and creative adoption of a variety of methods challenges ‘science fixated on methods’ (*methodenfixierte Wissenschaft*; Nonhoff 2019, 38) by indicating that, because one's object of study only takes shape over the course of the study through its discursive construction therein, “the method of analysis must be developed in the context of this object” as it has arisen (Nonhoff 2019, 39, my translation).³ This was the case also for my analyses, in which I made decisions about what tools to employ once it had become apparent what the material that I would be treating as data looked like.

Nonhoff's (2019) position that the methodological heterogeneity of critical approaches to discourse is itself a provocation to the scientific field – and thus constitutes critical practice – has some merit, but it is not the be-all and end-all of my argument here. My approach is not critical simply because I have not stuck to one framework in my analyses. It is very common for qualitative studies – and especially ethnographic studies like mine – to involve devising diverse analytical toolkits. I have previously also qualified my overall approach as an interdisciplinary one, whereby I consider sticking to a single discipline or approach not conducive to doing justice to my subject matter. Further, studies like mine are commonly underlain by similar post-structuralist concerns regarding how the production of scientific texts does not merely represent but actively produces “culture” (see, e.g., Clifford 2010 on ethnographic writing).

A position diametrically opposed to Nonhoff's (2019) is presented by Billig (2003, 38), who writes:

Critical Discourse Analysis does not claim to be ‘critical’ because of a technical or methodological difference from other approaches to the study of language. It is claimed

³ „muss die Methode der Analyse im Kontext dieses Gegenstands entwickelt werden“ (Nonhoff 2019, 39).

that Critical Discourse Analysis, like critical psychology or critical social policy, is critical because it is rooted in a radical critique of social relations.

In this view, critique appears to pervade analysis by being at its foundation, or its “roots”. The tools chosen are a byproduct of this orientation towards critique (Billig 2003). This is not because CDA does not (aim to) “shake up” mainstream scientific approaches through its methodological pluralism. Indeed, Billig (2003) also explains how the interdisciplinary orientation of CDA stems from a critical view of the analyst’s own discipline as too narrow and as fraught with mainstream positions that preclude critique, thereby reproducing conditions of power imbalance.

The fundamental disagreement between Nonhoff’s and Billig’s positions presented here is about where the potential for critique lies in a discourse analytical endeavor, and especially one that defines itself as critical. Nonhoff (2019) explicitly makes this point by drawing a distinction between (a) critical approaches to discourse in which the ‘potential for critique’ (*Kritikpotential*) lies with the analyst, who then *exercises* their critique through the tool of discourse analysis, and (b) approaches in which said potential lies within the discourse analysis itself, so that critique is *performed* in the doing of discourse analysis (as a discursive undertaking). In the former case, Nonhoff speaks of an ‘external relationship’ (*äußerliches Verhältnis*) between critique and discourse analysis, as the critical “attitude” pre-dates the analysis. In the latter case, which is preferred by Nonhoff (2019), we have an ‘integrated relationship’ (*integriertes Verhältnis*) of critique and discourse analysis, so that discourse analysis is undertaken as a critical practice in and of itself (e.g., through the in situ determination of the power relations to be critiqued, or through provocative methodological and writing choices).

The field under the label of CDA is characterized, according to Nonhoff (2019), by an external relationship between critique and discourse analysis in that its critical position is pre-defined. Part of this pre-definition has to do with the normative basis of critique, a topic discussed by Herzog (2016), who proposes his own distinction between approaches. Namely, for an approach to be critical, an assumption must be present that the selected research object is somehow critique-worthy from a particular perspective (Langer, Nonhoff, and Reisigl 2019b). This particular perspective is tied to some “normative grounds” (Herzog 2016, 279). In other words, the critical analyst holds ideological positions involving normative standards that are somehow “better” than what is critiqued, and can thus function as the basis for moral evaluation (van Leeuwen 2018). These positions/standards for critique pre-date the analysis, as Nonhoff (2019) stresses. Such standards can refer to abstract concepts like freedom or democracy – which, however, are themselves constructed and also usable as “instruments of repression, power and/or governance” (Herzog 2016, 281). This is an example of *external critique* in Herzog’s

(2016) terms, and it is argued that most practitioners of CDA engage in this kind of critique – a point with which Nonhoff (2019) is in agreement.⁴

The alternative to CDA and external critique proposed by Herzog (2016) is a sociological discourse analysis aimed at *immanent critique*, which also rests upon a central norm, namely that “(human-made) suffering should be avoided” (Herzog 2016, 288). Immanent critique involves reconstructing the normative ideals of the social systems under investigation and showcasing how their structures fail to fulfill these. This does not coincide with Nonhoff’s (2019) concept of integrated critique (his own alternative to external critique) for the following reason: Even when engaging in immanent critique and uncovering normative standards in the discourse analytical endeavor, discourse analysis still ultimately functions as the *tool through which critique is articulated*, making the relationship between critique and discourse analysis “external” in Nonhoff’s terms (cf. Nonhoff 2019, 22).

Turning to my project, by conceptualizing critique as an “attitude” here, I incorporate insights from both sides of the dipoles delineated by Nonhoff (2019) and Herzog (2016). On the one hand, I do not reject an external critique angle, and instead strive for transparency by reflexively acknowledging the basis of my critical standpoint. On the other hand, through my reflexive engagement with my critical approach, I seek to “perform research critically” through discourse analysis in Nonhoff’s integrated sense, by acknowledging my positionality and attempting to deconstruct the researcher/researched power imbalance. I expand on these two points in the following section (Section 2.3.2).

Lastly, in part of my work I integrate elements from Herzog’s (2016) proposal for immanent critique in discourse analysis by identifying contradictions between normative ideals and power-laden structures, also drawing on critiques that do not originate from me but from research participants. I expand on this point in Section 2.3.3.

2.3.2. Critique as reflexive skepticism

Returning to the polysemy of the term “critique”, I want to now qualify the role of critique in my project on the meta-level of scientific reflexivity. This is an understanding of critique related to the Kantian idea of propaedeutics (Reisigl 2013; 2019), which involves a self-critical assessment of one’s practices of knowledge production. According to Unger,

⁴ Despite this point of agreement and the terminological similarity (based on the word “external”), Nonhoff’s distinction of external vs. integrated critique and Herzog’s distinctions of external vs. internal (Herzog 2016, 281) and external vs. immanent critique are not precisely equivalent. This is because the main aim of Herzog’s arguments is to explore the potentials of normative critique, while Nonhoff comes up with his distinction in an effort to examine “in what way discourse analysis and critique are related to each other” (Nonhoff 2019, 22, my translation; original: „auf welche Weise Diskursanalyse und Kritik aufeinander bezogen sind“).

Wodak, and KhosraviNik (2016), this self-reflective stance is one of the key ways in which CDA is “critical”. Dreesen (2013) stresses the importance of this form of critique as it serves to avoid dogmatism and promote skepticism around such questions as “what are the premises of my analysis?”.

Having acknowledged an “external” mode of critique in my work, these premises need to be laid bare here. That is, accepting my own role as an analyst who is trying to be critical and hence engages in moral evaluation, I seek to “explicitly discuss the value commitments on which both endorsement and critique rest” in this study, as van Leeuwen (2018, 152) suggests. Namely, a starting point and goal of my research has been to draw attention to social media as techno-cultural constructs produced and marketed for profit by m/billion-dollar corporations (van Dijck 2013b; cf. Chapter 1). As CDA moves to a broader understanding of politics that goes beyond just public institutional affairs (Machin and van Leeuwen 2016), this can clearly be seen as a political matter.

In the wider context of current neoliberal economic systems, where private stakeholders like corporations with accumulated capital are in “complex relations of mutual dependence and complex tensions” with the power of governments (Machin and van Leeuwen 2016, 243), scrutinizing the discourses of the companies shaping the products that mediate our everyday communicative practices (as I do in Chapter 6 for Meta) is an important pursuit for CDA (KhosraviNik 2017). A related undertaking is to examine interactions on these platforms with an eye towards elucidating the role of technological mediation in giving these interactions particular, company-owned and -approved shapes, such as “posts”, “comments”, “replies”, perhaps even “tag groups” (cf. Chapters 4 and 7). Through the commodification of these functions, users’ communicative behavior is reconfigured as data, organized through algorithmic systems and harvested by the companies who own these infrastructural means of communication for profit. This basic idea has been theorized extensively in the context of many wider theories such as that of the “platform society” (van Dijck, Poell, and de Waal 2018), “platform capitalism” (Srnicek 2017), or even “technofeudalism” (Varoufakis 2023). As “all kinds of sociality are currently moving from public to corporate space” (van Dijck 2013, 37), the use of the digital infrastructure offered by corporations is imbued with ideologies and, in messier ways, affect (Dean 2010). It is thus also worth interrogating the emergence of and changes in “structures of feeling” (Williams 2015) surrounding this kind of translocal social engagement, which is, once again, achieved through means not owned by the individuals involved (Varis 2017). The tension between structure and agency at play in the material circumstances of social media communication (with its given infrastructure) are perceived and rationalized by users in ways that are not self-evident and require unpacking (as attempted in Chapter 5).

The ragtag collection of thoughts presented in the above paragraph does not just loosely connect to the empirical analyses I undertook in this study. Rather, it has played a role in inspiring this project in the first place (cf. Chapter 1) as I started my research with this anti-capitalist orientation, rendering my approach critical in Billig's (2003) "attitude"-focused sense.

At the same time, in performing "integrated" critique sensu Nonhoff (2019), I seek to reflexively acknowledge here the power relations inherent in the practice of discourse analysis, namely those between the analyst, the social actors involved in the study, and the readers. This manifests in my interest in undermining the self-serious understanding of the researcher-as-critic by: (a) acknowledging my ideological positioning within my analysis (see this and the previous section), (b) treating the critical perspectives of research participants alongside mine (see the next section), and (c), as Nonhoff proposes, by "testing out new forms of writing [...] with a playful, ironic note" (Nonhoff 2019, 34, my translation).⁵

To elaborate on this last point, when it comes to my writing, I first and foremost understand it from an ethnographic perspective as a process of constructing "partial truths", or "true fiction" (Clifford 2010). This involves not falsehood (as the term "fiction" may initially suggest) but an understanding that any account of people's practices will involve partiality and incompleteness. This stance also involves a treatment of writing as a key part of the analytical endeavor rather than a mechanical step of "writing up results". In this sense, ethnographic writing is fiction in that it is "something made or fashioned" (Clifford 2010, 7). The aim here is not to write "beautifully" (pace Fortun 2010) or to fundamentally challenge the norms of the genre within/towards which I am writing. After all, "poetics don't license texts without order" (Fortun 2010, xii). Rather, the goal of ethnographic writing like my own in this work is to produce texts that – notwithstanding their transformative function (cf. recontextualization; van Leeuwen 2008; 2018) – constitute "systems, or economies, of truth" (Clifford 2010, 7).

Further, Billig (2000; 2003) suggests that the development of CDA into an established field may be "taming" critical discourse endeavors, potentially "entail[ing] the loss of critique as an intellectual creativity, especially if there is a lack of self-reflexive analysis or, worse still, if self-reflexive analyses systematically omit uncomfortable, but key, factors" (Billig 2003, 44). To the extent that I can address these concerns in my writing, I include the present self-reflection in my text, framing it as a key part of the "critical" in my discursive approach. Nevertheless, I do not espouse the view of critique as "intellectual creativity", as a strong reading of such a position seemingly aligns with a view of critical approaches (and,

⁵ „neue Formen des Schreibens auszutesten [...] mit einer spielerischen, ironischen Note“ (Nonhoff 2019, 34).

concurrently, the researcher-as-critic) as special, or particularly enlightened, which can sometimes result even in a tendency towards ‘self-heroization’ (*Selbsthierisierung*) according to Nonhoff (2019, 34). This position also does not seem tenable given that the institutional output of research self-described as critical leads to the same products (various academic texts) that other approaches lead to, as Billig (2000, 292) also acknowledges: “the critical disciplines share the same political economy as their apparently uncritical competitors”. Instead, my view is that all academic work, including mine, involves intellectual creativity, which I choose to complement here with reflexivity and (hopefully) an engaging writing style.

Regarding this last point, in my writing I try to respond (in a contained way) to Nonhoff’s (2019) invitation to include more “playful”, even “ironic” notes in one’s texts. I do not shy away from occasionally making my text humorous, and I envision its readers as not only academics, but also my research participants (most of whom have expressed interest in reading this dissertation) as well as other lay readers – though I cannot vouch for how engaging this text would be for them. Ultimately, the takeaway from Nonhoff’s (2019) proposal that I try to incorporate in my writing is to produce rigorous analytical work in a critical vein while also not taking myself too seriously.

Having thus acknowledged my intellectual positioning and my role in the production of this text (including how it relates to that of its imagined readers), the perspective I have yet to engage with is that of my research participants – without whom this text would not exist.

2.3.3. Critique as object of analysis: Participants’ perspectives

Participants’ perspectives are an aspect of great relevance to my research, especially given that I explicitly frame this project as an ethnographic endeavor. The incorporation of emic insights in my analyses follows an incremental pattern in the analytical chapters of this dissertation, as I discuss *in situ* (cf. Chapters 4 and 5). Here I want to briefly remark on the incorporation of participants’ critical perspectives in my work. After all, critique is not the prerogative of critical discourse analysts only, but an everyday practice. In Gruber’s (2024b, 4) words, besides being “a reflexive methodological stance in many branches of social research” – the sense in which I have discussed it so far – critique is also “a mundane discursive activity of interactants engaging in normative discussions”.

Moving closer to this latter understanding of critique, after having discussed critique as an “attitude” and as reflexive skepticism, I can now turn to a discussion of critique as a ‘research object’ (*Untersuchungsgegenstand*; Dreesen 2013). This involves analyzing critical perspectives that do not strictly fall under what is defined as critique in a science-theoretical sense (*ibid.*).

Specifically, in part of my analysis (Chapter 6), I consider my interview participants' critical views of Facebook alongside Facebook's (or Meta's) own promotional discourse. This allows for polyphony in the articulation of critique in this study in a way that does not treat my (the analyst's) perspective as the only critical one. Yet, it must be acknowledged that by making participants' critiques of Facebook the *object* of my analysis, they still occupy a position of lower order: essentially a passive position, on which I overlay mine as that of the analyzing subject. This clearly reproduces the power imbalance inherent in discourse analytical practice, where the discourse analyst "performatively places herself in a higher position, so that even when she presents a critique of power, she perpetuates unequal social relations and occasionally does not take the perception of the actors in the subject field seriously as a primary description of the situation" (Nonhoff 2019, 33, my translation).⁶

Throughout my study, I try to counteract this effect by putting forth research participants' cultural descriptions, in line with the project's ethnographic ethos. At the same time, when it comes to the articulation of critique, participants' perspectives become only a small part of the puzzle, given the study's overall structuring and aims. Nonetheless, they actively inform the study's larger conclusions (cf. Chapter 7) and are discussed alongside Meta's corporate discourse in my analysis in Chapter 6. It is in this latter chapter that I explore what I have defined earlier as my dissertation's third question, repeated here:

RQ3: *How do users' discursive constructions of agency (theirs and the platform's) surrounding the routine use of Facebook groups compare with the discourse that Facebook's parent company Meta publically endorses for their product?*

The treatment of participants' perspectives as complementary to my approach to Meta's promotional texts brings my analysis as close as it can come to a form of immanent critique (Herzog 2016). In the sense of immanent critique, the normative ideals for the consumption of the commodities Facebook offers (e.g., how one is to use Facebook groups) are first identified to then be critically examined for contradictions and shortcomings. Participants' critical perspectives arising from their experience with Facebook infrastructure help in identifying relevant discrepancies. Still, this cannot be said to amount to a prototypical kind of immanent critique as it is not accompanied by a systematic examination of non-discursive factors (Herzog 2016). Besides, the normative basis from which my critique operates is – as acknowledged above – more loaded than the key normative foundation Herzog proposes. Namely, as I explained in Section 2.3.1, there is more normative baggage to my critical stance as "attitude" than the fundamental normative baseline proposed by

⁶ „begibt sich performativ in eine höhergestellte Position, so dass sie auch dann, wenn sie eine Machtkritik vorträgt, ungleiche soziale Verhältnisse fortschreibt und gelegentlich auch die Wahrnehmung der AkteurInnen im Gegenstandsfeld nicht als primäre Beschreibung der Situation ernst nimmt“ (Nonhoff 2019, 33).

Herzog – i.e., that “(human-made) suffering should be avoided” (Herzog 2016, 288). Ultimately, my critical approach does not constitute a clear-cut case of immanent critique, neither does it take a purely “external” position. The combination of these two apparently opposed perspectives is common in CDA praxis (Gruber 2024b).

All in all, my understanding of my study as critical is based on various interpretations of the term “critique”, which aim at promoting the transparency of my approach, my self-reflexivity as an analyst, and the consideration of participants’ perspectives in my critical analytical endeavor. For one, the open recognition of critique as an attitude that pervades my project is essential for contextualizing the interpretive analyses in which I engage, which far from aiming towards an ideal of objectivity, self-consciously take a stance towards addressing a perceived social problem. By also understanding critique as a reflexive view of my own research practice, I can openly stipulate what the “problem” I am tackling is. Namely, this project programmatically takes issue with the routine, affect-laden adoption by users of semiotic software which is owned and designed by a massive for-profit business with oligopolistic tendencies and markedly different interests (compared to the users) when it comes to having people engaging with their product. Finally, taking participants’ descriptions and criticisms of Facebook seriously allows me to “decentralize” my critique, so that it does not begin and end in the context of my own interests, but instead considers emic perspectives, which are central to the production of an ethnographic account.

2.4. Bringing it all together

In this chapter, I have presented a number of different approaches to analyzing digitally mediated interaction and discourse (in its narrower and broader sense), which all inform this project in complementary ways. This combination of theoretical standpoints is attempted in the spirit of an integrationist approach to interdisciplinary research, whereby I view every disciplinary angle incorporated in the project’s theoretical background as a skill that I bring to bear in tackling an empirical issue (van Leeuwen 2005b).

I have laid out the various theoretical angles my approach incorporates in a step-wise fashion, by presenting each of them in bundles that correspond to the three research questions I pose in this dissertation (RQ1–RQ3). However, this style of presentation is not meant to suggest a strict “division of labor” among the approaches. Despite the way in which they are introduced here in relation to specific analytical questions, the analyses that result from these questions are not independent of one another. The critical perspective I have introduced, for example, pervades the totality of my interpretive work. For this reason, I articulate a cumulatively critical interpretation of my findings in Chapter 7, which serves as a “discussion” chapter.

Further, through this chapter I have attempted to reconcile the differences among the theoretical traditions that the project draws on. Undoubtedly, not every issue in this regard could be resolved within this one chapter. For example, CA has been criticized for its approach to contextualization, whereby “the social is defined as a matter of methodological principle to pertain only to the level of co-participants in specific stretches of talk” (Blommaert 2001, 19). This clashes with my CDA-inspired treatment of interview data, which brings in external normative parameters and (very rarely) institutional aspects of identity that do not become explicitly interactionally relevant in the talk at hand. By taking an overall approach to analysis as entextualization (Blommaert 2001) or recontextualization (van Leeuwen 2008) of talk/text treated as “data”, I lean more towards the CDA view of social normativity and its role in analysis. In an effort to be both thorough and pragmatic, I deal with such theoretical discrepancies ad hoc when they arise in my analytical treatments.

All in all, I could summarize the theoretical approach I presented in this chapter as follows. This project views digitally mediated communication as inextricably linked to the affordances of the technologies that mediate it. These affordances do not unilaterally determine the forms communicative practices take, but offer possibilities for action that users agentively take up in creative ways. Perspectives from (Digital) Conversation Analysis capture this angle and serve as the backdrop for my analyses of Facebook interactions. At the same time, I view all communication as multimodal in a way that retains a materialist focus (from social semiotics) but also stresses users’ actions in establishing normative patterns of engaging with technologies. This latter view comes from Multimodal Mediated Theory and its precursor, mediated discourse analysis, and it is adopted here as a heuristic that allows capturing the dynamic interplay between acting subjects and the mediational means through which they act. In this way, I can focus on users’ appropriation of Facebook groups technology as mediational means, which is of great interest because the understandings that such appropriations entail do not necessarily align only with the normative assumptions embedded in this software but instead constitute subjective configurations of the technology that have come about in the users’ habitus through socialization. These ideas circle back to my relational view of affordances, whereby material infrastructure and user actions are both in the spotlight.

Finally, while I am interested in users’ communicative practices, I only examine these practices as recontextualized by users. Drawing on a critical discourse analytical framework that traces discourse in the recontextualization of social actions, I examine users’ accounts of their own practices in an effort to reveal their discursive undercurrents. I further jointly analyze on the one hand the users’ ideological baggage surrounding their Facebook groups-based practices, and on the other, the publically available discourse on Facebook groups endorsed by the platform’s parent company Meta. This whole endeavor

is conceived as an explicitly critical one, in which I highlight the normative standpoint from which I approach my data, reflexively acknowledging it, while also allocating importance to my study participants' critical perspectives as they reveal perceived inconsistencies within the Meta-endorsed normative framework for understating Facebook platform features.

Next, I want to present the methodological implementation of this project, in the context of which the theoretical background aligned here came to be applied. As my study is conceived as a (digital) ethnographic one, in the following chapter I will present what my ethnographic take on Facebook groups software has entailed, especially considering my data collection process.

CHAPTER 3

METHODOLOGY: A DIGITAL ETHNOGRAPHIC ADVENTURE

In the pursuit of Laura's killer, I have employed Bureau guidelines, deductive technique,
Tibetan method, instinct, and luck.

Agent Dale Cooper (*Twin Peaks* 1990)

When it comes to its methodological approach, this project has been conceived as an ethnography of social media. Considering the great variety of ways in which ethnographic research on Internet phenomena has been and is conducted, this statement requires thorough discussion. This chapter will thus present the particularities of my project's methods, focusing specifically on my data collection strategies and contextualizing them as well as providing a preliminary overview of my analytical approach.

Ethnographic investigations of social life on the Internet have a long history, starting in the early 1990's with studies like Baym's (1993; 1995; 1996; 1998) research on a Usenet newsgroup for soap opera fans, and Reid's (1993; 1996) Geertzian approach to community on Internet Relay Chat. In the 2000's, the interest in ethnographic treatments of the Internet's role in people's lives had shaped an emergent tradition marked by influential monographs like Hine (2000) and Miller and Slater (2000) – for overviews of this tradition, see Coleman (2010) and Sinanan and McDonald (2017). These developments have since inspired a large interdisciplinary body of methodology-oriented work that problematizes studying the Internet ethnographically (e.g., Robinson and Schulz 2009; Postill and Pink 2012; Caliandro 2014; 2017; Hine 2015; Pink et al. 2016; Kozinets 2019; Kozinets and Gambetti 2021). While some of this work has a more specifically (socio)linguistic outlook (e.g., Androutsopoulos 2008; Varis 2016), my study was informed by sources from various disciplinary angles. At the same time, this chapter does not set out to provide an exhaustive overview of the relevant literature, nor does it aim to address all of the many methodological concerns that Internet ethnographers – whether linguists at heart or not – raise in these works. Instead, the following discussion will only focus on methodological issues which closely pertain to the present project.

It should also be noted that this chapter primarily covers my (more pronouncedly “ethnographic”) data collection methods, giving only a brief overview of my analytical methods (cf. Section 3.4). The analytical tools employed for dissecting the varied data materials that resulted from my data collection process will be presented in greater detail at the beginning of the respective analytical chapters (Chapters 4–6). This allows me to provide here a more focused discussion of the digital ethnographic process, its challenges,

and the data corpus it yielded, which ultimately serves to contextualize the choices behind my research efforts.⁷

Specifically, my aims here are two-fold: (a) to present and argue for the methodological choices made in this study's data collection, reflecting on my decisions, and (b) to provide a roadmap of how I approached my data analytically. First, in Section 3.1, I will systematically present the project's conception as a digital ethnographic study, relating its methodological characteristics to larger issues concerning ethnography and/on the Internet. Namely, I will be dealing with: the "digital-ness" and "online-ness" of the approach (3.1.1) and this study's conception of ethnographic field sites (3.1.2). In Section 3.2, I will outline the various observational data materials that resulted from my data collection process (3.2.1) and present the actions I took for their ethical treatment (3.2.2). Section 3.3 will be devoted to my interviewee recruitment process as another important component of my ethnographic engagement beyond the collection of observational data. Lastly, Section 3.4 will outline key frameworks and principles that drove the analysis of this varied data set in my dissertation.

3.1. Digital ethnography: Why and how

The present project was conceived as an ethnographic one due to my interest in delving into the *situatedness* of the communicative practices involving Facebook groups that I observed. According to Varis (2016, 56):

Using the Internet, and drawing on language and other semiotic means in doing so, are locally situated experiences and entail locally specific practices, platforms, and semiotizations. Ethnography has precisely the tools for capturing this aspect of situatedness, offering a means for understanding informants' life-worlds and their situated practices and lived local realities.

My central research aim was to study how a specific feature of a particular platform (Facebook groups) is taken up, imbued with meaning, and deployed by users ("semiotized" in Varis's terms) in their playful communicative practices online. Alongside my empirical interests, a related deciding factor for choosing to work ethnographically was rooted in the planned project's epistemological orientation; namely, my desire to examine Facebook groups-related everyday cultural practices in a grounded manner. As an occasional user of ludic Facebook groups myself, I was interested in producing an account of ludic experiences with Facebook groups by drawing on users' local understandings of the role this infrastructure plays in their communicative conduct. Such concerns (an emic, reflexive,

⁷ From a formalist academic writing angle, the structuring of my text in this way also reflects my conventional understanding of my dissertation's macro-structure as a "traditional" thesis with a "complex" pattern of organization (Thompson 1999, cited in Paltridge 2002). This would make the present chapter the "general methods" section that comes before the distinct case studies covered in subsequent chapters (ibid.).

“immersed” look at the everyday, which delves into complexities) are reflected in the epistemological foundations of ethnography (cf. Madden 2010, chap. 1). These basics have remained at the core of ethnographic praxis even as the approach has extended to the study of people’s digitally mediated social practices (Hallett and Barber 2014; Blommaert and Dong 2020).

This “extension” of ethnography to cover social life on the Internet is not a particularly new development today, but over time it has led to the emergence of various terms describing the resulting approach in its many iterations, such as “virtual ethnography” (Hine 2000; 2008), “online ethnography” (Tunçalp and Lê 2014; Hart 2017), “netnography” (Kozinets 2019; Kozinets and Gambetti 2021), and “digital ethnography” (Varis 2016; Kaur-Gill and Dutta 2017). While these distinctive labels do often reflect some differences in research aims and practices, the coinage of such varied terminology may also be tied to a trend in (early) literature on Internet research methods, whereby proposed strategies and techniques are described in terms of methodological innovation: as something new and different, for which new nomenclature is needed⁸ (Jankowski and van Selm 2005; cf. Snee et al. 2016).

At any rate, the overarching conceptual differentiation between “traditional” and “online” (or “virtual”, “digital”, etc.) ethnography is also still largely entertained in the literature, but not in the interest of maintaining the two approaches separate or suggesting that one has greater validity than the other. Both “online” and “traditional” ethnographies *are* ethnographies (pace Wittel 2000), and in fact “combined” online-offline approaches are desirable for understanding today’s social world (Hallett and Barber 2014). Still, the separate treatment of the online variety of ethnography (in whichever of its terminological incarnations one prefers) is useful for identifying and problematizing the phenomenological intricacies of studying human behavior on “the digital plane”. Such discussions are crucial because these intricacies require ethnographers to dynamically adapt to the digitally configured realities of online research contexts (Beneito-Montagut 2011; Blommaert and Dong 2020, chap. 7; cf. Wittel 2000).

In this study, I will specifically be using the term “digital ethnography” to engage in relevant discussions. I have adopted digital ethnography as my particular approach following its definition by Caliandro (2014):

Digital ethnography is an emerging style of online ethnography that studies the cultural conditions of a contemporary networked society through the Internet. [...] its theoretical and methodological profile can be clearly defined from a wide scientific literature that focuses on how the architecture of digital environments (and their functions, such as links, retweets, or hashtags) shapes users’ behaviors, their interactions, and their cultural processes[.]

⁸ Slogonization (Schmenk, Breidbach, and Küster 2018) may also have something to do with this trend.

This definition echoes my interest in the architecture of social media features and its relation to users' practices. My deliberate choice of the term "digital ethnography" also aligns with Stirling (2016, 53), who uses the term in her own Facebook research as it "best describes the use of digital devices, spaces and interactions".

Importantly, Caliandro understands digital ethnography as "ethnography grounded by *digital methods*" (Caliandro 2014, 667, original emphasis). This underlining of the *digital* nature of the methods offers a good starting point for discussing the significance of my adopting a digital and, also, chiefly "online" approach for this project in particular.

3.1.1. "Digital-ness" and "online-ness"

In identifying digital methods as a defining element of digital ethnography, Caliandro (2014) draws on Rogers's (2009; 2013) distinction between "digital" and "virtual" methods. While virtual methods constitute adaptations of pre-existing offline research practices (e.g., conducting surveys online), digital methods are about doing "research *with the Internet*" (Rogers 2009, 5, original emphasis). This involves fully embracing, examining, and actively making use of the affordances of digital media in one's research in order to illuminate the significance of digital artifacts and their functions. Rogers (2009, 5) names hyperlinks and tags as examples of "digital objects" that can be examined in this way, and both hyperlinks and tags were objects of interest in this study, in the context of my overarching focus on the Facebook groups infrastructure (cf. Chapter 4). Generally, the empirical focus of this study made the adoption of digital methods sensu Rogers (2009) necessary as most of my observational work consisted in mobilizing and interacting with Facebook's affordances, while empirically examining mostly the digital realities of Facebook's desktop browser webpage edition, and less so the Facebook app – a choice which, in itself, invites some explanation.

I chose to mainly examine Facebook's website version in my digital-methods approach for reasons relating to: my empirical concerns, the nature of social media as techno-cultural artifacts, and practical considerations. Starting from the latter, more superficial level of practicality, the decision was made considering firstly that the entire research process relied primarily on desktop computers, where the browser configuration of Facebook also makes more information and options (e.g., menus) simultaneously available through the user interface at any given moment. On a deeper level, the choice to remain mainly desktop- and browser-based was, if one considers my research interests, both more organically reached and less consequential than it may seem at first.

For one, the strictness of this decision should not be overstated: I routinely also spent time observing relevant Facebook groups on the Facebook app, where I accordingly documented

my observations via screenshots – which I then re-captured on my computer’s browser to ensure consistency in the presentation of my data. There are obvious mechanical differences in the appearance and the related user experience of the Facebook app compared to Facebook’s desktop browser version, and when these were relevant for the analysis, they were actively considered (e.g., see Chapter 4 on the varying appearance of tagged content).

Overall, however, it was not the interface and mechanics of the Facebook app or its browser version that I was interested in, but rather I sought to observe *people doing things with the platform as evidenced on the platform*. In other words, the impulse for this study was an interest in users’ practices with the medium, not in the medium itself, as I programmatically rejected the technologically deterministic stance which has historically obscured the treatment of sociocultural nuances in social media research (Akkaya 2014). Besides, Facebook’s interface routinely changes through regular updates of the mobile app and redesigns of the browser edition (see, e.g., Version Museum, n.d.; Van Grove 2014; Schroeder 2022). Such constant change is typical for social media platforms, which, as products, are dynamically reshaped over time in order to construct consumer niches and remain engaging (van Dijck 2013b). The present study only concerned itself with Facebook functions insofar as people were observed using them; and these functions could only be considered in the form they had within the window of time in which the study took place.

Further, it could be argued that many users’ engagement with Facebook may unfold chiefly, or even exclusively, through one of its many configurations (e.g., the mobile app), and that this issue cannot be attended to here because I have focused mainly on Facebook’s desktop-based realities. However, the users’ embodied experience of accessing Facebook through particular devices and their concomitant software configurations falls outside the scope of this study. Whether a user does, say, their Facebook group administration work mainly through their smartphone (getting push notifications, tapping instead of clicking, etc.) or sat at a computer (e.g., keeping multiple browser tabs open for different tasks) is also a matter of importance when we seek to understand how social media shapes our lives, but it is not a side of the story that this study sets out illuminate considering my approach to ethnographic fieldwork (cf. Section 3.1.2 below).

In the end, when it comes to what concrete practices my digital methods comprised overall (whether browser-based or not), these ranged from more trivial actions (e.g., following hyperlinks, re-enacting the mechanics of tagging a “tag group” in a comment section) to more principled endeavors; for example: (a) using Facebook’s search engine to construct an ad hoc corpus of tag group titles and their sizes at the time of observation (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2); (b) studying archived posts in a Facebook group in which users devised their own categorizations of tag groups (cf. Chapter 4, Sections 4.2.2.3 and 4.4.4); (c) examining the user experience of finding, joining, and navigating Facebook groups,

inspired by the “walkthrough method” for cultural studies research on apps⁹ (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018; see 3.1.2 below).

Taken together, my practices studying Facebook amounted to what Rogers (2009, 11) calls “following the medium”, which constitutes “a particular form of medium-specific research”, applied here to my Facebook-related concerns. Following the medium as a principle mirrors – and is an extension of – “following the natives” in an ANT sense (Latour 2005; Caliandro 2014). This ANT connection happens to also hold for the walkthrough method, an approach with similar medium-centered sensibilities (see Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018). In this sense, the present study does not comprise a “medium-based approach” in the strict sense described by Akkaya (2014, 286); rather, it traces “user-related patterns and hence [...] discourse” (ibid.) by observing the semiotization of Facebook groups through user practices, filtered by media ideologies (Gershon 2010). So, this more detailed, medium-specific treatment of digital social practices I adopt here aligns with the study’s ethnographic ethos and fully embraces an actor-centered perspective for a “socioculturally informed” study of language and social media (Akkaya 2014, 285). At the same time, the approach also comprises an extra layer of attention to the medium in its interaction with human agents as a “mediator” in an ANT sense (Latour 2005). Rogers (2009, 5) refers to this “extra layer” as “*online groundedness*” (my emphasis).

Yet, examining “the digital” in a digital ethnographic study like this need not entail concentrating exclusively on “the online”. Varis and Hou (2019, 229) adopt the label “digital ethnography” partially because it allows referring to an ethnographic focus on “communication shaped by digital technologies” *without* suggesting any preferential or exclusive treatment of the online. The authors favorably note that the term does not evoke the facile dichotomy between online and offline life (Varis and Hou 2019) despite including the word “digital”. This hints at my approach’s take on the digital, which avoids the common fallacy that has been termed *digital dualism* (Jurgenson 2012); i.e., a view that strongly separates digital and physical, and connectedly, online and offline experiences, seeing the former as “virtual” and the latter as “real”. This perspective is widely rejected in contemporary scholarship (see, e.g., Maddox 2017 for a critique) based on the position that, since the Internet has entered them, our lives unavoidably unfold online *and* offline: there are no airtight boundaries between these two “planes”, as they routinely intersect (Blommaert 2018). My study follows this line of thought, conceptualizing social life as shaped in an *online-offline nexus* (Blommaert 2018) under a view of our day-to-day reality

⁹ Of course, the walkthrough method, being app-oriented, had to be adapted to the realities of a website in my case, but this adaptation left the method’s core notions with regard to critically navigating and exploring a digital environment intact.

as “augmented” in Jurgenson’s (2012) terms; i.e., characterized by “the enmeshing of the on and offline” (ibid., 84).

Empirically, then, approaching even what is at face value a characteristically “online” action – like, say, commenting on Facebook – undeniably involves offline components. Varis and Hou (2019) discuss the example of tweeting, which, aside from resulting in developments observable on a screen, requires materially interacting with technological media in “offline”, embodied ways, like tapping away at the smartphone one tweets from. As I have clarified before (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.2.1), this study does not examine these real-time embodied aspects of interacting with Facebook’s software, prioritizing on-screen observations instead. Yet, under the view of “augmented reality” I adopt, investigating one – here, the online – side of the coin without an explicit justification becomes problematic, both practically and conceptually. Hence, some qualifications are in order.

When it comes to ethnographic practice, given that the tenets of digital dualism have been considered moot for decades (cf. Hine 2000; Wittel 2000), ethnographies of the Internet that programmatically do not entertain any online-vs.-offline division have long been established (cf. Miller and Slater 2000; Postill and Pink 2012). While a strong case can be made for the advantages of such “online-offline” approaches (see, e.g., Beneito-Montagut 2011; Hallett and Barber 2014; Hine 2015), this does not mean that “offline” data *must* always be additionally sought out in digital ethnographies (Varis and Hou 2019, 230). Rather, the choice of just where one’s empirical focus will primarily lie – on- or offline – is dependent on one’s research aims and design (ibid.).

Considering all of the above, this study was conceived as a “primarily online” digital ethnography. Facebook groups and users’ actions in and with them were studied for this project “on the screen”, so to speak. This choice was consistent (a) with my empirical interests (the significance of using Facebook’s groups software in online ludic practices), and (b) with Facebook users’ experience of engaging in translocal ludic practices through Facebook groups.

Points (a) and (b) are complementary, and they illustrate that there were practical matters as well as phenomenological considerations underlying my choice to go “primarily online”. On a practical level, my interest in the phenomenon of ludic Facebook groups and the infrastructure that supports them necessarily dictated an online starting point, and in this case specifically Facebook. While this seems to contradict the idea that particular websites or technologies are not supposed to constitute obvious, neatly bounded research sites for ethnographers (Hine 2005a; 2017b), this insight cannot be taken at face value without considering a study’s empirical focus. In my case, exploring a particular website and its technology (as used by people) was my central research goal, and this necessitated starting from Facebook groups as a way to entertain a baseline assumption (that of “groupness”; cf.

Chapter 1) that the platform has inscribed in its features – an assumption which I later problematized (cf. Chapters 6 and 7). From there on, the choice of my particular online field site(s) was a more complicated matter, which I discuss Section 3.1.2 below.

On a broader level, the choice to conduct my fieldwork online in the sense of only “going” to a website and not physically going to any offline field site is also warranted on various grounds. For one, remaining “just online” in digital ethnographies in general, and in communication-orientated ethnographies of Facebook practices in particular (cf. Georgalou 2017; Procházka 2018; 2020), constitutes an established practice as it allows honing in on the particularities of digitally mediated communication. But more importantly, on a theoretical level, the choice to only go online for fieldwork, which eliminates the need for travel on the researcher’s part, is only an issue when traveling is considered a core factor for the establishment of the ethnographer’s authority, as Hine (2000, 45–46) notes. Far more than traveling, the ethnographer’s unique learning experiences online are what legitimizes this form of ethnographic knowledge (ibid., 46).

This brings me to point (b) above, which addresses the nature of the learning experience I was after. When it came to exploring how Facebook infrastructure is imbued with meaning, my central concern as a digital ethnographer was to “follow the natives *and* the medium”, as established earlier. For this reason, I sought to replicate the digital nature of users’ experiences as they spend time in/with Facebook groups for fun. Like other social media platforms, Facebook facilitates translocal connections between myriads of people. However, these connections are configured as digitally mediated encounters with other users – i.e., avatars that may or may not stand for people (Blommaert and Dong 2020, chap. 7) – and with their actions, which are only readable through digital “traces” on the platform’s user interface. For example, seeing a post, a comment, the signalization that a post or comment has been “edited”, etc. tells us “a user acted here” (Hine 2009; Androutsopoulos 2013, 234; Varis 2016, 62–63; Eisenlauer 2013; 2014). At a surface level, Facebook groups can be seen as algorithmically configured chronotopes (Blommaert 2018), which function as online “affinity spaces” for users; i.e., spaces in which social actors converge and engage in local learning together (Gee 2004; 2008a). While I am critically disposed against a commonsensical understanding of ludic Facebook groups as collections of people (cf. Chapter 1), as an ethnographer I sought to share in the learning processes involved in this form of play (Blommaert 2017) in an authentic manner, by also coming to learn about playful practices in Facebook groups “through the screen” and in the “space” that the medium imposes – as the users do. In other words, I primarily relied on what Androutsopoulos (2013) calls “screen-based data” for this learning.

Nevertheless, a “primarily online” approach is not an “online only” approach. My online focus was not underlain by an attempt to achieve some sort of “data purity” by divorcing

people's online practices from their lives offline – which would be conceptually unsound. Instead, informants' offline life-worlds were also explored as part of the interviews conducted, focusing especially on their interplay with the users' ludic Facebook practices. In this sense, my screen-based data were complemented with “user-based data” (Androutsopoulos 2013) through the project's interviews, which provided insights that were no longer strictly “online”. As in other online-oriented ethnographies (e.g., Carter 2004), informants brought up the online/offline division here too, framing it in ways in which it was significant for them, and thereby providing some illustration of the complexities of their “media-saturated lives” (Hine 2009, 7). For example, interviewees commented on a perceived “spill-over” of their Facebook-related practices into their “real lives”, as it was often put (e.g., connecting with other people from one's area thanks to Facebook groups). Such observations support the organic connection between the online and the offline, which this research embraces and explores, albeit not as its primary focus.

Finally, my chiefly online orientation allowed me to approach the Internet both “as culture” and “as cultural artifact” in Hine's (2000) terms. For one, while the present project does not belong to the long tradition of studying emergent online cultural formations (e.g., “communities”; cf. Fernback 2007; Coleman 2010; Graham 2016), my approach to software-and-people is still an approach to culture. In studying the semiotization of platform infrastructure in Facebook-based communication, I conceived my research as related to what Coleman (2010) names “ethnographies of digital media vernaculars” because I examined platform-specific content creation (e.g., “tag groups”) and relevant media ideologies (cf. Chapters 4 and 5). This amounts to painting a portrait of a particular “niche” or “slice” of online cultural life, which aligns with Hine's idea of studying the Internet as culture.

At the same time, this account may lend itself to broader socio-political reflections on the significance of having privately owned digital platforms with obscure algorithmic structures mediate/host our routine social interactions (van Dijck 2013b). In this regard, by honing in on screen-based matters, my study can respond to the call for critical discourse treatments of the impact that digital media infrastructure and its affordances have on our discursive practices (see KhosraviNik 2017; Bouvier and Machin 2018). This kind of impact is multi-faceted and in no way reducible to, say, the “production of a shared subjectivity” (Coleman 2010, 490) among Internet users. In other words, from an “Internet as cultural artifact” standpoint, online infrastructure can be studied here in a way that leads to conclusions fundamentally different from something along the lines of “social media architecture *is making people X*” – a logic that also flirts with technological determinism. And this is because, by conducting a screen-based ethnography that sees the Internet as culture too, a more nuanced account can be achieved of *what people are making of* a social medium's infrastructure *while on* the social medium.

In the end, the choice of a digital ethnographic approach situated primarily online was advantageous considering my study's priorities. But as far as space metaphors are concerned, what exactly does it mean to do ethnographic *fieldwork* online? Where is "the field" in this case?

3.1.2. The field(s) of this study

Defining field sites when ethnography goes online is one of the most hotly debated topics in the relevant literature (cf. Wittel 2000; Hine 2005b; 2009; 2015; 2017a; 2017b; Beneito-Montagut 2011; Tunçalp and Lê 2014; Caliandro 2017; Airoidi 2018). In pre-Internet ethnographic fieldwork, where field sites were sought out (and, ultimately, constructed) in physical spaces, one could base their delineation of a field on existing (e.g., geographical) boundaries (Wittel 2000). Online environments may seem to provide similar "borders" that could drive one's choice (e.g., a website, a platform), but the reality of people's social lives online complicates matters for the ethnographer. If we are interested in people's communicative practices on the Internet, we must consider that online socialization is characterized by *mobility* and *complexity* (Blommaert 2018, 46), meaning that users find themselves in constant motion across multiple sites, and that their social practices, even if they appear systematic, are fundamentally dynamic and "unfinished", and thus in a continuous unpredictable flux. This means that cultural understandings are shaped with strongly varied influences, and if our interest is to explore culture, staying within the strict boundaries of one tightly defined space could be severely limiting. As a result, ethnographers like Hine (2005a; 2009; 2015; 2017b) and Beneito-Montagut (2011) reject the idea of observing strictly "one online field site" as bound by infrastructural cues, and they propose alternative strategies.

Starting from the fundamental observation that decision-making in ethnographic enquiries is inherently flexible and dynamic, Hine (2009) frames the process of defining and thereby constructing field sites online as an *adaptive* process. She thus makes a case for *multi-sited* ethnographic fieldwork aimed at exploring the Internet's role in people's lives (Hine 2009; 2015; 2017). Beneito-Montagut's (2011) idea of "an expanded ethnography" seems to follow a similar logic, but in this case the researcher "follows the user" in their various media practices; i.e., how the user is active across various sites and applications. More recently, even more attention has been drawn on the instability of Internet "fields", which may warrant breaking with the field site convention altogether in a way reminiscent of the notion of "un-sited fields" (Cook, Laidlaw, and Mair 2009). Airoidi (2018) draws a distinction between "relatively stable" online fields and "meta-fields": The former are defined as more "bounded socio-technical contexts conceivable as places" (Airoidi 2018, 662) while the latter feature content that mutates very rapidly. An example of a relatively stable environment in this sense would be a forum-style environment, whereas a

characteristic meta-field is shaped, e.g., by the use of hashtags on Twitter or Instagram, which aggregate posts in ways that allow researchers to “follow the algorithm” (Airoldi, Beraldo, and Gandini 2016) to a certain extent as part of their ethnographic work.

In this context, the present study employed a flexible understanding of “the field(s)” with observations taking place both in more traditionally “bounded” sites and beyond them. Namely, I did not follow individual users (Beneito-Montagut 2011) or track meta-fields (Airoldi 2018) as outlined above. Instead, the project’s original bare-bones question served as a starting point for my methodological choices. That question was: *What role does the Facebook groups infrastructure play in users’ playful communicative practices?* In order to address this question by “following the natives and the medium” as explained in the previous section, I embraced Hine’s idea of adaptive ethnography to establish my research sites, aiming at “working across the immediately apparent boundaries, exploring connections, making tentative forays that are then turned into defensible decisions, and retrofitting research questions to emergent field sites” (Hine 2009, 6).

Specifically, I first aimed to observe Facebook spaces which would not only (or not necessarily, even) constitute Facebook groups, but would also comprise discourse *about* Facebook groups and their use. Thus, my first “tentative foray” in Hine’s terms was into a Facebook group, which was chosen because it seemed to constitute a kind of “meta-group”. Its title drew attention to the topic of Facebook group membership and the group itself featured a sizeable member count of around 69,000 users at the time of observation, which resulted in frequent postings about Facebook groups (e.g., discussing Facebook groups-related experiences, or asking for and sharing group recommendations and relevant information). In its description, the group identified itself as a “tag group”, and this was a key factor for my fieldwork’s direction from that point on.

In a nutshell, tag groups are Facebook groups which are routinely tagged in interactions on Facebook, so that their titles may be quoted in the form of hyperlinks. The tagged titles can then function as utterances in the context of on-going interactions. Tag groups became a central object of empirical interest in my study (directly resulting in the writing of Chapter 4) since, as a practice, they strongly feature users taking up the Facebook groups infrastructure and using it playfully, in patterns that are systematic enough to warrant the establishment of a label for the practice (“tag groups”). Having identified tag groups as an empirical object that encapsulated my research concerns, my next step was the formal establishment of two “bounded” fields that dealt with tag groups. Namely, I began my participant observation in two Facebook groups, pseudonymized here as a privacy-preserving measure (cf. Section 3.2.2 below): (a) the aforementioned *Love joining groups!* (henceforth *love groups*), and (II) *I can’t stop joining tag groups!* (henceforth *joining TGs*).

Through this series of decisions, at this point I had come to be dealing with bounded sites in the form of Facebook groups. While I had been a member of these groups prior to constructing them as field sites for my study, it became necessary to designate a period for systematic participant observation of the goings-on in these spaces. Considering the complications that the observation of digital environments brings vis-à-vis the ethnographer's time and how it is spent (Wittel 2000; Varis 2016, 62–63), a decision was made to focus closely on these groups as field sites by engaging in frequent principled visits over a three-month period (July 2021–September 2021). These visits were “principled” in that they involved documentation of developments in the group through screenshots and field note taking, and in that they were conducted with an explicit exploratory research purpose centered around tag groups. Beyond this conventionally “packaged” three-month period, I have remained a member of these groups, and although I no longer visit them as often nor do I draw actively on new postings to give them micro-analytical treatment for this study, it would be an oversimplification to say that I have “left” the sites, since not all of my ties to them have been severed – e.g., I have maintained contact with administrators and moderators of these groups (see also Rutter and Smith 2005, 88 for a similar discussion of the notion of “getting out of” a digital research site).

During the observational period in *love groups* and *joining TGs*, my focus on tag groups and relevant issues (e.g., interactional dynamics surrounding their use) crystallized as a key research interest and thereby led to the emergence of another relevant “site”. Namely, over this period, I observed users engaging in categorizations of tag groups based on thematic niches or interactional functions that these groups could potentially fulfill from a pragmatic perspective as tagged semiotic material. It was during this time that I was made aware of the existence of the “paused” Facebook group pseudonymized as *A guide to TGs*, which was dedicated to such practices of categorization (cf. Section 3.2.1 below; Chapter 4). After establishing contact with its administrator, I also observed the postings within this group and drew on its textual data to compile an ad hoc corpus of user-generated categories of tag groups. This provided further empirical insights into users' engagement with the Facebook groups infrastructure, hinting at tag groups' function as cultural capital in ways reminiscent of local understandings of memes (Nissenbaum and Shifman 2017).

Still, despite my adaptive approach that resulted in continuously emerging relevant sites, the fields of my research remained bound within the techno-cultural frame of Facebook as a social medium, which may be perceived as limiting. This was, however, a deliberate choice that was justified first and foremost by my empirical focus on the platform's infrastructure and how users make use and sense of it.

In the end, my ethnographic examination of the platform was shaped in a way such that it cannot be argued that two or three particular groups were “my sites”, nor that “the entire

platform” was. Unlike previous ethnographies of Facebook that focused either on individual Facebook profiles (Stirling 2016; Georgalou 2017) or on pages (Procházka 2018; 2020), the techno-cultural construct that was at the center of this study was the Facebook group. This led to an empirical trajectory whereby connections between ludic Facebook groups were observed and explored throughout the data collection (and the analytical)¹⁰ process, relying on the relevant affordances (following hyperlinks, using Facebook’s search engine, etc.). At an early stage, a new Facebook account was also created in order to explore how new users may be algorithmically exposed to Facebook groups as a feature of the medium – for which the walkthrough method was employed (Light, Burgess, and Duguay 2018). Additionally, Facebook- (or Meta-) authored sources were continuously consulted, culminating in a comparative analysis of their discourse on Facebook groups viewed against the interviewed users’ discourse (cf. Chapter 6). As regards the interviews themselves, the recruitment of my interviewees was also an important part of my engagement with Facebook (and particularly Facebook Messenger) for this study (see Section 3.3 below; Ntouvlis 2024). Importantly, this recruitment process helped broaden my study’s scope by taking place away from the initial Facebook groups of interest and by giving rise to user-centered definitions of what these “ludic Facebook groups” I was researching as a collective notion may be (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.3).

Taken together, the insights gleaned from this process overall allow the present project to present an ethnographic account of more than the cultural practices observed in a handful of bounded sites. At the same time, this study in no way provides an account of ludic Facebook group uses with a scope covering “all of Facebook”. Instead, the ethnographic fieldwork described here amounted to a deliberate *conceptualization and experiencing of Facebook as a constellation of groups* through varied research practices, which allowed me to assume the position and record the perspective of avid ludic Facebook group users. In this adaptive process, my research interest in ludic practices materialized around particular empirical foci (e.g., tag groups, discourse on users’ practices) gradually and organically.

All in all, my adaptive approach to digital ethnography described above showcases the limitations of viewing the conduction of digital ethnographic fieldwork as a matter of choosing traditionally conceived field sites. However, whether it can be said that this ethnography of Facebook groups took place in some given sites or not, an overview of the types of data it involved as well as how I went about their ethical treatment is necessary.

¹⁰ Some of these actions are documented in my analyses when they become analytically relevant (cf. Chapter 4).

3.2. Observational data and ethics

Ethnographic studies involve the collection of greatly varied and often unwieldy data sets, collected in an attempt to yield as rigorous a picture of the observed phenomena as possible (Blommaert and Dong 2020). To provide an orderly overview of the data materials collected in the present study, I adopt here Kozinets's (2019, 180) terminology for describing types of "netnographic" data collection. In these terms, I have collected (a) *immersive*, (b) *investigative*, and (c) *interactive* data. I will now present what these data consisted in (Section 3.2.1) before discussing ethical considerations (Section 3.2.2).

3.2.1. Overview of data materials

Working backwards on the list of data types given above, the fruits of my interactive data collection process, data type (c), involved "direct communications" (Kozinets 2019, 180) with participants. In this study, these took the form of reaching out over direct messages to Facebook group members and administrators/moderators (henceforth "modmins") as well as conducting full-scale interviews with selected participants. The interviewee recruitment process is described in Section 3.3 below. The particulars of the conducted interviews are discussed in Chapter 5, Section 5.1, where I provide a full overview of the data and how they were sorted for analysis.

As regards data types (a) and (b), I deal with these here under the blanket term "observational data". Starting with type (a), immersive data consisted in varied note-taking activities. First and foremost, screenshots of posts and comment sections within groups were taken, dated, and archived. These were often accompanied by notes on what was depicted (e.g., noting how many individual tag groups were concatenated in comments, or providing contextual information for posts). Field notes were also taken for more general observations; for example, for connecting various similar or dissimilar events documented in screenshots (which also led to the creation of separate folders for the screenshots), or for documenting thoughts that fed into "budding ideas" (Kozinets 2019, 180) for the direction of the project. Finally, an additional screenshot-taking practice revolved around documenting my navigation of Facebook's group features, inspired by the walkthrough method. For this process, as briefly mentioned earlier, I created a new Facebook account and examined how Facebook appeared to tailor the experience of a new user vis-à-vis "recommending" the joining of groups.

Besides immersive data, collecting investigative data, type (b), also constituted a key part of my research process. This kind of research is described by Kozinets (2019, 180) as doing "archival search and saving or storing the results". This materialized as three distinct activities in the present project:

- I. *Creating an ad hoc tag group corpus.* To investigate recurrent linguistic patterns in tag group titles which may relate to their function as interactional resources, I created an ad hoc corpus of tag groups (see Appendix A). For this, I identified all tag group titles that appeared in my collected screenshots (from the immersive process described above) and then manually searched for the groups using Facebook’s search engine. I added to my corpus the groups that I could retrieve in this manner, also noting their size at the time of observation. A full overview of the corpus’s construction strategy and its analysis is given in Chapter 4, Section 4.2.2.

- II. *Extracting user-made categories from a tag group-cataloguing group.* In the group *A guide to TGs* users “catalogued” Facebook (tag) groups by sorting them into categories. This generally worked as follows: A user would make a post in the group setting a topic for a category of tag groups, often using a hashtag, which facilitated retrieving this category; for example, such a post may have read: “#cats groups about cats”. Users could then comment under the post by tagging groups which fit into the category named by the original poster; for example, in the case of cats: “*patto ur catto*” (a title shared – at the time of writing – among a number of Facebook groups for cat lovers). This amounted to the categorization of tag groups by users for users. I extracted and used the categories thus created to contrast them with categories I had created with formal, more etic criteria (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.4). This process constituted a kind of “archival” research as *A guide to TGs* was a “paused” group at the time of observation, meaning that all new activity in it had ceased since 2021, when the main administrator had imposed this “pause”. The posts found in the group were thus quasi-archived data, which I searched through to extract new data that I stored for my analytical goals. The administrator’s consent was acquired prior to collecting these data.

- III. *Collecting informational/promotional texts authored by Meta.* Webpage texts were collected from facebook.com/community. This section of Facebook’s website domain constitutes a “resource center” offered by Facebook with informational and promotional content about administrating and moderating Facebook groups. Texts from various pages under facebook.com/community were stored for the purposes of a contrastive analysis of Facebook’s discursive construction of Facebook groups as “community” tools as opposed to participants’ perspectives on Facebook groups. The individual pages I archived were chosen on the basis of their topic; namely, pages were sought out on topics that had come up in interviews with participants (e.g., dealing with conflict in Facebook groups). A full presentation and analysis of these investigative data is given in Chapter 6.

Working with the varied data sources presented above entailed making principled decisions concerning the ethics of studying these spaces and featuring the data in my work. I discuss the ethical framework I developed for this purpose below.

3.2.2. Ethical considerations

When it comes to online research, ethical considerations are generally regarded as context-sensitive judgement calls rather than a matter of rigid adherence to predetermined checklists (Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2017, 19). For example, the guidelines of the Association of Internet Researchers (AoIR) are explicitly framed as suggestions to be taken on and applied in contingency-based ways (Franzke et al. 2020). Following the AoIR's suggestions and their key principle of "doing no harm", in my study I have also adopted a dynamic approach to research ethics, viewed "as a contextualized process of decision-making that is not limited to the initial stages of research design but takes place at various critical junctures of the research process" (Tagg and Spilioti 2022, 91). My take on this process was particularly informed by Markham's (2018, 1) idea of an *impact model* of ethics, whereby researchers "can take a more active role in decisions about the contexts they study, by exploring the possible positive and negative impact of their work". This means that, apart from ethical matters considered at the point of the study's inception, I have engaged in continuous in situ decision-making with a strong emphasis on the "possible future trajectories" of my practices (Markham 2018, 7) in an effort to ensure that they do not result in harm.

This way of doing things relies on mobilizing *reflexivity* as a resource for determining ethical research conduct (cf. Guillemin and Gillam 2004). Therefore, to understand how I came to these ad hoc decisions, a reflexive presentation of my study's context and the unfolding research process is necessary. I will start here from the considerations relevant to what I have named my "immersive" data and will conclude by discussing the ethics of dealing with my "investigative" data (i.e., data sources I-III above).

From an infrastructural perspective, my observations have taken place in *visible private Facebook groups*. Groups on Facebook can be assigned a "visible" or "hidden" status, the latter referring to essentially invite-only structures that cannot be accessed or even searched for unless one is an invitee, or a current or former member (Meta 2024h). Facebook also differentiates between "public" and "private" groups: In the former, group activity is visible to "Anyone, on or off Facebook", whereas in the latter, activity is only accessible for Facebook users who are group members (Meta 2024d). A visible private Facebook group is therefore a group that anyone can search for, and can then join on the conditions that: they have a Facebook account, and their request to become a member is accepted by the group's modmins. Because I was interested in private Facebook groups, my first concern was to determine what the groups' private status meant for my study from an ethical

standpoint as I sought to ensure that no harm could come to the users whose postings I observed.

Infrastructural cues, like the qualification of certain Facebook groups as “private” or “public”, are not enough to determine one’s ethical course of action, nor is the private/public conceptual distinction a dichotomy (Sveningson Elm 2009). Tagg and Spilioti (2022, 96), for example, write that “privacy cannot be defined in terms of platform architecture and user settings” when studying digital discourse, as shown by cases in which users have very high expectations of privacy even while posting in technically “public” spaces. People’s subjective perceptions of their digital activity as private or sensitive must thus also be taken into account when making ethical judgement calls (Sveningson Elm 2009, 76–77; Markham 2018, 5–6; Kozinets 2019, 172–76). In fact, privateness (vs. publicness), sensitivity, and related notions are complex constructs that are understood in varying ways both by users and by researchers of digital discourse (Garcia et al. 2009, 73–75; Landert and Jucker 2011). So, because the platform, the users, and the research community all participate in the definition of these key concepts, it is important that a dynamic approach to ethics strikes a balance in their consideration in situated ways. I have attempted this in my study in order to safeguard participants’ privacy as defined by factors including but not limited to infrastructural cues.

Practically, when it came to the ludic private Facebook groups I was studying, a key starting point for my thinking was that the posts I would see as a researcher within the groups are only visible to group members. This means that the “right to look” (ethically) as a researcher must be established in the first place. For this reason, I contacted the modmins of the groups in question and acquired their approval for proceeding with my study. To do this, I introduced myself, my institutional position, my project and its aims, and I guaranteed that any users whose postings came up in my writing would be pseudonymized (a point I will return to below). Because the moderation of the groups involved multiple active members, the modmin teams consulted among themselves to reach the approval decision, and in one case, after the approval, I was invited to a group chat with the modmins, which was created for facilitating my direct communication with them.

Securing administrators’ approval for one’s research into closed Internet spaces is widely viewed as standard practice (e.g., Townsend and Wallace 2016; Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2017, 25; Kozinets 2019, chap. 7), but its significance is not invariable across the board. Administrators are treated as gatekeepers, but the terms of their gatekeeping may vary per platform. In my case, private Facebook group modmins have the sole prerogative on the terms of Facebook group membership: they set the group’s rules, they determine questions that prospective members must answer to be admitted into the group, they accept or reject users that request to become members, they have the right to remove or ban members from

the group. These powers that Facebook's platform affords modmins cannot be directly challenged by members through platform functions, and dissent has to be handled interactionally within the group or through other channels (e.g., chats). These parameters render Facebook modmins, by design, very powerful gatekeepers, whose consent for the study's conduction therefore had considerable purchase.

Yet, observing the goings-on in a private Facebook group still involves observing the postings of (in my case) tens of thousands of other users in an environment that has "private" in the name it is given by the platform. This necessitates a more nuanced approach that takes into account the particularities of the private Facebook group infrastructure and its significance to users. Hård af Segerstad and her colleagues (2017) discuss ethical considerations relevant when approaching private (formerly called "closed") Facebook groups, but they focus specifically on dealing with highly sensitive data in a study of a private Facebook group for bereaved parents, which also had offline roots (in a grief support association). This contrasts with my own focus on groups dedicated to ludic engagement in Facebook groups with no explicit ties to offline activities. What is more, the nature of the data they analyzed, namely Application Programming Interface (API) data, invites different technical considerations for secure anonymization (Hård af Segerstad et al. 2017, 218ff.).

A more relevant ethical treatment of Facebook data that considers platform infrastructure and how it is rendered meaningful is presented by Willis (2019), who studied Facebook News Feed data. Facebook's News Feed (its "Home" or "Feed" in current terms) is tailored to a user's profile and displays (among much else) postings by the user's Facebook friends. These friends may have set their own postings' privacy settings to "friends only". So, while Willis (2019) had acquired the informed consent of the user whose News Feed she observed, she was also observing other users' activity restricted to "friends only". Willis argues that, despite the "friends only" setting, such News Feed data remains semi-public, considering that: (a) the data remain "technically public" due to their commercial availability to Facebook, third-party apps, and advertisers; and (b) users seem to treat their postings as public, although some individual postings may be seen as more personal – a consideration that must not be overlooked. Therefore, the data can be treated as observations "in a busy public space, which may not necessitate consent of every person involved" (Willis 2019, 5).

A parallel can be drawn between Facebook News Feed data and the data I have collected in private ludic Facebook groups. For one, the commercial availability of both types of data remains constant, as private group posts are subject to review by Facebook, can be accessible to third-party apps, and are potentially also visible to "[s]elect rights owners" (Meta 2024d). More importantly, however, the users' treatment of their postings as public

statements also holds, perhaps even more so than in News Feed data. In the groups I studied, users typically made posts to ask for Facebook group recommendations, crack jokes, or discuss their interests in Facebook group niches among an audience of virtual strangers, whose only given common ground was (a) their shared interest in Facebook groups, and (b) their status as members of these particular groups, which is contingent on them answering an entry questionnaire and being admitted by the modmins. These trends constructed these otherwise “private” groups as spaces for interacting with strangers, significantly unlike what one would expect when posting something on their profile. Although context design plays a key role in Facebook profile postings given that their audiences are intradiverse (i.e., involving users connected to the poster in greatly varied ways; see Seargeant and Tagg 2019), at the end of the day the kind of News Feed data discussed by Willis (2019) were restricted to “friends only”. Facebook friends are, in turn, users that the profile owner has explicitly enabled to view their postings by either sending them a “friend request” or accepting such a request from them. By contrast, postings in private Facebook groups are shared among aggregates of users, the constitution of which the poster has little control over: While one can choose what group to post in and have concomitant expectations about how the rest of the members will be and how to present oneself to an audience of strangers, a simple posting group member (i.e., one who is not a modmin) has no control over who actually is a member of the group; as stated earlier, this remains the sole prerogative of the modmins, and it is a key aspect of private Facebook groups as a platform feature. What is more, the two groups examined for immersive data collection also included much wider audiences than one’s Facebook friend pool may have involved. One featured over 30,000 and the other over 60,000 members at the time of observation, which far exceeds the maximum number of 5,000 (personally selected and approved) Facebook friends that one can restrict their profile’s postings to (Meta 2024i). These parameters lend considerable credibility to the potential treatment of private Facebook group data as semi-public, and hence as not necessitating the consent of all present users to study.

However, as Willis (2019) points out, it cannot be overlooked that certain postings may be viewed by users as more personal expressions based on what is shared in them. At my study’s inception, I saw the groups I had selected as featuring relatively non-sensitive content due to their playful thematic orientation, which did not explicitly center on taboo topics. Yet, during my systematic observation of the spaces, I sometimes came across more “personal” postings that presented the poster as being in a vulnerable position (e.g., facing struggles with their mental health and looking for a support group). I treated these encounters as “ethically important moments” in Guillemin and Gillam’s (2004, 262) terms; i.e., “difficult, often subtle, and usually unpredictable situations that arise in the practice of

doing research” and may lead the researcher to reflexively adjust their practices. As a result, I adopted a strategy of *data minimization* during data collection.

The principle of data minimization refers to the collection of solely the data that one needs in order to meet their specific research goals (Ess and Hård af Segerstad 2019). Adopting such a strategy can be challenging in ethnographic studies due to their inherent flexibility and the exploratory orientation that the ethnographic data collection process often has (Tagg and Spilioti 2022, 95). My own study indeed featured an exploratory period of more open observation, but the data minimization principle was adhered to in that I purposely avoided the collection of postings on sensitive topics or statements that were otherwise construed as overly personal or risqué (e.g., users requesting recommendations for groups about recreational drug use or sexual practices). This data minimization tactic was seen as a feasible measure with few drawbacks for my project as the postings’ topics had little bearing on my broad research goal, which was to explore how Facebook’s group infrastructure is imbued with meaning by its users. Although this decision did impose artificial limits on the scope of my exploration, it did not impact the validity of my interaction-oriented observations and, most importantly, it fittingly prioritized the ethical treatment of users’ postings.

In the end, despite my situated understanding of the Facebook groups as semi-public in Willis’s (2019) sense, and hence as amenable to covert observation with the gatekeepers’ consent, my visibility to the groups’ members en masse remained a key concern in my attempts to do right by the users whose semiotic practices I studied. As Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder (2017, 25) write, “[a]lthough ultimately the decision to disclose the presence of a researcher is down to the individual project, care needs to be taken to treat each research site with respect”. Discussing their own study of a private Facebook group, Hård af Segerstad and her colleagues (2007, 216) note that when dealing with vulnerable communities, it is imperative “to move beyond informed consent given by only administrators and moderators”, so that each participating individual can grant their informed consent, or “autonomous authorization” (see also McKee and Porter 2009, 90ff.; Egelsem 2015, 18). Still, considering the challenges of obtaining this level of authorization from thousands of users in a mediated environment, the authors conclude that “partial informed consent combined with carefully crafted digital methods for anonymization might be a viable route for responsible internet research” (Hård af Segerstad et al. 2017, 217). Taking into account that (a) unlike Hård af Segerstad and her colleagues’, my study of private Facebook groups did not focus on a clearly vulnerable population, and that (b) I had implemented an additional data minimization strategy to exclude sensitive data from my analyses, I followed the route of gaining gatekeeper consent and additionally devising tactics that ensured the preservation of participants’ anonymity, which aligned with my overall impact-oriented approach to ethics. This decision was reached and ultimately

consolidated as material developments and relevant considerations arose over the course of my research process. This went as follows.

At the beginning of my study, I considered making a post in each of my chosen groups in order to disclose my presence to their members; however, this course of action was quickly found to be undesirable in my project for a number of reasons. First, making such a post would amount to constructing the groups as “research grounds”, thereby granting them an asterisked identity that could cause an “observer’s paradox” effect to obtain, meaning that users would possibly alter their behavior based on their awareness of my presence (Herring 1996; Egelsem 2015, 30; Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2017, 25; Markham 2018). This would not only thwart my aim at reliable “naturalistic” data collection (Vanderhoven et al. 2014, 3), but would also essentially alter the groups’ character for modmins and members, effectively “spoiling” the space for its intended uses. In fact, the modmins’ stance suggested that they found such a posting undesirable for this reason. When asked whether I could make a post asking for potential interviewees from the groups (and thereby disclosing my presence), the modmin team who had invited me to join a group chat with them did not accept my request, nor were they willing to post on my behalf. This suggests a situation where a request for consent may bring about negative developments for users, who in this case would see the identity of their affinity space altered by my efforts to reach them all individually. Such cases provide support for adopting the impact-oriented model of ethics I follow here (Markham 2018).

An additional conundrum in trying to communicate with entire Facebook groups regards the effectiveness and feasibility of such an attempt at reaching the group users en masse. Obtaining the informed consent of large groups of people in a mediated environment presents a characteristic set of practical challenges (Eynon, Fry, and Schroeder 2017, 23–25; Hård af Segerstad et al. 2017, 216; Markham 2018, 4; Barbosa and Milan 2019, 57). An especially important one in my study was the uncertain reach of a potential relevant posting in the group. In groups featuring tens of thousands of users, which see regular changes in their membership base, and crucially, in an environment where non-transparent algorithmic structures determine which posts will make it onto which (and how many) Facebook users’ feeds, what guarantee can such a posting by the researcher provide that consent has been meaningfully acquired by a substantial number (let alone all) of the participants? A measure to increase the post’s visibility could have been to ask modmins to “pin it” on the group’s main discussion page (making it consistently appear at the top). However, this would result in an even more pervasive branding of the group as a researched space.

In practice, I did end up making a post in one of the groups and I experienced first-hand the relevance of these considerations regarding a post’s reach. While looking for interview

participants, I was able to obtain the approval of one modmin team to post a request for potential interviewees within their group. Despite the more than 30,000 group members, this post received only one comment and two reactions. Out of these responses, the comment and one of the reactions were by a modmin who supported my posting. At the same time, there was no way to gauge how many users this post had been shown to, or to what extent it had been considered: Had anyone clicked on the link providing details on my identity and institutional affiliation? Had anyone visited my Facebook profile, or read the entire post? While in no way a compelling factor in and of themselves, these uncertainties, combined with the aforementioned disadvantages of making a post within the groups, consolidated my decision to observe the groups with the gatekeepers' consent and a plan for thorough anonymization.

Turning to this latter point, preserving the anonymity of the users whose content I studied was paramount in my plans. However, the pseudonymization of individual group members whose words came up in my study would not be a sufficient measure. The searchability of Internet content (Varis 2016, 57) is a crucial factor to consider in a researcher's ethical decision-making (Egelsem 2015). Facebook provides a search engine tool within groups, meaning that if one were to join one of the groups I studied, they could easily trace any content quoted in my dissertation. Although I took care to minimize direct quotations (relying instead on paraphrasing and narrativizing as needed), given my analytical goals, which started with a conversation-analytical concern on how interactions worked within the groups I studied (cf. Chapter 4), it was not possible to completely refrain from quoting genuine interactions without substantially weakening my analytical observations (Tagg and Spilioti 2022, 98). For this reason, a bespoke "cloaking" strategy was used, adapted from Kozinets (2019, chap. 14). Namely, besides anonymizing the participants of the posting and comments I presented in my text, I also pseudonymized the groups I had studied: If the specific groups I conducted my research in cannot be identified, the quoted text cannot be searched for through the in-group search engine, thereby virtually eliminating the possibility of individual users being traced.

There was still one final consideration in this regard, however; namely, whether it may be worthwhile to track down the users whose quotes I worked with during my writing phase, as proposed by Tagg and Spilioti (2022, 98) and C. Jones (2011), in order to ask for their consent, informing them of my research goals and providing them with an opportunity to opt out. This would amount to reaching out to a handful as opposed to tens of thousands of users, making the task seem a more feasible one. Two connected reasons ranging from practical to epistemological matters spoke against this decision.

Starting from the practical aspect, by the time a post had been chosen for analysis in my dissertation and I was deep in the writing stage, a significant amount of time had passed (in

some cases, over two years) since the post in question had been made. Reaching out to the individual users (poster and commenters) involved in this post would materially have to unfold as follows: I would have to message these users through Facebook Messenger as a virtual stranger (and specifically not their Facebook friend), meaning that my messages would be received as “message requests” and filed in a separate folder of the Messenger app (Ntouvlis 2024). A pilot study I had conducted for my project to determine the feasibility and desirability of establishing contact with Facebook users from my personal profile via Messenger alerted me to a few issues with this idea. In said study, only five out of twenty-seven approached users responded to my messages; out of these five, four commented unprompted that a message being filed as a “message request” (like mine had been) was a factor that influenced their perception of the act of reaching out as “spammy” or even “sketchy” (Ntouvlis 2024). Two respondents also pointed out that they typically open “message requests” either long after they have been sent or not at all due to their lesser prominence in one’s inbox (ibid.). The low response rate and the unfavorable media ideological stances towards message requests suggested that I could probably not meet a solid standard whereby all the posters/commenters I wanted to quote could have been actually reached and adequately informed about my study’s goals. But more importantly, this method of reaching out would entail a gross misrepresentation of my research aims.

Assuming the users’ perspective, my approaching the users at the stage I am describing would amount to the following situation. They would be receiving a message from a stranger regarding a playful Facebook post or comment about tag groups that they had made months, if not years, prior. Said stranger would be asking to write up an academic analysis of said posting for his dissertation. Putting aside the negative connotations of being contacted via message request (which, indeed, need not hold for all users), and in fact, not assuming that the users’ response to such a request would be negative, this approach of them on my part would create the impression that the users and their activity were being *personally targeted*. This is not only an alarming prospect for everyone involved, but also a fundamentally flawed assumption considering the nature of my work.

For some ethnographers working in online environments, “verifying” participants’ identities (i.e., ensuring that their online self-representation corresponds to their demographic traits) is an important concern (see, e.g., Garcia et al. 2009, 68; Kozinets 2019). Not only is this not a relevant concern in this project, but my study also does not consider any personal information that users may be displaying on Facebook. This is due to the epistemological approach adopted here, which focuses on meaning making as social action and hones in on the intersubjective level, viewing language (and other communicative modes) as social fact and programmatically rejecting the tenets of methodological individualism (Blommaert 2018). Thus, the profile data (e.g., displayed demographic characteristics) of participants in a Facebook post/comment section are not

factored into the kind of analysis of digital talk-in-interaction I do in this study (where the quotations of postings are used). The participants' Facebook profiles are only considered insofar as they indicate that different actors are involved (i.e., actor A is not actor B). Similarly, Kozinets (2019, chap. 7) discusses how "interactionist approaches" in netnography (i.e., approaches rooted in the tradition of symbolic interactionism) likewise focus not on individual persons, but on "social acts" or "utterances" in ways that make users' identity labels (or "real names") irrelevant. What this means practically is that the users whose quotes I give analytical treatment to are anything but "personally targeted", as my act of approaching them months or years after they had posted something would suggest. These users' Facebook profiles may still be tied to the traces of their communicative behavior that I analyzed, but these ties are safeguarded by the anonymization measures I adopt.

So, all things considered, from an impact-oriented ethics perspective, contacting users post hoc would be redundant since (a) the users' identities are being hidden and protected from traceability through bespoke cloaking measures, (b) users' personal information does not enter my analytical treatment at all, and (c) the content analyzed has been chosen in a way such that it is not (plausibly seen as) sensitive (cf. data minimization). If I were to contact users at the analysis stage, this would involve the risk of points (a) and (b) being obscured by the unfavorable connotations that the sheer act of me tracking the users down and sending them a "message request" via Messenger would have.

At this point, it is necessary to recapitulate the contextualized ethical decision-making process I undertook for my immersive data. With the fixed goal to minimize the negative impact of my research and thus protect participants from harm, I did the following:

- 1) I acquired modmins' informed consent for studying the private ludic Facebook groups I chose;
- 2) I weighed the necessity, desirability, and potential adverse effects of also disclosing my presence to the groups en masse, ultimately deciding against it;
- 3) I purposely excluded sensitive information from my study:
 - a) through deciding to focus on groups not explicitly tied to vulnerable populations and, finding that this was not enough,
 - b) through a data minimization procedure;
- 4) I adopted extensive anonymity preservation measures by pseudonymizing not only individual quoted users but also the groups I was studying;
- 5) I minimized the use of direct quotations and, when they were found to be necessary, I weighed the impact of a potential post hoc consultation with individual users in a contextualized way, ultimately deciding against it.

The decision-making process narratively presented thus far for my immersive data forms the backbone of my study's ethical framework more broadly, so that its key points extend to how I dealt with my investigative data, namely: the tag group corpus I created (source I, listed in Section 3.2.1), the user-made categories of tag groups I drew on (source II from Section 3.2.1), and the textual data authored by the corporation Meta (source III from that section).

Working backwards, the collection of the texts authored by Meta was the most straightforward case in terms of ethical data treatment, as the texts are informational and promotional resources in the public domain, not traceable to individual authors, and the pages on which they appear are indicated for every quotation. Regarding the user-generated categories that I drew on from a tag group-cataloguing group, given that said space was also a visible private group, the same rationale and decisions as those adopted for the immersive data held. Finally, the creation of the tag group corpus may have drawn on screenshots I had made within the private Facebook groups I studied, but the recontextualized presentation of the tag group titles that appeared in the corpus essentially amounted to listing the titles of some publically visible Facebook groups or pages. Additionally, no data from within these (potentially private) groups were shown, but only the publically available information of their title and member count (at the time of observation).

All in all, the discussion so far has presented the particularities of my digital ethnographic approach to ludic Facebook groups, introducing my study's "field(s)" (while problematizing the notion of field itself) and outlining the kinds of data I drew on inside my chosen Facebook groups as well as how I ensured their ethical treatment in my study. I will now briefly turn to my interactive data collection for the project; i.e., the process of organizing interviews with Facebook users.

3.3. Interactive data: Finding interviewees

Talking to people is a key part of doing ethnographic work. In my study, this primarily took the form of nine semistructured interviews with ludic Facebook group aficionados. Other communication I established with Facebook users over the course of this project included private chats with group modmins and members. While these chats also unavoidably informed my situated learning, they remained off the record, meaning that this section will focus entirely on interview data, and specifically its collection through an interviewee recruitment process.¹¹

¹¹ Part of this section's overview of my efforts to find interviewees for this project is also presented and discussed in further detail in Ntouvli (2024).

Despite my efforts to plan ahead as much as possible, the interviewee recruitment process for this project was met with a number of interesting challenges. In the project's early stages, I conducted a small pilot study as preparation for part of my data collection process. This study, which has already been briefly mentioned (cf. Section 3.2.2), had one main goal: to determine whether my regular, personal Facebook profile or a bespoke "professional" Facebook profile would be more conducive to successfully establishing contact with potential interviewees. To explore this, I used these two types of profiles to reach out via Facebook Messenger to members of the two Facebook groups I was observing. The findings indicated that the information available on my personal Facebook profile inspired more trust than my recently created, and thereby largely perceived as "fake", "work profile". Perhaps most interestingly, as stated earlier, I serendipitously discovered that four out of five respondents viewed the message requests I sent them on Messenger quite negatively: as "sketchy", "spammy" or otherwise untrustworthy. I also received a temporary chat restriction, seemingly as a result of contacting large numbers of users, which suggested that this method of reaching out to potential participants was untenable.

Adapting to these indications, I decided not to approach via Messenger users that I had no prior contact with. This left me with two main options: (a) to look for interviewees among Facebook group modmins and members with whom I had already established contact; and (b) to reach out to potential interviewees in more public communication channels (i.e., not via chat), the most obvious choice for which would be addressing them via making a post in the groups I was observing. Neither of these options bore fruit, unfortunately.

For one, I was not able to recruit as interviewees any of the users I had already established contact with in this project; namely, none of the seven modmins I knew and the five respondents from my pilot study. From the latter group, three did not respond to my newer messages, one was no longer reachable via Facebook, and one was willing to participate in an interview, but our plans fell through after repeated rescheduling. This was the case also with one of the seven modmins I was in contact with. Another modmin did not agree to be interviewed citing lack of free time. Yet another stopped responding to my messages. The remaining four modmins all came from a group chat I had been invited in. When I asked them if they would be willing to be interviewed, only one came forward as willing and reached out to me privately. The plans we tried to agree to in our private chat also fell through when the modmin stopped responding. These developments were rather demoralizing considering that these were users who had otherwise been very helpful and forthcoming, and in some cases remained so even after not agreeing to be interviewed. This made me turn to addressing groups of users.

Similarly to Muro Ampuero (2022, 5) in his ethnographic work on Facebook, I expected that the size of the groups I was studying would make it reasonably easy to find some interviewees. I was granted permission to post a request for interviewees in only one of the study's groups, but as I also reported in the previous section, this drew minimal engagement, echoing a situation in Hosseini's (2017, 9) Facebook-based ethnography, where the admin's approval of her post did not yield much in the way of willing interviewees. In my case specifically, one member of the group got privately in touch with me to schedule an interview, but then stopped responding.

These developments brought an end to my consideration of options (a) and (b) above, at which point I decided to turn to my personal network. Although convenience sampling was a third option that I had not planned for, this appeared to be a common strategy in other ethnographically informed studies of Facebook, where the researcher's network was mobilized to find participants (e.g., Georgakopoulou 2016; Georgalou 2017). In this case, however, I would be contacting users that were neither modmins nor members of the particular groups I had spent months observing. Membership (and even better, leadership) of these groups had been my main underlying reason for approaching users for interviews up to this point. I now had to more actively turn to a criterion sampling method (Salmons 2014). I therefore started looking for users who: (a) spent time in Facebook groups for fun, and especially (b) knew what "tag groups" were. Given that tag groups had emerged as a key phenomenon in my study, they provided a good common denominator for structuring my interviewee sample.

Because I was initially reluctant to contact users that I had a personal connection to (including knowing them "offline"), I first reached out to one user with whom I was in contact only due to our shared interest in Facebook groups. This user, called "Johm" [sic] in this study (a pseudonym she selected), acted as a modmin in various Facebook groups and considered herself well-versed in modmin work, as she had, in fact, recently been invited to join a group created by Facebook for "power admins". Johm ended up acting as an "insider assistant" (King and Horrocks 2010; Salmons 2012) for much of the recruitment process, putting me in contact with other modmins either from within the Facebook-led "power admin" group or from her personal network. Through her mediation, which amounted to a form of snowball sampling (Salmons 2014), I got in contact with six more Facebook group modmins who met my criteria, and I eventually managed to conduct interviews with five of them (pseudonyms: Eos, Naomi, Mary, Simon, and Kelly).

As Johm put me in contact with new interviewees over a number of months, and maintaining my recruitment criteria intact, I complementarily also turned to my own personal network of contacts. First, I enlisted the help of an academic colleague, who put me in touch with another avid Facebook group user. This user, called Wilson here, had

made my colleague's acquaintance while socializing in the same Facebook groups. Further, I also made a post looking for willing interviewees on my own Facebook profile, stating my research goals and inviting any Facebook friends who met my criteria to contact me. Five Facebook friends contacted me in total. After discussions with them, I ended up interviewing two of them as they most closely met the criteria I had set, and they also did not belong to my close friends and family circle, which may have considerably skewed the dynamics of our interaction compared to the interactions I had had with other interviewees. The two users, called Elisa and Anna for this study, were people I had met in "offline" settings on one occasion each. Elisa and I had been "Internet friends" in our teens but had lost contact in recent years, while I had interacted only a handful of times with Anna on Facebook, where we had become friends after meeting "offline" once. These existing relationships, being not too close in my estimation, allowed me to maintain a level of friendly professionalism in the interviews.

All in all, the sampling process described above led me to conduct interviews with nine users, at which point I terminated my interview data collection having reached a satisfactory level of saturation (Salmons 2014). This took the form of no new information being forthcoming on the key points I explored through my interview protocol, particularly regarding tag groups, which were the main unitary theme across interviews. This development was reflected in the interview data coding, where there were no hapax codes regarding tag groups by the time I reached nine interviewees; that is, there were no new points about tag groups raised by one interviewee that had not been raised by others. Treating my interviewee pool as homogeneous given the users' shared affinity for ludic Facebook groups and tag groups in particular, the nine interviews I conducted also met the minimum interviewee sample size determined by Hennink and Kaiser (2022) for saturation in qualitative research.

This overview of my interviewee recruitment process has been presented here in the context of describing my broader ethnographic endeavor. Details on the interview data that resulted from this process as well as their treatment and analysis are presented in Chapter 5 (Section 5.1). In what remains of this chapter, I will be providing a broad sketch of the analytical treatment I applied to my data, which also functions as a roadmap for the following chapters.

3.4. Analytical approach(es)

My account of playful semiotic practices involving Facebook groups as semiotic software is split into three analytical chapters in this dissertation: Chapters 4, 5, and 6. They each represent distinct takes on my ethnographic data corpus. Ultimately, the different data sources and conceptual tools that the project draws on are combined to produce a multi-

faceted interpretive and critical approach to Facebook group infrastructure vis-à-vis its use in ludic practices. To facilitate a cohesive reading of this account, I want to unpack here how my approach to analyzing ethnographic data unfolds over the course of the dissertation.

Starting with my first empirical undertaking, Chapter 4 involves a series of analytical choices that oscillate between different kinds of emic and etic perspectives to data analysis. Broadly, in social scientific fields like anthropology, the term “etic” designates the use of a researcher-based analytical framework for the examination of cultural phenomena, which brings with it its own categories for the classification of what is observed (Mostowlansky and Rota 2020). By contrast, an emic approach aims at accounts of people’s doings which adopt the participants’, the observed people’s, point of view on the examined phenomena (ibid.). The emic/etic distinction has a long history within and across disciplines, and individual conceptions of each of the terms are marked by differences (Markee 2012; Mostowlansky and Rota 2020). As a case in point, Markee (2012) argues that the understanding of emic-ness differs between CA and ethnography. While both approaches “share an interest in explicating how participants understand naturally occurring courses of action” (Markee 2012, 2), thereby being both emic, their epistemological perspective on being emic differs. While ethnography brings in varied considerations concerning the participants’ life-worlds to bear on the analysis (including “macro-sociocultural” factors), for CA “talk functions as its own context” (ibid.), meaning that contextual considerations are based on observing interactants’ behavior *in/during* the talk at hand, based on the idea that any meso- or macro-aspects of context that are actually relevant will be manifestly treated as such by participants in the talk (Blommaert 2001; Wooffitt 2005, 63–64).

Chapter 4 alternates between these two views on emic-ness while also involving an etic component. It begins with an analysis of a post and comment section in the style of CA, which aims to understand coherence establishment as a participant-based process of sense-making. It does this by examining the organization of turns as well as the affordances of the technology that mediates the talk at hand. It thus achieves an emic description of just what makes Facebook (tag) groups-based interaction coherent by looking narrowly at what is happening in the talk. Next, the chapter approaches tag groups as semiotic material designed for its deployment in interaction. This treatment is primarily rooted in the analytical language of SFL (cf. Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), which leads to researcher-based categorizations and quantitative observations, all based in an ad hoc corpus constructed by the researcher (data source I from Section 3.2.1). The analysis thus pivots to an etic mode of accounting for the phenomenon of tag groups. Subsequently, however, this etic orientation is again undercut by an ethnographically emic ethos as a user-based categorization of tag groups is brought in (data source II from Section 3.2.1) and contrasted to the researcher’s. That is, contextual considerations are introduced which have been

revealed only through ethnographic engagement with ludic Facebook groups more broadly, leading to the discovery of a group (*A guide to TGs*) in which users catalogue groups they like.

Taken together, these three analytical “macro-steps” taken in Chapter 4 are combined to produce an account that reflexively integrates different epistemological perspectives, each of which keeps the other in check. The more “conservative” approach from CA on what may count as relevant context is taken as a first exploratory step. When it yields some results, researcher-based frameworks (SFL, but also multimodal discursive methods) chime in to tentatively expand the account, but they are again counter-balanced by being compared to users’ perspectives as revealed through ethnographic engagement.

Regarding participants’ perspectives, the move from Chapter 4 to Chapter 5’s analyses represents a bigger shift. Specifically, Chapter 5 starts dealing with the project’s interview data from a discourse analytical angle, while Chapter 4 did not include the perspectives of my interviewees. These are ethnographically gleaned insights into users’ understandings of their own agency in playful practices with Facebook groups. By being interactionally constructed data – involving me directly interacting with participants (De Fina 2019) – the interviews re-focus the analysis, taking it from the examination of users’ practices *as observed* to their examination *as recontextualized in users’ accounts* (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2). It could further be argued that, despite being ethnographically sourced through in-depth interviews, the data are given an etic treatment in Chapter 5, rooted in van Leeuwen’s (2008) terminological apparatus for discourse analysis (and additional concepts). The account that thus results from Chapter 5 is – as is any analysis – a recontextualization (or entextualization; Blommaert 2001) of observed discursive phenomena, viewed through a particular analytical lens.

Finally, Chapter 6 engages both with more interview data and, crucially, with texts authored by Facebook’s parent company, Meta, as published on facebook.com/community (data source III from Section 3.2.1). These are website data that are given a multimodal discourse analytical treatment in a critical vein, relying on social semiotics and related tools. They thereby uncover normative stances (discourses) promoted by Meta in this particular social environment. Importantly, however, these views are then juxtaposed with interview participants’ accounts, which articulate their own critiques of Meta’s (perceived) discursive stance. I have argued before (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.3.3) that the active engagement with users’ critiques here approximates a kind of “immanent critique” in Herzog’s (2016) sense. Adopting a different framing, the complementation of a social semiotic analysis of Meta’s discourse on its website through ethnographic interview data can be said to increase the “reach” of my account (Kress 2011). As Kress (2011, 241) noted, social semiotics “invokes and relies on ‘the social’, yet does not itself provide detailed accounts”, meaning that ethnography can be “a relevantly complementary enterprise” in that it fleshes out “the

social” through situated examination. In this case, my speaking with avid users of Facebook groups for ludic purposes helps paint a picture of the milieu in which Meta’s discourses on Facebook groups broadly circulate. That is, users’ normative stances provide a backdrop against which Meta’s discourses – unpacked through social semiotic tools – can be evaluated.

With this bigger picture in mind, let us now proceed to my first analysis of users’ appropriation of Facebook’s semiotic software, which focuses on the phenomenon of tag groups.

CHAPTER 4

TAG GROUPS: THE MAKING OF INTERACTIONAL RESOURCES

This chapter deals with so-called “tag groups” as a key phenomenon illustrating Facebook users’ creative mobilization of the Facebook groups infrastructure. In making and interacting with tag groups, users are able to reconfigure their communicative practices, creating a new *genre* in a social semiotic sense, through their engagement with Facebook’s semiotic software. Broadly, this chapter sets out to answer my project’s first research question:

RQ1: *How do users’ actions figure in the playful mobilization of the Facebook groups software as a communicative resource for coherent interactions on the platform?*

Practically, this question is approached through the pursuit of two goals. The first one is to understand how tag groups are used in coherent conversations in Facebook posts and comments. The second one is to provide a sketch of semiotic trends in the making of tag groups, which result from users’ actions in designing these groups. But before any of these goals can be pursued, and despite the preliminary description of my empirical objects provided in Chapter 1 (cf. Section 1.3), a fundamental question remains open: What even are tag groups?

4.1. First things first: What are tag groups?

The nature of tag groups as semiotic artifacts and its relation to the sites I have observed and drawn data from require some foundational discussion. At this stage, my description of tag groups will remain rather technical, and it will be based on my observations from my position as a researcher, before my interviewees’ perspectives on tag groups are discussed in the next chapter (Chapter 5). While as a researcher I have worked ethnographically, striving to achieve an emic understanding of the phenomenon at hand, the approach to tag groups attempted here precedes an examination of interviewed users’ accounts of tag groups. Only at the end of this chapter will a more explicitly user-based view of tag groups be introduced, which will allow me to provide a more thorough definition of what they are and what they are for. With these caveats in mind, we can start describing tag groups as follows.

Facebook groups can come to be labeled “tag groups” by users based on how the groups in question are commonly used for interacting on the platform. As their name suggests, the primary purpose of tag groups is for them to be tagged. *Tagging* is a function afforded by Facebook’s software whereby a hyperlink to a profile, page or group can be generated by

a user typing the character “@” and then inputting/searching and selecting the desired profile/page/group’s name from a pop-up list. Figure 4.1 exemplifies this process. In it, I have typed “@” into a new comment input box and then the letters “hey”. A list has thus popped up suggesting things I may want to tag, which includes one group (the first option, *Hey, I’m in that group!*) and a number of pages (*Hey Iris*, etc.). While the process of determining the precise nature and order of the suggestions presented in this pop-up menu is unknown, it is commonly believed that being a member of a group will result in said group being present (perhaps more prominently too, in one of the first spots) on this list. (This is also the main motivation users have for joining tag groups – a point that I return to below.) In this case, I happen to be a member of *Hey, I’m in that group!* and indeed this group has appeared as the first suggestion here. The list is then completed by a number of pages, all of them “verified” (see the blue tick), which may also explain their prominence as suggestions here.¹²

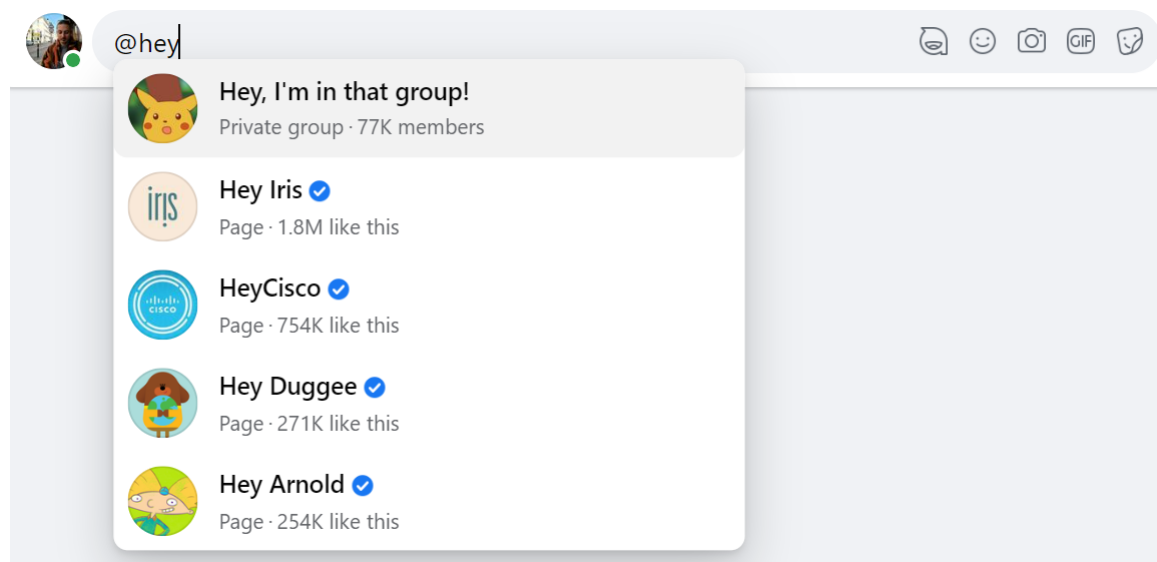


Figure 4.1. Tagging example. Screenshot captured on June 20, 2022

At any rate, once selected from the pop-up list, a profile/page/group is tagged. When, in our case, a group is tagged, its title becomes a hyperlink embedded in one’s post or comment, which redirects to the group and, as a sign on a surface level, is distinguishable from plain text by appearing in blue font (in the Facebook app) or in bold typeface (on the

¹² This blue tick, technically termed a “verified badge”, indicates that a given Facebook account (in these cases, a page) has undergone a process of “verification” (Meta 2024j). According to the Meta Blueprint website, which offers educational content (“courses”) on Meta’s products, through verification Facebook marks these accounts as “the authentic presence of a public figure, creator or brand” on Facebook or Instagram (ibid.). I could find no explicit statements made by Meta as to how an account’s verification affects its visibility and prominence across the platform, but it cannot be ruled out that verification may play a role in the ordering of tagging suggestions as seen in Figure 4.1.

platform's desktop browser version).¹³ We can thus formulate a first working definition of tag groups as follows – see (I) below. This definition will form the baseline for this chapter's analyses and in the final section (Section 4.5) it will be revised and enriched – as (II) – through the incorporation of the chapter's findings.

- (I) *Tag groups are Facebook groups which exist primarily in order to be tagged in Facebook comments or posts, so that their title may appear in the form of a hyperlink.*

Following Eisenlauer's (2013; 2014) critical hypertext analysis approach to Facebook, tagged groups can be said to contribute to the hypertextual dimension of a given Facebook post or comment thread, as they constitute added elements that are:

- a) multilinear (users can choose to click on the tagged title and follow the hyperlink),
- b) fragmentarily organized (part of the text – in this case, the group itself – is not present, but a node needs to be followed to access it),
- c) interactive (clicking on the hyperlink becomes part of users' unpredictable reading paths), and
- d) pronouncedly multimodal (cf. Eisenlauer 2013, 61–65).

With regard to multimodality, from a social semiotic perspective, it can be argued that, by appearing as tagged text, the tag groups' title becomes a semiotically distinct element, acquiring a *textual* dimension (Kress 2010). Specifically, the tag group gains increased salience in the context of a given post/comment thread due to its differentiation from plain typed text along the lines of typeface (van Leeuwen 2006), specifically in terms of *weight* in Facebook's desktop browser edition (bold typeface) or *color* in the Facebook app (blue lettering).

Further, when Facebook users tag a tag group in their interactions, the platform's functional affordance of tagging is used in conjunction with the Facebook groups infrastructure in way such that the latter comes to constitute a new "public commenting tool" (boyd 2011). According to boyd (2011), Social Network Sites (SNS) comprise four salient elements: profiles, friends lists, public commenting tools, and stream-based updates. In this theoretical frame, the category of "public commenting tools" comprises the "commenting features" of a SNS (such as Facebook comment sections and their functions) as well as its "group features" (such as Facebook groups). Using this terminology, we can say that tag groups are the result of a particular mobilization of Facebook's group features through the use of tagging; and this mobilization aims to contribute a new element to Facebook's

¹³ Since data collection in this study is based on Facebook's desktop browser site (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.1.1), tagged content (in this case, tagged groups) will appear in bold typeface in screenshots (e.g., see Figure 4.3).

commenting features. This new element – i.e., tag groups – given its distinctive semiotic make-up (hyperlink format, typeface differences), can come to acquire new *meaning potentials* (van Leeuwen 2005a). In other words, through this process, Facebook users transform the platform’s *group features* (Facebook groups) into novel *commenting features* (“tag groups”, a type of comment) by dynamically interacting with the affordances of the platform, primarily making use of tagging. The semiotic artifact that is thereby produced (the tag groups) and its development and deployment as a practice – which I will call *group tagging* – thereby come to be imbued with social meaning.

Since group tagging instantiates an ostensible turn towards the use of Facebook groups technology for explicitly *interactional* purposes, with tag groups functioning essentially as utterances, a pragmatics perspective may also be an advantageous angle for our first approach to this phenomenon. In Verschueren’s (1999) theory of pragmatics as a perspective on language that emphasizes its relation to concrete aspects of human life, a key concept is that of socio-interactive *adaptability*, whereby language “adapts” to our communicative needs in given (techno-)cultural settings (or *loci*). Pragmatic adaptability in this sense has been studied in relation to “new media”, in an effort to examine how variable technological affordances also leave their mark on linguistic practices (Virtanen 2017). Group tagging as a practice exemplifies pragmatic adaptability by showing how the semiotic software that shapes the users’ digital setting – Facebook’s platform infrastructure broadly, and Facebook groups and tagging specifically – is dynamically brought to bear for establishing playful communicative practices. Importantly, this view does not imply technological determinism, but a dynamic conception of affordances in line with Hutchby’s (2001), whereby “[a]t a minimum, ‘technological affordances’ can be interpreted as consisting of an interactive complementarity of the opportunities and constraints offered by the technology and what users make of these” (Virtanen 2017, 23). Following the social semiotic rationale that pervades my investigation, it is only through social action that the semiotic resources are *adapted* to Facebook users’ in-situ communicative needs. On the one hand, this adaptability goes beyond the linguistic, as we see users constructing novel communicative resources of a hypertextual (and hence multimodal) nature. On the other, the linguistic aspect of tag groups is worth studying in its own right, as it may incorporate traces of the semiotic choices that go into group tagging. I return to the latter issue below, in Section 4.4.

The description given so far may be viewed as suggesting that, when a Facebook group is constructed as a tag group, because it is primarily meant to function as a commenting feature (an interactional resource), it does not or cannot also function as a group feature, wherein participants can join and “gather around shared interests” (boyd 2011, 45). However, this is not necessarily the case. If users want to be able to tag particular groups, they seemingly have to join them first, so that – as is widely believed – these groups’ names

will appear more readily in the relevant pop-up menu when users try to tag them (by typing “@”, etc., as seen in Figure 4.1). This motivation for joining tag groups has two (interconnected) consequences:

- a) Users become “collectors” of tag groups by joining multiple of these groups so that they can then readily tag them in conversation;
- b) Facebook groups that were originally intended as tag groups can amass high member counts as multiple users join said groups so that they can readily tag them.

Focusing on consequence (b) for the purposes of the present description, what this leads to, in turn, is that tag groups may develop into “bona fide groups”, functioning as group features per se. Indeed, the groups from which the data in this chapter were drawn from are two such tag groups-turned-bona fide groups. I have pseudonymized these as *Love joining groups!* (or *love groups* for short) and *I can’t stop joining tag groups!* (or *joining TGs*).

These groups’ tag-group nature and their development into bona fide groups was attested in their description and member count observed during my immersion period, as well as in their titles. During data collection, *love groups* comprised around 69,000 members, and its description (as of June 1, 2021) read “A tag group for when you see a group you’re also in tagged in the wild”. Approximately six months later (January 17, 2022), a sentence had been appended to the group’s description reading “You can promote your groups and ask for group recommendations here”. *Love groups* was host to the type of activity described in the latter version of its description already from the start of data collection, which led to its selection as a research site in the first place. However, over time, as is evidenced here, this function of the group (a group-feature function, whereby users come together for interactions within the group’s space) became central to the point where the group’s description (that still identified it as a “tag group”) was updated to reflect this function. *Love groups* thus de facto constituted both a tag group and a bona fide group.

The situation was similar for the *joining TGs* group, which sported about 30,000 members (only growing by a few hundred over the course of six months). During the observation period, the group’s description read “for tagging purposes”. In this case, the group’s title also clearly alluded to the practice of collecting tag groups. With its large member base, this group thus also developed into a space for discussing Facebook (tag) groups and their collection.

All in all, this is how I came to study tag groups by being immersed *in* tag groups. The dual nature of tag groups as an interactive resource and as groups to join is at the center of this chapter’s analysis. In what follows, I will first present the methods through which I engaged in an empirical treatment of tag groups (Section 4.2) before I delve into the analysis proper (Sections 4.3–4.4).

4.2. Analyzing tag group conversations and tag group titles: Notes on method

As outlined earlier, for the present chapter's analysis, I was interested in two things: how tag groups are used as interactional resources, and how tag groups are designed to have particular characteristics. Ultimately, I wanted to trace how these two aspects intersect. If tag groups are seemingly *meant to* function as utterances, would their (linguistic) make-up not reflect this *interest* (Kress 2010) on the users' part?

I therefore first examined how (and whether) Facebook groups are used to for coherent exchanges on Facebook. In Section 4.2.1, I briefly present my operationalization of the notion of coherence for this purpose, my analytical methods inspired by Conversation Analysis, and my data reduction rationale which led to the ensuing analysis presented in this chapter.

Then, to explore patterns in the linguistic make-up of tag groups, I constructed an ad hoc corpus of tag group titles. In Section 4.2.2, I describe the corpus construction process, and the SFL framework that I used for its analysis.

4.2.1. Analyzing group tagging as coherent conversation

Coherence in interaction has attracted much scholarly attention in a variety of research traditions including Conversation Analysis (CA), wherein, as established in Chapter 2 (cf. Section 2.1), the study of computer-mediated communication has also garnered considerable interest (e.g., see Bublitz, Lenk, and Ventola 1999; Herring 1999; Korolija 2000; Berglund 2009; Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Blitvich 2012). While providing a detailed overview of state of the art is beyond the scope of the present chapter, it is necessary to establish how the notion of coherence is operationalized in my treatment of conversations relying on tag groups.

In Chapter 2, I have presented my theoretical understanding of coherence as a user-based one, whereby coherence is seen as a collaborative achievement that relies on interactants working together in order to make their interaction “make sense” (Tanskanen 2006; Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Blitvich 2012). This view of coherence as a subjective matter aligns with the emic epistemological orientation of CA (Markee 2012; cf. Chapter 3). Even with these clarifications, the definition of coherence remains rather elusive, so that the concept needs to be operationalized more concretely for its analytical deployment.

While in the view of coherence taken here, the notion generally cannot be pinned down to textual properties, in the ensuing analysis I will be adopting notions from CA as heuristics and approaching coherence as related to two aspects of conversation; namely, (a) *sequential organization* (Herring 1999), and (b) *topic* (cf. “topical coherence” sensu Geluykens 1999).

These two concepts provide a broad sketch of two relevant “areas” in/through which coherence is achieved, the latter being reminiscent of Adami’s (2014) focus on relatedness in her study of coherence in YouTube video responses. However, my analysis of the achievement of coherence itself will rely not on pointing to these phenomena, but on observing how users make sense of their interactional work in conversation locally through their *actions* (Korolija 2000). For this reason, it is also important to clarify that, in line with my dynamic understanding of affordances (Hutchby 2001), when Facebook’s affordances are mentioned as playing a key role in achieving coherence (e.g., when I speak of “infrastructure”, “features”, “functions”, and so on), I am actually referring to the *actualized use* of these affordances *by participants* as observed in the ongoing interaction. To the extent that the analysis mentions the resources directly as “actors”, this is only done as a form of metonymic shorthand.

These methodological considerations underlie Section 4.3, in which I engage in a stepwise analysis of (part of) a Facebook “post+commenting section” (Frobenius and Harper 2015). This (snippet of) interaction is drawn from the *joining TGs* group and has been chosen for micro-analysis as a *key incident* (Emerson 2007). It was judged as such due to the interaction’s length. The commenting section includes the longest tag group-based interaction attested in the data, suggesting some sort of sustained coherent conversation. Additionally, the comments’ content (i.e., tag group titles) provide insight into the process of tag group creation for interactional purposes. This latter aspect effectively constitutes a segue into my second main analytical aim in this chapter; i.e., to examine how tag group titles are created. To investigate this, I created a corpus of titles in the way I present below.

4.2.2. Analyzing tag group titles through an ad hoc corpus

To obtain an overview of trends found in tag group titles, I realized I needed to sample a number of them to systematically observe. I thus created a corpus made up of tag group titles that appeared in the screenshots I had taken as part of my immersion in *love groups* and *joining TGs*.

This choice was owed to a number of reasons. First, it is technically not feasible to arrange a large-scale (potentially automated) compilation of a “tag group corpus” as the designation of Facebook groups as tag groups is not one actively recognized by Facebook’s software. In other words, the category of “tag group” is a user-based one, and for this reason, tag groups as a target object of inquiry cannot specifically be searched for (e.g., using Facebook’s search engine). As I explained earlier (Section 4.1), the groups *love groups* and *joining TGs* are themselves (seen as) tag groups also functioning as bona fide groups, wherein (other) tag groups routinely come up in interactions (as in the interaction analyzed in Section 4.3 below). As such, these two groups provided a rich empirical source for tag group titles, which could not be specifically searched for otherwise.

Thereafter, I chose to work with the already screen-captured and archived data from my immersion period as opposed to drawing tag group titles from more recent posts in the groups. The rationale behind this choice was that the latter option would have essentially necessitated a new round of data collection via screenshots, which would, however, offer no foreseeable benefit for the aim of analyzing tag group titles, despite the additional effort and resources it would require. For example, drawing from newer posts would not have improved the generalizability of the data (which is itself not a central concern here; cf. Section 4.2.2.1). By contrast, choosing to draw on tag group titles from an already collected sample of posts in the two groups, both (a) allowed me to work on the same dataset, thus being closer to the description of local practices within the timeframe in which the groups were observed, and (b) brought the sampling closer to a broadly conceived notion of randomness. As the screenshots from the immersion period were not originally taken explicitly for the purpose of documenting a variety of tag group titles, they provided a selection of data which was not biased by such a selection criterion and, therefore, it constituted a data sample from which a “slice-of-life” image of tag group titles deployed in interactions could be surmised. Additionally, this choice provided an already delimited frame for the size and scope of this secondary data collection stage. Such a frame or limit needed to be conventionally set to contain the scope and size of the present investigation. A more large-scale examination of tag group titles per se would have exceeded the wider aims and scope of this project.

4.2.2.1 *Aims and limitations*

With the data from the corpus thus drawn, some notes are in order concerning the aims of the corpus-based analysis weighed against its limitations. First and foremost, the planned analysis had predominantly descriptive aims. It sought to articulate on an empirical basis broad observations about how tag group titles are linguistically constructed. Statistical generalizability was neither an immediate concern nor an achievable goal for this empirical endeavor for two reasons.

First, it is highly unfeasible to know and/or estimate the size of the “population” of tag groups (i.e., how many tag groups there are on Facebook in total). This is owed to the aforementioned user-based nature of the characterization of “tag group”, which is dynamic and difficult to track systematically as it is not recognized by Facebook’s software (at least not in any observable way). Further, the ephemeral nature of Internet content virtually guarantees that, even if such a number was possible to obtain or estimate, it would be in constant flux: Existing tag groups may be deleted by administrators or by Facebook/Meta (which users sometimes call getting “zucked” or “zucced”, as in “Zuckerberged”) at any time, and most importantly, new tag groups may be created continuously. These inherent challenges in coming close to a picture of the total number of tag groups in existence could

warrant an entire separate study with sophisticated quantitative (computational) methods, which lies outside the scope of this project. For our purposes, in the absence of any estimation of population size, statistical representativeness naturally becomes difficult to determine. Besides, an in-depth quantitative treatment of tag group title characteristics via a representative sample could only be attempted after a first “mapping” of what tag group titles look like on a smaller, local scale, which could then inform a deductive approach (e.g., by providing grounds for hypothesis formulation). It is such an exploratory first “mapping” that is attempted here.

Second, a statistical generalizability-oriented treatment of data in this study is in many ways epistemologically at odds with this project’s overall approach, which is a qualitative one, largely grounded in post-structuralist theory. The main orientation of this project remains idiographic rather than nomothetic (Lindlof 2008). That it is, the study aims to provide an in-depth localized account of a singular phenomenon, highlighting its complexity. For example, the complex issue of how to define tag groups is itself problematized here, so that a quick, simple definition cannot be taken for granted in order to make generalizable observations concerning tag groups. Overall, this study inherently strives not for the generalizability of its findings, but for the validity and accuracy of its observations, as it programmatically breaks with traditions that favor law-like statements for the description of social phenomena. The focus, therefore, is on more nuanced insights into local phenomena exemplifying human behaviors which are seen as equally “novel” and mundane; the focus is not on larger statements that aim to be generalizable in statistical terms. This, however, does not preclude also considering a number of cases systematically (within the same locality), as attempted through this corpus. This helps to avoid a reliance on anecdotal observations from my ethnographic immersion. While, as an ethnographic researcher, I may have formed “impressions”, compiling a corpus can provide an empirical basis for more robust, empirically informed statements, which in turn can support, challenge, and/or refine my impressions.

4.2.2.2 *Corpus compilation*

In order to identify which tagged groups from my screenshots to include in the corpus, two criteria were set. Namely, tag groups were considered “tag groups proper” eligible for inclusion in the corpus if they satisfied at least one of the following conditions:

- a) Their titles were actively tagged in an exchange for interactive purposes; i.e., they constituted (part of) an utterance.
- b) The groups were explicitly identified as tag groups through metapragmatic discourse (e.g., in posts requesting tag group suggestions).

As the source files from which tag group titles were extracted were in image format (screenshots), the titles had to be manually typed into a plain text file. This stage of corpus compilation was accompanied by a manual check of the tag groups' current status (whether they still existed) and their number of members (as of late March 2022). This manual check was conducted as follows: The tag group titles were searched verbatim in Facebook's main search engine; if they were found, their member count was noted. When this method failed to bring up the targeted group, the screen-captured post or comment in which said group appeared was retrieved within the group, and the tagged group was sought out via the hyperlink found there. If the relevant post/comment was missing or if the hyperlink was missing/broken, the tag group was ruled non-retrievable. If the relevant link was found to be functioning, it was followed and its member count was noted.

It was further planned that the groups' member counts should constitute an additional criterion – after (a) and (b) above – for determining the groups' inclusion in the final corpus (see Section 4.2.2.3 below); hence, non-retrievable groups were excluded from the get-go as their number of members (like their existence) could not be ascertained. Member counts were detailed in cases of groups with up to 1,000 members. Beyond this group size, member counts were rounded to the closest hundredth. For example, a smaller group would be reported as having exactly 423 members (at the time of observation), but a larger one with 1,423 would be reported as having 1,400. Given the ephemeral nature of these numbers, which can change on a moment-by-moment basis, further nuance would be trivial as it would not necessarily lead to greater accuracy. Even if it did, group sizes are only considered here as rough estimates of the groups' popularity, meaning that exact member counts are beyond the scope of this analysis.

Member counts were treated cumulatively in cases of tag groups with identical or near-identical titles. That is, if the search for a given group revealed a number of groups with the same or almost the same title (e.g., with differences in punctuation or single-word differences which did not alter the proposition considerably), the title of the searched group was noted once (as it appeared in the screenshot), but the member counts of all (near-)identical groups were noted and eventually treated as a sum. For example, the corpus entry for the group titled *as a connoisseur of groups, this will make a fine addition to my collection* had its member count noted as “37,600, 1,900, 25” since there were three groups featuring this same title, which had 37,600, 1,900, and twenty-five members respectively. In the end, this was treated as one entry on the grounds that the phrase that constituted the tag groups' title was essentially “collected” by a total of approximately 39,500 people. While there may potentially be overlaps (i.e., some users may follow two or more groups with the same title), this on the one hand could not feasibly be further examined, and on the other, could reasonably be deemed as an uncommon occurrence, if one assumes that users have some overview of tag groups they have already “collected” since they

supposedly use them in interactions. At any rate, the absolute precision of member counts was not of great importance as these counts simply served as broad indicators of the group titles' popularity.

Finally, it should be noted that the tagged content identified as “tag groups” based on criteria (a) and (b) above overwhelmingly had the infrastructural form of private Facebook groups, but it also included a few instances of Facebook pages used in this tagged form. This did not disqualify the content from inclusion in the corpus given that it still functioned interactionally like prototypical tag groups do (in fact, the nature of the tagged content could not be identified unless one tried to track down the tagged item). Still, instances of pages were marked accordingly in the corpus (with a note reading “page”).

The compiling procedure described above yielded a raw total of $N_{raw} = 286$ tag group titles. For the final corpus, some further refinement and processing was carried out.

4.2.2.3 *Processing and analysis of “form”, “content”, and the in-between*

The contents of the plain text file initially compiled were entered into a Word file for cleaning. First, the groups were alphabetically organized and the list was checked for potential duplicates. In this way, four double entries were found and removed, resulting in $N_{corrected} = 282$ group titles.

These 282 groups were then categorized across the board based on their member count, yielding four categories:

- a) Groups with 1,000 or more members, or $n_{group} \geq 1,000$: $n_1 = 174$; 61.7% (of $N_{corrected}$)
- b) Groups with between 500 (including 500) and 1,000 members, or $500 \leq n_{group} < 1,000$: $n_2 = 17$; 6%
- c) Groups with between 100 (including 100) and 500 members, or $100 \leq n_{group} < 500$: $n_3 = 49$; 17.4%
- d) Groups with under 100 members, or $n_{group} < 100$: $n_4 = 42$; 14.9%

These four categories provided a basis for culling smaller groups from the corpus on the grounds that tag groups with fewer members suggest that their titles are not widely liked or widely used in tag groups-based communication. The descriptive statistics regarding group size above indicate that a not inconsiderable number of groups (14.9% of the initial corpus) featured less than 100 members, suggesting that these titles were not widely adopted and the groups were possibly created ad hoc¹⁴ gaining little traction. On the one hand, a small member count does not appear to diminish the validity of a group's usage as a tag group in itself; rather, it may only be related to the extent of its use or its popularity. On the other

¹⁴ The ad hoc creation of tag groups is also instantiated in the interaction analyzed below, see Section 4.3.

hand, it is preferable to orient the present analysis towards tag group titles that more users seem to gravitate towards in order to reveal the more commonly ratified and thus possibly more fixed characteristics of tag group titles. To strike a balance between these two arguments and also avoid excessively trimming an already small corpus, it was decided that groups with 100 members or more would be included in the final, culled version of the corpus, yielding:

$$N_{final} = n_1 + n_2 + n_3 = 240$$

The final corpus of 240 tag group titles is given in Appendix A.

Next, the final corpus was further cleaned in preparation for part-of-speech (POS) tagging via the CLAWS software (UCREL, n.d.). In this process, member counts and additional marked information (e.g., “page”) were deleted, and the titles’ stylization was adapted to the input format guidelines of CLAWS (e.g., sentence marking with full stops and capitalization, standard spelling, removal/substitution of special characters or excessive punctuation). In total, 2,339 words were tagged. The output of the POS tagging was chosen to be in accordance with the CLAWS7 (or C7) tagset, which is, in certain respects, richer than the alternative provided by CLAWS (the C5 tagset). For example, unlike C5, C7 features the tagging of the (first and third) person feature for personal pronouns (for more information, see UCREL, n.d.). A manual correction of the POS tagging was conducted after the initial tagging.

Finally, for the analysis of the corpus data, combination of AntConc v3.5.9 and manual methods was used. The small size of the corpus made manual analysis feasible and at times less time-consuming than circumventing challenges that arose in automating the analysis. For example, the corpus needed to be treated less as continuous text and more as a collection of titles, the boundaries of which did not necessarily correspond to sentence boundaries, punctuation, etc. Automating the analysis of such aspects (e.g., through regular expressions) was judged to require more effort than simply doing the analysis manually. Naturally, the increased potential for errors or oversight that this may involve was considered and it was minimized by repeating each analytical procedure multiple times to check for errors.

The analysis was then organized around *form* and *content*, while also problematizing this distinction. The analysis of tag group titles’ *form* chiefly focused on the adaptation of tag groups as semiotic resources for use in interaction. For this reason, the representation of social actors via first- and second-person pronouns was the first central concern in order to explore the interpersonal dimension of the titles in an SFL sense. The analysis of linguistic form was overall informed by this Hallidayan functional grammar approach (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Thompson 2014), which is in keeping with this study’s broader

theoretical orientation. More SFL notions (e.g., “demand” phrases) were also employed to unpack what I term the “interactional orientation” built into tag groups’ titles. These concepts are presented along with the analytical findings below in Section 4.4.1.

Though a schematic division between the “form” and “content” of tag group titles was initially adopted for the analysis, the reductive nature of this division was also considered. Specifically, in Section 4.4.2, I deal with a salient pattern observed in tag group titles at the intersection of form and content, wherein the ideational and interactional metafunctions work together in ways that further point to the interactional orientation of tag group titles. Namely, I focus particularly on the ways *appraisal* (Martin and White 2005) is built into tag groups.

Further, the analysis of tag group title *content* amounted to a more exploratory topic-oriented categorization on my part (Section 4.4.3). The notion of topic being one of “the most controversial concepts in discourse studies” (He 2007, 435), I opted for a less theory-driven and more practical method for the consistent definition of thematic categories here, which I found in *thematic analysis* (Braun and Clarke 2012). Thematic analysis constitutes a flexible method for topic-driven qualitative analysis, in which multiple thematic patterns can be traced in the data, which are “important in relation to the particular topic and research question being explored” (Braun and Clarke 2012, 57). The process unfolds in stages, starting with one’s familiarization with the data, and proceeding with the creation of initial codes that coalesce into overarching themes; these are first tentatively defined, then reviewed, and then definitively named (Braun and Clarke 2012). Working with data (a collection of group titles) that are arguably less complex than interview data – which thematic analysis is commonly conducted on – allowed me to apply this process very straightforwardly and without software assistance. Additionally, this method was chosen due to its accessibility and adaptability to various research designs, which relies on researchers being free to choose the orientation of their thematic analyses based on their study’s epistemological underpinnings (Braun and Clarke 2012). For example, I aimed for my categorization to be chiefly inductive (though it could never be completely so) and not theory-driven. As Braun and Clarke (2012, 59) note, good practice in thematic analysis relies on such a reflexive awareness of one’s research aims, paired with a clear definition of principles that drive the taxonomy and are consistently applied. For this reason, I defined the following practical principles for the taxonomy: (a) no group titles should be left uncategorized (even if they should just be listed as “outliers”), and (b) that some group titles may need to be slotted in more than one category (accepting the flexibility of this tentative categorization). My taxonomy was ultimately meant as a first descriptive test for “mapping” topics recurring in tag group titles.

In a final step, both my content- and form-oriented taxonomies were juxtaposed with user-generated classifications (Section 4.4.4). This folk taxonomy – the groups in which were not part of my corpus – was drawn from a group I have previously pseudonymized as *A guide to TGs*. I provide further details on the utilization of this additional data source in the context of my analysis below. In comparing user- and researcher-based taxonomies of tag group titles, my goals were: (a) to provide a fuller, more informative picture of how tag group titles are shaped, and (b) to juxtapose and discuss a decidedly more etic and a more emic perspective on categorizing tag group titles.

All in all, the procedure described above yielded a corpus of 240 group titles and a user-generated data set with a folk taxonomy of groups. These sources were analyzed in order to shed some light on the design of tag groups as evidenced in their linguistic make-up.

I will now begin with the analysis of tag groups’ deployment as an interactional practice (Section 4.3) and afterwards I will turn to the analysis of the group titles in particular (Section 4.4).

4.3. “Y’all know what to do...”: Coherence in tag group conversations

Figure 4.2 is a screenshot¹⁵ of a post made in *joining TGs* on June 16, 2021, which also features the first of 163 comments that ensued under this posting. The post itself includes an image depicting linguistic text (“*slowly removes my heart-shaped sunglasses* / I beg your fucking pardon”) as well as typed (plain) linguistic text (“Y’all know what to do...”). The typed linguistic text is *anchored* to the image (cf. Stöckl 2014) as the image carries the central meaning in the composition, which the typed text comments upon as a form of captioning.

Interestingly, the image’s content is also linguistic text, in black font on a white background. The first line constitutes what Virtanen (2018; 2021) calls a *virtual performative*. Virtual performatives are typographically demarcated (here, through asterisks), zero-subject “self-referential stand-alone predications in the third person singular present tense through which users perform virtual action or emotion” (Virtanen 2018, 23). In this instance, in the first line of verbal text in the image, the action of “slowly

¹⁵ The screenshots presented in this chapter from here on are updated captures, retaken at the time of writing. For example, for the post Figure 4.2 presents, instead of the original screen captures I took on June 16, 2021, new ones taken on March 2, 2022 were used. While a constant update of the screenshots for all the data would be impossible, a one-time update is useful for the purposes of covering new activity that may have occurred on a given post due to the asynchronicity of Facebook comment-based interactions. Indeed, revisiting this post revealed that it now comprised 163 comments while in the original screenshot only forty-four had been captured. The tag group conversation analyzed here remained fundamentally unchanged. Any salient changes between the earlier and later forms of the page captured here will be actively brought up and analyzed.

removing one's heart-shaped sunglasses" is virtually performed. Then, the second line features the utterance that follows this action: "I beg your fucking pardon".



Figure 4.2. “Y’all know what to do...” post and first comment. “OP” stands for “Original Poster”. “1_A” stands for “first comment by Commenter A”

In what follows, I will first provide an account of how coherence is seemingly facilitated in the comments under this post through Facebook’s infrastructure (Section 4.3.1). I will then examine how the practice of group tagging in particular intersects with these mechanisms (Section 4.3.2).

4.3.1. Facebook comments and coherence

Following Farina (2018), Facebook posts can be viewed as “tellings”, which constitute basic opening sequences for the interaction that may ensue in the “quasi-conversational space” of a post+commenting section (Frobenius and Harper 2015). In this case, the opening turn (“Y’all know what to do...”) constitutes an indirect request or invitation (viz. “do what you know”). A (negative) response to the original poster’s (or OP’s) indirect request is given by the first commenter in 1_A, thereby creating an adjacency pair (Schegloff and Sacks 1973). So far, coherence in the post’s interaction is achieved through sequential organization with a request-rejection sequence (Schegloff 2007). OP invites their audience to “do what they know” with the content of the picture and Commenter A

turns down the invitation by claiming ignorance (“I actually do not know what to do”¹⁶); this puzzlement appears to be a shared or supported sentiment as the comment amasses the largest number of likes in this thread (thirty-seven).¹⁷ At the same time, Facebook’s software already plays a large role in presenting these two turns as related to each other through its routine provision of a commenting section for posts.

Figure 4.3 below presents the uppermost part of a tag group conversation (the longest attested in my data), which consists of an opening (the first comment) and thirty-five subsequent *turns*.¹⁸ This particular figure includes the first eleven turns, which will be subject to micro-analysis here. The comments are coded as follows: A unique number sequence represents each individual comment and its potential nesting. So, “1” stands for “first comment”, “1.1” stands for “first comment nested under 1”, “1.1.1” stands for “1st comment nested under 1.1”, and so on. The different letters and colors represent unique commenters. So, A is a unique commenter whose name and picture are always covered¹⁹ in pink, B is a unique commenter whose details are always covered in light blue, and so on. The letters standing for commenters are appended after the numerical comment code with an underscore. For example, 1.1.2_B is a comment made by Commenter B.

Notably, all thirty-five comments after the first one are presented by Facebook’s infrastructure nested underneath the opening comment, creating the *subthread* that comprises the tag group conversation at hand. This results from the use of the *reply* function, which “allows FB users to have control over the positioning of their comments in comment threads” (Farina 2018, 20) by enabling comment *nesting* (i.e., indentation).²⁰

¹⁶ This comment has been edited as indicated by the relevant note underneath it (“Edited”). The editing in question occurred on the same day and consisted in the correction of a typo (the commenter had originally typed “fo” instead of “do”).

¹⁷ An interpretation that could be offered for this exchange here is that OP is inviting the members of *joining TGs* to make the linguistic text appearing in the image into a tag group. This (or any other) interpretation, however, bears little relevance for our aims here as no such interpretation ever becomes interactionally relevant among the users themselves in the comments examined. Section 4.3.2 below briefly re-examines this potential interpretation.

¹⁸ Individual comments are here conceptualized as “turns” in the CA sense, following a large body of work in digital CA (for overviews, see Paulus, Warren, and Lester 2016; Meredith 2019). For a fuller understanding of how the CA concept of turn is adapted to the study of online talk, see Meredith (2019), and regarding turns in Facebook comment threads in particular, see Farina (2018, 7–9).

¹⁹ Note that, apart from the commenters’ names and pictures, a portion of comment 1.1.4_D has been redacted, as it would reveal the name of the group this conversation occurred in, thereby compromising my cloaking strategy for data anonymization (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2).

²⁰ At the time this post and its (initial) comments were made and first documented, Facebook’s desktop browser interface did not display this nesting (at least in my version). This was also the case at the time of Frobenius and Harper’s (2015) investigation. Because the data I am working with in this chapter do exhibit nesting, however, I will be granting it analytical treatment here. After all, the nesting function was applied retroactively to this thread, so that it contributes to the construction of ostensible coherence for anyone attempting a post hoc interpretation of the thread’s exchanges (as I am here). The fact that nesting was not present in the initial unfolding of the interaction clearly shows that it is not a *conditio sine qua non* for coherent interactions. In fact, I do not consider any single analyzed factor contributing to coherence as individually indispensable.

Additional nesting then occurs creating *inner subthreads* when the reply function is used on already nested comments. Through the way it influences the display of comments, allowing for an easier grouping of connected turns, the nesting function works as an infrastructural element facilitating coherence in Facebook comment-based interactions. Nesting is also reflected in the labeling of the turns as they are presented here.



Figure 4.3. Uppermost part of a tag group conversation in the “Y’all know what to do...” post’s comment thread

Still, nesting is not the sole – nor even a necessary – infrastructural element at play for coherence maintenance in Facebook-comment conversation. When the reply function is used, Facebook also *automatically tags* the name of the user whose comment is being replied to. For example, in Figure 4.3, comment 1.1.1_C replies to comment 1.1_B as evidenced not only by nesting, but also by the tagging of Commenter B’s name (covered

by the light blue box). For comment 1.1.2_B replying to 1.1.1_C no additional nesting is created, but rather the tagging of Commenter C's name (see the orange box) suffices to indicate that B is responding directly to them; the same is the case between 1.1.2_B and 1.1.3_C. These are examples of *addressivity* (Werry 1996) being built into the commenting infrastructure of Facebook. In his early study of Internet Relay Chat (IRC), Werry (1996, 52) characterized addressivity as a convention of IRC whereby participants "indicate the intended addressee by putting that person's name at the start of an utterance". Similarly to its function in IRC, addressivity here facilitates identifying immediate replies within the technological interface where conversation is occurring, as adjacency can easily be disrupted in such mediated exchanges (see, e.g., Herring 1999; Berglund 2009). Thus, Commenters D (1.1.4_D) and F (1.1.6_F), for instance, are able to indicate that they are directly replying to B without their and B's comments being adjacent. Yet, some ambiguity remains as to which of B's comments D and F are replying to (1.1_B or 1.1.2_B).

Notably, in Facebook's browser version analyzed here (as well as in the version of Facebook in which the post and comments were originally made; cf. fn. 20), addressivity is an automated function of the platform's commenting feature, so that it is not users who manually type out (let alone tag) other users' names to support coherence in the conversational flow; rather, it is the platform that triggers this process automatically when users click (or tap, depending on their device) "Reply". In doing so, the platform mobilizes yet another one of its functions, that of tagging. This also results in the user being replied to receiving a Facebook notification informing them of the reply. We can call this convergence of infrastructural functions for coherence maintenance in Facebook comments *automated tag-addressivity*.

All in all, the platform's affordances seem to play a significant role in the establishment of conversational coherence in Facebook comment (sub)threads through the reply function (insofar as users interact with this function). Namely, in the example I have presented, "replying" triggers both (a) nesting and (b) automated tag-addressivity, two functions which work in conjunction with each other to facilitate coherence. Still, this does not eliminate all ambiguity regarding the sequential organization of turns (see the example of D and F's replies to B above). Instead, nesting and automated tag-addressivity dynamically complement the users' actions in order to achieve an organized presentation of the exchange that is more sequentially transparent, albeit not always totally unambiguous. As regards the dynamic interaction of features (a) and (b) themselves, we see that additional nesting beyond a second level is avoided, whereupon automated tag-addressivity steps in, resulting in a less convoluted and more efficient display, which can, however, leave some room for confusion. The two functions may also be seen as working in tandem redundantly, as in 1.1_B replying to 1_A, or 1.1.1_C replying to 1.1_B, where either addressivity or nesting would have sufficed to clarify sequential order. Such redundancy can be addressed

by users, however, as they always have the option to delete the automated addressivity tag that Facebook generates when they type a reply. For example, unlike B in 1.1_B or H in 1.3_H, Commenter G has ostensibly deleted the tag in 1.2_G and 1.4_G, thereby contributing two comments that are now presented as replying to 1_A via nesting alone (although the matter of their coherence is more complicated; see Section 4.3.2).

So, even before the content of the turns itself is considered, the infrastructure of Facebook evidently plays a major role in helping users establish coherence in comment-based conversations on the platform. This is not to say that Facebook's features *determine* coherence, however. Even in earlier versions of Facebook, in the absence of such facilitating functions as *replying*, users did successfully achieve interactional coherence by developing other strategies (see Frobenius and Harper 2015). In fact, the varied ways in which interactants adapt to the affordances of various platforms in order to engage in coherent conversation have been well documented in CMC-focused literature over the years (see, e.g., Herring 1999; Berglund 2009; Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Blitvich 2012). Further, the observation that the infrastructure of Facebook (or any platform) is more "user-friendly" today than it was before (cf. Eisenlauer 2013; 2014; Frobenius and Harper 2015) is a trivial point, easily attributable to the tendency of social media platforms to constantly change in attractive ways in order to more efficiently "sell connectivity" (van Dijck 2013b). The argument here, instead, is that the already considerable role of the platform's affordances in helping these interactions work coherently for users is (a) not to be downplayed and, most importantly, (b) only further accentuated when more closely examining comments that rely on tag groups, as will be shown below.

4.3.2. Group tagging and coherence: Infrastructure, topics, adaptability

Taking a closer look at comment content, the inner subthread 1.1.X – reproduced below for convenience along with comment 1_A in Figure 4.4 – consists entirely of tag-group comments.

This inner subthread is opened by the "parent" comment 1.1_B, a tag-group comment, which itself replies to 1_A, a plain-text comment ("I actually do not know what to do"). 1.1_B amounts to an abrupt *topic shift* (Heritage 1989) in replying to 1_A, as user B offers a metacommunicative comment in the form of a tag group: B would make A's utterance into a tag group, but that would necessitate that B work to moderate said group – another testament to tag groups also functioning as bona fide groups (cf. Section 4.1). Despite the abruptness of the topic shift, which is not introduced or pre-negotiated (cf. Geluykens 1999), coherence between this turn and the previous one is achieved thanks to the infrastructural elements at play discussed above (nesting and automated tag-addressivity through the reply function). Notably, this topic shift is ostensibly never accepted by A in

what follows, but is accepted (in tag-group fashion) by C, while A never contributes to the conversation again (nor do they “react” to any comments).



Figure 4.4. Inner subthread 1.1.X along with comment 1_A. Cropped portion of Figure 4.3

Considering the entrance not only of C but also of additional commenters D, E, and F into the (inner sub)thread, it becomes analytically necessary to start treating this tag group conversation as *multi-party interaction* (Dynel 2014) or a *polylogue*²¹ (Kerbrat-Orecchioni 2004; Marcoccia 2004; Bou-Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Blitvich 2012). According to Marcoccia (2004, 117), in online polylogues “there is no defined group of participants but, on the contrary, multiple participants who join into, and withdraw from, the discussion at will”. In fact, Goffman’s (1981, 3) conception of participation status as involving anyone “in perceptual range of the event” renders essentially any member of the *joining TGs* group a participant in any comment-based conversation therein. According to Dynel (2014), in a public online context such as, say, YouTube, virtually anyone is also a *ratified participant* once an utterance is produced. This only partly applies to comment-based conversations in private Facebook groups like *joining TGs* as they constitute semi-public spaces where only

²¹ The terms “polylogue” and “multi-party interaction” are used interchangeably here. For the establishment of the former term, see Kerbrat-Orecchioni (2004); for a critique of it leading to its rejection and the adoption of the latter, see Dynel (2014, 38).

approved members of the group are ratified participants. But given that such interactions are asynchronous “persistent conversations” (Erickson 1999) that can be accessed at any time as they remain in an “open state” (Goffman 1981), the pressing question regarding coherence now becomes: How do ratified participants (i.e., group members) like C, D, E, and F *self-select* (Sacks, Schegloff, and Jefferson 1974) to contribute turns in a coherent polylogue?

In the case of 1.1.1_C, apart from the interaction having the kind of “infrastructural support” that has been discussed so far (cf. Section 4.3.1), it seems that C achieves coherent active participation by staying on the topic of “making a tag group”. Crucially, the hypertextual nature of tag groups encompasses a series of mediated actions (Scollon 2001) taken by C in order to make this comment. Namely, C has seemingly created the group that they have tagged here (**“I made it a tag group so you dont [sic] have to moderate it”**). Apart from its title (“I made it”), this is evidenced by the fact that said group had only fifteen members over nine months after the interaction occurred, making it even more plausible that it was an ad hoc creation that never gained popularity outside of this conversation. So, one way in which C managed to remain on the topic of “making a tag group” (and to thereby provide a coherent reply through group tagging) involved not only tagging a group, but also *creating one expressly in order to tag it*. Following Goodwin’s (2013) view of conversational structure preservation through actions that reuse publically available material (e.g., the content of previous turns), two actions that can be identified here are the action of creating a new Facebook group and that of tagging it, all the while working with the topic of the previous turn (“making a tag group”). These actions both coexist as frozen actions (Norris 2013a) in this tag group, which, being a hypertext, inherently has a “fragmented organization” (cf. Section 4.1). This state of affairs serves to underline that the way in which contributions can be made to cohere in tag group conversations may involve various strata of mediated actions embedded in the hypertextual (and hence also multimodal) nature of tag groups as semiotic artifacts. In the end, this instance of self-selection by C involves not simply taking the floor to tag a group, but also creating a group (to then tag), which are both actions closely dependent on the expert use of Facebook’s semiotic software.

While C stays on topic in 1.1.1_C, 1.1.2_B replies shifting the topic to “tag group collection”, presented through the metaphor of addiction. Then, 1.1.3_C readily accepts this topic shift by tagging another group with the collection/addiction parallel in its title. What is notable about the two pairs of turns exchanged between B and C (1.1_B and 1.1.1_C; 1.1.2_B and 1.1.3_C) is that they amass a relatively large number of (positive) reactions compared to the rest of the comments in the tag group conversation. They can thus be interpreted as being somehow noteworthy, commendable or otherwise successful actions contributing to the conversation. Their predominant judgement appears to be that

they are amusing, as “haha” reactions are the most numerous. Since our present user-based understanding of coherence in multi-party interactions involves examining “(a) discourse in context(s), (b) *action*, for example, what participants are involved in while conversing, and (c) *sense-making*” (Korolija 2000, 426, my emphasis), the large numbers of reactions on these comments may be interpreted as users recognizing these exchanges as highly coherent. Not only are these comments judged as “making sense”, but they are seemingly also found to be amusing, and in fact they invite further actions that express this sentiment in the form of Facebook reactions (“haha” ones). This further increases users’ multimodal engagement in the polylogue. So, the reactions suggest that these comments are viewed as remarkably coherent by users. The question, then, becomes: How so?

In the case of the first exchange, 1.1.1_C involved the additional action of purposely creating a new tag group, thereby adding to the collaborative engagement in the conversation, which is central to achieving coherence (Korolija 2000; Tanskanen 2006). In the second exchange, the turns stay on topic remarkably well by aligning not only along the vaguer topic of “tag group collection”, but also around the same addiction metaphor (see “addiction”, “tag group dealer”). Commenters B and C have made the tag group conversation work remarkably well by being in a position to tag “the right groups”: First, C purposely created one (1.1.1_C), then they cited one that happened to align very closely with the topic by using the same addiction metaphor (1.1.3_C); in-between, B introduced the topic of tag group collection/addiction appropriately when responding to the creation of a new tag group (1.1.2_B) by commenting that C was “enabling” their addiction because said user provided them with a new group (which, as an “addict”, B could not resist joining). An interpretation of why B and C’s interactional work is positively evaluated (viz. reacted to) as coherent conversational flow would be that these commenters manage to “make a conversation work” by (or despite) relying on the *inherently inflexible resource of tag groups*.

Theoretically, an infinite amount of groups could be purposely created as tag groups, meaning that tag group conversation participants could tag any phrase as a tag group title by simply creating that group (as in 1.1.1_C). However, the logistical difficulty (and sheer inconvenience) of creating a new Facebook group every time one wants to enter a discussion means that users must content themselves with a finite number of tag groups which they collect to then use as commenting features. This logistical difficulty has in fact been cited by Commenter B in their statement about not wanting to moderate an ad hoc-created tag group (1.1_B). The inflexibility that is inherent to communicating using rigid “building blocks”²² for one’s utterances (viz. a finite number of familiar tag groups) makes

²² The metaphor of tag groups as “building blocks” for utterances is especially appropriate if one considers comment 1.1.4_D. In this comment, D has tagged multiple groups in the same turn. The redacted portion of the comment is also in tag-group format, but has been covered because it reveals the name of the group in

the establishment of coherence challenging as utterance content is not easy to manipulate, and at times, the logistically taxing creation of a new group may be required.

These are matters of pragmatic adaptability, whereby communicative resources are made to align with communicators' situated needs. In the case of group tagging, Facebook users interact with the platform's affordances to effectively "build" their own (pools of) resources. The semiotic work that this entails may deter users from forming these resources ad hoc, so that they have to make do with what has already been made available to them through their previous socialization on the platform (e.g., their having joined certain tag groups in order to be able to tag them). Alternatively, users can still create tag groups on the spot (as Commenter C apparently has), thereby further exemplifying their dynamic interaction with the platform's resources in adaptable ways.

Finally, the turns that appear to be the least coherent at first glance reveal another important dimension of tag group conversations. Namely, the two turns by Commenter G, 1.2_G and 1.4_G in Figure 4.3, appear more disjointed from the conversational flow, or as "making less sense" in the context of the interaction than the rest of the comments seen so far. Despite appearing like direct responses to 1_A through nesting, one would be hard pressed to explain why the abrupt topic shift that they represent does not short-circuit the conversation. The automated addressivity tag is also absent from these turns. Similarly, the case of 1.3_H (in Figure 4.3) is also apparently incoherent to an outsider, though it still features automated tag-addressivity along with the nesting, which constructs it as a response to 1_A. Taken together, all three comments at hand include a tag group about obsessively collecting groups (topic: "tag group collection") in response to a plain-text comment (1_A) which responded to OP's request/invitation (cf. Figure 4.2). Still, these comments each amass a considerable number of reactions by this post's standards, ranging from five to thirteen. Treating reactions (especially positive ones like these) as indicators of users finding the conversation coherent as I have done before, one would be forced to view these turns as achieving coherence: participants seemingly welcomed these comments through their likes and "haha" reactions. How can this be?

The apparent coherence of these turns could be explained not in terms of how the turns respond to other ones within the polylogue, but rather as a result of the comments' "double articulation". This refers to the property of an interaction (like the tag group conversation at hand) of being structured essentially on two levels: (a) as involving its active participants (here, other commenters under the post) and (b) as also involving a more general audience of those "who do not make comments but passively participate in the polylogue" (Bou-

which this interaction took place (cf. "That's this group but I'm tagging it extra for emphasis"). The point is that, as tag groups cannot be partially tagged in current versions of Facebook and their titles cannot be broken down, every individual group can be viewed as one rigid Term Construction Unit (TCU) – or a "building block".

Franch, Lorenzo-Dus, and Blitvich 2012, 503). Bou-Franch and her colleagues apply this concept to interactions on YouTube, which have an “open, public nature” (ibid.). As noted before, however, the general audience that comments like 1.2_G here may be articulated for is more filtered: it only includes approved group members. Since this Facebook group has a clear thematic orientation (tag groups and their collection, as stated in its title and description), approved members can be expected to share an interest in tag groups. For this reason, comments like 1.2_G can appear as nested within threads but could in fact not be addressed to anyone in the thread in particular, but rather to this more “general audience” – presumably for identity-constructing effects. This is how they resultantly amass positive reactions, which ratify them as coherent contributions.

In conclusion, what this analysis has shown is that tag group-based conversations can function as coherent interactions in a highly infrastructure-sensitive way. In the interaction analyzed, the achievement of coherence was shown to rely on (i) infrastructural cues (the *reply* function, nesting, automated tag-addressivity) and (ii) the acceptance of abrupt topic shifts. As Korolija (2000) notes, “coherence is constructed in/during social interaction through participants’ collaboration, cooperation, and coordination of action” (426, emphasis removed). The way in which coherence is constructed in tag group conversations is thus a result of users co-orchestrating their actions (e.g., creating new groups, searching for appropriate ones to tag, “reacting” to “successful” comments). This is done in a way that creatively juggles the inherent rigidity of using Facebook groups as utterances, thereby exemplifying pragmatic adaptability. It is thus made evident how Facebook’s commenting features facilitate the establishment of coherence in this environment – point (i) above – while users cooperate to make sense of each other’s efforts to converse through group tagging. Specifically, because tag groups’ titles (which shape the content of utterances in these conversations) are rigid, users orient to staying on topic – cf. point (ii) above. This latter observation regarding tag group titles and their characteristic inflexibility invites a closer examination of tag group titles’ form and content.

4.4. Tag group titles

Having described tag groups as “rigid building blocks” for communication given the difficulty in customizing their titles, it is worth examining the linguistic make-up of these titles. It can reasonably be assumed that the creation of Facebook groups destined to be used as tag groups may be characterized by patterns in the group titles’ content and form that relate to their desired function as utterances. This would constitute a form of adaptable semiotic design, in which the Facebook users’ interest in creating communicative resources relying on the platform’s affordances is made manifest.

Concerning how “rigid” these titles are, it is important to note that it is not impossible for a Facebook group to have its title changed. Facebook supports this function, which is available for group administrators. However, given that a tag group’s title is its key identifying characteristic, and in fact, its *raison d’être*, title changes (especially considerable ones) are understandably uncommon for tag groups. In fact, among the 286 tag group titles examined while constructing a corpus for the present analysis (cf. Section 4.2.2) only three were found to have had their title changed; namely, groups 88 and 190 (where minor changes occurred) as well as 239 (see Appendix A). Consequently, the creation of a tag group can be seen as constituting a commitment to create a typically immutable phrase to be used in interaction. For this reason, it appears yet more plausible that the content and form of tag group titles should be designed following identifiable linguistic patterns that may contribute to the titles’ intended function.

In what follows, I provide an empirical analysis of linguistic trends found in tag group titles, offering a descriptive account of how these titles appear to be shaped in a way that facilitates interacting through them. Following the user-based definition of coherence adopted so far, the particularities of tag group titles’ design may be seen as one of the elements (i.e., actions) that contribute to coherence in tag group conversations, since this design concerns the shaping of resources for engaging in interactions coherently. As described earlier (cf. Section 4.2.2), this empirical analysis is based first and foremost on an ad hoc-generated corpus of 240 titles compiled after the immersion period. I will now start by providing below a descriptive account of the form (Section 4.4.1) of tag group titles, then problematizing the limitations of my content/form distinction (Section 4.4.2), and finally turning to tag group titles’ thematic orientations (Sections 4.4.3). For the latter aim, I will also be drawing on data from the Facebook group titled *A guide to TGs*, in which users catalogue tag groups known to them. Findings from this user-generated source will be contrasted with my own analysis, in an attempt to draw some conclusions about the nature of tag groups as techno-cultural artifacts (Section 4.4.4).

4.4.1. The form of tag group titles: Interactional orientation

The main pattern I saw arise in the corpus’s tag group titles is what I would call an “interactional orientation” in how they were phrased. So, the formal characteristics that interest me specifically in this section are those that betray this orientation in designing the titles. In the following analysis, I present and argue for which linguistic aspects amount to this effect, drawing on SFL notions.

This presentation is gradual, whereby the findings are framed as a *stepwise cumulative categorization of individual group titles*. That is, characteristics of the titles are considered in succession throughout the analysis, and categories are built and integrated into one another on the basis of their common function. So, the analysis is not aimed at providing

counts of instances of particular linguistic forms in the corpus (e.g., first-person pronouns); instead, it primarily aims to show *how many individual group titles from the corpus display particular characteristics*. Providing simple counts of recurrent forms would not be informative, because my tag group corpus is, as I argue, a collection of distinct potential utterances, each group title being one. To gauge the extent to which users put effort into having such potential utterances, or “lines”, at the ready, we must consider how many individual “lines” they construct with interactionally geared characteristics.

In order to compute and represent information as economically as possible in this mode of analysis, I adopt notions from *set theory* (Bagaria 2023). This allows me to group together tag group titles that display common characteristics by entering them into a self-contained and transparent category, i.e., a *set*, containing a number of units, or *members* (the individual groups, in our case). Of particular relevance are the following concepts:

- set cardinality, or *set size*, which indicates how many items a set contains and is represented as $|A|$ for a set named A ;
- *intersection* ($\cap$), which for two sets named A and B is defined as the set of items that are contained *in both A and B* , and is noted like this: $A \cap B$;
- *union* ($\cup$), which for two sets named A and B is defined as the set of items that are contained *in at least one of sets A and B* ; it is noted like this: $A \cup B$.

The concepts’ application allows the analysis to proceed sequentially by merging emergent categories, with the added benefit of the overlap between categories not interfering with cumulative calculations. Consider the following example.

If set A represents a category of group titles that display the linguistic characteristic α and set B represents a category of group titles displaying the characteristic β , then by computing the set size of A and that of B , we find how many individual group titles display α and how many display β , respectively. In notation, this would be $|A|$ and $|B|$. Further, the intersection of A and B – i.e., $A \cap B$ – would contain group titles that display *both* characteristic α and characteristic β . In other words, it would represent the overlap between the two categories. In notation, the number of titles contained in this “overlap set” would be $|A \cap B|$. Now, if we wanted to merge sets (i.e., categories) A and B in an informative way, we would need to: (a) add up the members of A and the members of B , but crucially also (b) not count the members of $A \cap B$ (i.e., the overlap, the duplicates) twice. The latter can be achieved if we subtract the members of $A \cap B$ once, given that, if we counted all members of A and all members of B in succession, the members that are both in A and in B (so, the members of $A \cap B$) would be counted twice: once when encountered in A and once when encountered in B . This entire process of “addition excluding duplicates” is expressed in set-theoretical terms as the *union* of A and B ($A \cup B$) – introduced in the list above – which contains all individual group titles that contain at least one of the characteristics α or β ,

excluding any duplicates. The size of this new, cumulative category would be $|A \cup B|$. So, mathematically, we have:

$$(1) \quad |A \cup B| = |A| + |B| - |A \cap B|$$

This basic formula that stems from the definition of a union in set theory, adapted to my corpus as described above, allows that categories be merged over the course of the analysis on the basis of their similar functions. As explained above, the main purpose of this is to construct a larger, internally diverse super-category of group titles that share the common trait of being interactionally oriented through the way in which they are phrased. The stepwise construction of this super-category is necessary as there are multiple linguistic features that can be taken to indicate interactional orientation, and the role of each of these features must be argued for and established by following transparent categorizing criteria, based on which quantitative observations can be made. The sets I will now start constructing allow me to argue for each of my analytical choices as well as show how they come together to paint a larger picture. Finally, besides this primary aim of finding traces of interactional orientation in tag group titles, the notions of set theory presented here also facilitate calculations for categories more broadly, and are thus useful for the remaining analysis of my corpus (even when it does not focus on formal matters).

With all this in mind, the first criterion that was set for categorizing the tag group titles was the presence of first- and second-person personal pronouns. The rationale was that the representation of the first (1st) and second (2nd) person in tag group titles could facilitate the titles' use as utterances from a 1st-person perspective, potentially also facilitating addressing a 2nd-person other. In more technical terms, because pronouns, being essentially deictics, or *shifters* (Silverstein 1976), presuppose a situational context involving interaction participants for felicitous reference resolution, this concerns the interpersonal metafunction of language in an SFL sense. My analysis thus started with a focus on personal pronouns, in particular 1st- and 2nd-person ones as they directly require two interacting parties as referents.

The analysis for 1st-person personal pronouns (*I, me, we, us*) was split into subcategories based on the (grammatical) number and the syntactic position in which the pronouns occurred. This was done in a 2x2-split fashion. For the number parameter, the values were “singular” (SG) and “plural” (PL). For the syntactic position parameter, the values were “Subject” (S) and “Object or Adjunct” (OA). In the notation used to represent these parameters for every set, person and number are given first, and syntactic position appears after an underscore (e.g., “_S” stands for “Subject”). So, for example, the category labelled *1.PL_S* stands for “the set of group titles containing (at least once) the 1st-person plural personal pronoun in Subject position (i.e., *we*)”.

The 2x2 split model I just described resulted in the creation of the following four basic categories for the 1st-person pronouns, each listed below accompanied by an example from the corpus. The example's number as found in Appendix A is provided and the group title is also given in italics, preserving its exact original orthography.

- ***1.SG_S*** Title 16: *as a sommelier of tag groups, may i offer a suggestion*
- ***1.SG_OA*** Title 113: *just fucking @ me next time, damn*
- ***1.PL_S*** Title 219: *We here at Men regret the inadequate service offered by your Man agent*
- ***1.PL_OA*** Title 235: *You could have just said "Hi. I'm transphobic" and saved us some time*

Table 4.1 presents the sizes of these sets and adds them up excluding duplicates. Also presented is the total number of occurrences of each pronoun in the entirety of the corpus, noted as n . So, for example, the n for the pronominal form *we* represents the number of instances of *we* in the corpus, and it is noted as $n(1.pl_s)$. This lower-case lettering (*1.pl_s*) is meant to indicate that this notation refers to *occurrences of the pronoun in the corpus overall* and not to the set of group titles defined by the presence of the pronoun in them (which is named in capitals and italics: *1.PL_S*). The findings for 1st-person personal pronouns are as follows.

Table 4.1. Tag group title categorization based on the presence of 1st-person personal pronouns (*I*, *me*, *we*, *us*)

Row no.	1.SG split by Syntactic Position		1.PL split by Syntactic Position	
#1	$n(1.sg_s) = 107$	$n(1.sg_oa) = 8$	$n(1.pl_s) = 12$	$n(1.pl_oa) = 5$
#2	$ 1.SG_S = 90$	$ 1.SG_OA = 8$	$ 1.PL_S = 11$	$ 1.PL_OA = 5$
1.SG overall			1.PL overall	
#3	$ 1.SG_S \cap 1.SG_OA = 2$		$ 1.PL_S \cap 1.PL_OA = 1$	
#4	$ 1.SG_S \cup 1.SG_OA = 96$ <i>renamed: $1.SG = 96$</i>		$ 1.PL_S \cup 1.PL_OA = 15$ <i>renamed: $1.PL = 15$</i>	
1. overall				
#5	$ 1.SG \cap 1.PL = 3$			
#6	$ 1.SG \cup 1.PL = 96 - 15 - 3 = 108$ <i>renamed: $1.Prsn = 108$</i>			

Table 4.1 is split into three (grey) sections of two numbered rows each, and it summarizes the results of the following calculations. In the first section (rows #1, #2), 1st-person

pronouns are split first by number and then by syntactic position. Both the counts (n) of the pronouns in the corpus and the relevant group title category sizes are given. For example, the table shows that there are 107 instances of *I* in the corpus ($n(1.sg_s) = 107$) and ninety titles that feature *I* at least once ($|1.SG_S| = 90$). In the second section of the table (rows #3, #4), the number-based split is maintained and the syntactic position parameters are combined, with intersections and unions presented. So, for example, there are two group titles in which *I* and *me* co-occur ($|1.SG_S \cap 1.SG_OA| = 2$) and ninety-six groups that feature at least one of the pronouns *I* or *we* ($|1.SG_S \cup 1.SG_OA| = 96$, or²³ $|1.SG| = 96$). In the third section (rows #5, #6), the number split is scrapped and the final cumulative counts are given for the title categories based on 1st-person personal pronouns. That is, the table in the end shows that the number of unique group titles that feature a 1st-person personal pronoun at least once is $|1.Prsn| = 108$.

Table 4.2 presents a similar analysis for group titles featuring 2nd-person personal pronouns (*you*²⁴), which does not feature a split by number (given the syncretism in the form *you*). There are twenty-eight *you*'s in Subject position and nineteen *you*'s in Object or Adjunct position in the corpus overall (see row #1 in Table 4.2). As for group title categories (see row #2), there are twenty-six unique group titles featuring Subject-*you* at least once ($|2.Prsn_S| = 26$) and sixteen featuring Object/Adjunct-*you* at least once ($|2.Prsn_OA| = 16$). Further, there are three unique group titles featuring both Subject- and Object/Adjunct-*you*, meaning that the overlap is: $|2.Prsn_S \cap 2.Prsn_OA| = 3$ (see row #3). In the end, as seen in row #4, the number of unique group titles featuring a 2nd-person personal pronoun at least once is: $|2.Prsn| = 39$.

Table 4.2. Tag group title categorization based on the presence of 2nd-person personal pronouns (*you*, hapax *thee*)

Row no.	2.Prsn_S	2.Prsn_OA
#1	$n(2.prsn_s) = 28$	$n(2.prsn_oa) = 19$
#2	$ 2.Prsn_S = 26$	$ 2.Prsn_OA = 16$
2. overall		
#3	$ 2.Prsn_S \cap 2.Prsn_OA = 3$	
#4	$ 2.Prsn_S \cup 2.Prsn_OA = 2.Prsn = 28 + 16 - 3 = 39$ <i>renamed:</i> $ 2.Prsn = 39$	

²³ Unions and intersections with lengthy titles are renamed when relevant (see rows #4, #6 in Table 4.1).

²⁴ There is also a hapax occurrence of *thee*. In-text, I will be using only *you* as a shorthand.

In order to calculate how many titles contain 1st- or 2nd-person personal pronouns at least once overall, one more finding is important, namely the intersection of *1.Prsn* and *2.Prsn*. There are seventeen titles in which 1st- and 2nd-person personal pronouns co-occur; i.e. $|1.Prsn \cap 2.Prsn| = 17$. From formula (1) above, then, which describes how to calculate unions, it follows that:

$$\begin{aligned} |1.Prsn \cup 2.Prsn| &= |1.Prsn| + |2.Prsn| - |1.Prsn \cap 2.Prsn| \\ |1.Prsn \cup 2.Prsn| &= 108 + 39 - 17 = 130 \\ |1.Prsn \cup 2.Prsn| &= 130 \end{aligned}$$

That is, out of the 240 tag group titles in the corpus, 130 of them feature 1st- or 2nd-person personal pronouns, which corresponds to 54.17%²⁵ of the corpus.

Still, *personal* pronouns do not cover all the ways of representing the 1st and 2nd person in tag group titles. The following three criteria were thus additionally considered in order to complement this categorization:

- a) Titles containing 1st- and/or 2nd-person *possessive* and/or *reflexive* pronouns;
- b) Titles featuring the *imperative* mood, which are thereby in 2nd person although no personal or other pronoun need be explicitly stated;
- c) Titles in which the personal pronoun *I* is dropped, either due to *informality* (e.g., *smashed/hitting that join button*) or in accordance with the standard practice for self-representation in virtual performatives as described by Virtanen (2018; 2021), which involves zero-subject constructions with a verb in third person (e.g., **Laughs in Brat**).

For the addition of titles defined by criteria (a)–(c) above, a shorter semi-automatic search was conducted among the 110 remaining titles beyond the 130 titles already containing 1st- or 2nd-person personal pronouns. This excluded overlaps between the categories in the most economical way. The search resulted in thirty-four extra titles for addition to the category of “representation of 1st- and/or 2nd-person”. I list these titles below through their identifying numbers (cf. Appendix A), naming the subcategories through keywords (e.g., *my* for the 1st-person singular possessive pronoun). If a characteristic was not present in any titles (e.g., the 1st-person singular reflexive pronoun *myself*, the 1st-person plural possessive pronoun *our*), it is not listed here at all. Note that there were no overlaps among the subcategories demarcated by criteria (a)–(c).

- a) *my* = {15, 51, 53, 114, 122, 124, 133, 134, 162, 181}; *your* = {11, 36, 108, 184, 206, 239}; *yourself* = {106}

²⁵ All non-integers are rounded at the second decimal place.

- b) *imperative* = {115, 154, 157, 178, 233}
 c) *informality* = {21, 52, 125, 158, 159, 160, 161, 163}; *virtual performatives* = {5, 6, 7, 228}

In total, we thus have 164 (130 + 34) tag group titles in which the 1st and/or 2nd person are represented. This corresponds to 68.3% of titles in the corpus.

This initial categorization based on 1st- and 2nd-person representation establishes a basis for the larger super-category of interactionally oriented group titles that I am working towards. For practical reasons, I will name that final super-category *INTER*; accordingly, I will name the category hitherto calculated *INTER_1*, conceptualizing it as the first step in my cumulative definition of *INTER*. (To facilitate calculations, I will also be naming another additional step *INTER_2* below.) With all this in mind, we have:

$$| \text{INTER}_1 | = 164$$

The argument so far has been that the representation of the 1st and 2nd person in tag group titles facilitates their use for engaging in talk-in-interaction by providing a “blueprint” for the involvement of two parties: the one producing the utterance as a 1st person and the one being addressed. As this does is not the only characteristic that can betray interactional orientation in a title, I will now present and add up two more categories here, defined with more complex criteria.

The first one is I will call *formally turn-like titles*, or *TURN* for short. This category is defined as follows:

TURN: Titles in this category are constructed as a new move/turn in the context of talk-in-interaction by virtue of including at least one of the following elements:

- “continuatives” (Thompson 2014), or “discourse markers”, or “interjections” – e.g., oh, wow, yes, haha, hold up, okay, look, yikes
- *turn-initial conjunctive adjuncts* – e.g., but, and, so
- *vocatives* – e.g., OP, Brenda, Commander Waterford, Zuckerberg
- *openings* – e.g., hello, welcome

An important exception to the definition above is that titles are not included in the category if the elements listed are only present *in quoted text* within the title, which amounts to an additional layer of linguistic representation through *projection* (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Thompson 2014; cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1). Representing the resulting category as a set of group titles, and listing them all by using their identifying numbers, we have:

TURN = {12, 13, 14, 21, 23, 36, 37, 41, 42, 44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50, 53, 78, 79, 80, 81, 113, 116, 126, 128, 130, 131, 132, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 142, 144, 150, 152, 157, 164, 168, 169, 171, 172, 173, 175, 176, 186, 198, 222, 231, 232, 234, 237, 240}

$$|TURN| = 55$$

So, out of the 240 titles in the corpus, there are fifty-five that display this turn-like format, which is equivalent to 22.92% of all the titles. The interactionally geared structure of these titles justifies adding them up to the “personal representation” category defined above as *INTER_1*, which had 164 titles. For merging *TURN* into *INTER_1*, the size of the union of the two sets must be calculated, as usual, meaning that the intersection (or “overlap set”) has to be found first:

$$INTER_1 \cap TURN = \{13, 21, 36, 37, 42, 47, 48, 49, 50, 53, 78, 79, 80, 81, 113, 116, 128, 130, 131, 133, 134, 135, 136, 137, 138, 139, 142, 144, 150, 152, 157, 164, 171, 172, 173, 198, 232, 237, 240\}$$

$$|INTER_1 \cap TURN| = 39$$

So, with the integration of *TURN* into *INTER_1*, a new interim *INTER* category will result, labeled *INTER_2* here, and its size, following formula (1), is:

$$\begin{aligned} |INTER_2| &= |INTER_1 \cup TURN| \\ |INTER_2| &= |INTER_1| + |TURN| - |INTER_1 \cap TURN| \\ |INTER_2| &= 164 + 55 - 39 \\ |INTER_2| &= 180 \end{aligned}$$

That is, 180 out of the 240 titles in the corpus, or 75%, either represent the 1st or 2nd person, or are turn-like in their form, or both, which renders them all interactionally oriented vis-à-vis their form in that they could function as utterances in talk-in-interaction.

A final category relevant to interactional orientation has to do with titles which, considering *speech roles* from an SFL perspective, can be described as “demand” utterances (Thompson 2014). This category is labeled as *DEM* and is defined as follows:

DEM: Titles in this category are formed as “demanding” information or goods-and-services from a functionalist perspective; i.e., they are questions or commands, thereby involving potential interactive participants on the interpersonal level.

The category includes both prototypical realizations of “demand” turns – i.e., interrogatives for demands of information, and imperatives for demands of goods and services – as well as non-prototypical cases like “quecleratives” (questions realized as declaratives, as in title 164: *So no one told you that your post would go this way [four clap emojis]*). However, the category again does not include group titles displaying the target feature within a quotation. Presenting the category as a set, we have:

$$DEM = \{28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 36, 38, 54, 55, 97, 103, 105, 106, 108, 109, 110, 111, 113, 115, 144, 152, 153, 154, 157, 164, 178, 193, 213, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 233, 239\}$$

$$|DEM| = 35$$

So, out of the 240 group titles in the corpus, thirty-five are “demand” turns, which corresponds to 14.58% of the corpus. In order to add this up towards our *INTER* super-category without overlaps interfering, the intersection (overlap) of this category with *INTER_2* needs to be found first, and then the union can be calculated.

$$INTER_2 \cap DEM = \{28, 29, 30, 31, 34, 38, 54, 55, 97, 103, 105, 106, 108, 109, 110, 111, 115, 153, 154, 178, 193, 213, 226, 227, 228, 229, 230, 233, 239\}$$

$$|INTER_2 \cap DEM| = 29$$

The union of these two categories amounts to the final form of the super-category of interactionally oriented titles, *INTER*:

$$|INTER| = |INTER_2| + |DEM| - |INTER_2 \cap DEM|$$

$$|INTER| = 180 + 35 - 29$$

$$|INTER| = 186$$

In the end, 186 out of the 240 examined group titles have an interactionally oriented form, which makes up 77.5% of all the titles in the corpus. To state in full what “interactionally oriented form” means: The interactional orientation of the titles’ forms as defined here amounts to the titles displaying at least one of the following characteristics: (a) representing the 1st or 2nd person; (b) featuring a turn-like construction through various linguistic features (see *TURN* above); (c) constituting “demand” utterances (see *DEM* above).

What these findings indicate is that 77.5% of the tag group titles examined have been designed linguistically in a way that may facilitate the use of these titles as turns in tag group-based conversations, thereby counterbalancing the inherent inflexibility of these titles, which are difficult or inconvenient to change in real time. Following the argument developed previously regarding coherence as an interactional achievement based on the interactants’ actions, the apparent tendency to design group titles in a way that would make them easy to embed in a conversation speaks to another action aimed at achieving coherent conversations. This action – or rather, this *practice*: the meaningful action sequence involved in creating a Facebook group and naming it – by default takes place before the conversations unfold. It may also occasionally take place parallel to an unfolding conversation as in comment 1.1.1_C (cf. Section 4.3.2, Figure 4.4). Casting the findings in this light allows us to start considering tag groups not only as exemplifying pragmatic adaptability but, materially, as multimodal artifacts designed through mediated actions that may be “frozen” within them (Norris 2013a).

More specifically, the shaping of tag group titles as interactionally oriented constitutes a semiotic practice in which a rather innovative interest on the part of ludic Facebook group

users is realized in a merged design and production process, in which the lines between user agency and platform infrastructure are interestingly blurred. In social semiotic terms, the notion of *design* realizes discourses by giving them a textual shape (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). The design of tag groups speaks to ludic Facebook users' interest in participating in interactions in a way that mobilizes their know-how surrounding features of the Facebook platform, in which they are well-versed. Yet, the "actual material articulation" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 6) of this design is a matter of *production*, wherein people's skills in media use come into play to shape artifacts – i.e., the actual tag groups we see. The production of tag groups relies on a pre-designed semiotic technology (Facebook's), yet the interest in engaging in this particular semiotic practice through this technology (group tagging) is rooted in a design process that reinterprets this semiotic software by playing with its affordances. As I have put it before, the "group features" of the platform are (re)designed as "commenting features". The blend of the design and production process in the creation of tag groups is characterized by users strongly relying on what Facebook's platform makes available, yet at the same time, their interests are not governed by the prescribed use of the semiotic software.²⁶ On a discursive level, then, by creating (and then using) tag groups, Facebook users are less actively controlled by the normative assumptions that govern the semiotic software they are engaging with (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017). These assumptions, however, are not irrelevant to the discursive direction of the design process we see in tag groups. Group tagging provides an example of "design as transformation of resources for communication" (Adami, Diamantopoulou, and Lim 2022), wherein "transformation" relates to the discursive context of the practice. It is relevant that there is a normative way to use Facebook groups, and that this standard is ostensibly not adhered to in group tagging. I will explore the extent to which tag group users appear to actively perceive a discursive breaking with the platform's norms in Chapter 6, also cumulatively discussing my findings in this regard in Chapter 7.

All in all, we have seen so far that, in their creative repurposing of Facebook groups into tag groups, users make groups easier to use in conversation. While the present corpus does not constitute a representative sample in statistical terms (which does not appear very feasible, as I have argued; cf. Section 4.2.2.2), a notable tendency is still clearly evidenced across 77.5% of the corpus. The corpus provides, after all, a snapshot of tag groups found in use during a period of time in ethnographically examined sites. Its sampling was also not biased towards finding specifically interactionally geared tag group titles – being used in interaction is simply what tag groups are for, and as I hope to have shown, this is evidenced in their make-up. Yet, the formally oriented analysis I have conducted so far lacks depth from a qualitative perspective as it is constrained by what seems, post hoc, as an arbitrary

²⁶ A related point about the interests embedded in social media features and (re)design appears to have been made in a talk by Elisabetta Adami, judging from the talk's abstract (cf. Adami 2017).

focus on “form”. If tag groups are made to be used in interaction, what kinds of interactions, and on what topics are they meant to be used for, judging from their linguistic design?

4.4.2. Between “form” and “content”: Appraisal in tag group titles

An emergent pattern I identified in the tag group title corpus concerns their formation of *judgements*. My understanding of “judgement” is again drawn here from SFL, and specifically Appraisal Theory (Martin and White 2005). Judgement is thus conceptualized as the *appraisal of individuals* through linguistic means, and it may be *inscribed* (i.e., explicit) or *invoked* (i.e., implicit).

Although it cannot be strongly argued that utterances passing judgement on individuals are inherently interactionally oriented and that therefore this category is one and the same as the *INTER* super-category I have defined, judgement is intimately tied to the interpersonal function of language, which drove my rationale for defining interactional orientation, as well as to stancetaking (Martin and White 2005). At the same time, expressions of appraisal are not a matter of “form” in the strict sense, as the lexical realization of various appraising stances also strongly involves the *ideational* metafunction. Since matters of interpersonal meaning have guided my focus on form and ideational meaning is taken as a matter of what we could call “content”, this renders appraisal an issue that cannot be reduced to my attempted distinction between form and content.

While a further elaboration of Appraisal Theory is beyond the scope of the present analysis, these basic observations allow us to set a criterion for categorizing tag groups as expressing judgement. Appraisal in tag group titles may not have an inherently interactionally geared effect, but it intimately relates to intersubjectivity and the relation between “speaker” and “hearer” (cf. the interpersonal metafunction in SFL terms), while also involving lexical choices with denotational meanings that relate to the ideational metafunction. Categorizing tag group titles as involving judgement thus provides an indication not only of *the fact that* there is an interest in using tag groups in interaction (like *INTER* did), but also of *what kind of* interaction these groups are often meant for. This perspective thus supplements my analysis up to this point from a more qualitative angle. With this in mind, I use the following succinct definition for my category of group titles expressing judgement:

JUDG: *Titles that contain appraisal of individuals (i.e., judgement), either inscribed (explicit) or invoked (implicit).*

As this is not a strictly formal category, and defining what group titles belong to it cannot rely as straightforwardly as before to the presence of particular structures, extra attention is necessary. Of particular importance is the question of how to systematically identify invoked judgements, which are implicit. The criterion I set for this is that the appraised individual must be linguistically represented in the clause. So, for example, in *heteros are*

making me uspetero (group 46), the appraised “heteros” are represented (realized as the Subject), and a judgement is invoked on the basis that they are making “me” upset. Sometimes, the appraised individual is the Subject but the Subject is dropped in the sentence, either because the Subject can be filled in easily, as in group title 107 (*is a transphobe with an unwashed ass*, where the subject can be typed or tagged in front of the tag group), or because it is evidently the 1st-person singular, as in 158 (*smashed that join button harder than a toe on a bed frame*). In these cases, the title is counted as representing the individual too. By contrast, group title 12 (*Ah yes, the potato. An excellent choice of camera.*) is not counted as an example of invoked judgement. Although it could be argued that judgement is invoked for the individual that has made this choice of camera (and that this, in fact, is the purpose of tagging the group), since said individual is not linguistically represented in the clause, my stricter criterion of the appraised’s explicit representation is not fulfilled. This decision may result in a small loss of such cases, but it also provides a robust cutting point which increases the overall reliability of the categorization, functioning as a choice to err on the side of caution.

Below, the *JUDGE* category is represented as a set, like previous categories were, but with an extra convention. Titles (given as their identifying numbers) which feature inscribed judgement are underlined; the non-underlined entries feature only invoked judgement. This means that if a title features both inscribed and invoked judgement, it is counted as a case of inscribed judgement. Title 39, *god has the worst fan base*, is an example of this. In this case, the underlined “fan base” is characterized as “the worst”, making for inscribed judgement; but at the same time, judgement is invoked for “god” by virtue of his having the worst fan base. With these considerations in mind, for *JUDG* we have:

$$JUDG = \{10, 34, 36, \underline{39}, \underline{40}, \underline{42}, 46, 57, \underline{58}, \underline{59}, 65, 66, \underline{67}, 83, 84, 85, 89, 93, 94, 100, 105, 106, \underline{107}, \underline{119}, 120, \underline{128}, \underline{132}, 143, 144, 145, 147, 148, 149, \underline{150}, \underline{151}, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 165, 185, 197, \underline{198}, 200, 201, \underline{209}, 212, \underline{215}, \underline{218}, 228, \underline{232}, 235, 236, 237, \underline{240}\}$$

$$|JUDG| = 58$$

So, fifty-eight out of the 240 group titles from the corpus are utterances expressing judgement. This amounts to 24.17% of tag groups examined being titled in such a way that they can be used in interaction to judge interlocutors. *JUDGE* thus provides an image of what kinds of interactions tag groups appear to be for.

Further, although *JUDGE* cannot be merged with the *INTER* category wholesale for the reasons outlined earlier (viz. it is less of a formal matter, also involving ideational meaning considerations), group titles in this category nonetheless have to do with interpersonal meaning too. From this prism, it is still informative to examine what percentage of the tag

group corpus is covered by the combination of the *INTER* super-category and the judgement category. The relevant calculation of this “union” in set theory terms is the same as before. We have:

$$INTER \cap JUDG = \{34, 36, 42, 46, 57, 59, 65, 66, 67, 83, 84, 85, 89, 94, 100, 105, 106, 128, 132, 144, 150, 157, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 165, 198, 209, 215, 218, 228, 232, 235, 236, 237, 240\}$$

$$|INTER \cap JUDG| = 39$$

$$|INTER \cup JUDG| = |INTER| + |JUDG| - |INTER \cap JUDG|$$

$$|INTER \cup JUDG| = 186 + 58 - 39$$

$$|INTER \cup JUDG| = 205$$

In the end, interactionally oriented titles and titles expressing judgement together make up 85.42% of the tag group corpus, or 205 out of 240 titles. A broader picture of just why tag groups can be seen as “made for interaction” is suggested by these numbers. Tag groups are interactionally oriented because either (a) they actively involve “listeners” (*DEM*); or (b) they feature apostrophes or seem to start or continue conversational turns (*TURN*); or (c) they represent the 1st and 2nd person, thus allowing users to engage in the conversation as themselves, addressing 2nd-person others; or finally (d) they contribute to stancetaking by expressing judgements about oneself or other individuals. This latter point may connect more closely to a function of identity construction, which appraisal may closely relate to in social media discourse (cf. Jakaza 2022).

All in all, though it becomes clear through this examination of tag groups’ “form *plus*” that they are designed to facilitate conversation, what they are *about* remains an open question. I turn to this now, looking at the thematic content of tag group titles in my corpus.

4.4.3. The content of tag group titles: Researcher’s description

When it comes to the topics featured in tag group titles, I derived a categorization from the corpus by way of thematic analysis, which I present below in a numbered list and a table (Table 4.3). The list shows categories I defined alongside their subcategories through nesting. The table presents the precise content of the categories (the groups therein, as their identifying numbers) and their size (the number of groups therein). As explained earlier (Section 4.2.2.3), this categorization amounts to a first description or “mapping” of topics that I, as an ethnographic researcher, found in the corpus’s titles. No groups were left uncategorized and overlap between categories was accepted insofar as it was not extensive. Importantly, this first categorization did not consider the user-based groupings of group titles I later explored in the Facebook group *A guide to TGs*. I will provide a treatment of

users' folk taxonomy of tag group titles in the next section, in which I compare my own categories (of content as well as form) with theirs (Section 4.4.4).

First below appears the list of ten main categories (in bold and underlined), their subcategories (in bold and nested), and descriptions thereof. In the descriptions, examples are also provided by citing the identifying numbers and names of the relevant group(s) from the corpus (cf. Appendix A). Content categories and subcategories are cited in-text using square brackets (e.g., [1] for category 1, [1.2] for subcategory 2 of category 1, and so on). After the list, information on the titles contained in each of these categories as well as category size is presented in Table 4.3. While the idea that underlies creating such categories is again that of sets, I do not use set theory notation in this section as I do not need to engaged in calculations.

1. **Engaging with (tag) groups.** Group titles in this category all refer in some capacity to practices surrounding Facebook groups and tag groups in particular; e.g., mass-joining – and thereby “collecting” – (tag) groups as well as deploying them in conversation. I present a further split into other subcategories for prevalent patterns [1.1–1.7].
 - 1.1. **Group tagging.** Titles here refer to the practice of tagging groups to engage in interaction, sometimes also using terms like “tag group conversation” (e.g., 31: *Do you really want to start a tag group conversation?*), or “tag group war” (e.g., 9: 1, 2, 3, 4, *I declare a Tag Group War*), or just “tag war” (e.g., 217: *We bout to tag war? Cuz BOY HOWDY it sure seems like we're bouta tag war.*).
 - 1.2. **Creating and running groups (administrating/moderating).** Titles refer more closely to the actions of running Facebook groups as administrators/moderators (e.g., 47: *Hey I admin that group*), or simply to creating groups (e.g., 209: *this should be a tag group but I'm far too lazy to make it*). A more specific pattern emerges among these titles, which is dealt with in [2.4] below.
 - 1.3. **Joining, leaving, reporting, being banned.** Titles refer to actions taken with regard to joining or leaving Facebook groups (perhaps forcefully through being banned), and also to reporting content within the groups (e.g., 98: *I'll try to join your group damn well knowing I don't fit the criteria*; 126: *No Brenda, reporting to admin does NOT magically get a group zucced*).
 - 1.3.1. For joining in particular, a sizeable further subcategory of titles exists here, wherein titles refer to *hitting the join button* (using various verb forms). These are covered in [2.1].
 - 1.4. **Promoting groups.** Titles refer to group promotion or suggestions; i.e., ways for users to expand their collections (e.g., 16: *as a sommelier of tag groups, may i offer a suggestion:*).

- 1.5. **Exaggeration: addiction or obsession metaphors.** The intensity of collecting (tag) groups as a practice is exaggerated in these titles. This subcategory deals in particular with group titles that employ a metaphor of addiction to or obsession with tag groups, which is meant to convey this intensity. For example, title 71 frames tag group collection as an addiction (*I have a tag group addiction and you're enabling me*), while 121 frames it as something overtaking the user's life (*My entire fb feed is tag groups, I wonder how my friends & family are doing*) and 123 as something discussed in therapy (*My therapist says I'm not allowed to join more tag groups*).
- 1.6. **Explicit media-ideological appraisal.** These titles constitute statements on the perceived quality of various forms of Facebook group features or stylistic conventions used in forms of social media communication. For example, title 38 refers to a form of virtual performatives as typographically set off with asterisks (*Get away from me with that creepy asterisks roleplay*). Title 42 refers to a view of plain text as inferior to group tagging: *Haha, you responded with text not a tag group, you peasant...*
- 1.7. **Collecting groups.** The remaining titles refer more broadly to the collection of (tag) groups albeit not exhibiting any of the patterns outlined above (e.g., no hyperbolic metaphors). Title 58 belongs here, for instance: *I Am But A Humble Tag Group Collector. Here To Collect Your Tag Groups*.
2. **Intertextuality across group titles.** This category contains group titles that exhibit patterns of intertextuality by alluding to each other (or to other Facebook groups) and thereby creating agglomerations of group titles that elaborate on a common theme or exhibit a similar structure. This category is thus about the intertextual ties among Facebook groups found in tag group titles. Titles in category [1] are similarly self-referential, by virtue of referring to engagement with tag groups. In fact, most of the present category overlaps with [1]. Despite this, the present category is helpful in that it brings to light certain trends and in-jokes found in the corpus's tag group titles, which would otherwise have been missed.
 - 2.1. **Intensely hitting the join button.** A variety of verbs (but mostly "smashing") are used to refer to the action of joining a group by very intensely clicking on the "Join" button that Facebook provides for this (e.g., 158–163). Alternatively, no relevant verbs are used and the action is implied (e.g., 198: *The Join Button Apparently Needs A Safe Word You Fucking Animals*).
 - 2.2. **Bullying OP.** A series of group titles about reacting to the OP (original poster) and their post in an offensive way (e.g., 143–150). Consider title 129: *Now the*

group will perform the piece “dragging the OP”, in *C minor*. The titles also belong to category [9] below.

- 2.3. **“Hello/hey + VOCATIVE/I-CLAUSE about groups”**. These group titles exhibit this common structure to voice a greeting, potentially followed by a 1st-person statement that refers to users’ experiences in Facebook groups. For example, we have seen title 48, *Hey I’m in that group*, in Figure 4.1.
- 2.4. **Running a Facebook group, not a country**. Titles here are addressed to or voiced by group modmins and they share the common joke that modmins run Facebook groups, not countries. These titles thereby refer to modmins’ perceived tendency to be excessively self-serious or bossy (e.g., 237: *You run a Facebook group not a fucking country but ok*). The vast majority of the groups here (all except 237) are responses that the modmins seem to be giving to the original joke (e.g., 78: *I know, I know. I run a Facebook group not a country, but okay*).
- 2.5. **“(EXCLAMATION +) another (tag) group”**. A type of group titles phrased in such a way that they allow the user to react to discovering a new group (perhaps wanting to join it). The exclamation part is not always present; for example, there is 131, *oh great.... looks like another fucking tag group I gotta join*, but also 117, *Looks Like Another Fuckin Group I Gotta Join*.
- 2.6. **“Sounds/looks like X (but okay)”**. A standard phrase featured in many group titles, where some appraisal is made (“(Y) sounds/looks like X”) and then is seemingly dismissed (“but okay”). For example, title 169 is *Sounds like a weirdly specific question but ok*. The second part (“but okay”) does not always occur (e.g., 174: *Sounds Like Fae Propaganda*). However, “but okay” does occur elsewhere, as in the aforementioned title 237 (*You run a Facebook group not a fucking country but ok*) from subcategory [2.4]. Similarly, the “looks like” expression appear in 117 from subcategory [2.5]: *oh great.... looks like another fucking tag group I gotta join*. These overlaps further exemplify intertextuality among tag group titles.
- 2.7. **“That’s it, I’m X-shaming”**. A series of groups that allow the user to start expressing a judgmental stance (e.g., 188–192). For example, *That’s It, I’m Piercing Shaming* upon seeing a (presumably bad) piercing (title 191).
- 2.8. **Groups = too specific**. A series of (tag) group titles referencing how exceedingly (even “oddly”) specific (tag) group titles can be (e.g., 23: *Christ, these tag groups are getting too specific*).
- 2.9. **“Ceiling fan” titles**. These titles are about making sarcastic comments on images that are excessively annotated by users in order to highlight a part of the

composition that was already obviously salient. So, if a user posts a picture with an unnecessary red circle drawn on it, some snarky remark is made about how the circle was not needed. The joke that this small subcategory is based on apparently refers to a Facebook group that is not in the corpus but is evidently connected; its title is: *Circle was not red. No idea what to read, dick got caught in the ceiling fan*.²⁷ There is also a subreddit about mocking excessive annotations like this, titled *r/uselessredcircle*.²⁸ Hence, this subcategory could be classified as a meme reference too (see [4] below).

2.10. **“That’s this group, but I’m tagging it ...”.** Titles for when a user tags a particular group while interacting within that same group (194, 195).

3. **Pop culture references.** Group titles that rely on pop culture references. These could be about personalities, works or products of various sorts (e.g., 103: *I’m not saying Bowie held the Universe together but... have you seen this?!).*
4. **Memes and memeing.** Group titles pointing back either to particular Internet memes (e.g., the “OK, boomer” meme in 8) or to the act of making and sharing memes (e.g., 51: *Hippity hoppity your meme is now my property).*
5. **Animals.** Titles referring to specific animals, chiefly cats, but also birds (cf. 20, 208). Title 56 refers to cat a little more obliquely, stating *I ACCEMPT THIS PEET OFFERING*, where “peet” is an endearing term for a cat’s paw.
6. **Critical political stancetaking.** These group titles express critical political stances on a variety of issues, often in insulting ways. The topics are:
 - 6.1. **Electoral politics** (critical towards a part thereof; e.g., 40: *Greg Abbott is a shameless fuckhead.*).
 - 6.2. **Religion** (critical of it; e.g., 202: *There’s no hate like Christian love!).*
 - 6.3. **Police** (referring particularly to an apparent incidence of high spousal abuse rates among police officers).
 - 6.4. **LGBTQIA+ and women’s rights** (defensive of them, attacking opposition; e.g., 107: *is a transphobe with an unwashed ass).*
7. **Men.** Mostly disparaging (sometimes vaguely threatening) comments made about men in group titles (e.g., 119: *Men [1/5 stars] Do Not Recommend).* These possibly betray

²⁷ The group can be found here: https://www.facebook.com/groups/793032258125467/?_rdr (last accessed on September 4, 2024).

²⁸ The subreddit can be accessed here: <https://www.reddit.com/r/uselessredcircle/?rdr=33089> (last accessed on September 4, 2024).

a militant queer feminist worldview (in line with [6.4] above). This category overlaps to a large degree with [9] below due to its insulting content.

8. **Sex.** Titles that refer to sexual practices (e.g., 53: *hold up, that's my kink*).
9. **Impolite comments.** Titles whose content is designed to be somehow impolite, offensive or insulting to recipients or represented participants and their actions. The content ranges from mildly sarcastic or dismissive comments to vague threats. For example, title 193 belongs here: *That's the dumbest shit I've seen today.... but please, continue*. Sometimes, the comment can be insulting in a rather oblique way, as in the virtual performative of title 7: **stares in CPS again, but harder**. “CPS” here (presumably) stands for “Child Protective Services” and the user producing this utterance here engages virtually in the action of staring at another interactant with CPS in mind, arguably because they are witnessing some form of child mistreatment. (The phrasing “in CPS” is analogical to “in [a given language]” – cf. also title 6 – and the “again, but harder” component of the title suggests the existence of an original **stares in CPS** tag group.) Finally, considerable overlap exists here with other subcategories like [2.2].
10. **Outliers.** These few titles could not be included in any of the above categories. They could still be construed as reactions if tagged under very specific circumstances, but the titles’ content does not specifically facilitate this, while it also markedly departs from the interaction-friendly structural pattern we have observed in most of the corpus (e.g., see *INTER*, *JUDG*, even [9] above).

Having presented the categories’ definitions and the rationale behind them in the numbered list above, Table 4.3 below presents the size and content of each (sub)category (i.e., the groups therein and their number, marked in bold). Titles that make references to pop culture are accompanied by a short explanation of the references (in brackets; see [3] below).

Table 4.3. Topic-based categories of tag group titles with their content and size

Category	Subcategories (if any)	Category content and size (<i>n</i> = ...)
[1] Engaging with (tag) groups	[1.1] Group tagging	9, 13, 30, 31, 57, 64, 67, 75, 77, 95, 125, 135, 142, 166, 178, 181, 185, 164, 195, 215, 217, 230 (<i>n</i> = 22)
	[1.2] Creating and running groups	47, 78, 80, 81, 209, 220, 237 (<i>n</i> = 7)
	[1.3] Joining, leaving, reporting, being banned	1, 14, 17, 21, 37, 50, 52, 63, 72, 73, 83, 84, 85, 98, 117, 126, 130, 131, 153, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 198, 199, 206, 211 (<i>n</i> = 29)

	[1.4] Promoting groups	11, 16, 180, 184 (<i>n</i> = 4)
	[1.5] Exaggeration: addiction or obsession metaphors	3, 71, 121, 123, 210, 226 (<i>n</i> = 6)
	[1.6] Explicit media-ideological appraisal	33, 38, 42, 138, 139, 151, 182, 183 (<i>n</i> = 8)
	[1.7] Collecting groups	2, 15, 18, 23, 44, 45, 48, 55, 58, 74, 86, 96, 100, 133, 136, 141, 165, 170, 171, 172, 173, 179, 203, 231, 238 (<i>n</i> = 25)
[2] Intertextuality across group titles	[2.1] Intensely hitting the join button	14, 17, 21, 52, 63, 72, 83, 84, 85, 153, 158, 159, 160, 161, 162, 163, 198, 199 (<i>n</i> = 18)
	[2.2] Bullying OP	101, 129, 143, 145, 146, 147, 148, 149, 150, 164 (<i>n</i> = 10)
	[2.3] “Hello/hey + <i>VOCATIVE/I-CLAUSE</i> about groups”	44, 45, 47, 48, 49, 50 (<i>n</i> = 6)
	[2.4] Running a Facebook group, not a country	78, 80, 81, 220, 237 (<i>n</i> = 5)
	[2.5] “(<i>EXCLAMATION</i>) + another (tag) group”	130, 131, 132, 136 (<i>n</i> = 4)
	[2.6] “Sounds/looks like <i>X</i> (but okay)”	117, 169, 170, 171, 172, 173, 174, 175, 176 (<i>n</i> = 9)
	[2.7] “That’s it, I’m <i>X</i> -shaming”	188, 189, 190, 191, 192 (<i>n</i> = 5)
	[2.8] Groups = too specific	23, 203, 231, 238 (<i>n</i> = 4)
	[2.9] “Ceiling fan” titles	24, 125 (<i>n</i> = 2)
	[2.10] “That’s this group, but I’m tagging it ...”	194, 195 (<i>n</i> = 2)
[3] Pop culture references		62 (adapted from “I Write Sins Not Tragedies”, a song by Panic! At The Disco) 103 (David Bowie) 109 (<i>JoJo’s Bizarre Adventure</i> , an anime series) 157 (Commander Waterford from Margaret Atwood’s <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i>) 164 (<i>Friends</i> sitcom theme song) 186 (Serena Joy from <i>The Handmaid’s Tale</i>) 213 (<i>Twisted Tea</i> , an ice tea brand) 234 (Mike Wazowski from the animated film <i>Monsters, Inc.</i>) (<i>n</i> = 8)
[4] Memes and memeing		8, 10, 20, 24, 26, 27, 51, 90, 99, 115 (<i>n</i> = 10)

[5] Animals		20, 56, 104, 134, 154, 208 (<i>n</i> = 6)
[6] Critical political stancetaking	[6.1] Electoral politics	25, 32, 40, 97 (<i>n</i> = 4)
	[6.2] Religion	39, 127, 140, 197, 200, 202, 236 (<i>n</i> = 7)
	[6.3] Police	6, 52 (<i>n</i> = 2)
	[6.4] LGBTQIA+ and women's rights	46, 107, 157, 161, 186, 201, 212, 214, 219, 235, 239 (<i>n</i> = 11)
[7] Men		4, 36, 65, 68, 87, 88, 89, 93, 99, 118, 119, 120, 132, 167, 196, 228 (<i>n</i> = 16)
[8] Sex		14, 41, 53, 66, 85, 110, 116, 122, 149, 152, 159, 162, 187, 198 (<i>n</i> = 14)
[9] Impolite comments		7, 12, 19, 22, 27, 28, 29, 34, 36, 38, 41, 42, 54, 59, 61, 65, 66, 67, 69, 82, 87, 88, 91, 92, 94, 102, 103, 105, 106, 108, 112, 124, 137, 156, 168, 177, 186, 193, 204, 205, 207, 213, 218, 221, 222, 223, 224, 229, 232, 234, 240 (<i>n</i> = 51)
[10] Outliers		5, 22, 28, 35, 60, 70, 76, 79, 113, 114, 128, 155, 216, 227, 233 (<i>n</i> = 15)

This categorization, or “first mapping” of what tag group titles in my corpus seem to be about is articulated *from the researcher’s perspective*, as is my analysis of patterns in title form (Section 4.4.1). Thus, besides these descriptions showcasing common themes in tag groups titles, the etic nature of the categorization is itself important. My categories were, for one, derived from a chosen sample – my corpus. While I have explained the nitty-gritty of my sampling choices (Section 4.2.2.2), it is also important to reflexively acknowledge on a broader level the role of algorithmic bias and my own positionality. The sites that I observed and from which I derived my corpus constituted tag groups that did not fall far from what I would describe as my “Facebook comfort zone”. I have explained elsewhere (cf. Chapter 3) that I had been a member of these groups before I started collecting data in them. Everything in this corpus thus starts with my own algorithmic filter bubble (cf. Seargeant and Tagg 2019; Blommaert and Dong 2020, chap. 7) and is based on this bubble’s intersections with those of other members of these groups, who have been brought together through special interests as well as the algorithmic build of Facebook’s platform. So, as regards thematic characterizations in particular, it must be stressed that they are strongly situated, which is a vital consideration for some groups more than others. It may be, for example, that tag groups *generally* tend to be about engaging with Facebook groups (category [1] above), as that is an aspect of the habitus of any tag group user. But it cannot be argued with the same plausibility that the practice of group tagging intersects with

political stances such as those seen in category [6]. (It would be reductive to even describe the topics of my tag groups as expressing “one political stance”.) I return to the limitations of my situated account in Chapter 8.

Further, my interest in producing an informative overview of tag group topics also shaped the form of this taxonomy. Essentially, the making of these categories was a process of analytical induction based on a messy set of ethnographic data – which is standard practice in ethnographic work (e.g., for data reduction purposes; cf. Goetz and LeCompte 1981). My desire to then entextualize this taxonomy in my dissertation led to additional layers of recontextualization. Throughout this process, I purposely did not consider any folk taxonomies of tag groups.

So, while it is consistent with ethnographic practice for me to be acknowledging the role of my subjectivity in shaping my research output, a more emic angle is still missing here. Namely, despite the ethnographic learning that has shaped my own understanding of groups and allowed me to produce this analysis at all, the users have not really “had their say” in how *they* would categorize (their) tag groups here. For this reason, I now turn to a classification of tag groups made by users in a space devoted to this purpose.

4.4.4. Users’ categorizations of tag groups (vs. the researcher’s)

A guide to TGs is a private Facebook group that defines its key purpose in its description (at the time of writing, July 2022) as follows:

This group’s purpose is to catalogue tag groups into related groups. Please add your group as a comment under all related post topics. All post submissions and irrelevant/non-tag group comments will be automatically declined/removed. Any questions, message an admin.

Based on this description, *A guide to TGs* seems to be mobilizing Facebook’s affordances in an original way in order to create a makeshift catalogue or archive (of tag groups) in the form of a Facebook group. From a technical standpoint, this works as follows.

Initially, posts are made in the group, each establishing a tag group category by providing (a) a short description and (b) *topics* for the category (see “related post topics” in the description above). “Topics” here refers to an infrastructural resource that Facebook groups offer. Topics in this sense are essentially hashtags and they thereby improve the searchability of content within a group. In *A guide to TGs*, topics are systematically attached to categories of tag groups. However, there is no one-to-one correspondence between topic-hashtags and categories, since more than one hashtag can be assigned to a single category. In the end, topic-hashtags are only one ingredient of the posts; it is the posts themselves that correspond to one category each.

Finally, posts appear to be made only by modmins (and not regular members) by default, which explains why the description above states that “All post submissions [...] will be automatically declined/removed”. In fact, at the time of observation (late May 2022), the group had been “paused” (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.2.1). This refers to a function of Facebook groups that, when activated, prohibits members from posting in the group until further notice. Only modmins can post in a paused group, and the last post at the time of observation had been made by an administrator about a year prior (May 29, 2021).

Moving our attention from posts to comments, once a category-setting post has been made, given the group’s instructions, members of *A guide to TGs* are encouraged to comment under the post. These comments should feature tag groups (tagged, of course), which are seen as entries for the category the post has set. According to the group’s description above, comments that do not meet these criteria are systematically removed. Still, there is no one-to-one correspondence between comments and entries either, as a single comment may feature multiple tag groups, and hence multiple entries for a category. Additionally, users are encouraged to contribute each entry of theirs under *all* the relevant category-setting posts, i.e., all posts featuring descriptors that apply to the tag group at hand. This means that this user-based cataloguing accepts overlap between categories by default.

For the purposes of the present description of users’ categorizations, *A guide to TGs*’s topic function described above played a central role. At the time of observation, the group featured 138 topics. These were individually surveyed in order to study the posts to which they were attached since, as explained, it is not the case that one topic necessarily corresponds to one category. Additionally, some topics were found not to correspond to any posts within the group (which may be a result of the posts being deleted), and some others were found to be “synonymous”; i.e., functioning as hashtags to the same post. Further, some topics were “pinned” by modmins, which means that they appeared with greater salience (compared to those not pinned) when users browsed through topics. However, since multiple pinned topics were found not to feature any posts or to feature posts with no entries, and since pinned-topic categories did not systematically feature more entries, this distinction between pinned/not pinned posts, though recorded, was not treated as analytically relevant.

In the end, my survey of the group’s posts, guided by topics, revealed a total of eighty-seven user-generated categories in *A guide to TGs*. Categories were defined as *distinct posts which featured at least two entries in their comment section*. The full list of categories from *A guide to TGs* is given in Appendix B, where the categories are named through their (sometimes multiple) hashtags, and explanatory notes are also provided.

Concerning how this folk taxonomy compares to my own research-oriented one, the driving idea behind this comparison was to find common ground as well as salient differences

between the two descriptions and, in this process, explore what new super-categories may emerge. I conceived these super-categories as based on both sources, so that they would bring the two descriptions together. The making of the super-categories has thereby essentially result from a form of analytical triangulation which features both a more etic (the researcher's) and a more emic (the users') perspective. Still, the super-categories are not meant to be seen as strict, mutually exclusive or final. In fact, they are not seen as the ultimate purpose of the analysis; rather, they are intended as a means for providing a more informative mapping of what tag groups seem to be about more generally, not only judging from my corpus.

Table 4.4 below presents these super-categories of tag groups (see the rows) based on categories that are found in both mine and the users' taxonomy (given in the second and third columns). Following this guideline, sixty-one of the users' eighty-seven categories appear in this table; the rest, which did not share common ground with my categories, appear only in Appendix B but are also discussed below where relevant. The super-categories (in bold) are presented in alphabetical order, also featuring some clarifications regarding their conception and content. For my own (sub)categories I provide their identifying number and name for the content-oriented ones (as seen in Table 4.3) and the set name for the form-oriented ones. The users' categories are represented by the "topic" hashtags assigned to them in *A guide to TGs*. Word-initial letters in the hashtags have been capitalized to facilitate reading. Hashtags assigned to the same category are grouped together, with one of them appearing at the front and the rest following in brackets.

Table 4.4. Super-categories of tag group titles based on the combined consideration of (a) my corpus-based categorization of content and form patterns and (b) users' folk taxonomy found in *A guide to TGs*

Super-category	Researcher's (sub)categories	Users' categories
Actions within Facebook groups based on platform infrastructure <i>References to administrating groups, users joining, being "accepted", "banned", "muted", etc., all actions technically afforded by Facebook</i>	[1.1] Group tagging [1.2] Creating and running groups [1.3] Joining, leaving, reporting, being banned	#Acceptance (#GroupAcceptance), #Admin (#GroupAdmin), #Banned, #Departure, #Following, #Mute, #OpenComments, #OurGroups, #Repost
Animals <i>Various animals/pets</i>	[5] Animals	#Animals, #Cats, #Dogs

Gender and sexuality <i>Potentially including explicit political stancetaking around these topics</i>	[6.4] LGBTQIA+ and women's rights [7] Men	#Gay, #Lesbian, #LGBT (#LGBTQ, #ShareWithPride), #Men (#Man), #Women
Group niches defined by gimmicks, especially in title wording <i>Groups devoted to a gimmick, mostly manifested in their title but also surrounding other stated functions (e.g., users acting in character, or being accepted on certain conditions)</i>	[2] Intertextuality across group titles (all subcategories)	#AGroupWhere, #AhYes, #AreYouOk (#OK, #RUOK), #Audacity, #ASCII, #ConditionalAcceptance, #Debate, #Games (#Trivia), #Imagine, #ImHigh, #JoinButton, #Lomg, #Name (#Names), #Polls, #Pretend (#PretendToBe), #SoundsLike, #SpecificDate, #Spoot, #TagGroupsAboutTagGroups, #ThreateningAuras, #TimeSpecificJoin, #Unsee, #WhatTheFuck, #Wow, #Yikes
Memes <i>References to memes or related practices (e.g., "stealing" memes)</i>	[4] Memes and memeing	#Boomer (#BoomerHumor), #Florida, #Loss, #Memes (#StealingMemes), #WishAds
NSFW <i>Content that would be deemed "Not Safe/Suitable For Work"</i>	[8] Sex	#Adult, #BodyParts, #Kinks (#Kinky)
Insulting <i>Titles designed to cause insult</i>	[2.2] Bullying OP [9.2] Impolite comments JUDG	#AreYouOk (#OK, #RUOK), #Audacity, #BattleTags (#Insults, #Insulting), #Offensive, #OP, #Retort, #WhatTheFuck, #Yikes
Political <i>Tag groups amounting to militant political stancetaking</i>	[6.1] Electoral politics [6.2] Religion [6.3] Police	#ACAB, #Incel, #Political (#Politics), #Religion
Pop culture <i>References to popular culture</i>	[3] Pop culture references	#Anime, #Movies, #Music
Reactions <i>Titles designed as reactions to content, to be used in talk-in-interaction</i>	INTER	#AhYes, #AreYouOk (#OK, #RUOK), #OP, #React (#Reactions), #Reaction (#ReactionImage), #Retort, #WhatTheFuck, #Wow, #Yikes

It is helpful to address the ten super-categories in Table 4.4 in three stages, so as to highlight what tendencies in tag group title formation they suggest. These three stages correspond to the examination of super-categories based on (a) group titles' (interpersonal) function, (b) groups' theme/topic, and (c) the self-referentiality of tag group titles.

First, looking at the super-categories *Reactions* and *Insulting*, this recurring orientation in categorizing tag groups (viz. their titles) betrays the group titles' interactionally geared nature, which this chapter has highlighted. This trait both comes up in my more etic, corpus-based analysis and is salient enough for users themselves to include it in their folk taxonomy. Users identify separate categories of groups that are made explicitly for providing a way of reacting to Facebook content, often in offensive ways. However, an interesting discrepancy emerges here between mine and the users' groupings.

The discrepancy has to do with the (imperfect) form/function division that my taxonomy has entertained, and which is absent from the users'. Evidently, my own academic interest in producing a taxonomy required some involvement with theories supplying sensitizing concepts. Against a backdrop of SFL theory, I had thus separated my analysis roughly into a part focused on linguistic features with an interpersonal orientation and another part in which I looked more at representational content/topics. Judgements in tag group titles (falling under the *Insulting* super-category here) were a matter that occupied an in-between space in my imposed dichotomy. By contrast, the users' taxonomy, being unhindered by academic considerations, brings to light that, also at a pre-theoretical level, reacting to things and insulting people are important when it comes to tag groups. The consideration of this emic perspective, then, helps bridge the artificial form/function gap I rooted my analysis in. While that dichotomy was helpful to the extent that it allowed me to make more informed, minute, and systematic observations – which are eligible for institutional recognition –, it relied on “experience-distant concepts” (Geertz 1983). Having illustrated through numbers and tables that an interactional orientation and various forms of (face-threatening) judgments are recurrent patterns in tag group titles, the users' emic perspective now supports the validity of that treatment by bringing forth similar “experience-near” categorizations (ibid.), while also showing what onto- and epistemological distinctions are actually (not) salient in people's day-to-day engagement with tag groups.

That said, it is evident that some observations regarding form are salient to the users themselves, particularly as regards recurring vocabulary or phrases. Topics like #AhYes, #AreYouOk, #WhatTheFuck, #Wow, and #Yikes define categories based on the presence of these forms in the group titles. Besides illustrating again the conversational use of tag groups, the creation of these categories in a folk taxonomy speaks to the salient intertextual recurrence of these forms in titles. At least in these cases, then, titles are seemingly treated by users as strings of linguistic text which share characteristics important for their

interpersonal function. By contrast, next up we find a class of super-categories from Table 4.4 which focuses on tag groups' thematic content: *Animals*, *Gender and sexuality*, *Memes*, *NSFW*, *Political*, and *Pop culture*.

The grouping of tag groups based on their theme or topic is significant for understanding the dynamic nature of tag groups as user-mobilized techno-cultural constructs. The congregation of people around certain topics leading to the creation of multiple relevant groups, and in this case also their cataloguing, suggests that these topics constitute common interests among "group taggers". This in turn suggests that, despite group tagging amounting to a reconfiguration of Facebook's group features into commenting features in boyd's (2011) terms, tag groups still retain the group-feature characteristic of people coming together around shared interests. Whether users join and interact *within* all of these tag groups is not feasibly examinable, but regardless of whether this occurs or not, a group identity is still constructed for users by virtue of their "collecting" tag groups attached to certain themes, and then displaying this collection via group tagging. This means that, despite effectively functioning as commenting features in talk-in-interaction, tag groups remain group features of Facebook in more than a technical sense: they are constructed as such by users who employ them as points within *or around* which to gather based on beloved topics.

It must also be noted here that many of the user-based topic categories that did not make it into Table 4.4 due to their lack of common ground with my own categories are also theme-oriented (e.g., #Art, #Covid_19, #Drugs, #Food, #Kids, #Photography, #Writing; see Appendix B). It is therefore relevant to ask why these theme-oriented user-based categories were not mirrored in my analysis. An obvious reason for this has to do with my methods. My taxonomy relied only on data from my corpus, which as I discussed above, reflects my own engagement with Facebook and the two groups I chose to study in particular. Being a different space, *A guide to TGs* constitutes a different algorithmic environment, subject to input from users with different Facebook-based routines and interests. I thereby consider these discrepancies in topics a matter of variability that is introduced in the data by examining another space, which I view as enriching my study's illustration of what tag groups can be about. The point stands that, by having particular topics/interests as their focus, tag groups are also artifacts around which users can converge, similarly to bona fide Facebook groups but with the added potential to group titles (and hence their topics) by tagging them in interactions.

Finally, we are left with the two remaining super-categories from Table 4.4: *Actions within Facebook groups based on platform infrastructure* (henceforth *Actions*) and *Group niches defined by gimmicks, especially in title wording* (henceforth *Gimmicks & wording*). These

two super-categories display the tendency of tag group towards *self-referentiality*, and I go over them one by one below.

Firstly, self-referentiality may pertain to referencing actions that are part of one's day-to-day dealings with Facebook group infrastructure (*Actions*): being muted (#Mute), someone announcing their "departure" from a group (#Departure), reposting content (#Repost), choosing to "follow" a post by leaving a comment with a tag in it (#Following), etc. This kind of self-referentiality was very prevalent in category [1], "Engaging with (tag) groups", from Table 4.3. However, there is not a complete correspondence between that category and the user-based ones. Users themselves do not appear to single out as salient categories the groups in which they exaggerate their group collection tendencies (cf. [1.5]) or, much less, those in which they express media ideologies (cf. [1.6]). This is not unsurprising given that such observations are more distanced. People's reflexivity does not necessarily extend to all behavioral patterns that an ethnographic researcher may observe: What an ethnographer may single out as important, people themselves may find so mundane as to not consciously notice (Blommaert and Dong 2020, 3).

Secondly, in the case of *Gimmicks & wording*, self-referentiality may pertain to identifying types of groups which actively construct themselves as "a particular kind of group", primarily through a gimmick (mostly evident in their title), and not so much through a thematic focus or a title that promotes an interactional function (although there is considerable overlap with the latter trait, which I will return to below). In other words, instead of being "about something", these are groups characterized by *how they do things*; i.e., what users do in/with them. For example, #ConditionalAcceptance refers to groups defined by the fact that they only accept new members on certain (ludic) conditions; similarly, #TimeSpecificJoin features groups that only accept new members at specific times or on specific dates; in #Games, the groups host games within their space (instead of being about gaming, which there is another user-based category for, titled #Gaming). Sticking to such a gimmick is inherently self-referential as the groups are defined in terms of "this is a group in which we do 'group things' differently". This makes these structures' nature as Facebook groups salient for understanding how they differ from other groups. By contrast, in a group about a given topic – say, something under #Music – the differentiating factor for the group is its theme – in this example, music. In such a case, the category suggests that the group is about music and all the things that "being in a group" entails are seen as par for the course and do not draw special attention. By contrast, gimmicky groups set conditions explicitly relating to how they put Facebook's infrastructural elements to (playful) use; for example, how they will assign more importance to entry conditions (cf. #ConditionalAcceptance), or how they use posts to play games among members (cf. #Games). For these groups, their gimmicks amount to *different ways of being a Facebook*

group – or, more accurately, different ways to (re)interpret Facebook groups-related affordances.

These gimmicks are often also reflected in the wording of individual titles, such as in #AGroupWhere, where titles begin with these three words, expressing that “this is a group where X convention holds”. For example, in *a group where we all pretend to be boomers*, users must interact in character, acting out a stereotypical idea of baby boomers which constructs people from this generation as being inept at using newer technologies. This example would coincide also with the category of #Pretend (also in Table 4.4) as it involves in-character performances. In other cases, the titles express gimmicks about the tag groups’ interactional function; for example, by including interjections. #AhYes-groups contain “ah yes” in their title so that they can be used in conversations as utterances starting with this interjection. For this reason, many *Gimmick & wording* groups like #AhYes can also be found under *Reactions*. The gimmick here is that “this is a group where the title is used for interactional purposes”. This is again a specific way of appropriating Facebook groups’ affordances, after all.

In what follows, I summarize all of the different kinds of appropriation of the Facebook groups infrastructure that this chapter has highlighted through its analyses.

4.5. Summary: What are tag groups again?

This chapter began by framing the phenomenon of tag groups as relying on the appropriative, adaptable usage of Facebook’s affordances for particular communicative purposes. This was captured in an initial, bare-bones definition of tag groups given in Section 4.1, which can now be critically revisited:

- (I) *Tag groups are Facebook groups which exist primarily in order to be tagged in Facebook comments or posts, so that their title may appear in the form of a hyperlink.*

Definition (I) did not make use of terms like “interactional orientation”, which came up later in the analysis. Rather, it was teleologically phrased (cf. “in order to”, “so that”), and what was presented as the goal of tag groups’ existence was their appearance in a communicative context (“Facebook comments or posts”) in a particular form (“hyperlink”). In light of this chapter’s findings, Definition (I) could be revised into (II):

- (II) *Tag groups are Facebook groups which, through the function of tagging, come to be treated as semiotic resources that can be engaged with and drawn upon for various specific purposes determined by users. For example,*
a) *their titles can be designed in particular ways so that the groups may readily be tagged in conversations to function as utterances;*

- b) *they can be treated as collectible materials and be subject to metasemiotic analyses (e.g., categorizations);*
- c) *they can signal a user's interest in various topics that they represent by virtue of being collected and displayed by that user.*

Definition (II) succinctly summarizes the points that have come to light about tag groups through this analysis. To narrativize all this, tag groups are first and foremost Facebook groups; i.e., group features of the platform. However, as their name suggests, they are closely tied to the function of tagging, in that they are commonly tagged. In this way, these Facebook groups are deployed as semiotic material in various contexts. This analysis has focused on their deployment as utterances in talk-in-interaction (cf. Section 4.3), which is often facilitated by the design of the groups' titles (cf. Sections 4.4.1, 4.4.2). Tag groups thereby exemplify a process of pragmatic adaptability, wherein the affordances of a social media platform are put to creative use, giving rise to communicative resources.

It is also possible to produce taxonomies of tag groups that cluster them around specific topics and intertextual relations/trends displayed in their titles (Section 4.4.3). In fact, users themselves can be seen engaging in folk taxonomies. Such a folk taxonomy has also informed my own analysis, presenting a more experience-near understanding of tag groups (Section 4.4.4). This practice of cataloguing tag groups on the users' part essentially gives rise to metasemiotic discourse about pieces of Facebook's infrastructure, which users play a key role in (re)designing. Tag groups thereby display a tendency of Facebook users' to appropriate – often rather self-consciously – the platform's semiotic software for ludic purposes.

Creating, collecting, cataloguing, and engaging with tag groups more broadly, is thus a matter that involves a considerable degree of reflexivity on the users' part. The following chapter delves deeper into the relationship between tag groups and their users as mediated by Facebook, examining users' discursive construction of their and Facebook's agency when it comes to group tagging.

CHAPTER 5

GROUP TAGGING: AGENCY IN DIGITALLY MEDIATED FUN

Tag groups are things. This has been an ontological assumption running through much of my analytical treatment of tag groups so far. Even in the analysis of a comment section full of users replying to one another to hold a coherent conversation, tag groups were understood as *stuff being used*. The examination of their titles and categorizations also framed tag groups as entities, so that my overall approach to tag groups has hitherto framed them primarily as *reified multimodal communicative resources*.

Still, the premise of my analysis has been that tag groups arise as a result of concerted user *actions* that involve Facebook's infrastructure: creating Facebook groups, naming them in certain ways, tagging them in comments or posts, to name but a few obvious ones. I have conceptualized these actions – all of them practices in their own right – as constituting the higher-level practice of *group tagging*. The term is meant to capture the agentive mobilization of Facebook groups in the context of a practice that fundamentally relies on using the platform's tagging function. Tag groups are thus only the crystallized result of group tagging. In theoretical terms, we can say that a given tag group embodies the frozen actions (Norris 2013a) that led up to its creation and emplacement in the environment where it is encountered.

With this turn to users' actions, this chapter also comprises a shift towards a more pronouncedly emic analytical standpoint. It zooms in on users' accounts of their own practices, which constitute *recontextualizations* of what they do (van Leeuwen 2008). In doing so, the chapter focuses on the example of group tagging to address my project's second research question:

RQ2: *How do users seem to perceive and discursively construct their agency vis-à-vis practices that arise through the playful creative mobilization of Facebook groups?*

In what follows, I will start by discussing the methodological implementation of this approach, which gave rise to specific micro-analytical foci for the subsequent analysis.

5.1. Group tagging in the users' words: Notes on method

For this project, I conducted nine semistructured one-on-one ethnographic interviews. These were conceived and implemented as interactions in which the interviewees' ideological views on Facebook groups-based practices are discussed. As such, the interviews were also seen as a process of knowledge construction (and not "extraction"), significantly co-shaped by my participation as an interlocutor, so that even as I stress the emic orientation of this chapter, I do not seek to downplay my role in the interpretative

process, even in its early beginnings *in* the interview itself (De Fina 2019). It is with these caveats in mind that I will now present the interviews as “data” that were “dealt with” in particular ways.

5.1.1. Interview data overview

Considering the online focus of my project, online interviews were the most suitable choice for conducting in-depth discussions with participants. That is, because I was interested in “chiefly online” practices (cf. Chapter 3), my potential interview participants were people who engaged in these practices translocally, and hence geographical proximity was irrelevant to finding interviewees for this project (Ntouvlis 2024, 94–95). Participants were thus sought out online through the interviewee recruitment procedure outlined in Chapter 3 (Section 3.3) and long-distance interviews were organized. The precise medium for conducting the interviews was agreed to with the participants (following Salmons 2012, 12) and it invariably came down to Zoom video calls due to the software’s encryption technology and facilitation of recordings. Although it was not presented as a necessity because the interview data were not to be granted multimodal analytical treatment, all participants opted to also enable their cameras for our talk. The discussions were conducted in English.

Before the start of each interview, participants provided their consent after being informed of the study’s research goals and ethical framework vis-à-vis the treatment of the interview data. This included the confidential treatment of the interview materials (video and audio recordings, notes, transcripts), which were to be stored in a password-protected environment and subjected to analyses (including of transcribed direct quotations) tied to this project. All interviewees were guaranteed the use of pseudonyms for their contributions, and they were offered the opportunity to choose their own pseudonym. Additionally, they were invited to share only the amount of identifying personal demographic data that they were comfortable sharing. This decision was taken in accordance with the analysis’s anti-essentialist and interactionalist orientation, whereby the interviewees’ reified identity traits (e.g., age, gender, nationality) would not be considered in correlation to their answers unless these traits became interactionally relevant, at which point they would be shared on the record with the interviewees’ informed consent. If additional demographic information that was not on the record was found to be of interpretative value, consent was sought from the interviewees post hoc for the inclusion of such considerations in the analysis. All interviewees were favorable towards sharing the pronouns they went by and their country of residence.

Table 5.1 below provides an overview of the interview data. It includes: the ascending chronological order of each interview’s conduction (“1” for the first interview, “9” for the last); the interviewee’s pseudonym, pronouns, and country of residence; whether the

interviewee was or ever had been a ludic Facebook group modmin; the date and duration of the interview; and, finally, the cumulative duration of the interview data (final row).

Table 5.1. Overview of interviewee profiles and interview specifics (date of conduction, duration)

Intvw. no.	Interviewee pseudonym	Interviewee pronouns	Interviewee location	Ludic group modmin?	Date (dd/mm/yyyy)	Duration (h:mm:ss)
1	Eos	they/them	USA	Yes	07/09/2022	0:57:17
2	Naomi	she/her	USA	Yes	10/09/2022	0:54:37
3	Johm [sic]	she/her	USA	Yes	11/09/2022	1:52:51
4	Mary	she/her	USA	Yes	03/02/2023	1:06:17
5	Wilson	he/him	Canada	Yes	15/02/2023	0:50:35
6	Elisa	she/her	Sweden	No ²⁹	17/02/2023	1:02:23
7	Anna	she/her	Belgium	No	26/04/2023	0:57:07
8	Simon	he/him	USA	Yes	03/05/2023	1:39:21
9	Kelly	she/her	USA	Yes	11/05/2023	1:15:20
TOTAL						10:35:48

Based on the interview duration data as presented in Table 5.1, the average interview time was approximately one hour and ten minutes (mean duration = 1:10:39; standard deviation = 0:21:41). Three interviews (with Johm, Simon, and Kelly) lasted longer than average, the longest one being my interview with Johm, which almost reached two hours (1:52:51), outlasting the shortest one, Wilson’s interview (0:50:35), by over an hour. This considerable variance in interview durations was largely due to the interviews’ structure.

I opted for *semistructured interviews* (Mann and Stewart 2000), which allow for a combination of planning and flexibility (De Fina 2019). According to Leech (2002, 665), semistructured interviews “can provide detail, depth, and an insider’s perspective” as they “allow respondents the chance to be the experts and to inform the research” (ibid., 668). In practice, an interview protocol was devised, which featured a number of thematic areas to be explored. This pre-determined thematic structure varied slightly in accordance with the interviewees’ profiles. For example, there were questions specifically for interviewees who were or had been Facebook group modmins (see thematic area 3 in Table 5.2 below). Generally, through the use of grand-tour questions and prompts (Leech 2002), interviewees

²⁹ Elisa had only administrated a university-based group, which provided peer-to-peer academic support for students in her program, and thereby did not fit my definition of play-focused groups due to being anchored in an offline milieu. As far as ludic Facebook groups are concerned, she had only technically been a modmin for a group whose key gimmick was that every member was also a modmin. She did not view this as legitimate modmin work.

were freely granted space to expand on topics on which they could elaborate. The interviews were terminated once all of the (applicable) pre-determined thematic areas had been touched upon, at which point the floor was given to the interviewees so that they may add any further comments and/or ask questions.

Table 5.2 presents the interview protocol's thematic areas along with examples of questions and interactional moves for each one. Italics indicate approximations of how questions were phrased. The thematic areas are numbered starting from zero, which stands for the interview's preparatory phrase. With the exception of 0, 7, and 8 (which always occurred as the first, penultimate, and last phases respectively), the numbering does not necessarily represent the order in which the topics were breached as that was dynamically determined based on the flow of the conversation.

Table 5.2. Overview of interview protocol

Thematic area no.	Thematic area title	Examples of questions/moves
0	Introduction, informed consent, initial rapport establishment	<i>Welcome! Thank you for your time!</i> Introduction of self, project, and goals (incl. focus on ludic Facebook groups as <i>Facebook groups you are in for fun</i>) Information on ethics framework and request for consent Request for personal information <i>Do you have any questions at this stage?</i>
1	General overview of interviewee's experiences with Facebook	<i>Thinking all the way back to when you joined Facebook, how did it all begin for you?</i> <i>How did you get into Facebook groups?</i> <i>How did you become familiar with tag groups?</i>
2	Interviewees' practices surrounding Facebook groups	<i>Are you in many Facebook groups? What are they about?</i> <i>How do you navigate Facebook groups in your daily use of Facebook?</i> <i>Are you very active in the groups? Do you post/comment a lot?</i> <i>What do you like about Facebook groups?</i> <i>Have you ever left or been kicked from a Facebook group? If so, why?</i> <i>Have you ever been given a penalty?</i> <i>I see entry questionnaires, or "membership questions", for joining Facebook groups. What do you think of them?</i>

3	Interviewees' modmin practices surrounding Facebook groups	<i>How come you admin/moderate Facebook groups?</i> <i>What do you like about that?</i> <i>How many groups are you a modmin of? What are they about?</i> <i>Can you walk me through what a typical day being a modmin is like?</i> <i>How do you feel towards the members of your Facebook groups?</i> <i>How do you deal with conflict in your groups?</i> <i>Have you ever left/shut down/archived a group you were a modmin of?</i>
4	Tag groups	<i>Imagine I know nothing about this: When would you say that a Facebook group is a "tag group"?</i> <i>What are tag groups about, if anything? Are there any beloved topics?</i> <i>I see people referring to collecting tag groups. Would you say you have such a "collection"?</i> <i>How do you feel about tag groups? What draws you to them?</i> <i>What kind of users would you say enjoy tag groups?</i>
5	Group tagging (more action-focused questions)	<i>Do you use tag groups in conversations? How does that work? Can you give me an example?</i> <i>How is tagging tag groups different from simply typing out comments?</i> <i>Can you be good or bad at engaging in "tag group conversations"?</i> <i>I have seen people tag other things besides groups, like pages. Is that somehow different?</i> <i>Could you compare using tag groups on Facebook to anything else that you do/see people do on other platforms?</i>
6	Overall view of ludic Facebook groups	<i>We are talking about Facebook groups that you are in for fun. Are there any Facebook groups that you see differently/as intended for more "serious" use?</i>
7	Room for questions, comments, anecdotes	<i>Is there anything that we haven't talked about that you would like to add/share/ask about?</i>
8	Conclusion and information on further availability	Closing and thanks Information on how to reach me

Overall, the topics covered in the study's interviews arose from my observational engagement with ludic Facebook groups. Drawing on my field notes, I sought to elicit users' (ideological) perspectives on communicative phenomena I had become interested in,

such as group tagging, which is the case in point for this chapter's analysis. In what follows, I outline the steps taken to analytically approach the interviews as data.

5.1.2. Data sorting

My first step in data sorting (Wolcott 2009) was to draw up content *inventories* for the interviews (*Gesprächsinventare*), which provide holistic overviews of what was discussed in each interaction and serve to inform further decision-making regarding which portions will be granted in-depth analysis (Deppermann 2008). The interview (video) data along with these first inventories were then entered into the software MAXQDA 2022 for coding.

A flexible software-based coding strategy was adopted from thereon, taking as a given that the coding process could not be entirely inductive but would unavoidably also be theory-based to some extent (Deterding and Waters 2021). The process was primarily guided by the thematic areas defined in the interview protocol (cf. Table 5.2), but it was also adapted to: (a) the varied conversational flows that emerged as a result of the semistructured nature of the interviews (Deterding and Waters 2021), and (b) interviewees' thematic crisscrossing across the predetermined thematic areas. Six main codes were created through this process, and a hierarchical coding system emerged, whereby each main code featured a number of subcodes (ranging between two and seven). The subcodes were motivated partly by specific thematic foci encountered in users' contributions, and partly by salient theory-driven "*aha*" moments; i.e., quotations of particular interest (Deterding and Waters 2021, 727). The main codes (with their subcodes) were then arranged into two "coding sets" in MAXQDA terminology, which are essentially "families" of codes. The two sets were created at the end of the coding process, and they reflected the two broad analytical directions in which I wanted to proceed based on my observations. Namely, the sets differentiated between topics relevant to my analytical focus in the present chapter (SET 1) and those relevant to my goals for the following chapter (SET 2). In the end, by following this coding system, I engaged in an ordered interpretive analytical process that aimed at the entextualization of my data into my dissertation – the most obvious step to that effect being the final one, of sorting the codes into "coding sets" tied to chapters.

Listed below is an overview of the coding sets, including the codes they contained and the number of subcodes in each (in italics). For better comprehensibility, I spell out in full any abbreviations I used, and provide explanatory addenda in square brackets. An expanded version of this list, which spells out all the subcodes as well, can be found in Appendix C.

1. SET 1: Tag groups & group tagging
 - 1.A. Tag groups (reified) – 7 *subcodes*
 - 1.B. Group tagging (act) – 5 *subcodes*

- 1.C. Tag groups/group tagging comparison [to other platforms and their features] – 6 subcodes
2. SET 2: Facebook infrastructure & critique
 - 2.A. Infrastructure [elements on the use of which interviewees expanded on] – 2 subcodes
 - 2.B. Critique of Facebook – 3 subcodes
 - 2.C. Facebook (groups) comparison [to other platforms and their features] – 6 subcodes

Besides the coding feature of MAXQDA, I also used the highlighting feature to demarcate emergent new thematic orientations brought up by interviewees, which may not have fit neatly into the defined codes (e.g., the introduction of niche phenomena like “frankentagging”³⁰).

After this stage, I was able to engage in data reduction in service to my analytical goals. Below I outline how this process functioned for this chapter’s analysis as well as what analytical tools I used, from the transcription system to the conceptual frameworks that guided my observations.

5.1.3. Data reduction and analytical tools

The data reduction process for the present analysis involved choosing data on a singular topic that all users had commented on, which would allow me to consider all of the individual users’ perspectives. Given that I was interested in group tagging as a (recontextualized) practice, it was very thematically pertinent to choose users’ *definitions of what tag groups are*, as these invariably involved recontextualizations of the actions giving rise to tag groups. The chosen excerpts were thus responses to a question posed in the interviews when introducing tag groups as a topic; see Table 5.2, thematic area 4, first question example. This question-answer sequence occurred in all interviews. In it, I would preface my question by acknowledging my academic interest in tag groups and inviting users to set that aside (e.g., “imagine I know nothing about this”); then I would ask something along the lines of: “When would you say that a Facebook group is a tag group?”. While there was a thematic area dedicated specifically to group tagging (see Table 5.2, thematic area 5), focusing on the question about what tag groups are was a more advantageous choice here because (a) all of the interviewees had responded to this question at some length (as opposed to other questions that were given short answers, to the effect of “no” or “I don’t know”); and (b) given that tag groups are the reified results of the group

³⁰ “Frankentagging” refers to a now defunct group tagging practice, wherein users would tag parts of multiple group titles consecutively, thereby stitching together (or “frankensteining”) a new title. This is no longer possible as (at the time of writing, February 2024) Facebook no longer allows tagging only a part of a group’s title.

tagging as a practice, questions about tag groups *are* questions about group tagging, albeit phrased differently. In fact, interviewees' answers illustrated this point: When asked about what tag groups *are*, all interviewees launched into recontextualizations of what "they/users/people *do*" (cf. Section 5.2 below).

In the next step, the chosen data were transcribed following the conventions of the GAT 2 (*Gesprächsanalytisches Transkriptionssystem 2*), a system for transcribing talk-in-interaction originally developed for German-language scholarship as GAT, but since updated to GAT 2 (Selting et al. 2009) and made more accessible to a broader audience as its guidelines have been translated into and adapted for English (Selting et al. 2011). Generally, the versatility of GAT 2 was a deciding factor in my choice to adopt its conventions. This updated version of GAT has explicitly been developed with the aim of ensuring its compatibility with various strands of linguistic research (Selting et al. 2009, 355). For example, there is a clear delineation of three transcript types with different levels of granularity, which allowed me to systematically stick to my desired level of detail by following a given set of guidelines. Specifically, the GAT 2 distinguishes between: (a) the *minimal transcript*, designed mostly as a working tool, also useful for social scientific content-oriented analyses; (b) the *basic transcript*, which builds on the minimal one, including "prosodic information which is necessary to avoid misinterpretation of the segments in their interactional context" (Selting et al. 2011, 18); and (c) the *fine transcript*, which allows for more fine-grained transcription of prosodic phenomena (e.g., pitch movements). For my analytical purposes, the basic transcript provided the desired level of nuance, which I could apply consistently. Further, from a practical standpoint, the existence of an online tutorial on how to implement the GAT 2 (GAT-TO)³¹ and (what I judged to be) the system's relative intuitiveness for uninitiated readers also factored into my decision.

An overview of the GAT 2 transcription conventions used can be found in Appendix D. The appendix also lists all orthographic modifications I have made in the study's transcripts to capture phonetic variants of individual words (e.g., *jus* ' standing for *just* with a deletion of /t/). These orthographic modifications were also made following GAT 2 conventions for English transcripts (cf. Selting et al. 2011, 9–12).

As for how the analysis unfolded on a conceptual level, a brief explanation of my chosen analytical tools is in order. Like in the entirety of my project, at the most fundamental level of linguistic analysis, a functionalist outlook on language was adopted, rooted in SFL (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Thompson 2014). Very briefly, this constitutes an approach to language as social semiotic, focusing on speakers' in-context choices of linguistic material; as for linguistic material, its form is seen as tied to its communicative function and thus having a *meaning potential* to be examined in its in-context realization

³¹ Available at: <https://gat-to.uni-jena.de/> (last accessed on August 9, 2024).

(see Bateman 2017 for a discussion of SFL as a linguistic theory). Apart from being the theoretical root of my study, practically, this functionalist orientation means that the terminological apparatus of systemic functional grammar appears in my analyses in the naming of various linguistic phenomena: for example, in the view of transitivity as a representation of (various kinds of) *processes* involving (various kinds of) *participants*. So, I may refer to the construction “I tag groups” as (a representation of) a *material process* (a process bringing some material change to the world), where “I” is the *Actor* and “groups” are the *Goal*.

Another key concept for this analysis is *modality*, which amounts to the construction of “a kind of interpersonal ‘aura’ of the speaker’s attitude around [a] proposition” (Thompson 2014, 70), for example with regard to the proposition’s probability or usuality. I am specifically interested in the phenomenon of *modalization* in SFL terms; that is, the expression of modality in offers of information.³² An overview of relevant concepts and terminology can be found in Thompson (2014, chap. 4), while the use of all relevant terms in the analysis will also be accompanied by brief explanations.

The main framework that guides the discourse analytical work in this chapter, and which also stems from this systemic functional take on language, is van Leeuwen’s (2008) approach to discourse as recontextualization of social actions. Specifically, I draw on the framework’s parts dealing with the representation of social actors (van Leeuwen 2008, chap. 2), actions (chap. 3), the purposes of actions (chap. 7), and their legitimation (chap. 6). With its sociosemantic apparatus for highlighting discursive understandings of social practices as they are phenomenologically instantiated in linguistic material (cf. Chapter 2, Section 2.2.2), this framework allowed me to examine the linguistic resources used by interviewees in their recontextualizations of group tagging, with an interest in how these choices reflect and construct discursive views of the practice.

Further, the SFL-based and discourse analytical tools described thus far also needed to be complemented by interactionalist tools. The reason is that my interview data were treated here as *spoken interactional data*. Treatments of spoken data are accommodated by SFL and feasible within its frame (see, e.g., Thompson 2014, 177–80). However, SFL does not systematically attend to the para- or extralinguistic characteristics of speech that such data exhibit. For example, accounting for dysfluency phenomena, such as pauses, cut-offs, and repair, can be revealing in the examination of intersubjective meaning construction (Clift 2016). I thus once again employed tools from interaction-focused approaches, such as CA and interactional sociolinguistics – particularly the latter’s view of stancetaking (cf.

³² The Hallidayan concept of modalization largely corresponds to the concept of “epistemic modality”, defined as an expression of “the speaker’s assessment concerning the truth value of their statement” (Rheindorf 2006, 207, my translation; original: „die Einschätzung der SprecherIn bezüglich des Wahrheitwerts ihrer Aussage“).

Kiesling 2020). Similarly to SFL's in-context approach (Bateman 2017), these approaches prioritize the treatment of linguistic meaning-making in a contextualized manner, avoiding assumptions regarding users' intentionality, cognitive processes, or mental states, and instead empirically observing the intersubjective construction of meaning as interlocutors (inter)act with one another (see, e.g., Drew, Walker, and Ogden 2012 and their treatment of self-repair). All in all, it should be noted that what follows is not primarily an analysis of interaction, but instead a critical discourse analytical effort, occasionally incorporating tools from interactional traditions to increase its empirical reach.

Summarizing, in the following sections I will be analyzing interview excerpts, transcribed using the GAT 2, in which interviewees answer my question on what makes a group a tag group, thereby recontextualizing group tagging and concomitant practices. I will be adopting a critical discourse analytical approach drawing on van Leeuwen (2008), which is rooted in SFL. I will be complementing my approach with interactionalist tools from CA and interactional sociolinguistics, which help me empirically attend to aspects of dialogical meaning construction through speech.

The concrete analytical foci I will be dealing with in each of the following sections are as follows. In Section 5.2, I will focus on the representation of social actors and their actions in users' accounts of tag groups, to examine the extent to which *agency is attributed to Facebook's infrastructure* regarding its role in the shaping of group tagging. In Section 5.3, I will turn to users' tendency to explain the *purposes* of group tagging, in what I view as acts of discursive *legitimation*. Finally, in Section 5.4, I will deal with users' *stancetaking* towards group tagging, examining their emergent identities through phenomena of *modalization* observed in their accounts.

5.2. Tag groups as (mediational) means to an end

A key sensitizing concept in my study is the idea that the techno-cultural infrastructure of social media plays a key role in the shaping of users' playful practices (cf. Chapter 1). This view is influenced by a materialist understanding of technological mediators as agentic actors, informed by ANT (Latour 2005), as well as calls for scrutinizing the role of technological infrastructure in critical discourse studies of social media (Bouvier and Machin 2018). Rather than technologically deterministic, this remains a dialectic approach to the affordances of communication technology (Hutchby 2001), which are seen as actively co-shaped by users' agentic work. Through my interview data, I wanted to interrogate *the extent to which users understand* platform infrastructure (e.g., Facebook groups and features like tagging) as having an active role in the emergence of their playful practices.

Van Leeuwen's (2008) discourse analytical framework provides a heuristic for investigating the attribution of agency to represented participants through the analysis of social actors' representation in texts. Consequently, a way to examine the extent to which agency is attributed to social media infrastructure is to engage in a tentative treatment of *Facebook groups* as represented social actors. While typically such a treatment would be reserved for human subjects, viewing groups as social actors in users' recontextualizations of group tagging is not intended as a view of infrastructure as human. Rather, this is a framing that allows us to empirically explore the question: To what extent are Facebook groups *assigned agency* by the people who talk about them, here in the context of explaining group tagging?

Consider Example 5.1, in which Eos responds to the question of how they would explain what tag groups are, by immediately launching into a recontextualization of material actions in which groups are an object.

Example 5.1 ((Eos, {33:35–34:09}))³³

- 01 E: uhm=so: (.) h° for <<clapping once> ME::,>
02 h° i have groups that i: (-) have MADE.
03 speCIfically because i wanned to !TAG! them.
04 I: [hm_HM,]
05 E: [uh::,]
06 (.) and=that jus'_like as a group MAker:-
07 like=i_usually won't seek OUT a group,
08 I: [hm_HM,]
09 E: [(--) as] a TA:G group unless someone else !TAGS! it.
10 like=if sommun like (xxx) in a comment TAGS a group (xxx xxx) like-
11 y' know=as a TAG group.
12 I: [hm_HM,]
13 E: [uh:]=then I'll JOIN it maybe-

³³ For examples that are interview excerpts, in the double brackets that typically include the communicative setting of an interaction transcribed in GAT 2, I present only the pseudonym of the interviewee (say, X), which always stands for the setting "one-on-one interview with X". I then include timestamps of the transcribed interview portion in curly brackets. Inside the excerpts, the interviewee is represented by their initial (here "E" for "Eos"), and my turns are marked with "I" as in "Interviewer" (or simply "I", me).

14 because i think it's FUNny.

15 I: hm_HM,

In terms of human social actor representation, the users represented in Example 5.1 (“I”, “someone”, “someone else”) are *activated*, meaning that they “are represented as the active, dynamic forces in an activity” (van Leeuwen 2008, 33). This is linguistically realized through various transitivity structures, where in SFL terms human subjects are the Actors in material processes: e.g., “groups that *I* have made” (line 02), “*I* usually won’t seek out a group” (line 07), “*someone else* tags it” (line 09).

By contrast, when treated as represented actors, the groups are mostly *passivated* (with the exception of line 14, analyzed below, after Example 5.2). Specifically, they are *subjected* to various actions; i.e., “treated as objects in the representation” (van Leeuwen 2008, 33). They are represented, for example, as Goals in material processes: e.g., “*groups that I* have made” (line 02), “to tag *them*” (line 03). In a different example, in “I have groups” on line 02 – the first instance of groups being mentioned once Eos has taken the floor here – “groups” are the objects of a relational process that describes a *possessive* relationship, where “groups” are the possessed party and the human actor “I” is the possessor (Thompson 2014).

The passivation of groups stands, even in cases where users are *backgrounded*, i.e., not explicitly represented alongside the actions they implicitly perform, as in Example 5.2 from my interview with Naomi.

Example 5.2 ((Naomi, {37:23–37:43}))

01 N: a group is a TAG group–
02 when its (.) PRImary function is==
03 =the PRImary function of the group is;=
04 =!NO:T! for posting content withIN a grou:p?
05 I: [hm_HM?]
06 N: [(-) b]ut FO:r–
07 (-) !TAG!ging the group to MAKE;
08 (-) a comment (.) O:N,
09 a POST elsewhere.
10 I: hm_HM,

While no human actor is explicitly represented in Example 5.2 as activated, we once again have “group” as the Goal of a material process (“tagging *the group*”, line 07), and thus passivated/subjected.

Although the passivation of groups constitutes the most pervasive pattern observed in users’ explanations of group tagging, groups-as-social-actors are also encountered in relational processes in which they are not strictly the passive party. In Example 5.1, line 14, “it” (referring to “a group”, line 10) is the Carrier of the Attribute “funny” in the relational attributive process of “it’s funny”. In Example 5.2, we have a prototypical start to a definition, where Facebook groups appear in a relational identifying process (“a group is a tag group”, line 01) followed by the *condition* under which this identification holds (“when [...]”, lines 02–09).

Still, there are also two rare instances across interviewees’ answers to the question at hand where groups are activated as actors, and they both constitute notable exceptions. The first case is in the first half of Example 5.2, where “a group” is activated, but only in a roundabout way. In lines 01–02, Naomi begins with a *specification* of groups through the relational identifying process mentioned above, introducing “tag group” as *a kind of* group, which “functions” in a particular way. This action of “functioning” is *objectivated* (represented by a noun) and attributed to the group through *possessivation*: “its primary function” (line 02), “the primary function *of the group*” (line 03). So, while the group technically has an active role in the action underlying these phrasings (i.e., the group is functioning), this activation is “buried” in the possessive structures. This in effect “backgrounds agency, changing it into the “possession” of a process which has itself been transformed into a “thing.”” (van Leeuwen 2008, 33).

The other instance in which we find an activation of groups-as-social-actors is in Mary’s explanation, presented in Example 5.3 below. Consider particularly lines 15–17.

Example 5.3 ((Mary, {43:16–44:27}))

01 M: yeah=so I would SAY:=
 02 =THE:se a:re; ((suppresses cough))
 03 (1.6) gimmicky MEme groups,
 04 whe:re (.) people TAKE common phrases,=
 05 =that would_be a reSPONSE to::-
 06 a POST,
 07 (-) and they make tha:t the TITle of the grou:p,=
 08 I: =hm_HM.

09 M: (.) and THEN:,
 10 (---) in the COMMENT-
 11 you reSPOND by: like=
 12 =A?ing the:: group.=
 13 I: =<<nodding> hm_HM [hm->]
 14 M: [EA:ND-]
 15 then it shows up as_like a blue clickable THING,
 16 °h and that SORDof;
 17 (1.8) °h there is a linGUIstic (.) indication there: of;
 18 °h (2.1) JOKing:?
 19 (.) OR of; °hh
 20 (2.4) like=being part of a BI??
 21 I: hm_HM?
 22 M: uh::m h° (---) and i DON'T think people really:-
 23 (.) use these groups AS groups that they post !IN!,
 24 but MORE so as groups that_exist-
 25 for the sole PURpose,
 26 OF °h (-) !TAG!ging them,
 27 an' HAVING it pop_up in the blue text.
 28 I: hm_[HM;]
 29 M: [like=]the blue HYPERlink text.
 30 I: <<nodding> YUP,>

In this excerpt, Mary generally keeps with the trend of activating human actors and passivating groups: e.g., “*people take*” (line 04), “*they make*” (line 07), “*you respond*” (line 11), “*people [...] use*” (lines 22–23); vs. “*ating the group*” (line 12), “*use these groups*” (line 23), “*tagging them*” (line 26). Yet, in line 15, the participant “group”, substituted by the pronoun “it”, is activated: “it shows up as, like, a blue clickable thing”. Treating “to show up” as a *behavioral process* (Thompson 2014, 109–110), “it” (the group) here is the Behavior. Notably, the verb is immediately followed by an adjunct of circumstance: “as,

like, a blue clickable thing”. This adjunct introduces the role of the group in the process of showing up, specifically the group’s Guise (Thompson 2014, 116). In the end, while the group-as-social-actor is allocated an active role in this phrasing, its action does not relate to a material process (bringing about changes in the world). The action represented is instead one of appearing, and it serves to introduce the role that the group fulfills through the form, or guise, that it takes (“a blue clickable thing”).

Most importantly, this kind of phrasing that activates the group is dropped over the next two lines through *self-repair*. In conversation analytical terms,

we refer [...] to self-repair because so frequently speakers are in some way changing what they are in the course of saying, or have said, not in order to correct a mistake, but for some other interactional ‘purpose’. Purpose has been placed in scare marks here to remind us that as analysts we cannot be sure what a speaker’s purpose is, or was; we are reluctant to speculate about some cognitive state (purpose, intention) on the part of the speaker, so instead we explore analytically the interactional effect of a self-repair.

(Drew, Walker, and Ogden 2012, 73, emphasis removed)

In this case, in her ongoing recontextualization of the action sequences involved in group tagging, Mary first constructs the group as an active party but then chooses to change her phrasing in the context of providing her explanation. Specifically, in line 16, she follows the “it shows up” turn with “and that”, where the pronoun presumably refers either to “group” or to the entire propositional content of the previous line (the group showing up). But that formulation is cut short: Mary first produces the discourse marker “sort of” (which is also the accented element in line 16) and then a long pause of 1.8 seconds with an audible in-breath (line 17), before rephrasing. So, we eventually get a new phrasing with an existential clause: “*there is* a linguistic indication there” (line 17).

This constitutes a shift from a recontextualization that involves the *activation* of groups with regard to showing up in a particular guise to one that involves an *existentialization* of them appearing as such, meaning that the guise in the latter case is represented as something that “simply exists”, without agency being allocated to groups. Without assuming Mary’s intention to alter her prior phrasing due to it being somehow “wrong”, we have here an empirical indication from an interactional standpoint that the phrasing *had to* be dropped *despite* not overtly creating interpersonal “trouble” in the interaction. For example, I did not challenge Mary’s phrasing in these lines, which would prompt a “third position repair” (Clift 2016, 243ff.) – i.e., a case in which Mary would have said something in Position 1, I would have interjected pointing out trouble with that in Position 2, and then she would have engaged in self-repair in Position 3. Instead, some dysfluency is observed while Mary keeps the floor in these lines (see the discourse marker, the long pause) and then the speaker voluntarily changes course in terms of how she formulates the same recontextualizing

action of explaining a tag group's guise. Namely, she has gone from a formulation that activates groups, representing them as agents, to one that does not, and instead presents their form and function as a state of affairs that "simply exists".

All in all, the exploration of how much users ascribe agency to groups as actors in their explanation of group tagging, reveals that groups are represented predominantly as objects or tools. It is human beings that tend to be constructed as doers. In the rare cases in which groups are given an active role, agency is assigned to them in weak terms: through possessivation or in behavioral processes. In fact, in one of these cases, this kind of phrasing is voluntarily altered (repaired) by the interviewee as it seems to lead to trouble (a cut off, dysfluency) in her phrasing her explanation (Example 5.3, line 17). In the end, my interviewees did not seem to display a discursive awareness of Facebook's technology (specifically groups) as active parties in the shaping of their playful practices.

Another pattern that did emerge, however, and is in fact evidenced in Examples 5.1–5.3 too, is users' tendency to provide explicit discursive constructions of the *purpose* of group tagging when asked to explain what tag groups are. Eos justifies creating groups we would call tag groups *because* they want to tag said groups, and they say they may join such groups *because* they find them funny. Naomi similarly talks about what tag groups are *for*. Mary's explanation also boils down to some speculation about the "the sole purpose" (Example 5.3, line 25) of tag groups' existence. I deal with these and similar statements in detail below.

5.3. The ends legitimate the means

With the exception of Elisa, all users asked to explain what tag groups are explicitly commented on the purpose of group tagging. In Example 5.1a, a portion of Example 5.1 reproduced here, we find Eos's statements to that effect.

Example 5.1a ((Eos, {33:39–34:07}))

02 h° i have groups that i: (-) have MADE.

03 speCIfically because i wanned to !TAG! them.

((19 sec omission))

13 E: [uh:] =then I'll JOIN it maybe–

14 because i think it's FUNny.

Here, the actions of making (line 02) and joining tag groups (line 13) are represented as *goal-oriented purposeful actions* (van Leeuwen 2008, 127–128), where the purpose is

articulated in terms of desire (“because *I wanted* to tag them”, line 03) or another mental process (“because *I think* it’s funny”, line 14).

While a social actor (“I”) is explicitly present in these statements of purpose, Naomi’s account from Example 5.2 above also features many finite structures, this time with the implicit actors absent: “for posting” (line 04), “for tagging”, “to make” (lines 06–07). These finite structures are embedded in Naomi’s overall *technological* construction of the purpose of group tagging as a *means-oriented action*, which results in the backgrounding of human agency (van Leeuwen 2008, 129). This means that, as seen earlier, Naomi presents a group’s *function* as the defining attribute that makes it a tag group.

The only interviewee who did not explicitly construct a purpose for group tagging, Elisa, commented on her inability to do this, providing a telling anecdote:

Example 5.4 ((Elisa, {30:15–30:56}))

01 I: if_i knew NOthing about tag groups;
02 E: [HM.]
03 I: [uh:] how would_you exPLAIN them to me;
04 E: mh: (1.9) i_i HAD_!THAT! situation;
05 (-) YESTerday (-) when talking to my boyfriend about this
innerview?=
06 I: [=MH_hm:?]
07 E: [and_i] (xxx xxx) i said it was an interview about TAG_group==
08 =and (xxx and) he_was like what_the fuck is a TAG group?
09 I: [((chortles))]
10 E: [and] i_i i THINK,
11 (---) i think i said something along the LINES_of-
12 (---) a GROUP that (--) is also a !COM!ment,
13 I: [hm_HM,]
14 E: [(.) (xxx) uh] that can fit into a comm(ent)_COmment section?
15 I: hm_HM,
16 E: and=he was like why would you ever wanna <<:-)> JOIN_those?>=
17 =and uh i did NOT have_a good answer for_that.

18 I: oKAY,

In contrast with the other interviewees, Elisa does not explain tag groups by recontextualizing group tagging, but instead recontextualizes another recontextualizing event, in which she had to explain tag groups to her boyfriend. In doing so, she presents a social actor (her boyfriend) verbally requesting an explanation for the phenomenon, with some intensity (“he was like what the fuck is a tag group?”, line 08). When an explanation that does not explicitly cover the purpose of group tagging is provided (lines 12, 14), the boyfriend is represented as asking for it immediately, again with some intensity (“ever”): “and he was like why would you ever wanna join those?” (line 16).

In Elisa’s anecdote, group tagging thus emerges as a practice that needs to be explained *particularly with regard to its purpose*. Specifically, with her narration, Elisa responds to my request to explain tag groups by showcasing her inability to readily explain them, and in doing so, she presents an event in which she was similarly asked by another social actor (her boyfriend) to explain tag groups. Yet, as we have seen, that request ultimately boiled down to purpose: Elisa “did not have a good answer” (line 17) for *why* she would “ever” join tag groups, and these are notably not the terms in which my question was posed in lines 01/03: “if I knew nothing about tag groups [...] how would you explain them to me?”. My broad request to explain the phenomenon was seemingly interpreted as a request to explain the *why* of it. This is also observable in Johm’s response, presented in Example 5.5.

Example 5.5 ((Johm, {07:03–07:29}))

01 J: uh:m (.) i’ve actually had_to exPLAIN this==
02 =a couple <<laughing> TIMES>.
03 I: HM_hm?=
04 J: =a !TAG! group is when you have a FACEbook group==
05 =that IS not in!TEN!ded;
06 I: [hm_HM;]
07 J: [(.) FO:]R;=
08 =or at_least it_was not oRIginally intended;=
09 =for people to actually POST in.
10 (.) [°h UH:M-]
11 I: [hm_HM;]
12 J: it’s a group that_you’ve inTENDed;

13 for people to U:SE as (.) a !PHRASE!,
 14 I: hm_HM?
 15 J: to: reACT to something.
 16 I: hm_HM,

Johm prefaces her explanation with a comment on having had to provide one “a couple times” before, too (lines 01–02). Then, she launches into a definition in which human actors are activated more often than not (“*you* have”, line 04; “for *people* to actually post in”, line 09; “*you*’ve intended”, line 12; “for *people* to use”, line 13); but more importantly, this definition stresses tag groups as manufactured for a purpose, especially in line 05 with an emphatic accentuation: “that is not INTENDED”. Again, the purpose of a group is the defining attribute for its status as a tag group. The discursive construction of group tagging’s purpose is also linguistically realized with a number of finite structures throughout the excerpt: “for people to actually post in” (line 09), “for people to use” (line 13), “to react” (line 15).

A possible interpretation for users’ tendency to shift the interactional focus to *purpose* when asked to explain tag groups is that the practice they are recontextualizing (group tagging) is one whose purpose has no institutional recognition (Facebook/Meta being the institution in question). Specifically, because group tagging is constructed as a matter of human agency in which the platform’s infrastructural elements (viz. groups) are viewed as tools or instruments used outside their ideal use cases as “group features” (boyd 2011), the practice needs to be *legitimated*. When bringing up group tagging’s purpose in trying to explain what tag groups are, users are providing *instrumental rationalizations*, which are a way to legitimize practices “by reference to their goals, uses, and effects” (van Leeuwen 2008, 113).

Still, for a statement of purpose to constitute a legitimation, “an element of moralization” (van Leeuwen 2008, 113) must be present, which is derived here mainly (but not solely) from Facebook’s institutional authority as a semiotic platform. In her rationalization, Naomi (Example 5.2) places particular emphasis on established, platform-endorsed Facebook practices. She thus relates group tagging to practices that have the platform’s institutional “stamp of approval”: a tag group is “NOT for *posting content within*” (an expected use case of groups), but “for *TAGGING*” (another established Facebook feature). Users’ goals – still involving Facebook’s technology, such as comments – are postponed in Naomi’s account (“to make a comment”, line 07–08), as they are in Johm’s (see Example 5.5, lines 09, 13). In Eos’s more personal account, where (their) human agency is foregrounded, desire constructs purpose (Example 5.1/1a, line 03), but the platform

function that legitimizes creating tag groups occurs with strong emphasis in the same line (“specifically because I wanted to TAG them”). In Example 5.4, line 16, Elisa’s boyfriend’s recontextualized utterance (as reported) asks for the purpose of *joining* tag groups (another action based on a standard Facebook group function) and Elisa does “not have a good answer”. Yet, later in our conversation ({approx. 37:00}), upon being asked why tag groups may have members (despite not being made for posting within), Elisa provides her reasoning. She states that, upon thinking more about tag groups in preparation for the interview, she realized that she would join tag groups *so that* they would show up more readily *in the relevant pop-up menu* when she was trying to tag them in conversation. This is Elisa’s “good answer” to the question of why she joins tag groups, and it again rationalizes group tagging via reference to goals involving Facebook functions: tagging and its pop-up menu.

Notably, a different approach to the legitimation of joining tag groups is taken by Eos in Example 5.1: “because I think it’s funny” (line 14). The embedding of the appraisal “it’s funny” within the mental process of thinking³⁴ is in keeping with Eos’s more personal approach to the explanation (a framing that starts in line 01: “for me”). But the appraisal itself constitutes a *moral evaluation*, which assigns a quality to this act of joining (funniness derived from the group) that is positive within the domain of playful online practices. We thus again have a different kind of discursive legitimation of group tagging, and notably, this time it is *modalized* (cf. “I think”, line 14). I now turn to such modalization phenomena found in users’ accounts, in an effort to interrogate the significance users assign, in the context of this interview, to aspects of their mediated practices. This will lead me to also analyze users’ *stancetaking* when recontextualizing group tagging.

5.4. Group tagging, its function(s), and us

Under a conceptualization of group tagging as a communicative practice, my request that interviewees define it amounted to a request for them to reflexively consider and describe their own communicative conduct by recontextualizing semiotic practices. This is a matter of *metapragmatic awareness*, which is paramount for regimenting the pragmatic functioning of linguistic forms (Verschuere 2000). In this section, I will thus explore how users reflexively talk about the pragmatic function of group tagging.

While a treatment of group tagging (and its products, tag groups) as a purely linguistic matter would be inadequate for my analytical aims here (i.e., shedding light on how technological mediation is meaningful to users), I will adopt some terminology from linguistic pragmatics within my established multimodal perspective that treats language as

³⁴ In SFL terms, “I think” here can also be seen as a *grammatical metaphor* (Thompson 2014, chap. 9) or a *metaphorical realization of modality* (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 686ff.).

social semiotic, as I have done before by drawing on the concept of pragmatic adaptability (cf. Chapter 4). I am thus keeping with the Hallidayan approach to language and meaning making that I generally follow while also bringing in (a particular understanding of) pragmatics to discuss matters of reflexivity in communication.

Two points can succinctly illustrate the theoretical feasibility of this endeavor. Firstly, Verschueren (2000) formulates his argument for the vital importance of metapragmatic awareness under “a theory of linguistic pragmatics which defines language use as the adaptable and negotiable making of linguistic *choices*, both in production and in interpretation, from a variable (and constantly varying) range of options in an interactive effort at generating meaning” (Verschueren 2000, 443, my emphasis). This theoretical backdrop resonates very strongly with the Hallidayan functionalist view of language use as a process relying on choices that speakers make between systemically varied alternatives (see Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, chap. 1). Secondly, Verschueren’s interest in pragmatic *function* does not imply – and in fact rejects – a structuralist kind of functionalism, where the meaning-in-use of linguistic elements would be seen as derived mainly (if not solely) by their relation to other linguistic elements within a “closed” view of language as an autonomous system (Verschueren 1999). Instead, this theory of pragmatics “emphasizes the functional relatedness of language with the other facets of human life” (Verschueren 1999, 9), aligning with the in-context treatment of language in Hallidayan theory (Bateman 2017) and the related social semiotic view of multimodality, which approaches meaning-making resources in general as inextricably embedded in social processes of representation (Kress 2010).

With this theoretical grounding, I will now take a closer look at users’ recontextualizations of group tagging with an eye towards how users talk about *what group tagging* (and its product, tag groups) *does*. By examining expressions of modality in the users’ discursive displays of *meta-awareness*³⁵ (Verschueren 2021), I will investigate their stances vis-à-vis group tagging as a communicative practice mediated by Facebook’s infrastructure. I will start in Section 5.4.1 by juxtaposing one of the most modalized interviewee accounts (Kelly’s) with others that feature less modalization (Simon’s) or none (Naomi’s), while also showing that modalization does not necessarily correlate with talk about tag groups’ function (as Anna’s account demonstrates). Instead, the interpersonal character of modalization and the variation in its use paint a portrait of users’ diverse individual stances.

³⁵ Following Verschueren (2021, 118–119), I use “meta-awareness” as a more general term than “reflexivity”. I also try to minimize the uses of the terms “reflexivity” and “reflexive” to describe metasemiotic activity in a narrow sense. This is done partly to avoid confusion with the uses of these terms elsewhere in the dissertation, where I discuss ethnographic work (e.g., Chapter 3). In those cases, I refer to reflexivity in a much broader sense (i.e., researchers’ critical consideration of their own work).

5.4.1. “How do I describe a tag group? Oh gosh!”: Modalizing metapragmatic awareness

The nine people with whom I spoke about Facebook (tag) groups were all knowingly and willingly participating in an academic interview on this topic. The academic interview could thus be characterized as the activity type (Verschueren 2021, 128) that framed our interaction and guided our mutual understanding of what was said therein. In the contextualization of our conversation within this activity, my question (as the interviewer/researcher) of “when a group is a tag group” could reasonably be interpreted as necessitating a more technical answer. A trend I therefore observed was a tendency on the users’ part to focus on the function of group tagging (rather than, say, a description of its mechanics). This appeared to be a through line in terms of the content, or the ideational/experiential meaning aspect (Thompson 2014) of users’ responses. In terms of interactional meaning, there was a tendency for users to hedge their statements through modalization, which however showed considerable and significant variation.

To illustrate, let’s start with Kelly’s response to the question to my question (Example 5.6), which indirectly constructs an empirical picture of how she contextualized and interpreted my query regarding “when a group is a tag group”.

Example 5.6 ((Kelly, {37:58–38:31}))

- 01 I: when is a group (.) a TAG group;
02 K: (1.4) oh_GOD.
03 (-) uh:m (2.0) oh_GOSH;
04 (3.8) i FEEL_like if:-
05 (.) mhm=a TAG group,
06 h° how do_i describe a tag group?=
07 =oh_gosh (.) UH:M-
08 (2.1) I feel_like it’s a good WAY:,
09 (.) to: kind_of bring together a common reSPONSE to a post?
10 I: [HM_hm,]
11 K: [(-) uh]::m i think that’s the BEST way that i can describe it?

It can be reasonably claimed that Kelly is struggling here. She starts her response with a long pause (line 02), and continues with exclamations (“oh god”, line 02; “oh gosh”, line 03) as well as more, longer pauses (lines 03, 04), sometimes filled (“uhm”, line 03). In lines

04–05, she starts constructing an embedded conditional clause about tag groups (“if a tag group”), which however gets dropped in line 06, when she utters a rhetorical question (“how do I describe a tag group?”). In line 07, she produces another exclamation (“oh gosh”) followed by a filled pause (“uhm”) and a long (2.1-second) unfilled pause (transcribed in line 08). Only then, in line 08, does Kelly start stringing together a description of tag groups, which notably focuses on their function.

Namely, Kelly explains group tagging by saying that a tag group (“it”, line 08) is “a good way to kind of bring together a common response to a post” (lines 08–09). This statement represents a relational process (a tag group *is* a way), in which the practice of group tagging gets nominalized, as it is lexically represented by the noun “way”. As with the other interviewees, what we have here is essentially a discursive construction of purpose in the attempt to explain group tagging. Based on its characteristics (backgrounding of agents, nominalization in “way”), Kelly’s statement specifically amounts to a recontextualization of group tagging as a *means-oriented action* (van Leeuwen 2008, 128–129).

Kelly is thus not simply “describing tag groups” in her response, as she purports to in her rhetorical question (line 06). For example, she does not describe tag groups’ formal characteristics (linguistic or otherwise). Nor does she, say, recontextualize the action sequences that go into tag groups’ creation, or their tagging in certain environments. Instead, in constructing group tagging as a means-oriented action, she represents tag groups first and foremost as a way to do something: “to bring together” (line 09). This latter finite structure, which is still deagentialized but not nominalized, represents a material process, the Goal of which is “a common response” (line 09). So, the entire representation of group tagging here boils down to *the speech act that group tagging enables*: responding to a post – specifically by citing an established response.

Thus, when describing group tagging, Kelly is actually describing its interactional *function*, while the material semiotic make-up of the practice in its crystalized form (e.g., the fact that tag groups are, infrastructurally, Facebook groups, or tagged hypertext) is backgrounded in her talk, which ultimately frames tag groups as a *means* to an end. Many features made available through Facebook’s affordances could be a response to a post; i.e., could fulfill (another instantiation of) this pragmatic function: for example, plain text, or “*off the shelf*” responses (Jovanovic and van Leeuwen 2018). The latter term refers to predetermined response options provided by platforms, such as emojis, stickers, likes or other reactions like Facebook’s “love”, “haha”, etc. (ibid.). So, in the case of “off the shelf” responses, using them would also amount to citing a common response, as one does with tag groups according to Kelly. The difference would be that said common response would have not been “brought together” by users, but rather by the platform. So, when Kelly makes the function of group tagging most salient in her recontextualization, she is

presenting actions regarding its semiotic coming about only to describe a particular *way* in which *users* achieve this pragmatic function (responding). In other words, group tagging is recontextualized as a means-oriented action because the semiotic work that goes into it is represented only insofar as it tells us something about how one achieves things *through* it.

All in all, judging by her response, Kelly seems to have interpreted my question as a question about the function of group tagging. At that, she appears to have difficulty putting her meta-awareness of it into words. Continuing the examination of the words she ultimately puts it in, a striking phenomenon observed in the excerpt is extensive modalization.

Example 5.6 includes four realizations of modality in the offering of information (viz. modalization), which we can also call a matter of epistemic modality:³⁶ “I feel like” (twice, lines 04, 08), “kind of” (line 09), and “I think” (line 11). Three of these modalizations are, in systemic functional grammar terms, *subjective* ones. Namely, in “I feel like” and “I think”, an actor (here, the speaker, Kelly) is present through “I” and bears the *modal responsibility* for the assessment. Conversely, “kind of” is not tied to an actor, which makes it an *objective* modalization (cf. Thompson 2014, 73–75).

What is more important here, however, is *where* the modalization seems to occur: namely, in statements about the function of group tagging – which is virtually all that Kelly’s explanation is made up of, along with dysfluencies and exclamations. Looking at lines 08–09 first, which articulate Kelly’s description of group tagging discussed above, we see Kelly introducing a statement about function with a separate clause expressing subjective modality (“I feel like”), and then additionally hedging her statement in a more objectivized way through “kind of”.³⁷ Right after this, in line 11, Kelly comments on this definition she just gave, producing “self-reflexive speech” in Verschueren’s (2021, 124) terms: “*I think* that’s the best way I can describe it?”. She thus recursively adds another layer of modalization to her statement about function.

If we were to use a scale for the intensity of a modal representation as used in systemic functional grammar (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 179–180), we could say that we have a *median value* for the modality expressed here. That is, in the expression of probability that something is true, Kelly’s statements are not strongly tied to either high or low probability (cf. expressions like “I’m certain that...” or “I don’t think that...”, respectively). Her statements instead inhabit an in-between position in the modal space, which means that

³⁶ The modal verb “can” on line 11 does not express epistemic modality and is thus not of relevance here. The same exclusion of non-epistemic modality from the analysis holds throughout it.

³⁷ When modality is realized in a separate clause as in this case, this is referred to as *explicit* modalization. In a case like “kind of” (Example 5.6, line 09), where the modal element appears within the clause of which it modifies the truth value representation, we speak of *implicit* modalization (Thompson 2014, 75).

they are not articulated in terms of positive polarity (simply “yes”), but there is instead a distancing from that (“*probably* yes”).

All in all, what we can observe so far is that Kelly *hedges* her commitment to the truth of her statements about the function of group tagging, mostly representing said statements as personal judgements through subjective modalization. This could be interpreted as a realization of *uncertainty* on Kelly’s part, especially as it comes combined with: (a) the many dysfluencies throughout Example 5.6, (b) the rising intonation in Kelly’s final statement (line 11), as well as (c) the various exclamations and the rhetorical question produced in an effort to come up with a response to my question.

The remaining instance of modalization in Kelly’s account, “I feel like” on line 04, is not so clearly tied to a statement about function, as the conditional clause it introduces is dropped after line 05. The conditional structure does, however, draw a parallel to Naomi’s definition of group tagging, given in Example 5.2 (reproduced below for convenience). Here, Naomi also articulates a condition under which a group is a tag group (“when its primary function is [...]”, lines 02ff.).

Example 5.2 ((Naomi, {37:23–37:43}))

01 N: a group is a TAG group–
 02 when its (.) PRImary function is==
 03 =the PRImary function of the group is;=
 04 =!NO:T! for posting content withIN a grou:p?
 05 I: [hm_HM?]
 06 N: [(-) b]ut FO:r–
 07 (-) !TAG!ging the group to MAKE;
 08 (-) a comment (.) O:N,
 09 a POST elsewhere.
 10 I: hm_HM,

I have noted before that Naomi strongly focuses on the *purpose* of group tagging in her account. Under our new interest in function, we can reframe this as a focus on function too. Indeed, Naomi explicitly uses the term “function”, and produces a goal-oriented recontextualization similar to Kelly’s. Her account also concludes by referring broadly to the same speech act/interactional function that group tagging facilitates according to Kelly: commenting on a post (cf. Example 5.2, lines 07–09) – although the aspect of citing a common response is not mentioned by Naomi. Based on the observation that Kelly’s entire

answer was also focused on function and the fact that a conditional structure is used when Naomi states the function of tag groups, it may be argued that Kelly's dropped conditional structure could have been, like Naomi's, also oriented at constructing the function of group tagging. Of course, this is little more than an educated guess (hence the very heavy modalization in my previous sentence), but such an interpretation would render *all* instances of modalization in Kelly's explanation directly related to statements about function, thereby indicating a commitment of low intensity to the truth of any statements made on the matter.

Yet, in stark contrast to Kelly's, Naomi's explanation in Example 5.2 focuses on the function of group tagging *without any modalization*. Nor is it characterized by any pronounced dysfluencies similar to Kelly's. This suggests that different users may orient differently towards responding to the same question testing their meta-awareness of group tagging: Naomi does this without hedging her statements, while Kelly's response involves heavy modalization. This effectively amounts to the construction of different *stances* in the representation of this meta-awareness by different users. I deal with this aspect of individual stancetaking in the next subsection, after further examining the role of modalization in the reporting of tag groups' function.

One observation that is relevant here when comparing Naomi's and Kelly's responses is that in both cases, my question about when a group is a tag group was interpreted as a question about the function of tag groups, not the semiotic form in which the practice of group tagging is reified. Regardless of the extent to which they hedge their statements, both respondents, when asked to explain group tagging, focused on the things that they can do with it.

The same is the case for Simon's answer, presented in Example 5.7 below. A closer look at the use of modalization in Simon's explanation gives a more nuanced picture of how the expression of modality correlates with statements about function.

Example 5.7 ((Simon, {1:06:09–1:07:02}))

- 01 I: what would_you SAY,=
 02 =WHEN do_you call a facebook group a !TAG! group?
 03 (3.8)
 04 S: i do_think typically when it can be used as a COMEback==
 05 I: =hm_[HM-]
 06 S: [OR] as (.) an inside joke.
 07 I: hm_HM [oKAY.]

08 S: [uh:m,]
09 (4.6) it's (.) almost LI:KE-
10 °hh (3.4) you're with_a group of FRIENDS;
11 and one friend really likes (2.2) <<:-)> PI:zza.>
12 h° and_so every (ti) every time you see something PIZZarelated==
13 =you wanna TAG your friend. °h
14 I: <<nodding> oKAY.>
15 S: TAG_groups are a way to ta:g (-) ALL your friends-
16 <<:-)>who care about a particular THING->
17 all at ONCE.
18 and sometimes it's no? just the TOpic,=
19 =it is °hh (.) a JOke.
20 (.) so:: [(.)] you're able to call attENTION to that joke;=
21 I: [hm_HM,]
22 S: =every_time that you TAG it.

As mentioned, Simon's explanation is rather similar to Kelly's and Naomi's in terms of its focus on function. It is also partly similar to Kelly's with regard to modalization. On line 04, after a large (3.8-second) pause, Simon introduces his view of the interactional function of tag groups (as a "comeback" or "inside joke") with a clause that expresses modality, both in a subjective guise ("I do think") and in a more objectivized way ("typically"). Then, on line 09, after another long pause (4.6 seconds), he begins with an objectivized modalization ("it's *almost* like") to introduce a simile for group tagging, again after a long pause (3.4 seconds, line 10). Within the simile, Simon recontextualizes an action sequence leading to the tagging of Facebook groups in order to notify friends about content they are interested in: pizza, in his example (lines 10–13). After I produce a prompt ("okay", line 14), Simon takes the floor again to state "tag groups are a way to tag [...]" (line 15). This formulation of tag groups as a *way* to do something amounts to the same kind of recontextualization found in Kelly's account – that of group tagging as a means-oriented action (Example 5.6, lines 08–09).

For a closer comparison of Simon's account to Kelly's vis-à-vis modalization, we should also look at *where* modalization occurs again. Simon only begins his account after a long pause (line 03) with a combo of modalizations ("I do think typically"). He then introduces

more modality on line 09 (“it’s almost like”), in a position bookended by long pauses: 4.6 seconds before and 3.4 seconds after. This correlation between modalization and dysfluencies is also observed in Kelly’s account (cf. Example 5.6, lines 04 and 08 particularly for pauses). What differentiates Simon’s explanation is that, once he starts the “friend liking pizza” simile, he drops modalization (and the long pauses accompanying it). From line 10 onwards, only “sometimes” in line 18 could be analyzed as an instance of modalization (insofar as it denotes usuality), and it serves the purpose of a quasi-self-repair: On lines 15–17, Simon suggests that groups are tagged to draw friends’ attention to a topic (“thing”) they care about; on line 18, he starts amending that strong (not modalized) statement, by mentioning jokes as something tag groups can also make callbacks to (in addition to particular “topics”). In the end, while it starts with modalization, the second half of Simon’s explanation features virtually no hedging and he ends up constructing the same kind of recontextualization of group tagging Kelly made for it (as a means-oriented action; see “way to”), but with little hedging.

Overall, not only does focusing on the function of group tagging appear to be a dominant tendency in interviewees’ responses, but a focus on the semiotic form of tag groups is rare and, in one case (Anna’s, discussed below), actively dispreferred. Up to this point, only Mary’s account has remarked on the form that group tagging takes, but that comment immediately tied form to function (cf. Example 5.3, lines 15–18). Anna’s account, presented in Example 5.8 below, goes a step further than omitting any mention of semiotic form or immediately tying it to function: it frames talk about the form of tag groups as irrelevant to my question.

Example 5.8 ((Anna, {32:18–33:10}))

- 01 I: when is (a) a group a TAG group,=
 02 =imagine i know NOthing about this,
 03 uh:: when IS a:-
 04 facebook GROUP=-
 05 =cause they’re MADE of the same !STUFF!;=
 06 =RIGHT?
 07 a tag group IS-
 08 a <<making air quotes>facebook GROUP> technically.
 09 A: [YAH-]
 10 I: [uh] but what makes you SAY=-

11 =!OH! this_is a TAG group;
 12 (2.3)
 13 A: uh::m,
 14 (1.7) well_because it's BLUE,=
 15 =<<laughing> no:: i'm KIDding> hehehe-
 16 but_the: usually eh: i THINK that a_a facebook=no.
 17 a facebook eh: !TAG! group gets creATed;
 18 °h OUT of the: repetitiveness,
 19 of a LINE being used (.) in::-
 20 re!SPONSE!,
 21 !TO!_re to reSPOND to_a:: (.) to a::-
 22 to=to CONtent.
 23 to a POST [let's say.]
 24 I: [HM_hm:.]

A unique occurrence in my data, Anna's first response to the question of when a group is a tag group refers to its form: when "it's blue" (line 14). This is articulated as "*because* it's blue" even though no why-question was posed. (I provide a lengthy transcription of how the question was posed in lines 1–11 to demonstrate precisely this.) At any rate, this direct reference to tag groups' form is immediately reframed as a joke in line 15, where Anna laughs and clarifies that she is "kidding". The joking in lines 14–15 thus represents a change in footing (Goffman 1981), which interactionally establishes that referring to tag groups' material characteristics does not constitute an appropriate response to my question: it belongs to the realm of joking around. Then, in lines 16–17, Anna shifts back and launches into a recontextualization of the action of creating tag groups – an action which, she says, results from the "repetitiveness" of a certain "line" being used as a response (lines 18–20). This is reminiscent of Kelly's talk of "common responses" (cf. also the intertextuality observed in tag group titles in Chapter 4, Sections 4.4.3, 4.4.4). However, it is unclear whether in lines 21–23 Anna starts referring to the function of tag groups or is post-modifying the noun "a line" (line 19). In the former reading, the finite structure "to respond" (line 21) would be tied to "a Facebook tag group gets created" (line 17). In the latter reading, "to respond" would be tied to "a line being used", and this would amount to an instance of self-repair, in which the previous formulation "in response" (lines 19–20) appears to have been inadequate. The emphatic stress on the first "to" on line 21 makes me

lean towards the second reading because I interpret this stress as an indicator that a more suitable phrasing (“to respond”) has been found and is being hastily introduced with some intensity in order to maintain the floor and gain more time to present the rephrasing. In fact, there is some dysfluency on line 21 (false start, repetition) that occurs while Anna – in my interpretation – gets her delivery of the new, more appropriate phrasing straight.

Turning to modalization in Anna’s account, line 16 stands out with another combination of modals: “usually” (objective modalization) and “I think” (subjective). This comes at the point where Anna starts to respond to my question “in earnest”, having first made a joke in lines 14–15. The occurrence of modalization at such a starting position has also been observed so far in Kelly’s (Example 5.6, lines 04, 08) and Simon’s (Example 5.7, lines 04, 09) responses. Unlike Kelly and Simon, however, Anna does not then produce an account that is clearly about the function of group tagging, nor does she recontextualize group tagging as a means-oriented action. This indicates that modalization is not strictly correlated in my examples with the content of the representation it modifies. Rather, as an aspect of interpersonal meaning, it suggests that the speaker distances themselves from committing to the truth of their statements, which here are responses to a question about a social media communicative phenomenon in an academic interview.

All in all, the excerpts analyzed here show how, when quizzed on their meta-awareness of group tagging as a communicative practice, users engaged in recontextualizations of the practice that mainly focused on its function, while the semiotic make-up of tag groups was not of interest. More importantly, the interviewees showed different degrees of commitment to their accounts. For example, there was a lot of modalization in Kelly’s response (along with pronounced dysfluencies and other elements suggesting a difficulty in providing a meta-pragmatic account), while in Naomi’s there was no modalization whatsoever, and in Simon’s there was some, which eventually got dropped. Some was observed also in Anna’s account, but it was not directly tied to statements about what one does with/through group tagging.

The individual variation observed here is indicative of varied individual *stances* towards the representation of group tagging as evidenced in its recontextualization through particular linguistic choices. Next, I consider how this stancetaking is entrenched in the individual users’ social histories related to the practice of group tagging as well as in the interactional activity at hand; i.e., being asked to explain tag groups in an interview.

5.4.2. Experts on the spot

The only response to “when is a group a tag group” that has not been examined so far is Wilson’s (Example 5.9), and it is the one that features most modalization.

Example 5.9 ((Wilson, {20:37–21:34}))

01 W: uh:m i would SAY;
02 (-) !TAG! (.) groups uh::m-
03 (--) are GROUPS whe::re-
04 (-) uh:m they're not typically FORMED to be:==
05 =like commUnities per se:?
06 (.) uhm=they're FORmed=uh:m
07 (1.5) °h in !MY! (xxx i) i_guess fr my_opinion,=
08 =as_like uh: (.) almost_uh? as_like JOKE groups?
09 I: [HM_hm.]
10 W: [whe:re] kind_of the NAME of_the group;
11 uh::m is_the: kinda th' whole POINT,=
12 =beCAUSE uh:m-
13 the FUNction would_be tha? you would uh !TAG! the group,=
14 =in a COMment uh on;=
15 =kind_of (xxx) UNrelated post,
16 uh:m=TO:
17 (.) FOR communicve 'ffect==
18 =typically to make FUN of someone;
19 uhm=in_my: (.) in my VIEW==
20 =AND to: (.) °h uhm:-
21 just=KIND_of (-) °h
22 the: the_the more comPLEX uh:m and increasing,
23 (-) uh:: (-) WEIRDness of the group name-
24 uh (.) the FUNnier.
25 I: Okay,

Some form of modalization occurs in eleven out of the twenty-three lines in which Wilson holds the floor in Example 5.9 (lines 01, 04, 07, 08, 10, 11, 13, 15, 18, 19, and 21). This is

exceptional, though Wilson's opening actually solidifies a common trend in users' responses to my question. Namely, Wilson begins answering with a filled pause and "I would say" (line 01). Now that all of the interviewees' responses have been presented, we can note a tendency for users to open their explanations with modalization (often preceded by elements like filled pauses or/and discourse markers): see Eos's (Example 5.1, line 01, "uh so for me"), Mary's (Example 5.3, line 01, "yeah so I would say"), Kelly's (Example 5.6, lines 02–04), Simon's (Example 5.7, line 04, "I do think"), and Anna's explanations (Example 5.8, line 16, after she has switched back from joking). Elisa also begins with a modalization when she starts recontextualizing an explanation she gave to her boyfriend in her anecdote (Example 5.4, lines 10–11). Only Johm's (Example 5.5) and Naomi's (Example 5.2) explanations do not begin like this, Naomi's account being completely devoid of modalization as we saw above (Section 5.4.1) and Johm's being very similar in that regard, as will be shown below. So, modalization, especially at the start of accounts, is a common thread among interviewees' tellings, but the diversity that is also observable with regard to modalization is significant in its own right.

Continuing with Wilson, after his opening, the interviewee – like others before him – recontextualizes group tagging by focusing on its purpose (why tag groups are formed), introducing some objective modalization on line 04 ("they're not *typically* formed to be") before using more expressions of modality over lines 07–08. Namely, line 06 ends with another (1.5-second) pause, after which modal expressions, dysfluencies, and filled pauses occur together in lines 07–08: "in my (... I) I guess for my opinion as like uh almost uh as like". "Almost" (line 08; also in Example 5.7, line 09) is a more objectivized modalization, but "I guess" and "for my opinion" (line 07) – the latter presumably a self-repair for the false start "in my" – represent Wilson as bearing the modal responsibility, as the Senser of the verb "guess" and as the Possessor of the noun "opinion", respectively. In fact, the latter expression can be seen as less subjectivized than the former as there is a process of possessivation (van Leeuwen 2008) at play in the recontextualization of "opining" (or more colloquially, "believing") – the action is represented through nominalization as a thing (an "opinion") that someone possesses. The same is the case in line 19, where we have a filled pause followed by "in my view". The rest of the instances of modalization, seven in number, are objective realizations: "kind of" (lines 10, 11, 15, 21), "would" (line 13, twice), "typically" (line 18).

Now, if we were to take a look at the topics covered in Wilson's answer to my question, this can easily be seen as the most comprehensive answer I was given. He begins by explaining how tag groups come about, recontextualizing the act of group creation by focusing on purpose (lines 01–08). He then refers to the form of groups (their name) as a significant element ("the whole point" in fact, lines 10–11), something only seen again in Mary's answer (Example 5.3), and indirectly contradicted in Anna's answer (see her joking

in Example 5.8). Wilson then deliberately turns to describing the function of tag groups (“the function would be [...]”, line 13), which is: commenting on posts, and “making fun” of other users (lines 13–19). Finally, Wilson ends his account by bringing his observations about form and function together and articulating them in a law-like statement: “the more complex uh and increasing uh weirdness of the group name uh the funnier” (lines 22–23).

The question of how and whether macro-characteristics of individuals’ life-worlds, such as institutional settings or demographic traits, figure or should figure in conversation-analytical treatments of talk-in-interaction is a much debated matter (see, e.g., Zimmerman 1992; Blommaert 2001). However, the comprehensiveness of Wilson’s answer effectively makes interactionally relevant his experience as a graduate of a university programme on digital communication and culture, which he has mentioned in the preparatory chat before our interview. With his academic background in an area that would cover the explanation of phenomena like group tagging, Wilson may be orienting himself towards my question with the stance of someone that can or (feels they) must display some academic or professional expertise.

This interpretation may explain his stancetaking with regard to the degree of *investment*, or commitment to his statements, which he displays through modalization. According to Kiesling’s (2020) model of stancetaking, an interactant’s stance is articulated in terms of: evaluation (of the represented actors and events), alignment (i.e., confluence with other interactants through adherence to established topics and the task at hand), and *investment*. Investment is related to epistemicity, or epistemic stance, i.e., the expression of degrees of knowledge; for example, through evidentiality, which relates to the representation of knowledge sources, or epistemic modality (Kiesling 2020, 4). Hence, the modalization phenomena I have been examining here are a key heuristic for speakers’ investment.

Wilson’s account, apart from being the longest and most comprehensive response to my question, is, as noted earlier, also the most highly modalized. His modal stance is one of median intensity, showing no intense commitment – in either direction (positive or negative) – to the truth of the statements he puts forth. More importantly, however, the majority of the modality markers Wilson produces are objective modalizations (in which he does not explicitly bear modal responsibility): e.g., the discourse marker “kind of” (used four times; lines 10, 11, 15, 21), or the adverb “typically” (used twice; lines 04, 18). Still, there are also subjective modalizations, as we saw: “for my opinion” (line 07), “in my view” (line 19), and the opening “I would say” (line 01). The former two were analyzed above as possessivating the action of “believing”, and thereby minimizing the prominence of the actor – Wilson – by making him into a possessor of a thing (an opinion, a view). In other words, they are less strongly subjective modalizations. “I would say”, in turn, the only clear-cut subjective modalization, falls in line with the trend of “modalizing when opening”

that, as we have seen, pervades most interviewees' accounts. As such, this trend can reasonably be seen as an artifact of the activity type (responding to a question in an academic interview) without the need to bring in the interactant's macro-contextual experiences for explanatory purposes. After all, apart from the aspect of investment, Wilson's alignment (*sensu* Kiesling 2020) to the task at hand, providing an explanation for tag groups as requested, is also a key dimension of his stancetaking.

In the end, through his particular pattern of investment evidenced in his chiefly objectivized modalizing, Wilson interactively constructs a more detached, objective-seeming stance, which is in line with his academic training in analyzing digital culture phenomena. This can be contrasted with the more neutrally invested stance displayed by Johm, who establishes her status as familiar with the task at hand (explaining group tagging) at the beginning of her response, as seen in Example 5.5, reproduced here:

Example 5.5 ((Johm, {07:03–07:29}))

- 01 J: uh:m (.) i've actually had_to exPLAIN this==
 02 =a couple <<laughing> TIMES>.
 03 I: hm_hm?=
 04 J: =a !TAG! group is when you have a FACEbook group==
 05 =that IS not in!TEN!ded;
 06 I: [hm_HM;]
 07 J: [(.) FO:]R;=
 08 =or at_least it_was not oRiginally intended;=
 09 =for people to actually POST in.
 10 (.) [°h UH:M-]
 11 I: [hm_HM;]
 12 J: it's a group that_you've inTENDED;
 13 for people to U:SE as (.) a !PHRASE!,
 14 I: hm_HM?
 15 J: to: reACT to something.
 16 I: hm_HM,

There is no modalization in Johm's explanation of group tagging, with the exception of "at least" in line 08, which functions in the context of a self-repair. Namely, the statement that tag groups are "not intended" for posting content within them (line 05) gets further qualified as tag groups not being "*originally* intended" for that. The absence of the extensive hedging found in Wilson's account suggests a higher level of investment on Johm's part in that she does not represent herself as detached from the reporting of information. For example, following Kiesling (2020, 4), if Johm were to utter "*I think* a tag group is...", that would suggest that in Goffmanian terms "the assertion is only from the animator's [here, Johm's] perspective", and its truth value could be further challenged by new information (e.g., another speaker/animator's assertion). There is also high investment particularly when Johm recontextualizes the practice of explaining (or having to explain) this in the past (lines 01–02). According to Kiesling's model, this is because the animator is reporting on an "internal state" (Kiesling 2020, 4), and the discourse marker "actually" intensifies the statement.

The difference in Johm's and Wilson's social histories surrounding group tagging thus can be seen as underlying their accounts. As mentioned, Wilson has an academic background (and interest) in digital communication, and over the course of the interview he admitted to being familiar with tag groups albeit not an avid user. Based on his self-characterization as not too avid a group tagger, in our interview I also offered to show Wilson an example of tag groups in use so that he could identify them with certainty – a proposal that he accepted. This was a unique occurrence in my interviews. Johm, on the other hand, was – as also suggested by her statement in the first to lines of Example 5.5 – very confident about her knowledge of tag groups. She reported using them extensively in the past (though less so in the recent past) and being herself a creator of some, as well as a modmin of groups that are used as tag groups.

What this points to is two different kinds of expertise (being constructed) on the part of the interviewees as a result of differences in their habitus. While empirically I have only approached *recontextualizations* of the practices interviewees claim expertise on (group tagging), their stancetaking in constructing these recontextualizations amounts, in the two examples discussed, to two divergent identity performances: one of a systematic but detached explainer of practices (Wilson) and one of an involved and experienced expert user (Johm).

From a mediated discourse perspective, the appropriation of Facebook's technology as mediational means in the practice of group tagging relies on the social histories of individuals, conceptualized as their habitus (Scollon 2001). Each of these interviewees has been in contact with this particular use of Facebook's semiotic technology. In the construction of knowledge within the interview, the users' habitus comes through not only

in their accounts of (what they perceive to be) the characteristics of tag groups, but also in the way that their statements are put forth: in either more or less detached ways, with greater or lesser involvement. Drawing on contextualization cues such as the activity type we were engaged in, interviewees tended to focus their explanations on what tag groups do; i.e., their function, or more specifically, what people can do with group tagging. This brings to the fore the varied levels of meta-awareness that users have of their semiotic practices, in which the function of group tagging is seen as more pertinent than its (Facebook-based) form (e.g. tagged, “blue” hypertext).

Further, as group tagging constitutes a ludic practice, users’ affective investment in it also plays a role in the formation and, consequently, the representation of their expertise. Wilson, being not as personally invested in the practice and more of an observing expert, produced a largely objectivized account of group tagging. Johm, by contrast, opened her explanation by indirectly noting her commitment to this practice, which has caused her to be called upon to explain it a few times. Another relevant observation here concerns Eos’s statements that they join tag groups because they “think [they’re] funny” (cf. Example 5.1, line 14) – a modalized statement that frames tag groups’ entertainment value as the key drive for using them. Considering the context of the academic interview in which these users’ accounts were produced, it stands to reason that the interviewees’ recontextualizations would be more technical and less focused on describing affect. Yet, the aspect of having had enjoyable experiences with group tagging, which are slotted more broadly into the interviewees’ habitus and its other components (e.g., one’s academic background), always underlies these accounts. This is also evidenced in accounts like Simon’s, who brings in a simile involving friends and things they enjoy (cf. Example 5.7), and Elisa’s, who in Example 5.4 recontextualizes an occasion on which she had to explain tag groups to her boyfriend but had no answer as to *why* she engages in group tagging, suggesting the bounded, autotelic nature of this ludic practice. This is what renders group tagging something that has to be explained to outsiders – though one may lack the words for it, like Elisa did, as ludic experiences are often not experienced as a type of learning *per se* (Blommaert 2017).

In conclusion, the variation observed in interviewees’ modalization of their accounts of tag groups showcases their subjective and thus individually varied ludic engagement with the practice of group tagging. Some meta-awareness necessarily regiments users’ communicative practices vis-à-vis tag groups, but when we look at the recontextualization of their meta-awareness in an academic interview, we can see traces of their social history with group tagging coming to the fore in the expression of their stance, particularly with regard to their investment in their statements. What this alludes to more broadly is that, on the one hand, group tagging as a practice may constitute an intersubjective matter, whereby a loosely understood ludic community of users can recognize and share a certain media-

ideological background that allows them to imbue Facebook groups technology with similar significance. On the other hand, this common understanding is also internally varied: some may come to tag groups as academically informed actors, others as highly engaged Facebook group modmins with years of experience.

To recast this in social semiotic terms, while I have focused before on the design of tag groups from the angle of articulation (Chapter 4), this section has cast some light on the matter of interpretation of tag groups' design, wherein interpreters also need to "supply semiotic knowledge" (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001, 8). This semiotic knowledge can be broadly defined as belonging to an "interpretive community" (ibid.) of which all my interviewees are "members", but the same knowledge is also socio-historically shaped. This may lead, for one, to varied understandings of what traits of the practice at hand are more salient (e.g., the function or the form tag groups?). But more importantly, the socially embedded nature of this knowledge can also lead – as seen in the last part of my analysis – to varied ways of reframing one's (meta)semiotic knowledge when asked to articulate it.

5.5. Summary: Group tagging and users as agents

Taking a more explicit view of group tagging as a practice, in this chapter I have tried to present users' perspectives on it by drawing on interview data. I have specifically examined users' explanations of what tag groups are, viewing them as recontextualizations of the actions that go into group tagging.

Section 5.2 interrogated the extent to which my interviewees recognize their own and Facebook's active role in the making of tag groups, a practice in which users rely on Facebook groups infrastructure and make new sense of it. The analysis showed that interviewees construct users like themselves as the key agents in this regard, viewing Facebook's semiotic technology as an instrument with which they do things. This discursive understanding clashes with scholarly views on the agency of technological infrastructure as a mediator for social practices, instead showing that when users engage in the creative appropriation of platform features like Facebook groups, they see themselves as the agentive parties.

Further, users appear to focus on the purpose of group tagging when explaining tag groups, providing legitimations for this more user-based practice, as seen in Section 5.3. Answering the question of why Facebook groups would be used in an "unexpected" way, as they are in group tagging, appears to be a key priority for users. This may be interpreted as a tendency to construct legitimacy for a practice that is not granted recognition by the platform. Users ultimately describe group tagging as a particular (fun) way for them to conduct themselves on Facebook (e.g., to make comments). In all these descriptions users display their meta-awareness about the purposes behind their own semiotic conduct.

Taking a closer look at how this meta-awareness is put forth, I finally examined modalization in users' accounts (Section 5.4). Patterns in the use of modalization display significant variation among my interviewees. Considering that all these users were engaged in an academic interview in which they were asked to reflexively explain their own practices, some common threads in their responses (such as starting their accounts with modalized statements) can be understood as a product of the activity type at hand. However, the considerable variety in how – and how much – users include modalizations in their accounts is indicative of their varied stances in describing group tagging. This may be explained via reference to the users' social histories and how they intersect with this ludic social media practice.

In the end, even if group tagging is seen as something users do with Facebook groups for particular reasons, their semiotic knowledge on the practice is socially constructed and thus not necessarily homogeneous. A more cohesive understanding of Facebook groups can reasonably be expected from Meta, the company that owns and develops them. Meta does not acknowledge the existence of tag groups, which appear instead to be a user-based reinterpretation of the platform's affordances. With this in mind, in the following chapter, I will try to empirically explore just what Meta's vision of Facebook groups consists in and juxtapose it with users' perspectives, ultimately asking: Are practices like group tagging understood as being at odds with social media companies' discourses on their product, even as these same practices rely on these products?

CHAPTER 6

FACEBOOK GROUPS: META’S “COMMUNITIES” OR THE USERS’ TOOLS?

At the very top there was a screen that showed a picture of a man who stood there looking at a picture of a man who stood there looking at a picture of a picture of a man on a screen.

And he was looking at another picture of a man who stood there looking at a picture of a man who stood there looking at a picture of a picture of a man who was the double of me.

Everything Everything (2024 “The Mad Stone”)

This thesis has hitherto explored Facebook groups as semiotic software appropriated by the platform’s users as tag groups (Chapter 4), and has subsequently examined users’ discourse on the practice of group tagging (Chapter 5). The present chapter attempts to additionally inform this exploration by considering Meta’s public discursive framing of Facebook groups. Users’ creative use of this software for creating tag groups as well as the ways in which they present the emergent practices surrounding them are, after all, rooted in mediatization that relies on products offered by Facebook as a privately owned platform.

Through much of the analysis, Facebook groups have been treated as the platform’s “group features” (boyd 2011), but this branding has not empirically considered the platform owners’ discourses on these features. Semiotic software inherently involves normative expectations for its usage, which manifest in its design (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017), yet the owners’ accompanying promotional and/or instructional texts also make such normative stances manifest through semiotic choices that recontextualize users’ engagement with the platform. Approaching this question for Facebook groups in particular, in what follows I will examine Meta’s view of Facebook groups and their use, as articulated on a website dedicated to presenting Facebook groups to (prospective) administrators.

Subsequently, I will complement this treatment with a new analysis of interview data, in an effort to comparatively assess the extent to which Meta’s discursive framing of Facebook groups aligns with my interviewees’ perspectives. More specifically, I will undertake an analysis of the discourses of ludic group modmins surrounding a key platform function that involves Facebook as an active agent in the moderation of platform content: namely, Facebook’s *reporting* tools. My broader aim is to interrogate through this case study if users’ perspectives can be argued to be at odds with Meta’s discursive framing of Facebook groups. In line with my analysis in the previous chapter, my interests remain on the matter of agency, asking whom agency and power seem to be attributed to by Meta and

by users when it comes to one's engagement with Facebook groups for fun. All this is to say that this chapter will be addressing my project's third research question:

RQ3: *How do users' discursive constructions of agency (theirs and the platform's) surrounding the routine use of Facebook groups compare with the discourse that Facebook's parent company Meta publically endorses for their product?*

The chapter is structured as follows. Section 6.1 focuses on methodology. In it, I present the new data source this chapter considers, an official Meta website titled "Facebook Community". I provide an overview of my choices surrounding website data collection (Section 6.1.1), sorting, and analysis (Section 6.1.2) as well as the rationale behind them. In Section 6.2, I begin the analysis of the "Facebook Community" website, interrogating Meta's discourses vis-à-vis: (a) the construction of Facebook group users/administrators as social actors with particular characteristics (Section 6.2.1), (b) the website's representation of the social practices these (imagined) users/administrators normatively engage in (Section 6.2.2), and (c) the involvement of these acting subjects in Meta's representation of them through the embedding of users' "voices" on this website as well as the site's interactive features (Section 6.2.3). Then, Section 6.3 juxtaposes Meta's and my interviewees' perspectives surrounding Facebook groups technology. Focusing in particular on the reporting tools Meta offers for Facebook groups, I first analyze their representation by Meta on "Facebook Community" (Section 6.3.1) and then comparatively scrutinize the discourses on reporting articulated by the modmins interviewed in my project (Section 6.3.2).

6.1. Approaching "Facebook Community": Notes on method

The new empirical data source treated in the present chapter's analysis is an official Meta website within the Facebook domain titled "Facebook Community: Resources for Group Admins Building Communities on Facebook" (facebook.com/community; Meta 2024e). In line with my aim to critically approach Meta's publically held positions on their semiotic software, this site was chosen because it provides insight into how Facebook's owners describe and promote Facebook groups.

Although "Facebook Community" (henceforth FC) is not the only site developed by Meta to present Facebook groups to (prospective) users, it is the most relevant one for my goals due to its intended audience: (prospective) Facebook group modmins.³⁸ Facebook

³⁸ Although the website's title speaks of "Resources for Group *Admins*", much of the information it offers is also relevant for moderators (or mods) of Facebook groups, who may have fewer privileges than admins but still (co-)run Facebook groups by being involved in practices like gatekeeping and moderation (see Meta 2024c). Acknowledging this, I will be using the term "admin" for my analysis of the website specifically when the users I refer to are identified as admins by the site – which they are more often than not (cf. Sections 6.2, 6.3.1). Elsewhere, I will be using the more inclusive term "modmin". I have opted for this

(specifically ludic) group modmins' perspectives constitute one of the empirical cornerstones of the present project as seven out of my nine interviewees have been experienced modmins. Examining Meta's groups-related texts addressed at modmins allows me to explore not only how modmins construct their own agency as users of semiotic software (as I do through my interview data; cf. Chapter 5), but also how ascribed identities are constructed for them by the owners of this software. This angle is vital for my critical treatment of Facebook groups as it juxtaposes the discourses of two "factions" (Meta/Facebook's owners vs. ludic Facebook group modmins) with different interests (broadly: monetary gain vs. conviviality) converging around the same digital infrastructure (Facebook groups). In line with my social semiotic perspective, I am interested here in how these diverging interests, characterized by power imbalances, are reflected/realized in semiotic work (Kress 2010).

FC's intended audience being modmins was a deciding factor in my choice to analyze it over other spaces owned by Meta in which Facebook groups are also presented for a particular audience. Other sites/pages I could have examined include Meta's Facebook groups-focused website for digital content creators (Meta 2024f) or the groups-focused pages of Meta's Business Help Center (Meta 2024a). The discourses realized in those spaces, however, would be of little relevance in the broader context of my project as the perspectives of digital content creators and "businesses" – diverse groups of actors with their own (financial) interests in engaging with Facebook groups – are not examined in my work, which hones in on people's engagement with Facebook groups "for fun". Finally, another site authored by Meta that was a potential candidate for this analysis is the collection of groups-themed pages of Facebook's generic Help Center (Meta 2024g). However, these are aimed at a general Facebook user audience, regardless of whether said users administrate, moderate or take any particular interest whatsoever in Facebook groups as a significant part of their day-to-day social media practices. Further, the structure of those portions of Facebook's Help Center pages resembles that of "Frequently Asked Questions" pages, being list- and (verbal) text-heavy as well as highly self-referential through the frequent use of hyperlinks, seemingly for troubleshooting purposes. This troubleshooting-oriented character of the Help Center is further evidenced in a "Was this helpful?" survey item that appears on every page or expanded menu that visitors can browse. Through this survey item, feedback can be provided ("😊 Yes" or "😞 No"), presumably for the optimisation of these help pages.

In addition to the data from FC, this chapter also comprises new treatments of interview data in the context of a comparative analysis that juxtaposes modmins' discourses to Meta's

particular portmanteau here (and in the rest of the dissertation) because I have found it to be the term favored by users, as opposed to the term "admod", which is used on FC.

as they pertain to the significance of Facebook groups infrastructure in people's practices. The specific focus of the interview data that appear in this chapter is modmins' perception of Facebook's features for "reporting" content in Facebook groups. Data from two interviews, Elisa's and Anna's, were not considered in-depth for this chapter's analysis as these interviewees had no experience as modmins of ludic Facebook groups. For a detailed overview of the interview data's characteristics, see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.1. Below I present an overview of the materials I worked with for the FC website analysis.

6.1.1. Website data collection: Materials and sampling

Website data collection can take many forms as the concrete data materials one can generate for analyzing a website vary from html files to various forms of picture or video recordings (Djonov and Knox 2014). Webpage data are notoriously fleeting in that, while they may be archived (e.g., on archive.org), they are always subject to changes, whether larger or smaller in scale (Perlmutter 2003). The "saving" of a webpage thus unavoidably amounts to the capturing of its state at one point in time. Consequently, as Djonov and Knox (2014, 172) note, "there is no single 'best way' to collect webpages for data analysis", so that one's method needs to be adaptively chosen based on one's goals, acknowledging the advantages and limitations of any choice made.

In the data collection process for the present chapter, I used html files and screenshots. Specifically, I collected html files in an initial, preparatory phase during the planning of this chapter's focus in late June 2023. Based on my aim to conduct a guided qualitative analysis rather than scrape large amounts of website data (or the entire website) for a corpus, this initial data collection round was essentially a "scouting" phase, in which I aimed to familiarize myself with the website and its contents. It also included note taking to assess the relevance of different areas of the website for my analytical aims. Then, for the construction of a data corpus for micro-analytical treatment, I chose to work with screenshots, which I collected using Microsoft's Snipping Tool, a free Windows 10 application. This second phase of data collection was carried out in early April 2024 and was the basis for my multimodal micro-analysis. As a result, the state of the website I will be analyzing is that of 3–4 April, 2024.

The use of html files for the analysis proper was deemed not ideal as these files failed to reproduce very accurate renditions of the website's visited surface, by severely disrupting its layout in the programs I used to display them. Screenshots were preferred instead after considering videos (screen recordings) as an additional option. While video recordings would have provided a more dynamic reconstruction of a visitor's browsing experience, the focus of the present analysis, which lies primarily on the webpages' design, ultimately did not necessitate the collection of video data, especially considering that video data would also have proven more unwieldy in the coding process. Still, partly also in order to capture

the “unfolding” of webpages for users to a certain extent, I elected to take screenshots in a way such that they would cover complementary pieces of each given page. For example, the first screenshot of a webpage would cover its uppermost part displayed on my screen, and the next screenshot would be captured after scrolling down just enough so that the portion covered by the first screenshot was no longer visible. In this way, each subsequent screenshot had no or little overlap with the preceding one and the pages could be captured in their entirety piece by piece.

Further, the screenshots were taken with the following display size characteristics: The original size (chiefly on 100% zoom, and 90% on “activated” regions – see below) of a Google Chrome window adapted to one vertical half of a 27-inch desktop computer screen (with Windows 10’s default setting on the scaled size of displayed elements). The window’s vertical scrollbar was also captured in order to provide an indicator of the relative (vertical) placement of each screenshot within the wider context of the page. Besides the surface text of these pages, interactive (hypertextual) elements that could be activated to display new content (e.g., via clicking to expand collapsed regions) were also documented in their activated form. This was done without fail for everything in the page’s “main viewing area” (Djonov 2007, 145) and not always for other stable elements (e.g., clicking on the magnifying glass at the top right of every page to access the search function). The activated regions from the pages’ main viewing area were mostly (verbal) text-based and were recorded on 90% zoom for more parsimonious screenshot generation. Since said regions were not part of the surface text displayed to users upon visiting the page, the change in display size (zooming) did not disrupt the recording of “what a visitor encounters at first pass”. In the end, through this method of screenshot capturing, I was able to work with faithful reproductions of the website as visited, while also working with maximally practical data materials (image files) which were easier to process.

The screenshot capturing procedure was not applied to the entire website. To begin with, the initial scouting phase helped me establish that the content and intended audience of this website overall made for an appropriate data source considering my aims. After this phase, for the analysis itself, a selection was made regarding portions of the website that I would collect data from based on their relevance for my project’s direction. The core of this strategy was rooted in the following rationale: Considering the ethnographic orientation of this project, users’ emic views on Facebook groups were the point of departure in shaping my interest in FC’s content. Meta’s perspective on Facebook groups is relevant to this study only to the extent that it can be juxtaposed to the (interviewed) users’ perspectives in order to sketch patterns of differential meaning-attribution to Facebook groups and their features as semiotic software. For this reason, the criterion for including FC pages in my sample was their correspondence to thematic contents from my interviews. In other words, I collected for my sample only pages that referred to features/functions of Facebook groups

that had come up in my interviews. These had been coded in my interview data under my “Facebook infrastructure & critique” coding set (see Chapter 5, Section 5.1.2; Appendix C). In this way, the material in my FC sample would be suitable for the kind of comparative analysis that this part of my project aimed at.

In addition to the pages concerning features discussed with my interviewees, I also documented the website’s homepage due to its central importance. Homepages are established as the major point of reference for websites, representing the sites’ structure as well as their “identity and mission” (Djonov 2007, 145-146). For this reason, much of my analysis that attempts to provide an overview of FC (cf. Section 6.2 below) centers around the homepage, which offers telling data on a website’s discursive orientation by establishing its “identity and mission”.

Still, my sampling rationale raises issues concerning the representativeness of my sample. The orientation of my analysis being qualitative, representativeness constitutes a secondary concern for my purposes here, behind validity. My aim is not to provide a holistic account of FC’s discursive orientation through an analysis of patterns present throughout the website. Rather, I endeavor to analyze the discursive framings found on FC vis-à-vis the mobilization of the Facebook groups software, the (imagined) users’ role in this, and the identity construction/ascription that comes with it. All this is attempted specifically with reference to: (a) features of Facebook groups that I have discussed with my interviewees, and (b) the site’s self-presentation on its homepage. On the occasions where I make some quantitative analytical claims in my attempts to provide an overview of the discursive orientation of FC, caveats deriving from my sampling rationale described above apply. For this reason, the limitations of my sampling method are actively addressed when quantitative observations are made in-text (cf., e.g., Section 6.2.1). Further, my quantitative observations are restricted to rudimentary descriptive statistics (frequency counts). These allow me to provide a concise and informative description of my sample as a backdrop for the arguments made in my qualitative analysis.

In the end, the procedure specified above yielded a corpus of $N = 91$ screenshots, taken from fourteen different pages of FC. Table 6.1 below provides an overview of the screenshots taken, grouping them, in the rows, according to the fourteen different pages they came from. Because not all pages come from the same level of the website’s hierarchical structure, the first column of the table includes code-like *identifiers* (“page IDs”) which express the pages’ embedding in pre-theoretical terms. The first identifier in the table is “0” and it refers to the website’s homepage. Beyond that, the identifiers enumerate “main pages” through their first character (an integer). Pages that are hierarchically embedded “under” a main page have identifiers that feature an additional number after a dot. So, pages “1.1”, “1.2”, and “1.3”, for example, are all distinct pages,

which however are hierarchically “below” the main page that has “1” as its identifier. Some main pages whose “sub-pages” I have considered are sometimes not part of the sample (e.g., there is a “2.1” but no “2”). In these cases, the embedded pages still display the missing main page’s number, and the missing main page’s title is noted in the table, too. I analyze the precise nature of the pages’ hierarchical embedding in the website’s structure in Section 6.2. Besides the identifiers, the table’s columns also show the titles of the collected pages (all come directly from the website, except the homepage’s), as well as the number of screenshots taken from each page.

Table 6.1. Overview of FC pages collected and number of screenshots taken from each page

Pg. ID	Page titles	<i>n</i> of screenshots
0	Homepage	15
1	“Using Key Group Tools”	4
1.1	“Understanding Community Quality”	5
1.2	“Understanding Community Standards”	5
1.3	“Understanding your Privacy Settings”	5
1.4	“Using Keyword Alerts”	4
2.1	“Choosing the right privacy setting for your group” (Missing: 2 – “Getting Started with Groups”)	5
3	“Managing Conflict”	3
3.1	“Managing conflict between members”	6
4	“Building a Team”	3
5.1	“Creating membership questions” (Missing: 5 – “Establishing Membership and Rules”)	6
5.2	“Using post approvals in your group”	4
5.3	“Enforcing group rules”	15
6.1	“Writing engaging posts” (Missing: 6 – “Keeping Your Group Active”)	11
TOTAL		<i>N</i> = 91

Besides the information included in the table, which provides a rough overview of the pages’ thematic content through their titles, some notes are in order about the internal structure of each page in terms of its layout. Namely, each page, regardless of its level of embedding, begins with what I call a *banner structure* in its uppermost region. This banner structure invariably includes the page’s title or slogan (on the left) as well as a large landscape-oriented image (e.g., Figure 6.1 below), or a video thumbnail placed on the right hand side (e.g., Figure 6.10 below). Beyond this banner structure, the internal layout of each page may vary considerably, featuring different combinations of multimedial hypertextual elements, though all pages invariably include *surfacing links* (Djonov 2007);

i.e., hyperlinks that lead the visitor to other pages of FC. As signs, these are image-text combinations (e.g., Figures 6.5a–b below) and they are typically arranged in clusters (e.g., the “Latest News” region in Figure 6.1).

Having thus provided an overview of the amount and nature of the website data I will be dealing with, in what follows I present the methods that drove my analysis, including how the data were processed.

6.1.2. Data sorting and analytical methods

I began approaching the FC data analytically by following Pauwels’s (2012) model for the multimodal analysis of webpages, which is rooted in a systemic functional approach to multimodality like my own study. While Pauwels’s (2012) framework was not followed faithfully for the entire analysis (since, for example, its aim to dissect “cultural expression” was not consistent with my aims), it provided an excellent starting point for systematically collecting and sorting my data. So, the first phase of Pauwels’s (2012, 252) model, titled “Preservation of First Impressions and Reactions”, largely corresponded to my preparatory html-collection phase, and particularly the note taking I did during that time, which included a “[r]ecording of affective reactions”, as proposed by Pauwels (*ibid.*).

When I returned to FC to collect the screenshots that would eventually make up my corpus for micro-analysis, I organized the materials through a filing system that recorded, in every file name, the screenshot’s provenance; i.e., where it belonged in the website’s structure. The identifiers provided for the pages in Table 6.1 are an adaption of this filing system, as the latter also employed a pre-theoretical description of the pages’ embedding in FC’s hierarchical structure. Following this, the screenshots were entered into MAXQDA 24 for coding. Various alternatives were considered for the coding strategy, including using theoretical codes that corresponded to social semiotic concepts. For example, I tried coding images that involved – what I categorized as – “narrative representations” (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006; cf. Section 6.2.2). However, such categorizations were found to be reductive as they would amount either to coding overlaps (capturing multiple potential analyses of the same content) or to a rigid categorical sorting with no additional nuance as to how the categorization came about. The latter would also require judgement calls as to which (one) analysis would be more fitting for each data point (e.g., a picture on the website). In this case, with me being the only coder, the validity of these categorical analyses would suffer as it would not rely on inter-coder consensus. My argumentation for each choice would also be difficult to present in full for reasons of space and focus.

Ultimately, I opted for more descriptive codes. Following Pauwels’s (2012, 252) framework, this part of the analysis corresponded to the second phase he proposes, titled “Inventory of Salient Features and Topics”, which includes the action point “[c]ategorize

and quantify features and topics”. Inventories of website attributes (or “features”) and main content categories (or “topics”) were also made for this phase as proposed by Pauwels (2012), and they ultimately informed the analysis of the website’s structure presented in Section 6.2 below.

Based on the aforementioned inventories of salient through lines, the website data were subsequently coded with a primary focus on visual representations (e.g., images or image-language combinations). This contrasts with the coding of my interview data, which was driven by linguistic content. The reason for this is that in the case of the website data – which were, materially, pictures – linguistic text was less accessible in the screenshots than it was when dealing with the interview data inventories. Therefore, linguistic content was considered complementarily to the visual compositions at first, and closer analyses thereof were conducted ad hoc, after determining which screenshots required closer treatment. This process resulted in the creation of four codes, presented in the list below.

1. people doing (94 instances)
2. people doing but NOT communicating (4 instances)
3. digital media present (15 instances)
4. people voicing (19 instances)

The numbers of coding instances given in this list include overlaps; i.e., single images that were coded with more than one code. These were marked with the note “duplicates” in my coding software to facilitate further analysis. Every code (1–4) is covered in the analysis below (Section 6.2). Briefly, code 1 stands for representations of people engaged in some activity, or practice; code 2 stands for representations of people engaged in some activity that is not prototypically a communicative practice (e.g., doing yoga); code 3 stands for representations in which digital media are present; code 4 stands for representations of people seemingly voicing some utterance the content of which is retrievable (i.e., also present on the website).

In terms of analytical tools, I have drawn mainly on social semiotics here, and particularly conceptual frameworks designed for analyzing webpages. Through this foundation, I view the FC website as a structured hypermodal (i.e., hypertextual and multimodal) construction (Lemke 2002). As specified above, Pauwels’s (2012) framework for multimodal website analysis has driven much of the early work I did with the data. For the start of my analysis, I have drawn on Djonov’s (2007) SFL-inspired terminological apparatus, which served to break down FC’s hierarchical structure for my analytical purposes here (cf. the beginning of Section 6.2). Additionally, I provide an interpretive account of FC’s interactivity following Adami (2015) insofar as it helps me discern the author-audience relations constructed through the website (cf. Section 6.2.3). The particulars of each of these analytical perspectives will be expanded on as they become relevant below.

Further, guided by my initial observations, I treat the pages of FC as polyphonic (multimodal hyper)texts in a Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1981). In untangling the multiple “voices” at play in the representation of Facebook groups and their uses, I also employ Goffman’s (1981) notion of participation format, to distinguish between the animators, authors, and principals identifiable on FC (cf. Section 6.2.3).

An overarching conceptual umbrella is a view of discourse as recontextualization of social practice (van Leeuwen 2008). Notably, in contrast with my previous deployment of this framework (cf. Chapter 5), I focus here on more than linguistic data, which is consistent with the multimodal articulation of the framework. My engagement with the FC data as primary sources here may thus be chiefly rooted in this vein of CDA, but my analysis is additionally informed by secondary sources; for example, studies discussing discursive patterns that also emerge in my data.

In the following sections, I present my analysis based on the principles specified above. I start by briefly breaking down FC’s hierarchical structure in order to contextualize my findings. From there on, I focus on FC’s visual representation of users (chiefly admins) of Facebook groups (Section 6.2.1) and the representation of users’ actions vis-à-vis the extent to which they are constructed as agentialized and mediatized (Section 6.2.2). I then explore FC as a site fraught with power imbalances that are found to be in interplay with discursive phenomena, including polyphony and interactive website design (Section 6.2.3). Finally, Section 6.3 builds on these findings and casts them in a new light by bringing in interview data for a comparative analysis of Meta’s (Section 6.3.1) and users’ views (Section 6.3.2) on one specific Facebook function mobilized in groups, that of reporting.

6.2. The Facebook Community website: Users, mediatization, and power

My aim in this section is to provide an overview of the FC website in terms of its structure and content, focusing particularly on its representation of and interaction with users and their actions.

Overall, as already hinted at, FC exhibits a hierarchical structure in the arrangement of its contents. To begin with, following Djonov’s (2007) SFL-inspired terminological apparatus, we can say that the website’s homepage, seen partially in Figure 6.1³⁹, establishes the site’s macro-Theme (Djonov 2007) as that of a “resource center for building a thriving community”. Figure 6.1 also represents the three major *sections* (Djonov 2007) into which the website is divided: “Resources”, “What’s New”, and “Programs”. Hyperlinks to these sections are displayed in the ribbon at the top Figure 6.1, which is a persistent feature of

³⁹ All screenshots presented in this chapter were captured on 3 April 2024 unless otherwise noted.

the website, displayed on every page that visitors browse (although it is not always seen through as in Figure 6.1).

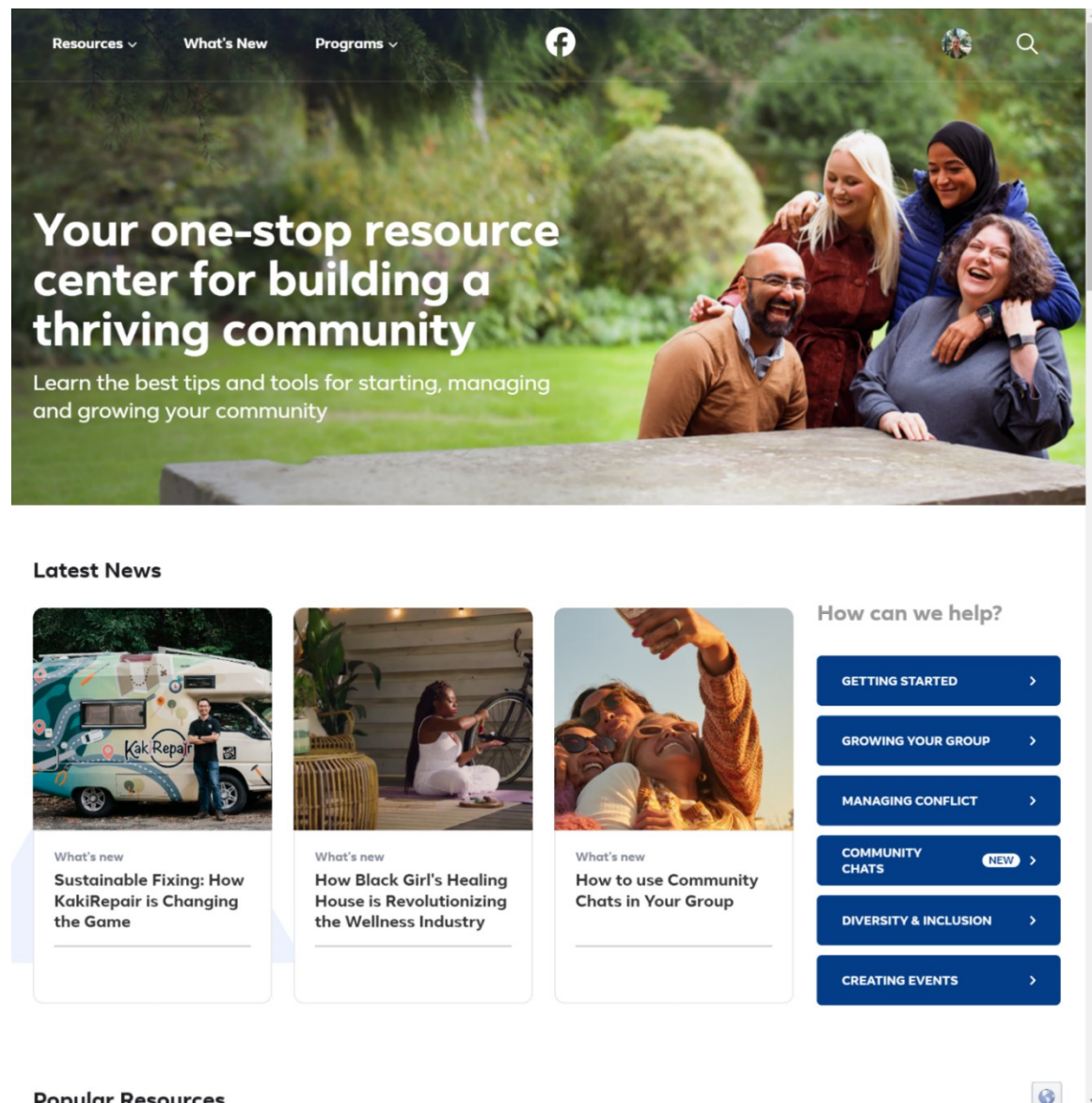


Figure 6.1. Homepage of facebook.com/community (uppermost portion)

The screenshots collected in my sample all come from the “Resources” section of the website, which is the section that systematically refers to different uses of Facebook groups as semiotic software – or “different things people can do” with Facebook groups, as suggested by the list of the different parts that the “Resources” section is split into, seen in Figure 6.2 below, left. All but two of these spaces’ titles begin with an *-ing*-form, recontextualizing some practice that can be performed with or around Facebook groups.

The remaining two sections, “What’s New” and “Programs”, appear to host content that is less central to FC as a “one-stop resource center”. “What’s New” is framed as presenting news stories somehow related to Facebook groups, in the form of articles authored by Meta.

There is a main landing page for this area providing an overview of (some of) its articles. Shortcuts to a few of these articles are also presented on FC's homepage, in the region under the header "Latest News" (see Figure 6.1). The third major section, "Programs", includes three subsections titled "Community Connect", "Certification", "Learning Labs", and "Accelerator", each promoting Facebook's initiatives for boosting various forms of user engagement. These were not discussed in my interviews and thus fall outside the scope of this chapter.

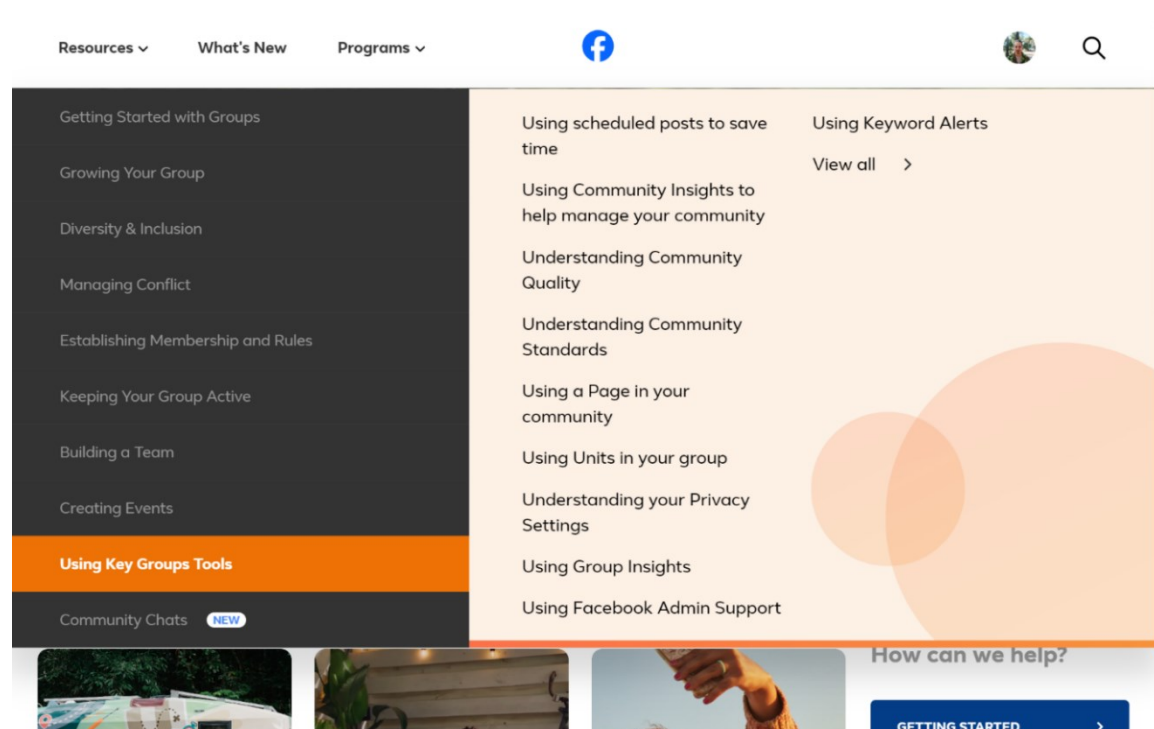


Figure 6.2. The "Resources" menu, expanded; from facebook.com/community

The relative placing of the hyperlinks for "Resources", "What's New", and "Programs" on the ribbon further suggests the role of "Resources" as the "backbone" of FC. If we were to treat the ribbon's arrangement as a left-right composition, "Resources" occupies the left-most spot, suggesting its representation as the Given (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). A term tied to information structure, "Given" prototypically bears a connection to the concept of "Theme" from thematic structure (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 119–121). In cases considered "unmarked" in English's systemic functional grammar, the two go together thanks to their typical ordering in an initial position (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). FC being a "one-stop *resource* center", it is fitting that the "Resources" section should be given such a position.

Finally, it must be noted that, unlike the prototypical example of a website *section* as defined by Djonov (2007), "Resources" is remarkable in that, unlike the other two major

sections of FC, it does not feature a *main page*; i.e., a distinct landing page providing an overview of its content. Analytically, this can be dealt with in two ways:

- a) There is an expandable menu that opens when visitors hover their cursor over or click on the “Resources” hyperlink (see Figure 6.2). This menu, which lists ten *subsections* of “Resources” on the left, could be taken as the *main page* of the “Resources” section.
- b) Alternatively, the website’s home page could be taken as functioning *also* as the “Resources” section’s main page, despite featuring content from other sections too (e.g., see the surfacing links for content from the “What’s New” section in Figure 6.1).

Showing no particular preference for either (a) or (b), I will be treating “Resources” as a *section*, the items listed left on Figure 6.2’s expanded menu as *subsections*, and the everything else nested below that, I will simply be calling *pages* (to avoid a term like “sub-subsections”).

Taking a closer look at Figure 6.2, each subsection of “Resources” listed on the left side consists of a *main page* establishing the subsection’s Theme (Djonov 2007) as well as a number of other pages nested within said subsection (seen on the right in Figure 6.2). Referring back to Table 6.1, this would mean that the first numbers in the page identifiers provided there refer to *subsections’ main pages*, while the second numbers (if present) refer to pages within said subsection, i.e., hierarchically “under” the main page. So, for example, “1” stands for the main page of the subsection “Using Key Group Tools”, while “1.1”, “1.2”, “1.3”, and “1.4” stand for distinct pages within that subsection. These particular pages from “Using Key Groups Tools” are seen listed in Figure 6.2 because the subsection in question has been activated (by hovering the cursor over it), and this action has revealed its list of pages on the right, including “Understanding Community Quality” (our “1.1”), “Understanding Community Standards” (our “1.2”), etc. Clicking on the subsection’s name (“Using Key Groups Tools”) or on “View all >” (at the end of the list) lands the user on the subsection’s main page; i.e., our “1” from Table 6.1.

Besides observing what is present on the page, following Pauwels’s (2012) multimodal framework for website analysis, an important early step in approaching a website consists in performing a “negative analysis” to identify things that are “meaningfully absent” (Pauwels 2012, 253). Most striking here is the absence from FC of a phenomenon which has been central in this dissertation’s analyses, namely group tagging and its products, tag groups. As has been established, these terms refer to users’ practices that rely on the creative mobilization of Facebook groups infrastructure in ways that are not ratified by the platform. The dynamic use of groups as tag groups and not as “spaces” to be joined speaks to a dynamic engagement with the platform’s affordances that deviates from what seems to

be the ideal use case for Facebook groups according to Meta – namely, creating “communities”. The absence of any recognition of tag groups and group tagging on FC solidifies these practices as yet more “user-based”, or “of the users” – as opposed to “of the platform/company” – though they still constitute platform-based practices that, it could be argued, Meta is aware of, considering that social media companies have an overview of the activity on their platforms. I take up the “meaningful absence” from FC of any mention of tag groups in Section 6.3 below.

For now, it is enough to observe that, while ostensibly ignoring tag groups, the perspective on Facebook groups that Meta presents here directly relates groups to the macro-Theme of “community”. Besides a particular view of the Facebook groups infrastructure, this focus on community is also tied to a particular view of users constructed on FC.

Facebook/Meta’s growth as a business has gone hand in hand with a number of shifts in the company’s discursive construction of its users, as expressed in CEO Mark Zuckerberg’s public statements (Hoffmann, Proferes, and Zimmer 2018). A recurrent point in Zuckerberg’s statements has been that Facebook “helps put users in contact with the communities around them, both physical and online” (Hoffmann, Proferes, and Zimmer 2018, 10). At the same time, users have been presented “as both passive audiences for content and collective agents capable of action” (ibid.), the latter being meant particularly in an institutional sense (e.g., Zuckerberg has highlighted the opportunities for democratic participation by interacting with politicians through Facebook). These positions put forth by Zuckerberg now over a decade ago (ca. 2009–2014) cannot be argued to represent one concrete vision that is put on display on FC – and in fact, Zuckerberg’s discursive construction of Facebook’s mission has historically seen changes (cf., e.g., Beekmans, Maly, and Van Hout 2023). However, both (a) the reinforcement of community/connection as a key signifier and (b) the construction of users as audience *and* active actors are found on FC too. In the following section (Section 6.2.1), I elaborate on the former point, while Sections 6.2.2 and 6.2.3 explore the duality hinted at in the second point.

6.2.1. Visual representations of users: Community and diversity

The visual depictions of people/users on FC constitute an advantageous starting point for the analysis of user representations as they seem to be one of the website’s most prevalent characteristics, judging from the sample of pages collected for this analysis. As specified earlier, this sample comprises ninety-one screenshots of fourteen webpages, which belong to six (out of ten) different “Resources” subsections of the website (cf. 1–6 as starting digits Table 6.1’s identifiers), plus its homepage (cf. 0 in Table 6.1). Importantly, the strong presence of images of people was not a criterion in the sampling process, but rather an observation that emerged during and after the taking of the screenshots, never driving the data collection process, which had other criteria (cf. Section 6.1.1). As such, the sample

may not be robustly representative, but it is sufficiently free from sampling bias to provide a reasonably informative illustration of some observable trends. This identification of “salient features” is presented here as an early stage of multimodal website analysis following Pauwels’s (2012, 252) model, before I delve into more in-depth qualitative considerations.

First and foremost, it must be noted that all the photography present in the website’s screenshot sample features human represented participants. That is, there is no photograph (or video thumbnail) that does not depict at least one person. To illustrate the incidence of this across the sample: out of ninety-one screenshots collected ($N = 91$), only twenty-two did not feature photographs⁴⁰ of people, making the frequency of photographs of people across the sample 74.73% (or 68/91 screenshots). Additionally, in half (eleven out of the twenty-two) “unpopulated” cases, the screenshots represent clickable text-heavy page regions that I purposely activated for documenting their content. These regions are not expanded by default (a matter of interactivity – see Section 6.2.3), meaning that these eleven “unpopulated” screenshots do not belong to the default surface text displayed to FC’s visitors. Subtracting them from the total of ninety-one screenshots (for $n = N - 12$, i.e., $n = 79$), one finds that in 86.08% (or 68/79) of the complementary portions of the website’s pages sampled for this analysis, the visitor would be confronted with some photographic depiction of people.

All in all, bearing in mind sampling caveats, FC appears to have a rather “people-heavy” appearance. On a surface level, this prevalence of human figures in a website on Facebook groups creates a non-trivial symbolic association between the product being presented (Facebook groups) and people (in the broadest sense), or more specifically the supposed users of this technology, the (prospective) Facebook modmins that FC is targeted at. In fact, the represented participants are explicitly identified as Facebook group admins very often throughout the website. This pattern starts on FC’s homepage, which I will henceforth use as my main case for qualitative analysis given its importance for the website overall (Djonov 2007).

Briefly returning to Figure 6.1, which depicts the uppermost portion of FC’s homepage, it must be noted that the four highly salient represented participants seen there are, in a lower portion of the page, showcased as “Featured Community Leaders”. This involves a photo gallery with a list attached where each admin’s name, subtitled by the name of their group, can be clicked on to reveal an individual portrait accompanied by an evocative quote on

⁴⁰ I use the term “photograph” for clearly framed photographic depictions on the website’s surface. This term does not coincide with “screenshot”, screenshots being the material units in which the website’s surface was documented. So, for example, Figure 6.1 constitutes one screenshot that includes four photographs.

the theme of community. Figures 6.3a–d present a collage of the four “Community Leaders” and their quotes.

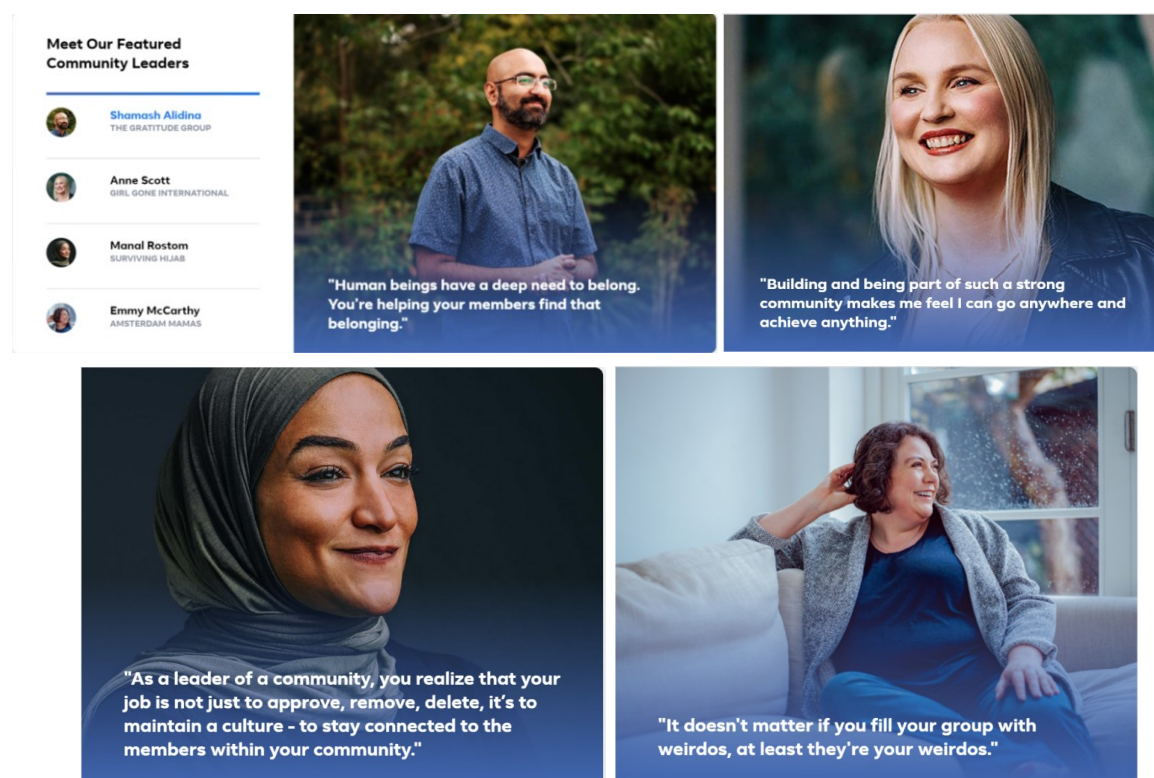


Figure 6.3a (top left). The “Community Leaders” feature of FC’s homepage, with the first of four admins selected (Shamash Alidina). The left-hand menu from which admins can be selected via clicking is also depicted

Figure 6.3b (top right). The second of four admins from the “Community Leaders” feature of FC’s homepage (Anne Scott)

Figure 6.3c (bottom left). The third of four admins from the “Community Leaders” feature of FC’s homepage (Manal Rostom)

Figure 6.3d (bottom right). The fourth of four admins from the “Community Leaders” feature of FC’s homepage (Emmy McCarthy)

The entire “Community Leaders” feature (henceforth “CL feature”) provides thematic reinforcement to the central idea of community, which has been established as FC’s macro-Theme. This is most evident on a superficial level in the denotational content of the admins’ quotes, though I will attend to the quotes’ linguistic make-up in greater detail later (in Section 6.2.2). What is more relevant in this part of the analysis is how the overall multimodal representation of these users is mobilized in service to the theme of community. In the terms of van Leeuwen’s (1996; 2008, chap. 2) Social Actor Analysis, we can identify a variety of semiotic processes through which the actors are represented: *personalization*, *functionalization*, and *physical identification*. The integrated instantiation of these discursive strategies (and particularly of physical identification) amounts to a significant instance of *overdetermination* in ways that I explain below.

Firstly, seen in combination with their group photograph in Figure 6.1, through the CL feature the represented “Community Leaders” (henceforth “CLs”) are *personalized*, i.e., represented as human beings, and clearly linguistically identifiable as distinct ones, as they are also *nominated* with their full (first and last) names. Alongside their nomination, these social actors are also *functionalized*, meaning that they are “referred to in terms of an activity, in terms of something they do, for instance, an occupation or role” (van Leeuwen 2008, 42). Here, this functionalization is realized lexically with an *-er*-suffix noun, which is typical in English: these people are community *leaders*, they *lead* communities. This effectively achieves a sustained emphasis on the theme of community as it constructs the users’ identities by situating them – as named individuals, too – within communities through the prism of their role in them (leaders). Another, related side to this functionalization found on FC’s homepage is that it does not name roles that focus on the technological mediation involved in being a “CL” through Facebook groups: these actors are not “administrators”, they do not “administrate” some structure, nor are they “users” of a technology. While group admins are not called “leaders” everywhere on the website, this is a significant point I will return to in Section 6.2.2, in which I focus more closely on the representation of users’ actions.

Further, the admins featured on FC’s homepage are also represented through *physical identification*, particularly through the mode of image. In other words, what these admins look like is shown through photography. This results in these social actors being *overdetermined*, i.e., (implicitly) involved in multiple layers of social practices. Specifically, physical identification always adds a connotative dimension to social actors’ representation since “physical attributes tend to have connotations, and these can be used to obliquely classify or functionalize social actors” (van Leeuwen 2008, 45). In this case, the four admins, through their physical depiction, are obliquely classifiable based on characteristics that they embody, such as age, race, body type, and gender expression.⁴¹ The photographs of the four admins thus do not simply stand for “this is what these people look like” but can also be read on a connotative level as depicting people of varying ages, white people and people of colour, thinner and larger people, male- and female-presenting people. Thereby, the admins that are featured on FC’s homepage are also “readable” as a *diverse* set of “CLs”.

⁴¹ The same social actors represented here may be classified or functionalized based on other (or only some of these) criteria too, depending on the reader’s interest (in a social semiotic sense), which unavoidably influences interpretation – interpretation being a transformational, socio-historically situated process (Kress 1996; 2010). In other words, other readers/analysts may see fewer or other connotations to these actors’ physical representations because they come to interpret them against the backdrop of their own interests, and more broadly their habitus. My analysis here represents only my “own reading position” (Iedema 2001, 186), which is crucially shaped by my critical analytical aims. At the same time, this analysis tries to explore the meaning potentials of these representations as comprehensively as possible.

The rhetorical mobilization of diversity and the “markedness” that it entails in neoliberal corporate discourse (among other fields) has been noted by Urciuoli (2016), who focuses particularly on the commodification of languages and ethnic or racial identities as value-added neoliberal objects. It is beyond the scope of this chapter to provide an in-depth take on the rhetorical deployment of diversity on FC, but since it constitutes a key element in the homepage’s representation of users/admins, a few notes are in order.

For one, FC includes a dedicated “Diversity & Inclusion” subsection under its main section of “Resources”. This consideration paired with the semiotic choices observed on FC’s homepage demonstrate an aesthetics of diversity that should rhetorically function to the company’s benefit, thereby doing work similar to that of the corporate diversity statements analyzed by Urciuoli (2016). Notably, those diversity policy statements from Starbucks, Kellogg, and other corporations’ websites address diversity as a theme relevant to their *workforce*, recasting it as a skill in the context of a neoliberal construction of agency. FC (ostensibly) does not refer to workers when it refers to users/admins – but rather, to “leaders”.

The racial diversity of these “Community Leaders” in particular, as multimodally thematized on FC’s homepage (and in physical identifications of users/admins throughout the sample), can also be understood as an instantiation of *racial capitalism*; i.e., “the process of deriving social and economic value from the racial identity of another person” (Leong 2013, 2152). Tracing the phenomenon in the US context, Leong (2013) sees racial capitalism as having developed out of an increased societal and legal preoccupation with diversity, which has resulted in a systemic pattern of commodifying non-whiteness. In the case of FC’s website, Meta can be seen as capitalizing on what Leong (2013, 2169) calls this “thin” version of diversity which focuses on appearances, so that FC’s central message of being all about “community” can be qualified as oriented towards an idea of *racially diverse* communities in particular.

All in all, the analysis so far reveals FC’s orientation to “community” as its key theme. This is reflected in the ample representation of human participants, who – characteristically on the homepage – are established as distinct people who are diverse leaders of communities, rather than, say, users of software. In what follows, I expand on this ostensible empowerment derived from users’ representation on FC, focusing first on how they are represented as *acting*, most usually in non-mediatized ways.

6.2.2. Representing users as actors: Community and (lack of) mediatization

In my sample of ninety-one screenshots from FC, there are 113 distinct photographs⁴², all of which, as established, include people. Excluding repetitions of the same images (fifty-two), this amounts to a total of sixty-one unique photographs of people, represented alone or in groups. But what are these people *doing*?

In social semiotic terminology, images designed to present the doing of some action are called *narrative* – as opposed to *conceptual* – representations (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). Yet, in approaching the actions of people depicted on FC below, I will not limit myself to narrative representations only. This is because, for one, even in the instances of photographs more accurately analyzable as conceptual representations, recontextualizations of some social action(s) are still occurring, especially when people are involved – which, in my sample, they always are. For example, the bottom-left photograph seen in Figure 6.1 (featuring an RV) can be argued to be a conceptual representation, specifically a *symbolic attributive* process, whereby the represented participant, apparently an Asian man, is the Carrier or Possessor (owner) of the RV depicted, as he poses in front of it confidently. Similarly, the large group photo of the “CLs” seen in Figure 6.1 may be best characterized as a *symbolic suggestive* process, wherein the very well-lit and merry participants are not organically embedded in their surroundings (which are blurred), instead standing out in the foreground with increased salience (additionally realized through brightness, color differentiation, color saturation, etc.) to suggest a “mood” of happiness, cheer, good times together. If one considers the text overlain on the image, the general mood can be argued to be exuding “community”, a lexically established signifier which creates an effect of intersemiotic complementarity (synonymy) with the image (Royce 1998).

These brief analyses are in line with the website’s apparent orientation. Namely, in presenting a product (Facebook groups), FC can be said to be relying on a website design strategy (Martinec and van Leeuwen 2009) that preferentially adopts a *sensory coding orientation*, which is common in advertisements and aimed at evoking emotional responses from audiences (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). These analytical observations thus speak to significant semiotic processes through which social actions are recontextualized in the

⁴² Excluded from this count are the small round portraits of users – such as those seen left in Figure 6.3a – which are based on outcrops from larger pictures and are commonly found throughout the website. These outcrops are always accompanied by other multimedial content (written text, sound clips), which decisively *anchors* the portraits in a Barthesian sense (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006, 18). I thus exclude these instances from the definition of “distinct photographs” because of their strongly framed embedding in larger multimodal structures (e.g., see Figures 6.3a, 6.9, 6.10), their smaller size and concomitant lower salience, as well as the fact that they are typically outcrops from larger photographs.

data at hand. However, my interests here begin at a more descriptive level, with a concern on the *kinds of actions* that users can be seen engaging in on FC.

First, I must note something that approximates a “meaningful absence” in Pauwels’s (2012) sense – more accurately, a “meaningful underrepresentation”. For a social media corporation’s website devoted to a platform feature, it is most striking that, out of sixty-one unique photographic depictions of people, in only nine unique images are people represented as interacting with digital devices (chiefly smartphones). If we include duplicates to provide an illustration of what a website visitor would organically encounter, the ratio of “pictures including people with digital devices” to “all pictures of people” is 15/113, or 13.27%.

Devices may be explicitly present, as in Figure 6.4, or their presence may be implied in a cropped image, as in Figures 6.5a–b below. Figure 6.4 comes from the “Understanding your Privacy Settings” page and it is the largest photograph on the page, serving as part of the page’s banner structure.



Figure 6.4. Woman using a smartphone in a kitchen; from the “Understanding your Privacy Settings” page

In Figures 6.5a and 6.5b digital devices are not so explicitly present, but the represented participants’ posture and gaze direction suggests that they are handling devices. Indeed, uncropped versions of the photographs found elsewhere on the website (outside my sample) clearly indicate that this is the case (e.g., Figure 6.5a appears to be a still from a video on the “Writing recurring posts in your group” page). It is notable that in Figures 6.4 through 6.5b, the depictions of people using digital devices accompany text that explicitly deals with Facebook features and how to use them: “Privacy Settings” in Figure 6.4; “posts” that can also be automated via particular “tools” in Figure 6.5a; “online events” and “Facebook Live”, “Messenger Rooms”, “Polls” in Figure 6.5b. This is also the case in Figures 6.6a

and 6.6b below, the banner structures from the “Using post approvals in your group” and “Using Keyword Alerts” pages, respectively.

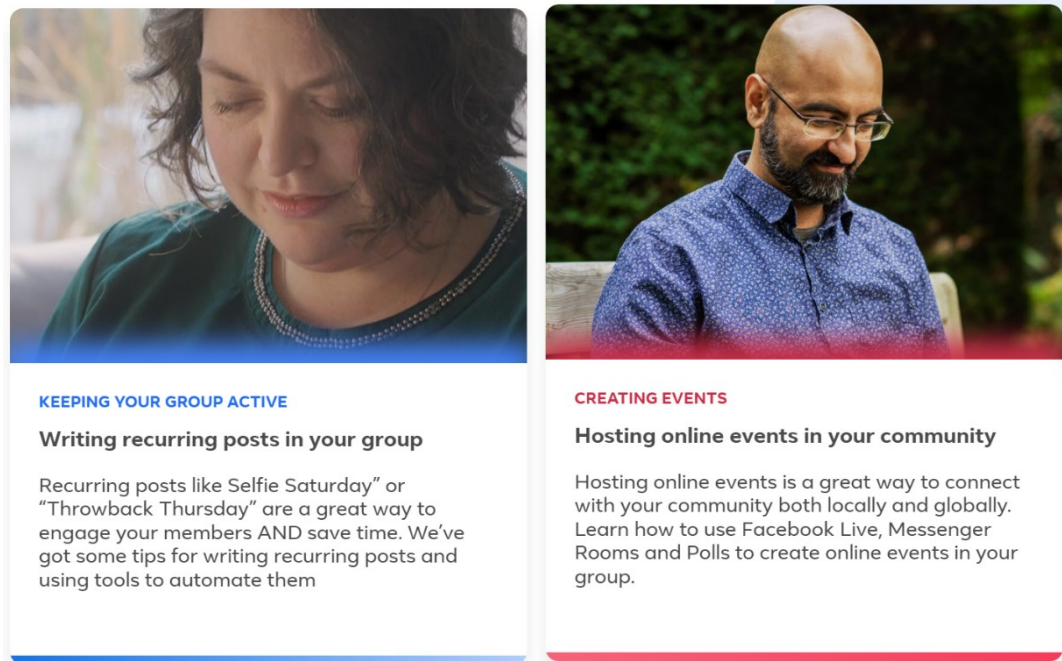


Figure 6.5a (left). CL Emmy McCarthy looking at a device; from a surfacing link on the “Writing engaging posts” page

Figure 6.5b (right). CL Shamash Alidina looking at a device; from a surfacing link on FC’s homepage

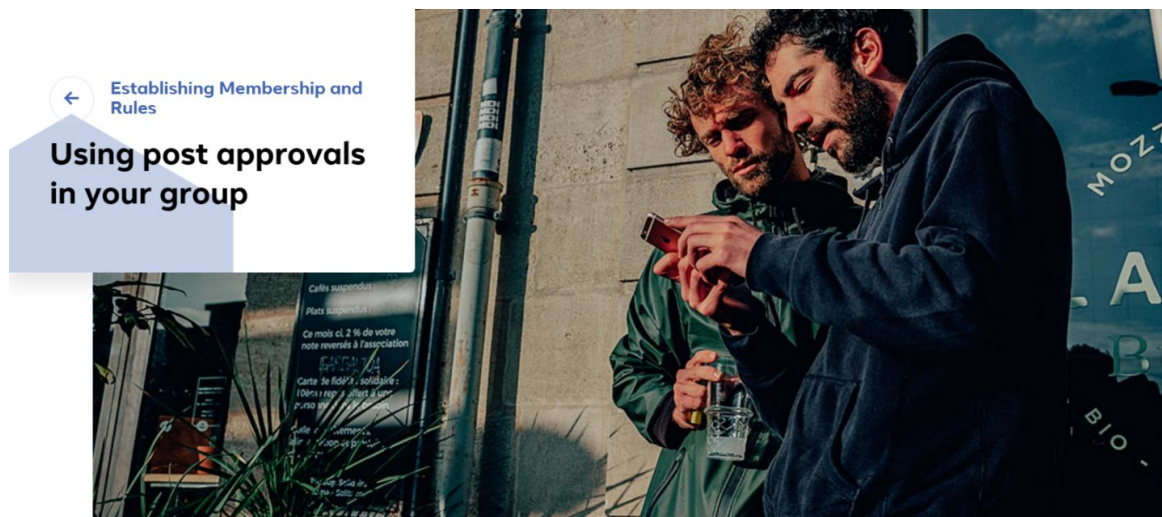


Figure 6.6a. Two men handling a smartphone in an urban setting; from the “Using post approvals in your group” page

As Figures 6.6a–b demonstrate, people can be depicted using devices also with company, sometimes in the context of activities such as taking a selfie, like the women in Figure 6.1 (see bottom, right-most photograph). In only one of the photographs featuring devices are people not actively engaging with them: Figure 6.7 is the banner structure from the main page of FC’s “Building a Team” subsection. It depicts two men posing for the camera while

one of them has his hands on a laptop's keyboard. The men are depicted in a room full of tech paraphernalia.



Figure 6.6b. The homepage's featured CLs handling a smartphone in a garden; from the "Using Keyword Alerts" page

Sparse as their presence is on FC, the photographs of people that also depict technological devices are revealing when examined in the context of how mediatization is constructed in corporate technology discourse (Fast 2018). Analyzing texts by major ICT companies, particularly with regard to mobile technologies and their promotion, Fast (2018, 21) observes visual trends that amount to depicting media "as extensions of man". She notes that "[v]isually, this theme is typically presented through images of technology use in shifting social contexts, such as the home, office, beach, subway, etc." (ibid.). This pattern of effectively naturalizing media usage by depicting devices being used in banal settings is amply present in my sample of FC pages, as also exemplified in Figures 6.4–6.7. Fast (2018) defines this trend as a "technologies of life" (sub)discourse, wherein mobile media are depicted as embedded in the represented participants' (socio-economically privileged) lives to suggest that they organically belong there. Notably, said lives are mostly urban, and when the outdoors is depicted, this is done in the context of "types of privileged mobility, most notably connected to tourism, sport, and leisure" (Fast 2018, 23). This trend holds for FC's photos seen above, which feature urban (street) settings (Figure 6.6a), the (bourgeois) home (Figure 6.4), an apparent office/workspace (Figure 6.7), and an outdoors, garden/backyard setting, associated with leisure (Figure 6.6b).

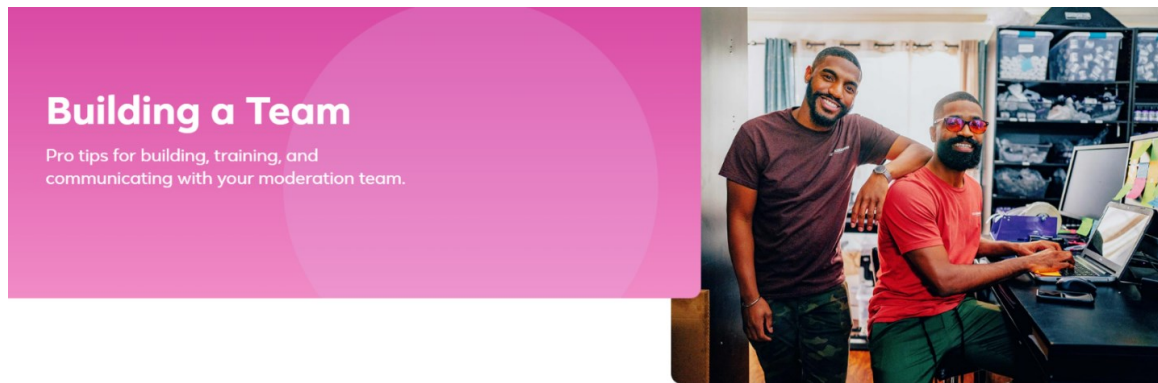


Figure 6.7. Two men posing in a computer-equipped room; from the “Building a Team” page

All in all, depictions of people using devices promote the idea of an organic belonging of those devices in people’s lives, but such depictions are still rather rare on FC. In fact, the vast majority of pictures represent people having face-to-face interactions, either amongst each another (in groups of two or more) or/and with off-screen/implied participants. There are only eight exceptions to this, which involve, for example, people posing by themselves (e.g., the CL feature in Figures 6.3a–d; RV man in Figure 6.1) or one person meditating (see Figure 6.1, bottom, central image). In all remaining photographs, represented participants are seen either having on-going (para)linguistic in-person interactions (e.g., conversing, laughing) or engaging together in some cooperative activity (e.g., bowling), optionally while also posing (e.g., see the featured admins in Figure 6.1, one of whom directs his gaze towards the camera).

Overall, out of the 113 photographs found on in my FC sample:

- a) in 90/113 (79.65%) people are depicted interacting or doing something *together*, *without digital devices* present;
- b) in 8/113 (7.08%) people are depicted posing or doing something else (always without digital devices) *alone*;
- c) in 15/113 (13.27%) people are depicted handling *digital devices* (whether with other people or not).

Under (b) are the only cases that feature no interactions among people whatsoever (not even implied through the depiction of digital media use). This means that the vast majority of images on FC depict interpersonal interactions, supporting the website’s macro-Theme of community. But this vision of community is striking in that it is presented as a predominantly face-to-face affair, with seemingly no devices involved in most cases – cf. (a) in the list above. This is striking given that the website in actuality promotes technological infrastructure hosted on digital devices for translocal interpersonal engagement. Some (tenuous) correlation appears to exist between text directly referring to Facebook functions and the depiction of people using devices, as seen in Figures 6.4–6.6b,

as well as in Figure 6.7, where the text includes the technical term “moderation team”. However, cases in which the mention of particular Facebook features is paired with representations of people interacting without devices in a physical setting are also common. For example, Figure 6.8 (an excerpt from the homepage) shows a wide image promoting the relatively new “Community Chats” feature (a chat function tied to the member base of a particular group). In it, a woman is seen interacting in-person with another figure, who is partially off-screen.

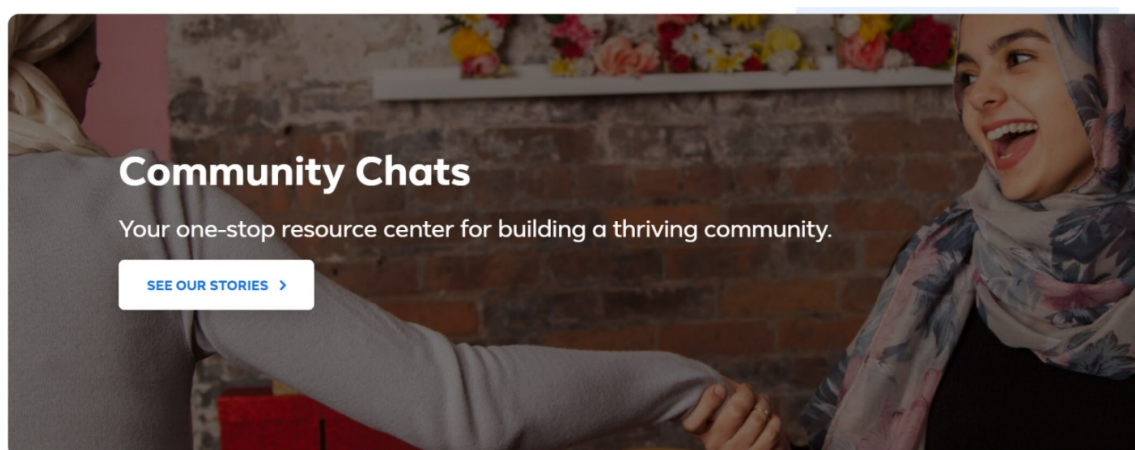


Figure 6.8. Woman interacting face-to-face with another person; from FC’s homepage

So, while the website unavoidably refers to technical platform features (and is in fact dedicated to them), the photography embedded in FC overall also betrays a preoccupation with depicting primarily in-person interactions. This tendency may be as understood as echoing Zuckerberg’s early (2009–2014) emphasis on “real” community building through Facebook, as reported by Hoffmann, Proferes, and Zimmer (2018). These authors further argue that “Zuckerberg’s care to position online communities as on par with other communities may be a carefully chosen response to criticism that online sociality contributes to the erosion of physically proximate communities” (Hoffmann, Proferes, and Zimmer 2018, 10). The strong focus on depictions of in-person conviviality on FC may thus be read as a self-conscious response to such views rooted in digital dualism (Jurgenson 2012). Yet, this interpretation is at best partial if one additionally considers the website’s apparent programmatic tendency to downplay or obscure the role of mediatization in the “community building” it promotes. I demonstrate this below by returning to data from the homepage, which sets the tone for the website’s vision.

I have previously noted about the CL feature on FC’s homepage (Section 6.2.1) that the functionalization of admins as “leaders” of communities is simultaneously a shunning of their framing as “users” of any software, or even as “administrators” of structures. Examining the linguistic make-up of the admins’ quotes in the CL feature (cf. Figures 6.3a–

d above) more closely reveals an even greater adherence to this tendency. Going from the least to the most relevant quote for my purposes here, Emmy⁴³ states:

Example 6.1⁴⁴

It doesn't matter if you fill your group with weirdos, at least they're your weirdos.

The semiotic software of Facebook groups could be argued to be present in this representation, through the noun “group”, but notably it is possessivated through the pronoun “your”. We thus have a nominalization of the social actions of creating and running a Facebook group (in the noun “group”), which is then presented as something owned by the generic “you” (the “leader”), who is here a Possessor. The same possessivation occurs vis-à-vis members, who are endearingly termed “weirdos”, but are “*your* weirdos”, strengthening the sense of common belonging, or even ownership. The action of “filling” one’s group is also obliquely an action that involves the use of Facebook’s technologies, but nothing about Emmy’s statement makes that explicit. In fact, “filling” one’s group could be a generalization here, standing for a range of actions to be taken on the platform so that one’s group can gain members. My interviewees Naomi, Johm, Simon, and Kelly mention, for example, “growing” one’s group by tagging its title around Facebook or within a larger group (that one potentially already runs). Notably, the agency in Emmy’s quote consistently lies with the same “you”: in the “filling” case we find it in a transitive structure where “you” is the Actor (“you fill”).

So, to the extent that the semiotic software of Facebook groups is present in Emmy’s statement, the actions involving it are represented as triggered by the admin (“you”) as an active agent – though a little more obliquely active in the case of possessivations. This trend of possessivating nouns that stand – explicitly or not – for the use of platform functions is also observable in the text found in figures examined earlier: “your Privacy Settings” (Figure 6.4), “your members” (Figure 6.5a), “your community” (Figure 6.5b), “your group” (Figures 6.5a–b, 6.6a), “your moderation team” (Figure 6.7). Still, user agency is constructed somewhat differently in Anne’s quote:

Example 6.2

Building and being part of such a strong community makes me feel I can go anywhere and achieve anything.

In Anne’s account, the actions of “building” and “participating” are deagentialized and objectivated through *-ing*-structures, so that the manner in which a “strong community” is

⁴³ Although their last names are also given (see Figure 6.3a), I refer to the featured admins by their first names in accordance with how I refer to the users I have interviewed (though in their case, those given names are pseudonyms). This measure also improves sentence readability.

⁴⁴ Examples that are not interview transcripts are indented so that they can stand out more clearly from the main body of the text – which is easier for interview transcripts due to their difference in font.

built and comes to comprise members is represented more like a state of affairs, and indeed one not directly tied to the admin's actions. In SFL terms, "Building and being part of such a strong community" is introduced as the Theme of the sentence here, and the user/admin is represented as a social actor only in the Rheme ("makes *me* feel [...]"), which is typically the region of a sentence where information is presented as New (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014). This quote essentially presents the *results* of the building of and participation in "strong communities" – a deagentialized process – in a way that involves the social actor ("me", "I") very positively. In fact, the result ultimately appears to be empowerment: a feeling of omnipotence ("[...] feel I can go anywhere and achieve anything"). Technological mediation is less explicitly represented here than in Example 6.1 as the language retains a focus on "community", a less technical-sounding signifier than "group" in Example 6.1, given that the latter could also be taken to mean "Facebook group" more directly.

In the end, Emmy's quote presents groups and their members as something the admin owns/possesses, while Anne's account presents the creation and engagement in communities as a seemingly platform-independent, given "point of departure" (Theme; Halliday and Matthiessen 2014), which engenders positive results for the individual. While these accounts do not refer to the underlying technological infrastructure very transparently, Manal's quote does, in an interesting way:

Example 6.3

As a leader of a community, you realize that your job is not just to approve, remove, delete, it's to maintain a culture – to stay connected to the members within your community.

Manal presents the *purpose* of a "leader's" work ("As a leader [...] your job is [...]"), and in doing so she strikingly recontextualizes actions clearly tied to the Facebook group infrastructure ("approve" for approving users for entry in the group; "remove" for removing users; "delete" for deleting content) in order to specifically state that these are *not* the leader's true purpose. The goal is, instead, to cultivate community (FC's macro-Theme), and the way this is articulated does not necessarily suggest technological mediation: "to maintain a culture", "to stay connected". Alternatively, the clearly mediatized actions ("approve", etc.) could be read as the banal activities that contribute to "maintaining a culture" (so that they are not figuratively "the opposite", but essential components, even prerequisites). Even in this reading, we find that the mediatized actions, which are essentially the nitty-gritty of maintaining culture, are backgrounded, so that the quote presents the purpose of being a leader as doing the big, more positive- and less technical-sounding thing of "maintaining a culture". In any case, Manal's quote amounts to a construction of platform-based actions as less important aspects – definitely not the goal –

of a group administrator's work. This obliquely supports the website's visual construction of "community" as predominantly instantiated in face-to-face settings, with devices involved only sparsely, as here technological mediation once again takes a back seat.

Finally, Shamash's quote strays the farthest away from the issue of mediatization:

Example 6.4

Humans have a deep need to belong. You're helping your members find that belonging.

Here Shamash provides what van Leeuwen (2008) calls a *theoretical rationalization* for the legitimation of one's actions as an admin. This process generally relies on stating a supposed general truth about the state of things: "Humans have a deep need to belong" in this case. In Example 6.4, the theoretical rationalization takes the specific form of an *explanation*, i.e., the strategy of implicitly answering, through the general truth stated, *why* one would do something; in this case, create/admin a Facebook group. Indeed, the digitally mediated actions of creating and maintaining Facebook groups are recontextualized as "helping" other users that one is close with ("your members") to "find that belonging" – which, as established, they just *need*.

Taken together, the admin statements featured on FC's homepage are in keeping with a tendency to obfuscate the role of mediatization in practices surrounding Facebook groups: by presenting mediatized practices as a matter of one's own agency (Emmy), by propagandizing their positive results for the individual (Anne), by openly rejecting their importance (Manal), or by mostly erasing them to legitimate them through appeals to truisms (Shamash). Ultimately, judging by its homepage, FC's main Theme is seemingly not Facebook groups (and how to engage with them as semiotic software); instead, all the evidence seen so far affirms that the Theme is *community* (the building thereof, participation, etc.). The discursive orientation of this website as established on its homepage thereby seems to be working towards the *normalization* (van Dijck 2013b) of the social media product it promotes. As van Dijck (2013, 19) remarks, such normalization mostly occurs gradually for platforms through "changing levels of acceptance", whereby technologies can come to be seen as a given for communicative practices. This results in an obscuring of the constructed, techno-cultural nature of the media products involved: "Once new technologies and their use have gained a naturalized presence, it is much harder to identify underlying principles and thus question their *raison d'être*" (van Dijck 2013b, 20).

Shamash's quote in Example 6.4 in fact pre-empts any such questioning of why one may create Facebook groups, or why media products like Facebook groups are offered to the public at all. In fact, Shamash's statement can be seen as an instantiation of the trope of

media indispensability that is pervasive in corporate technology discourse (Fast 2018). Fast (2018, 15) argues that “mediatization is constructed [by major ICT corporations] as the response to an internal human drive for connectivity”, which is clearly echoed in Shamash’s talk of humans’ “deep need to belong”. In this sense, it is also interesting that a statement identifiable as standard tech company discourse is “voiced” by Shamash, a user (elevated to the status of “Community Leader”).

Taking a step back, we may note that many multimodal depictions of users’ actions on FC constitute recontextualizations of *semiotic actions* (van Leeuwen 2008); i.e., representations of people *saying* something or otherwise communicating (rather than engaging in actions that bring about material changes to the world). The CL feature with admins’ quotes (Figures 6.3a–d) constitutes a prime example of what defines a recontextualization of semiotic actions for the present analysis: a multimodal representation of people producing an *utterance* that is somehow retrievable as it *becomes part of the website’s verbal textual content*. Under this definition, images like Figure 6.8 do not qualify as recontextualizations of semiotic actions because, while the salient represented participant in Figure 6.8 (the woman on the right) can be said to be depicted as (being in the process of) saying something, what she is saying is not retrievable/displayed as website content.

In the following section, I analyze the incorporation of recontextualized semiotic actions in the website’s structure as well as their interplay with interactivity, arguing that these two aspects taken together are significant indicators of where power lies on FC.

6.2.3. Involving users: Polyphony, interactivity, and power

The recontextualization of users’ semiotic actions on FC effectively reconfigures the website as a *polyphonic* (multimodal hyper)text in a Bakhtinian sense (Bakhtin 1981). The represented human participants, framed as users/admins (or “Community Leaders”) but not Facebook staff, are represented as “voicing” a lot of the information that FC provides in its capacity as a “one-stop resource”. The significance of this semiotic choice is manifold.

On a surface level, this polyphony creates an aesthetics of participation, whereby the website visitors – (prospective) Facebook users – are addressed by other users, rather than solely by “the company”. This cultivates a “by users, for users” impression of the website’s make-up. However, FC, being a website, is a product of a particular design strategy that pervades the structuring of the semiotic choices made therein (Martinec and van Leeuwen 2009; Djonov and Knox 2014). The identification of the author(s) or rhetor(s) (Kress 2010) whose interest has significantly shaped FC’s direction cannot be approached here with too great a degree of specificity, but we can for all intents and purposes take the party whose interests have shaped the website to be – in a catch-all metonymy – the corporation Meta.

The choice to embed users' "voices" into the website's structure needs to be examined, then, with regard to how it diversifies the production format (Goffman 1981) surrounding the website's "utterances". At a first level, while Meta's interests underpin how the website is designed, the *author* (Goffman 1981) of the website's messaging (i.e., the person/party choosing what goes into the message) remains unclear. The contents of the website may have been materially "put there" by any number of workers in Meta's employ, potentially also making use of artificial intelligence, which would mean that significant portions of the semiotic work I analyze here may have been computer-generated. Be that as it may, when users' voices are involved it becomes essential to interrogate the extent to and the manner in which the Goffmanian roles of *animator* (the person articulating the message) and *principal* (the person whose interests or position the message expresses) are in sync.

For one, introducing "users' voices" into the website's textual flow engenders a shift in the production format in that the utterances produced by these represented users have the users as their apparent animators. Taking Shamash's statement from Figure 6.3a as an example, the quotation marks used in the verbal text overlain on Shamash's photograph, as well as the top-bottom composition (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006) of that portion of the image (putting aside the left-hand list of "Community Leaders") suggest that these words have been/are uttered by Shamash. The verbal message at the bottom represents the Real (ibid.) in this composition, i.e., is presented as the core information here, "what has been/is being said". In the end, this is a composition about what Shamash has said/is saying and in it Shamash is the animator, the person (represented as) *materially saying* something – the "talking machine" in Goffman's (1981, 144) terms.

However, it cannot be as clearly argued that the position established here is also Shamash's, i.e., that Shamash is also the principal in a Goffmanian sense. Firstly, the preceding analysis suggests that Shamash's quote enacts the trope of media indispensability characteristic of corporate technology discourse (Fast 2018), and hence Shamash's statement amounts to expressing a position that is commonly espoused by tech companies (like Meta). Secondly, the multimodal representation of quotes in the CL feature (Figures 6.3a–d) strengthens the idea that these utterances are in fact expressing Meta's vested interest in their product (Facebook groups) being seen in a positive light.

For one, the CLs featured are all depicted in symbolic suggestive representations, emanating positive feelings through what appears to be a sensory coding orientation behind these images, as argued earlier (Section 6.2.2) – a point I will return to. Moreover, the top-bottom composition in the presentation of the admins' quotes, as briefly observed for Shamash's case above, positions the physically depicted participant at the top, and hence, from an information-value perspective, in the realm of the Ideal (Kress and van Leeuwen 2006). That is, Shamash (like CLs in general) is represented as part of the "promises" that

the multimodal composition at hand implicitly makes: Smiling, with a dreamy look into the distance and a confident body posture, this is a user fulfilling the “deep human need to belong”, as he puts it, for himself and others. Considering the website’s discursively constructed goal of empowering administrators (as analyzed above, e.g., in Anne’s quote, Example 6.2), the suggestive representation of “smiling Community Leaders” as a desideratum clearly aligns with Meta’s interests rather than expressing the individuals’ positions, even though the latter appears to be the goal of *personalizing* these represented participants (Section 6.2.1). In other words, Shamash and the other admins in Figures 3b–d, while ostensibly framed as agentive individuals (named, flesh-and-bones, running communities), can be argued to be speaking *in the capacity of* spokespersons for Meta – which would make Meta the principal here in a Goffmanian sense.

Further, as established in Section 6.2.1, the four featured CLs are mainly identified through their names, their function (as “leaders”), and their physical characteristics (which bring their own connotations of “diversity” to FC). Yet, we – the website’s audience – know little about these users as historical subjects. For example, in the CL feature we are given the names of the groups that these admins “lead”, but the quotes do not appear to concern those particular groups and the admins’ experiences therein. Rather, they are broad statements on the theme of “community”. While seeing these individuals as the principals behind their own quotes may appear like an accurate reading at first pass, the propositional content and overall semiotic design and emplacement of these quotes on the site ultimately renders the assumption that the quotes express these individuals’ positions rather tenuous. We do find ourselves on a website designed and offered by Meta, after all; these admins’ words also do align very well with the website’s key theme and Meta’s aim to promote a product; and besides, we don’t really know a whole lot about Shamash, Anne, Manal or Emmy as people with experiences that shape individualized, historical positions. *Any* admin could be using a generic “you” to refer to the benefits of being a Facebook group admin, for instance (cf. Examples 6.1, 6.3, and 6.4).

Based on these observations, I would argue that the visual representations of the featured CLs discursively constitute legitimations articulated through an appeal to *role model authority* as well as *abstraction* (van Leeuwen 2017). Specifically, the CL feature establishes that the represented users are “Community Leaders”, meaning that they are engaged in the practice of administrating Facebook groups. This is a practice that FC, a website that promotes Facebook groups to prospective administrators, has an interest in legitimating, as is common in advertisements (van Leeuwen 2017). The represented actors who do administrating work in Facebook groups (generating engagement and hence profit for Meta’s platform) are thus framed as something more than mere administrators – namely as “Community Leaders” – and are thereby discursively elevated to an aspirational position so that they can function as role models. The messaging is something along the lines of: If

these outstanding individuals run Facebook groups, that must be a legitimate practice. Additionally, the admins' construction as a *diverse* group of leaders through their physical representation as argued above (cf. Section 6.2.1) serves to amplify this effect, predicated on an underlying moral stance that diverse people in leadership positions are a good thing.

Concerning abstraction, as these are symbolic suggestive representations of users rendered with a sensory coding orientation, some vague positive messaging can also be inferred from the images: confidence and self-assuredness through Manal's facial expression (Figure 6.3c) and Shamash's facial expression, posture, and gaze (Figure 6.3a); happiness and comfort through Anne's broad smile (Figure 6.3b) and Emmy's laughing while leisurely lounging on a couch. Through the embodiment of these abstract positive suggestions in these actors' visual representation, the social practice that they are tied to (being a Facebook group administrator) is further legitimated.

So, an interpretation of the represented admins' linguistic utterances as serving Meta's interests (i.e., having Meta as their principal) is more strongly supported when one considers the overall multimodal representation of these users, which is almost idyllic. This kind of positive representations of the actors tied to the practices this website promotes (using Facebook groups, becoming an administrator) serves to legitimate said practices. Rather than a "resource center" (cf. Figure 6.1), then, these observations establish FC as more of an advertisement center.

Ultimately, the production format of users' embedded utterances as analyzed above with data from FC's homepage can be seen as indicative of a more general approach to polyphony employed on the website. Namely, individual users are represented as voicing statements which are chosen for display by (some presumed actors at) Meta and which advance Meta's view of their product, effectively functioning as advertisements. This polyphonic composition of FC amounts to an *aesthetics of participation* (as users' voices appear to be represented) which, importantly, does not truly actualize a meaningful inclusion of users and their perspectives – these may in fact be critical, as some of my interviewees' were (cf. Section 6.3.2 below).

Turning to the represented social relations between the website and its envisioned audience (Facebook users/group administrators), another salient characteristic of the multimodal design of polyphony across the website is its *interactive* aspect. This can already be observed in the CL feature I have been discussing, where in order to view the different pictures-with-quotes, the site's visitor needs to actively click on the list with the admins' names. This means that the pictures are not presented as a slideshow with an automated progression from one picture to the next, but an action is required from the visitor (clicking) for more "user voices" to be accessed. While it is not omnipresent in embedded voicing phenomena nor is it exclusively tied to them, interactivity in the representation of different

“voices” on FC is consistently used to diversify the multimodal make-up of pages that rely on the recontextualization of users’ semiotic actions. Consider Figure 6.9 below.

Figure 6.9 shows the first part of FC’s “Managing conflict between members” page. The top third (roughly) of the figure displays the typical banner structure of FC pages with a large landscape-oriented picture of people and a title card. It could be argued that this depiction of three people talking is a recontextualization of semiotic action, but given the criteria I have set for the term’s use here, I do not group this among instances of users voicing FC content, as it is impossible to retrieve what is being said (if anything). Still, not unimportantly, this is an image of three people cheerfully interacting with each other face-to-face, which is in keeping with general FC trends identified earlier (Section 6.2.2). The setting retains its connotations (Ledin and Machin 2020) of people/users being in nature (suggesting “natural”, “organic”) as a leisurely activity (implying a comfortable urban life, seen in other images across the website).

In the bottom third of Figure 6.9 is something that does qualify as recontetxualized voicing, though. A purple field (henceforth “box”) includes an apparent quotation by “Joelle, Community Admin” (notably, not “Leader”). A small round portrait of Joelle (cf. fn. 42 above) is on top of this box to suggest that the statement has been uttered by her. But Joelle’s voice is multimodally rendered through a non-interactive structure: no clicking, cursor hovering, typing, etc. is required to access what she says, nor is interacting with this box an option. In Adami’s (2015) terms, the purple box does not constitute an “interactive site/sign”, but merely a static sign on the webpage’s surface.

This contrasts with the voicing we find in the middle region of the screenshot. Here, we have another box structure, which includes a written quote (“We encourage people to use the report function to report posts that need moderation”) apparently attributed to “Jeff”, who is – like Joelle – functionalized as a “Community Admin” (in a subtitle to his name). He is also visually represented through a small round portrait to the left of his name. Under this, within the same box, a playable sound clip is embedded. A transcription of the sound clip is provided at the end of this FC page, in a section titled “Audio transcript” (see Appendix E for a screenshot). So, in Jeff’s example, the action of speaking is recontextualized through the interplay of even more modes (written language, image, *and* sound/speech), but importantly, it also involves interactivity. Clicking on the play button is necessary to hear Jeff’s voice, and his words can be accessed also through a transcript at the bottom of the page that one can scroll to (though this is not immediately tied to any clickable node).

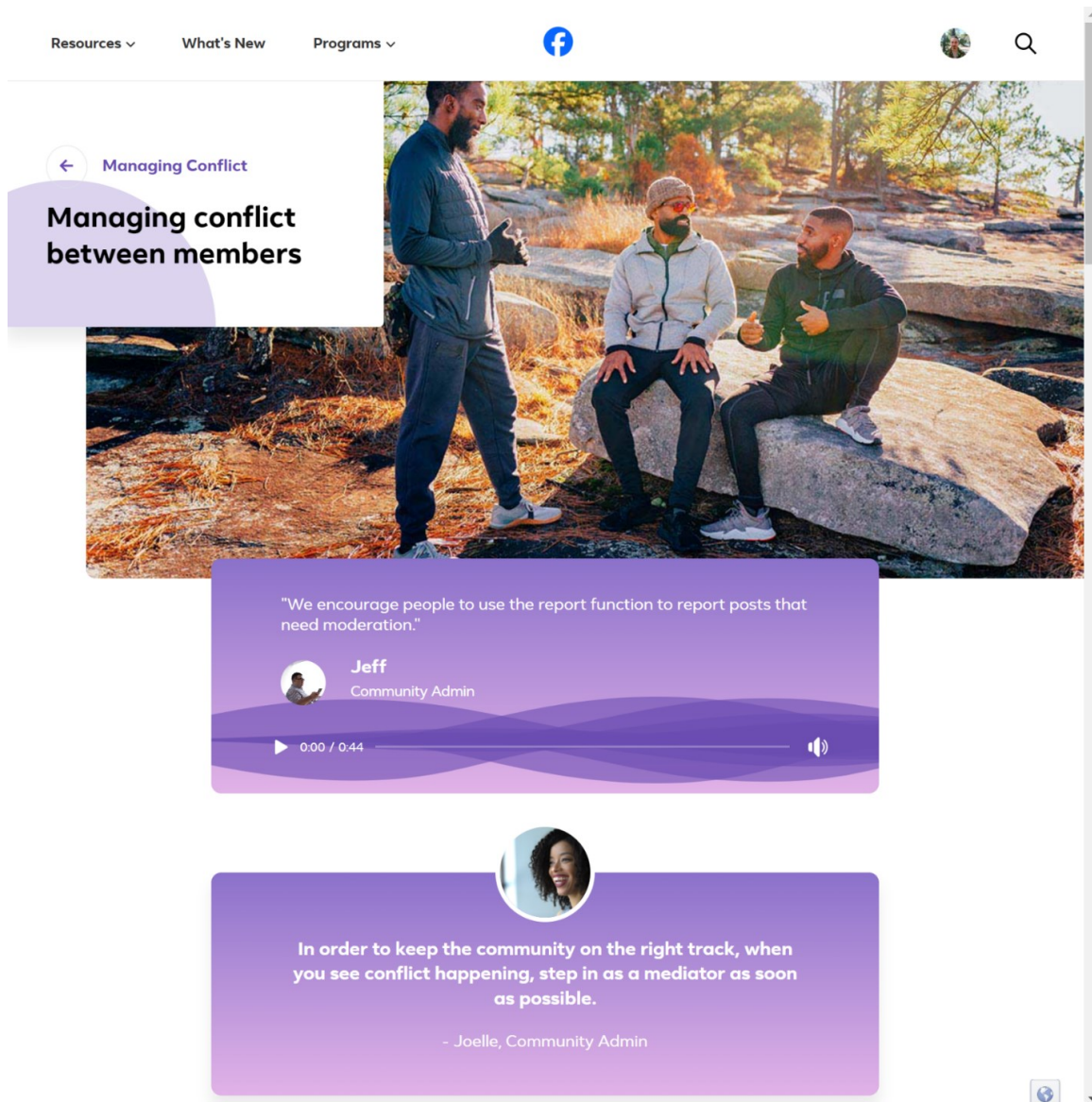


Figure 6.9. Uppermost portion of the “Managing conflict between members” page

Taken together, Joelle’s and Jeff’s “boxes” in Figure 6.9 can be argued to constitute “character zones” (Bakhtin 1981), i.e., portions of the (hyper)text where a particular subjectivity or “voice” is presented as distinct, through a set of semiotic choices. This Bakhtinian term can be used to track parts of the website in which the animators change, meaning that the CL feature can also be seen as a configuration of character zones. Similar zones are present across FC and can also take the form of video, as shown in Figure 6.10 below, which is the uppermost part of the “Enforcing group rules” page.

At the bottom of Figure 6.10, we find a character zone in a box structure (like Joelle’s in Figure 6.9) with a quote by CL Anne (from FC’s homepage), here functionalized as “Group Admin”. In the page’s banner structure, a video is embedded, the thumbnail of which shows Anne once again. The play button superimposed on the video is an interactive site/sign for

starting playback, while the “Transcript” button underneath the video is also an interactive element that, when clicked on, reveals a transcript of what is said in the video.

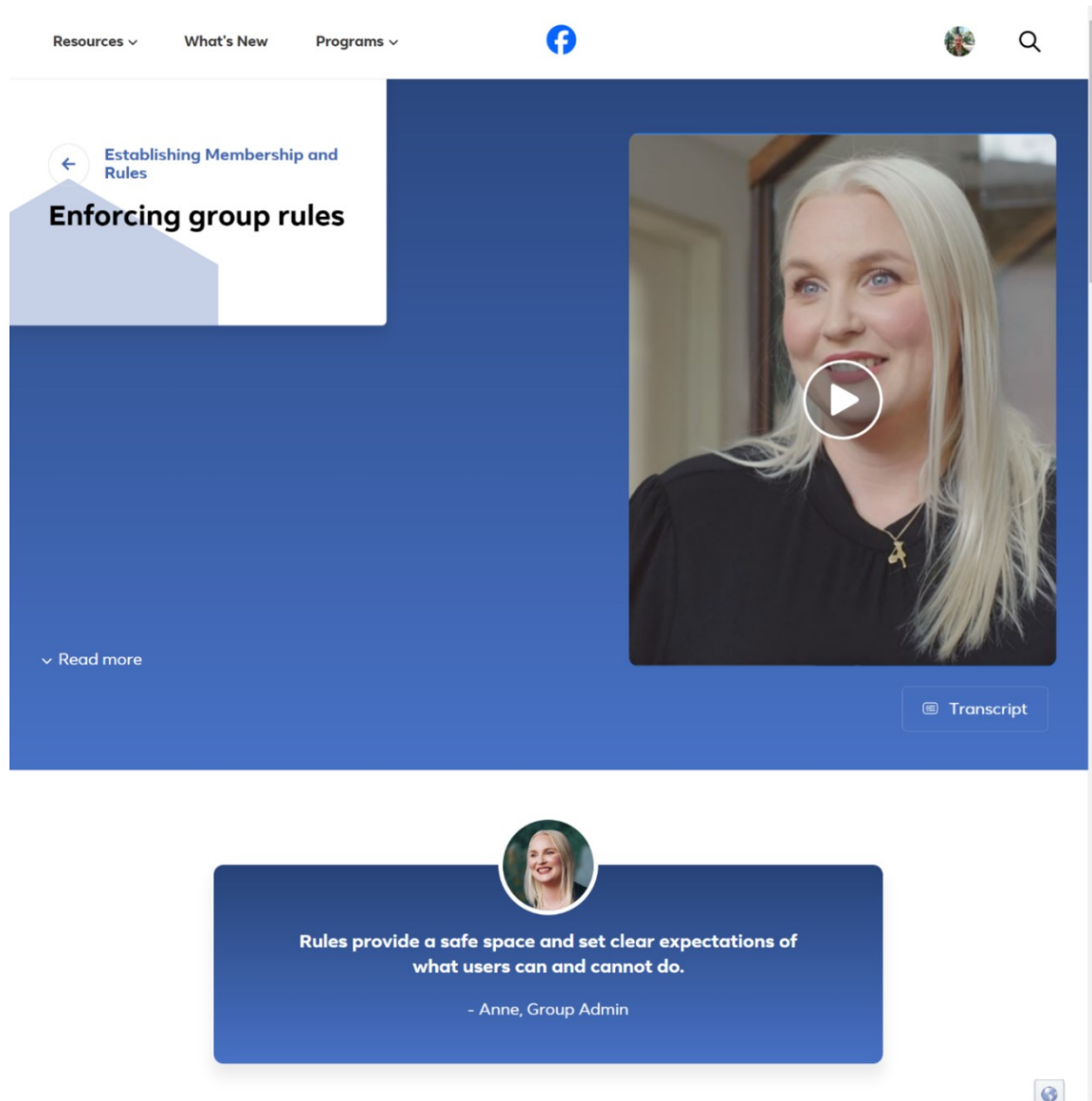


Figure 6.10. Uppermost portion of the “Enforcing group rules” page

Judging from the video’s thumbnail and transcript button only, it could be argued that this is another spatially arranged character zone, through which visitors can gain access to Anne’s words. Yet, the video features statements from three different admins/characters: Anne, Emmy (also known to us from the homepage), and Janet. Multiple actors’ voices are thus embedded within the video in a temporal arrangement. The video also features prompts not animated by users, which come in the form of blue cards with superimposed white text. The first such prompt can be seen in Figure 6.11a below (“Let’s talk rules”), while Figure 6.11b shows a still of Emmy talking to the camera, which also reveals that the video is subtitled by default. Figures 6.11a–b present the video’s transcript expanded, too.

All in all, these cases of embedded content that introduces different characters in the website's make-up rely substantially on the website's hypertextual dimension, namely vis-à-vis its interactivity. Following Adami (2015), we can examine the sites/signs that are the key nodes for accessing voices (e.g., play buttons, the transcript button) on the *syntagmatic plane*, to interrogate how they are spatially arranged in the wider context of the page, and on the *paradigmatic plane*, to explore what happens when they are actualized (e.g., clicked on) and they thereby lead down intertextual paths, realizing the in-absentia relations they afford.

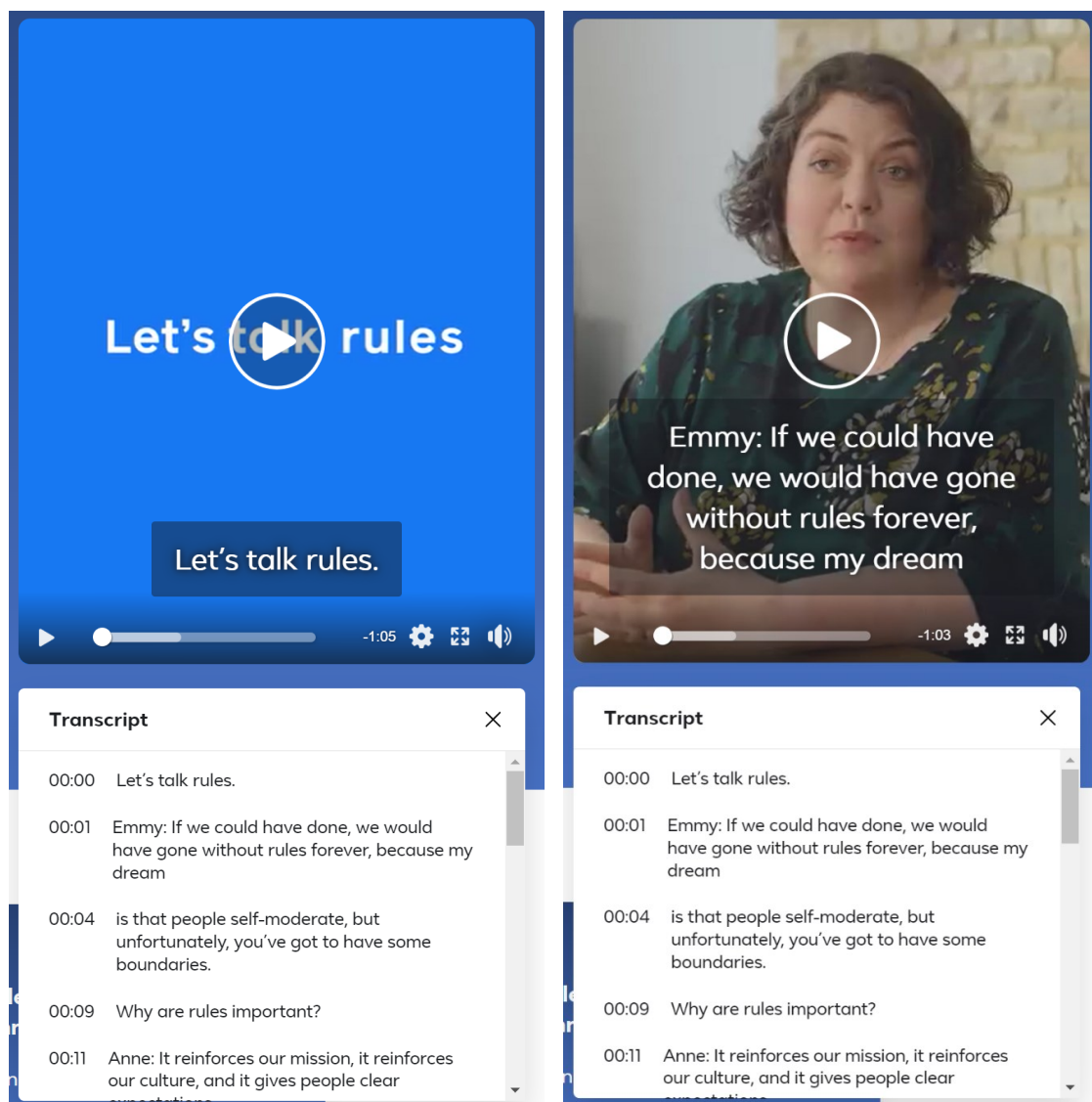


Figure 6.11a (left). Still of the embedded video on the “Enforcing group rules” page (at 00:00), with its transcript opened

Figure 6.11b (right). Still of the embedded video on the “Enforcing group rules” page (at 00:02), with its transcript opened

I turn to the syntagmatic dimension first, or “the aesthetics of interactivity” (Adami 2015, 143). Through content like the sound clip in Figure 6.9 or the video in Figures 6.10/11a–b, the FC website is constructed as having an interactive make-up, which involves the user, and in fact signals the potential for a more materially accessible experience of the website in the case of the “Transcript” button (Figures 6.10/11a–b).⁴⁵ Paired with the representational dimension of the sites/signs, which are integrated in structures featuring depictions of people (cf. the sound clip box in Figure 6.9, the thumbnail with Anne in Figure 6.10), this creates an environment where the visitor can “hear from” other users/admins by clicking on or near them.

In more technical terms, interactive sites/signs afford actions that visitors can perform, thereby lending users an agentive role in their browsing of websites as hypermodal constructions (Lemke 2002). The actions afforded through a website’s interactivity may be recontextualizations of social actions one would undertake without digital mediation (cf. Poulsen 2022, who examines offline/online shopping practices). While it is not absolutely necessary for the present analysis to draw this parallel to “offline” practices, a similarity can be noted between the action of “clicking to hear someone’s voice” (literally or figuratively) and initiating an interaction with another person in a face-to-face context. In this sense, not only does FC’s polyphony suggest a “pluralist” stance (on who can/should be providing information here) by involving *users-as-animators*, but the conjunction of polyphony with interactivity additionally involves *users-as-visitors*, granting them an agentive role. Through its aesthetics of interactivity, then, FC allows its visitors (the equivalent of) a choice to initiate interactions with other users (the *users-as-animators* embedded in the page), thereby realizing a veneer of “peer-to-peer-ness” on a hypertextual level.

Yet, when looking at the paradigmatic dimension, or “the functionalities of interactivity” at play here, FC appears to be a “closed structure” (Adami 2015, 157), where power lies with the website’s authors (“Meta”). For one, despite their symbolic significance just discussed, virtually the only material actions afforded to the visitors are those of clicking. There are no possibilities for transformative actions like typing/providing textual input, with the exception of a search bar function that can be accessed by clicking on the magnifying lens icon at the top right of every page (visible in Figures 6.1, 6.2, and 6.9). Still, even by typing text into the search bar, the only effect that visitors’ interactions with the site can ultimately have is the accessing of new text (by causing a new FC page to be

⁴⁵ Though not tied to an interactive node, the presence of a transcript for the sound clip seen in Figure 6.9 constitutes another accessible feature. Further, the subtitling that is present in embedded videos by default (in addition to the expandable transcript) adds another layer of semiotic choices working towards website accessibility. Alongside their material benefits, these choices construct the website as a more inclusive space that offers additional access options for those who might need them (e.g., transcripts of speech for deaf visitors).

displayed). The provision of text beyond the search bar or even the transferring of text (through “sharing” functions) is not possible through FC’s interactive signs/sites in the sample analyzed. Additionally, even when new text is accessed, it comes from FC itself or, rarely, other pages within the Facebook domain (cf. Section 6.3.1, fn. 47 below for an example). Hence the characterisation of “closed structure”. The consistent self-referentiality of FC is evident also in its search bar feature and the surfacing links present on every page, where nodes to other FC pages are gathered and presented to the visitor. In the end, on FC, virtually all roads lead to FC, resulting in an asymmetry of power between the authority designing the website (Meta) and the visitor, who is engaged in a kind of hypertextual loop in this “one-stop resource center” (Figure 6.1).

To summarize, this overview of my FC data reveals that Meta’s official presentation of Facebook groups to (prospective) users/modmins is chiefly focused on the signifier of “community”. Visual representations of people (predominantly in groups) abound on the website. Through these depictions, FC’s idea of community is constructed as characterized by diversity and as unfolding organically and in a chiefly non-mediatized manner. The depiction of digital devices is sparse in the representation of people, and it seems to align with common types of ICT company discourse on mediatization. What is more, the represented people’s language use alludes to technological mediation only rather obliquely, instead focusing on their agency as individuals.

This appearance of strengthened agency or user-centeredness is also realized through the representations of people (users) “voicing” the website’s content. This creates a “by users, for users” image for the website, but closer examination reveals that the users on FC function mostly as animators of Meta’s interests (e.g., legitimating the promotion of Facebook groups) and not as the parties whose position is expressed. Visitors are seemingly invited to play an active role in “hearing from” the users-as-animators through various interactive features. Yet, Meta has total say over the website’s contents, and despite many interactive sites/signs being present, they ultimately only allow users to navigate this one website and other affiliated pages. There is thus an inherent contradiction to the website’s design, where at different levels of analysis we find conflicting messaging vis-à-vis users’ agency. This can be viewed as an example of Facebook’s ideology at work.

In the end, the discursive construction of Facebook group technology on FC is centralized, with Meta being the ultimate authority behind this “resource center”. As we have seen, a great deal of semiotic work on FC is oriented towards the ostensive empowerment of users, making the website appear inclusive and democratic, even though Meta has the final (and first) say on it. Having thus examined Meta’s discursive framing of Facebook groups as semiotic technology and their use, in what follows I comparatively examine the users’ perspective by drawing on my project’s interview data.

6.3. The users vs. Facebook: The ludic as subversive?

Early in my treatment of FC's make-up above I noted that group tagging, a user-based appropriation of Facebook groups, is not allocated any space in FC's company-approved presentation of Facebook groups and their features. The users I interviewed also seemed keenly aware that group tagging is not aligned with the expected uses of Facebook groups technology. This awareness is implicitly exemplified, for one, in my interviewees' tendency to legitimate their group tagging practices (see Chapter 5). In fact, a conscious divide emerges in some interviewees' statements between what I will call:

- a) *Facebook-standard practices* – i.e., the uses of Facebook groups that are (perceived as) approved and promoted by Meta; and
- b) *User-based practices* – i.e., Facebook groups-related practices based on users' appropriation of the medium in ways not ratified by Meta.

This division is explicitly elaborated by Mary, and it notably goes beyond group tagging. About halfway through our interview, Mary has been talking about users gaining popularity within ludic Facebook groups (becoming “Facebook group famous”; Mary, {30:00–30:02}). She notes that there is no benefit in achieving this kind of fame given that Facebook does not afford the material accumulation of a following because, as she puts it, “it’s not a traditional social media site with followers” (Mary, {30:04–30:07}). The absence of material benefits to one’s “Facebook group fame” clearly establishes this practice’s nature as ludic (Huizinga 1949; Blommaert 2017). At the same time, the ludic nature of the practice (it having “not really much of a benefit”; Mary, {29:58–29:59}) is tied to Facebook’s (perceived) *lack* of affordances that could actualize the practice in a concrete way on the platform’s semiotic surface. That is, there is no technical feature that could reconfigure the immaterial cultural capital of “Facebook group fame” into, say, a “follower” count. Rather, this kind of fame is solely “held up” by users, who are, of course, using Facebook’s semiotic technology for the phenomenon to even exist, but ultimately define the phenomenon based on how it does *not* align with established Facebook features or/and expectations for using them. Like group tagging, this is an example of what I call a *user-based practice*.

Mary immediately expands on this point by moving from talk about digital infrastructure to talk about *Facebook’s designers*, saying that “the idea of Facebook fame is something that the people that make Facebook would never think of” (Mary, {30:08–30:15}). The ludic practice of being “Facebook group famous”, which according to Mary does not align with the vision of the “people who make Facebook”, occurs in the context of larger ludic structures that she terms “weird Facebook”, or more narrowly “meme groups”. She describes the latter as “communit[ies] in which people are incentivized to post to entertain

each other” (Mary, {30:21–30:23}). When asked to elaborate on her view that “the people who make Facebook” would not actively consider these practices, Mary says the following:

Example 6.5 ((Mary, {31:28–34:09}))

01 M: so: i would SAY that_the people-
02 that WORK at facebook probably_like=;
03 =they !KNOW! that this is a phenomenon that exISTS,
04 but_it's NOT like-
05 °h the USE case of facebook groups=.
06 =like °h the REal use case of facebook grou:ps;
07 I:S: (.) like;
08 (--) MAKing a group fo:r,
09 your community SOFTball lea::gue;
10 OR like-
11 °h making a GROUP for your;
12 COLlege cla:ss:.=
13 =OR;
14 °h (-) stuff like THAT?.
15 o:r Even,
16 (.) °h i_mean i think they can ALso be-
17 things that? aren't BASED;=
18 =in REal_life relationships?=
19 =like you could have a GROU:P;
20 for_LIKE <<shaking head>°h (.) uh:,>
21 PEOpLe that? are;;
22 exPERiencing the-
23 LOSS of a !CHILD! ,=
24 =like !THOSE! groups exIST,
25 I: [HM_hm?]

26 M: [BU?] (.) there's,
 27 (--) it's GEnerally (-) for_like !ACT!ual community_building purposes?
 28 and_i think that the REAsOn why=--
 29 =quote_unquo?e weird FACEbook !IS!-
 30 weird FACEbook,
 31 is becuz there isn't a POINT.

In Example 6.5, Mary juxtaposes “weird Facebook”—i.e., ludic user-based practices – with what she terms “the *real* use case of Facebook groups” (line 06) – i.e., Facebook-standard practices. The latter has “*actual* community-building purposes” (line 27) and the initial examples she gives (lines 08–12; e.g., a group for one’s community softball league) are what she later defines as groups “based in real-life relationships” (lines 17–18). However, despite the first examples Mary provides being of this nature, in line 16 she engages in self-repair to specify that the Facebook-standard practices for Facebook groups are not exclusively about communities with “offline” antecedents.

Example 6.5 thus shows an awareness of the “mission” of Facebook groups according to Meta, as revealed in my preceding analysis of FC: community building. In fact, the way Mary phrases her explanation, suggesting that “*actual* community building” is primarily rooted in “real-life relationships”, echoes FC’s multimodal discursive construction of community as a principally face-to-face affair, which FC achieves by obfuscating mediatization (cf. Section 6.2.2). There are also undertones of digital dualism in Mary’s view of the “offline” as “actual”, which are reminiscent of views that Mark Zuckerberg’s rhetoric of community building through Facebook presumably tries to counter (Hoffman, Proferes, and Zimmer 2018). All in all, while it cannot be ascertained that Mary has actively engaged with the content of FC, she shows an awareness of some of its key discursive points, and goes on to define ludic practices surrounding Facebook groups (“weird Facebook”) *through these practices’ opposition to Meta’s view*.

Notable in this regard is also the representation of social actors as agents in Example 6.5: For “Meta’s side”, we have “the people that work at Facebook” (lines 01–02) and “they” (lines 03), both occupying active roles in the representation (as the subjects in a mental process verb “know”). Users are mostly represented through a generic “you”, only once active as a Possessor (“you could have a group”, line 19) and once more obliquely active through possessivation (“your community softball league”, line 09). There is also the collective “people” on line 21, which occurs when Mary describes the audience of a hypothetical group. Beyond this, the only human agent in the text is Mary as “I”, coming about for the purposes of modalization (“I would say”, line 01; “I mean I think”, line 16; “I

think”, line 28). All other actions that concern Facebook groups are deagentialized. For example, in “making a group” (lines 08, 11), the implied agent is “users”, but they get buried in the use of the *-ing*-forms. Elsewhere, we have existentializations (“a phenomenon that exists”, line 03; “those groups exist”, line 24; “there’s”, line 26) and relational processes (e.g., “it’s not like [...]”, “is like”, lines 04ff.), once for constructing purpose (“it’s generally for [...]”, line 27). Taking all this together, in Example 6.5 Mary seems to be giving her opinion (“I would say”, “I think”) on a state of affairs (“a phenomenon that exists”) that involves two distinct groups of agents: those who are on “Meta’s side” (“people who work at Facebook”) and users (simply “people”, or “you”).

In the end, on the flip-side of the Facebook standard (of the “real use case” of Facebook groups), Mary says we find “weird Facebook”, which is defined by the fact that “there isn’t a point” to it – an indicator of the ludic nature of the practices therein. The terms used by Mary to capture ludic uses of Facebook groups (“weird Facebook” and “meme groups”), as well as variations thereof, recur in most of the project’s interviews to describe Facebook group uses that the interviewees enjoy purely “for fun”: Eos speaks of “weird and meme groups”, Johm also mentions “meme groups”, while Wilson, Simon, and Elisa (though Elisa is not a ludic group modmin) all liken tag groups to memes, with Mary qualifying them elsewhere as “text memes”. Though not explicitly using these same terms (“weird”, “meme”), the remaining interviewees Naomi and Kelly also refer to the phatic function of tag groups, which create affinity bonds through the shared recognition of indexical meanings – an established function of memetic content (cf. Knobel and Lankshear 2007; Varis and Blommaert 2015; Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023). Most importantly, besides being able to articulate and often label metapragmatic phenomena surrounding their “user-based practices”, all interviewees consistently define tag groups/group tagging in particular as groups *not* made for posting inside them (cf. Chapter 5). Group tagging is thereby reaffirmed as a ludic user-based practice par excellence, which encapsulates an alternative pattern of appropriating Facebook’s semiotic software vis-à-vis group features.

On one occasion, the “user-based” (i.e., not “Facebook-standard”) nature of the practice is framed as explicitly *subversive*. This is done by Simon towards the beginning of our interview, where he is talking about his experience “getting into” Facebook and Facebook groups in particular.

Example 6.6 ((Simon, {04:02–04:58}))

01 S: °h so: zuckerberg very much deSIGNED;
 02 facebook GROUPS to <<:-)>be_like,
 03 (-) a_CUTE wholesom:e,
 04 local: THING.>=

Zuckerberg or “them”, and by extension Facebook’s design, are then presented as wilfully subverted through user-based practices, a process that Simon and a like-minded subset of Facebook users enjoy: “some of us, we just really get a kick out of subverting those expectations” (lines 14–16), he says, smiling as he goes and eventually bursting into laughter. He then gives an example of what a subversive group could be called and he names a group that he had created titled “cool stuff on Wikipedia”. Such a group is seen as going against Facebook’s expectations, and in fact, the topic of any group is considered ultimately irrelevant when it comes to the group’s status as a subversive one (“it could really be about anything”, line 26). At any rate, in Example 6.6, Simon – like Mary in Example 6.5 – tells of two conflicting subjectivities converging around Facebook groups as semiotic software (and their use): Meta’s side (“Zuckerberg” here) and users’.

Through this mostly descriptive account of my interviewees’ view of ludic Facebook groups-related practices as seemingly opposed to Facebook’s “standard” uses/expectations, I have briefly shown that users characterize their ludic practices partially by implicitly constructing “two sides” to the story: Facebook/Meta’s and their own. In what follows, I want to follow this thread and take a closer look at this emergent “clash” of expectations and uses of Facebook groups, by juxtaposing users’ and Meta’s discourse regarding the use of one particular feature: *reporting*.

Needing to limit myself to the in-depth examination of only one topic for reasons of space, I chose the functions of reporting in Facebook groups (of which there are two kinds, as I will explain) as a case in point in accordance with my goal to uncover clashes in the representation of users’ and the platform’s *agency*. Examining report functions, which relate to content moderation, constitutes an advantageous empirical choice in this regard because this is the Facebook groups-related feature that most actively involves “Facebook” as a regulating authority. First, using data from FC, I will explore Meta’s construction of where the agency lies in the use of Facebook’s reporting tools, arguing that users – specifically admins – are presented as the purveyors of and authorities on the practice (Section 6.3.1). Afterwards, I will examine interview data in which modmins discuss how reporting works on Facebook, and in doing so I will highlight the decisively active role that agents associated with Facebook/Meta have in users’ accounts (Section 6.3.2).

6.3.1. Reporting according to Facebook: It’s a user thing

The FC page that deals (among other things) with the report function as it pertains to Facebook groups is titled “Managing conflict between members”, and its uppermost part has been presented earlier as Figure 6.9 and discussed in terms of polyphony and interactivity (Section 6.2.3). While the page is more generally about group content moderation in instances of conflict, the significance of reporting in this regard is made evident by the fact that it is the first function mentioned on the page, in the box featuring

Community Admin Jeff's words (see Figure 6.9). Jeff is the first animator whose utterances are embedded on the page (going from top to bottom), and his voice is embedded through a voice clip (transcribed at the bottom of the page; see Appendix E) as well as through the featured (written) quote introducing the report function, which reads as follows:

Example 6.7

We encourage people to use the report function to report posts that need moderation.

The actors represented in this very salient first quote from the page only come from Facebook's userbase: "We" and "people". Given that they appear to stand for different referents, it can be surmised that "we" refers to users sharing Jeff's role of "Community Admin", while "people" is a more generic term for group members. This reading is supported by the rest of Jeff's statements in the audio clip, which is transcribed at the bottom of the webpage. I present the transcript here as Example 6.8, preserving its original orthography and line breaks as well as numbering each line to facilitate reference to particular passages. I also preserve typographic traits like bold script and italics (but not font type). A screenshot of the transcript as it appears on FC can be found in Appendix E.

Example 6.8

01 **Audio transcript**

02

03 *"Our community is so big, we rely on the members to moderate the community. We*
04 *encourage people to use the report function to report [to admin] posts that need*
05 *moderation. If someone does break a rule, usually we will make a comment in the*
06 *comments [stating] what rule they broke, why it's not allowed, and ask them to read*
07 *the rules, and then we'll close comments on the thread. That way the person that*
08 *posted it is definitely going to see it, but there are going to be others that also read that*
09 *and can be educated about that.*

10

11 *If you have a person in your community that is malicious towards other people and you*
12 *don't do anything about it, the other members, they're going to say: 'Well, if this*
13 *community is like this then I don't want to be here anymore,' and they'll leave."* - Jeff,
14 *Community Admin*

Throughout his statement (excluding the "direct speech" it includes), Jeff carves out a distinction between people in his position (admins) and group members more generally. The latter are referred to via a mix of nominal and pronominal elements: "the members" (line 03), "people" (line 04), "someone" (line 05), "they", "them" (line 06), "the person" (line 07), "others" (line 08), "a person", "other people" (line 11), "the other members", "they" (line 12). Sometimes group members are also represented in the context of assimilation into nouns like "community" (lines 03, 11). Most importantly, these "regular"

users (not admins) are predominantly *subjected* to actions: “we rely on the members” (line 03), “we encourage people” (lines 03–04), “ask them” (line 06), “if you have a person” (line 11). There are a few cases of “regular members” being activated, or at least not subjected, too, but these either (a) concern actions that are the conditions for admins – the main agentive party in the passage, as I explain below – to react (e.g., “If someone does break a rule”, line 05; or the attributive relational process of “a person [...] that is malicious”, line 11), or (b) they are reactions the members have to the admins’ (non-)actions (e.g., “they’re going to say”, line 12; or the cleft construction with existentialization “there are going to be others that also read [...]”, lines 08–09).

This role allocation pattern for “regular members” is not surprising as the page and this extract in particular is supposed to address (prospective) admins in order to instruct them on Facebook group moderation. In fact, admins as social actors in this excerpt are virtually *always* activated. They are first represented through first-person plural pronouns (e.g., “Our community”, “we rely”, line 03; “we encourage”, lines 03–04; “we will make a comment”, line 05), and later, in the transcript’s second paragraph, through second-person pronouns (“you have a person”, “your community”, line 11; “you don’t do anything”, lines 11–12). The shift to second person marks Jeff’s direct address towards the page’s audience, presumed to be (prospective) modmins. At any rate, the division between admins as the more agentive party and members as the more subjected party persists, and what is notable is that no actors are represented which would allude to *Facebook’s* agentive role vis-à-vis the report function.

There may be a practical reason for this. A distinction exists between two different reporting functions in Facebook groups: (a) the *report to Facebook* tool (available throughout Facebook), and (b) the *report to admin* tool (available within groups). Using the former tool amounts to asking “Facebook” (i.e., its – human or artificial – agents) to review the reported content, check whether it violates Facebook’s code of conduct (its “Community Standards”), and take disciplinary action if deemed necessary (e.g., removing the content or penalizing the profile/page/group it appeared on). The latter tool can be used within Facebook groups and it notifies the groups’ administrators of perceived transgressions. As clarified by FC’s (nebulous) authors through the use of square brackets in the transcript of Jeff’s words (“[to admin]” in Example 6.8, line 04), Jeff is referring to this *report to admin* function. Pairing this with the fact that Jeff himself is an admin ostensibly addressing other admins as an animator, it somewhat stands to reason that he would not involve Facebook’s agency in his representation, focusing instead on a divide between admins and group members as the only agents involved. Yet, his words that contain this pattern of agency allocation have been placed in a very salient position on the page by design. That is, a choice has been made here to present an admin’s statement on

report to admin as the first thing after the page’s banner structure, and this has facilitated the absence of Facebook as an agentive actor.

This pattern of not assigning Facebook an agentive role, while also entertaining the same *admins-vs.-members* division with admins being the agentive party, is present throughout this FC page, even when the animator is not Jeff (or any other admin) and even when the *report to Facebook* function is discussed.

First, let’s consider the “Key Tips” from the same page, which start exactly after Figure 6.9 ends, presented in Figure 6.12 below. The tips in this list are not voiced by a user-as-animator like Jeff, but directly by the page’s author(s). They all rely on the use of imperatives (from “Rely” to “Don’t forget”), which directly involve the addressed admin/page visitor as “demands” (Thompson 2014, 47). Most interestingly, the first three bullet points, which partially refer to the *report to admin* function, are all based directly on the first paragraph of Jeff’s statement (see Example 6.8), thereby recontextualizing his insights into group moderation as “tips” that the website provides. Table 6.2 below shows side by side Jeff’s and the website’s statements that correspond to each other. The statements are numbered consecutively (1–3) and include a letter before their numbering which stands for their source: “J” for “Jeff”, “T” for “Tips”. Lexical items that remain unchanged or only change grammatical form are set in boldface.

Key Tips

- Rely on your members to report heated conversations and help moderate the community.
- Encourage people to use the report to admin tool to flag posts that need admin moderation.
- If someone does break a rule, reiterate the rules in the comments and consider closing comments on that thread.
- If you see something that goes against Facebook’s [Community Standards](#), report it directly to Facebook.
- Manage your chats through a suite of [moderation tools](#) that let you ban, delete, or suspend members and remove messages.
- Don’t forget to use your admod only chat to collaborate with your team on best course of action

Figure 6.12. “Key Tips” from the “Managing conflict between members” page

Table 6.2. Jeff’s statements and FC’s “Key Tips” for dealing with conflict, with shared phrasings highlighted

Jeff’s statements	“Key Tips”
(J1) Our community is so big, we rely on the members to moderate the community .	(T1) Rely on your members to report heated conversations and help moderate the community .
(J2) We encourage people to use the report function to report [to admin] posts that need moderation .	(T2) Encourage people to use the report to admin tool to flag posts that need admin moderation .
(J3) If someone does break a rule , usually we will make a comment in the comments [stating] what rule they broke, why it’s not allowed, and ask them to read the rules, and then we’ll close comments on the thread .	(T3) If someone does break a rule , reiterate the rules in the comments and consider closing comments on that thread .

By recontextualizing Jeff’s statements as “tips” while simultaneously making Jeff’s original speech available on the same page too (hence allowing visitors to potentially pinpoint the source), the authors of FC discursively enact a full embracement of Jeff’s role as an authority on how to moderate groups, which includes using the function *report to admin*. The “Key Tips” essentially “re-animate” Jeff’s statements and involve only minimal changes, the most consistent and central one being a turn from indicative verb forms to imperatives: e.g., “we rely” (J1) becomes “rely” (T1), “we encourage people to use [...]” (J2) becomes “encourage people to use [...]” (T2). Given that, when voiced by Jeff, these statements were meant to suggest that Jeff (a regular admin) is also their principal (cf. Section 6.2.3), their “recycling” here suggests that the most reliable source of normative guidelines for engaging with the *report to admin* function is a group admin like Jeff. This “re-animation” is just a figurative “changing of hats” on the webpage’s surface, where the principal behind the words is supposed to remain constant as the admin.

Additionally, when FC reconfigures the information offered by Jeff as “tips”, FC’s/Meta’s imposition implied by the imperatives – which are “demands” in an SFL sense – is lessened as FC’s authors are seemingly only communicating insights that come from users themselves, specifically admins like Jeff. The website’s authors even minimize the invasiveness of their semiotic work in recontextualizing these insights by very often reproducing lexical aspects as they are (cf. boldface in Table 6.2). This leaves Facebook as a centre of authority out of the equation, never linguistically represented in any sort of opposition to users and their interests. Instead, through the “Key Tips” scrutinized so far, FC continues entertaining only the boundary between admins and simple members, as it was set by Jeff (e.g., “Rely on your members” in [T1], Table 6.2). At the same time, the website also upholds the aesthetic of peer-to-peer-ness discussed earlier (Section 6.2.3), which is established through its polyphonic design.

Still, Facebook as an agent does appear in the fourth “Key Tip” from Figure 6.12, which refers to the *report to Facebook* function:

Example 6.9

If you see something that goes against Facebook’s Community Standards, report it directly to Facebook.

In Example 6.9, Facebook is represented in the roles of Possessor of its own rules (“Facebook’s Community Standards”) and of Beneficiary, specifically Recipient (Thompson 2014, 111–12) of reports, in “to Facebook”. Both of these representations downplay Facebook’s agency in the *report to Facebook* function. As a Possessor, Facebook is involved as an active party in the existence of “Community Standards” only obliquely, as the party that the “Standards” *belong to* – not as the party that sets or decides them. Even more passively, Facebook is then represented as the party that simply receives reports. This is a type of passivation that van Leeuwen (2008) calls *subjection through circumstantialization* – meaning that the subjection is realized through an adjunct of circumstance (here with the preposition “to”). At any rate, any (subsequent) action concerning reports that Facebook may be involved in as an Actor (e.g., deleting content, issuing restrictions) is not represented – which constitutes a “meaningful absence” in Pauwels’s (2012) sense. Instead, the active roles in this representation are played by users, who are addressed here in the second person (in “if *you* see” and “report”, an imperative).

Also, assuming that admins are the addressed parties here (given the page’s target audience), it is interesting to note that admins are invited to use the *report to Facebook* function, whereas the *report to admin* function is (unsurprisingly) intended for members who are not admins to use. This starts constructing *report to Facebook* as an additional, exceptional layer of reporting.

Further, the fifth “key tip” on this page, though not directly related to report functions, is worth comparing to Example 6.9 as it mentions “moderation tools” for Community Chats, a set of features also undeniably shaped and owned by Facebook, much like “Community Standards” are:

Example 6.10

Manage your chats through a suite of moderation tools that let you ban, delete, or suspend members and remove messages.

Like the phrase “Community Standards” in Example 6.9, “moderation tools” is an interactive site/sign (cf. Figure 6.12), which features a node to another page owned by Meta

which explains the term.⁴⁷ These links engage the visitor by giving them an active role that ostensibly affords a sort of recourse to more information, in the interest of transparency (cf. the Community Standards link to Meta’s “*Transparency Center*” in fn. 47). One salient difference, however, pertains to the fact that “moderation tools”, which could well stand for Facebook’s agency, are given an *active role* in Example 6.10. Apart from being a circumstantial Adjunct – i.e., *means* for the action of “managing” (Thompson 2014, 114–15) – “moderation tools” is also the implied Actor of “let” in the relative clause “that let you ban, [...]”. This is a case in which software designed by Meta (the moderation tools) is assigned an active role, and it is notable that this software is not possessivated, i.e., not explicitly claimed as owned by the platform, in contrast to the phrasing “Facebook’s Community Standards” in Example 6.9, which does not involve activation. Consequently, the involvement of Meta’s semiotic software in the practices of banning, deleting, etc. outlined in Example 6.10 is again downplayed in the representation. The (unclaimed by Meta) “moderation tools” only enable admins, as Beneficiaries, to take action themselves. That is, the Actors behind the actual material practices involved in Facebook group moderation are “you”, the addressed (prospective) admins, targeted through an imperative (“manage”) and functioning as the implicit subjects of “ban”, “delete”, “suspend”, and “remove”.

In the rest of the page, this shunning of the assignment of an active role to Facebook/Meta vis-à-vis reporting – and aspects of content moderation in general – continues. The rest of the page features, first, a box containing a lightbulb and featured statement (not animated by users, see Figure 6.13), and then, some paragraphs of verbal text concerning the moderation of Facebook groups. Said paragraphs are presented transcribed with line numbering in Example 6.11 below, retaining the line breaks from the original as well as marking the portions of text that have embedded links on the website (by setting them in bold and underlined). Screenshots of these texts can be found in Appendix E. After these paragraphs, the page closes with the audio transcript seen as Example 6.8 above and as a screenshot in Appendix E. Let us now interrogate where agency lies in the page’s remaining content.

⁴⁷ The “Community Standards” link leads to a page from Meta’s “Transparency Center”: <https://transparency.meta.com/policies/community-standards/?source=https%3A%2F%2Fwww.facebook.com%2Fcommunitystandards> (last accessed on August 11, 2024).

The “moderation tools” link leads to a page from Facebook’s generic Help Center (cf. Section 6.1): <https://www.facebook.com/help/messenger-app/710123129607435?ref=hub> (last accessed on August 11, 2024).

First, the lightbulb box sets the tone for the admins' representation as the agents par excellence in Facebook group moderation: They are the Actor (or Sayer) in the material (or verbal) process of "writing" ("Some admins write [...]") and the implied Actor of the goal adjunct "to use".

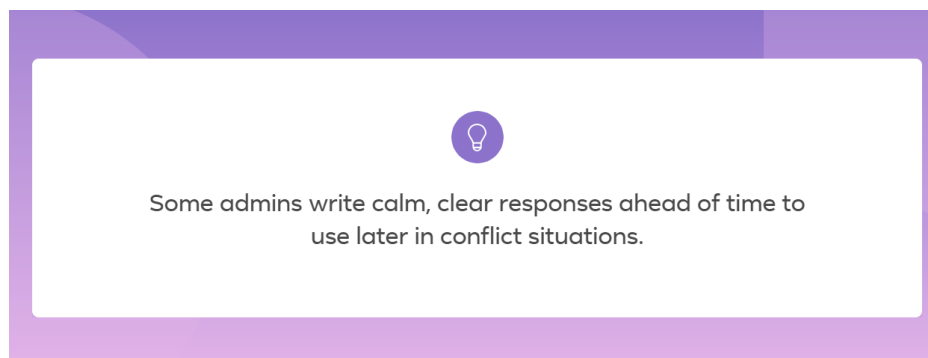


Figure 6.13. Lightbulb box from the remaining portion of the "Managing conflict between members" page

After this, the ensuing paragraphs also consistently construct admins as the authority on the information FC provides. We have already observed this in the recontextualization of Jeff's statements as "Key Tips" (see Table 6.2 above), but in the paragraphs that appear later in the page (Example 6.11), there is more explicit linguistic evidence for this in the form of *projections* (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014; Thompson 2014).

Example 6.11

- 01 From time to time, your community may experience conflict between members. Conflict
- 02 can arise from a different opinion, misunderstanding, confusion or controversy.
- 03 Respectful disagreement and debate can be a part of a healthy community. If a
- 04 disagreement turns disrespectful or breaks your community rules, your admin actions
- 05 can help get the community back on the right track.
- 06
- 07 When conflict occurs, such as a heated conversation in a thread, admins recommend
- 08 acting quickly. Get involved before the situation escalates. Speedy action helps reset
- 09 the tone of the conversation and lets the community members know you care by being
- 10 present.
- 11
- 12 If you see a thread that has gone off track, experienced admins recommend the
- 13 following:
- 14 • Engage with the member in the comments and try to reset the tone of the
- 15 conversation.
- 16 • If needed, restate the rules in the comments of the thread, and turn off commenting.
- 17 • Leave the thread visible so others can learn what happened.
- 18
- 19 Community members take your actions seriously. When tensions and emotions run

20 high, admins recommend taking a moment to think about how a new member would
 21 react to what you are about to say before posting. Model the behavior you wish to see
 22 in your community.
 23
 24 If moderation isn't working, consider temporarily muting the member. Allow some time
 25 for the discussion (and the member) to cool down. When all else fails, feel empowered
 26 to remove members from your community.
 27
 28 Many admins we spoke to told us that they were initially unsure about removing people
 29 from the community, but realized it was sometimes necessary. As an admin, you uphold
 30 the culture and rules of your community. Members appreciate your moderation,
 31 including removing other members who aren't following your community's rules. For
 32 more on how to deal with difficult members, check out our article [here](#).
 33
 34 Some admins we spoke with said they'll temporarily turn on post approvals to calm
 35 things down. Once things have cooled down, they'll turn post approvals off again.
 36
 37 In extreme cases, such as something that goes against Facebook's
 38 **Community Standards** (nudity, hate speech or threats of violence), you or someone on
 39 your team can report the post to Facebook. Use the **report link** near the post, photo or
 40 comment to report it directly.
 41
 42 It is unlikely you can watch your community all the time. Experienced admins
 43 recommend enlisting members' help by asking them to report heated conversations to
 44 an admin so they can take appropriate action.

In SFL terms, projection is a concept roughly equivalent to the more traditional concept of reported speech, though it does not cover exactly the same ground and it approaches similar phenomena from a different theoretical angle (cf. Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 519; Thompson 2014, 193). Through projection, a “double layer of representation” is created, whereby we can identify a first- and second-order use of language, prototypically mapped onto a *projecting* and a *projected* clause, respectively (Thompson 2014, 201). In this way, a projection essentially involves “a representation of a linguistic representation” (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 508, also quoted in Thompson 2014, 201). In Example 6.12, for instance, an extract from lines 34–35 of Example 6.11, “Some admins [...] said” is the projecting clause (the first layer of the representation), while “they'll temporarily turn on post approvals to calm things down” is the projected part (the second layer, “hosting” another linguistic representation, i.e., what the admins said).

Example 6.12

Some admins we spoke with said they'll temporarily turn on post approvals to calm things down.

Projections are of interest at this stage of the analysis because a number of them with remarkably similar wording are used in the FC text seen in Example 6.11 to construct “admins” or “experienced admins” as the authorities on the insights this page provides (i.e., on group moderation and reporting). In other words, I am interested here in the interpersonal matter of what/who is represented as the *source* in these projections (Thompson 2014, 207), and what this linguistic choice amounts to. Only one of the projections is about the use of the reporting function (Example 6.17 below), but Meta’s discourse on agency in reporting needs to be understood in the broader context of how FC’s authors represent admins as the main authorities on Facebook group moderation.

First, consider Example 6.12 above alongside 6.13, which is also taken from the long text in 6.11, this time from lines 28–29:

Example 6.13

Many admins we spoke to told us that they were initially unsure about removing people from the community, but realized that it was sometimes necessary.

The agents being activated in Examples 6.12 and 6.13 are, as usual, admins (“some/many admins”, “they”) as well as, notably, “we”. The first-person plural only occurs on the webpage at hand in these two instances, plus also as “us” in Example 6.13, the Recipient of “told us”. These pronouns constitute rare linguistic representations of FC’s authors as social actors. In the two instances of “we”, the authors are activated as agents, functioning as Sayers in the verbal process of “spoke”. So, to the extent that FC’s authors are linguistically represented as having an agentive role at all, that is restricted to them “speaking with” (Example 6.12) or “to” (Example 6.13) admins. The authors of FC are thereby established as relaying information provided by others, admins, who are the sources in these projections. Considering that these authors – however unclear their identity – work for Meta and function as its representatives, Meta’s side is thus constructed as simply the “transmitter” of admins’ opinions and attitudes.

Turning to these admins’ roles, the projections in these extracts involve (a) two “traditional” cases of reported speech (“Some admins [...] said/told us [...]”), which in SFL terms we would call *reported locutions* – i.e., linguistic acts not quoted verbatim – and (b) one case of a *reported idea* – i.e., a thought, also presented without any (ostensible) quoting (Thompson 2014, 202). Case (b) involves the mental, cognitive process of “realizing” (Thompson 2014, 99) and the verb’s subject is only implied to be the admins, who are the Sensors in this case: “[they] realized that [...]”. In the cases under (a), the

admins are clearly the Sayers in their respective projecting clauses with the verbs “speak” and “tell”. This amounts to a text in which the choice is made to represent the admins’ words (albeit not verbatim) through projections, yet when FC’s authors (representing Meta’s side) are explicitly represented as doing any speaking (“we spoke with/to”), this is only in service to qualifying who the admins are, post-modifying “some admins” through a defining relative clause (“Some admins *[that]* we spoke with/to”). It is only the *propositions* (broadly, the statements) *made by the admins* that are represented here as salient information for the visitors, while FC’s authors seem to only have done some (irretrievable) speaking with said admins in order to pass on these admins’ insights.

Still, it is not only admins’ statements (propositions) that get reported. The long text in Example 6.11 also presents admins’ *proposals*, i.e., “demands of goods and services”, which would prototypically be phrased with imperatives.⁴⁸ There are four such projected proposals of remarkable similarity, all introduced with “recommend”, which I reproduce as Examples 6.14 through 6.17 below in the order in which they appear in Example 6.11. I also include in square brackets the lines on which these extracts are found in Example 6.11.

Example 6.14

[...] admins recommend acting quickly. [lines 07–08]

Example 6.15

[...] experienced admins recommend the following:

- Engage with the member in the comments and try to reset the tone of the conversation.
- If needed, restate the rules in the comment of the thread, and turn off commenting.
- Leave the thread visible so others can learn what happened. [lines 12–17]

Example 6.16

[...] admins recommend taking a moment to think about how a new member would react to what you are about to say before posting. [lines 20–21]

Example 6.17

Experienced admins recommend enlisting members’ help by asking them to report heated conversations to an admin so they can take appropriate action. [lines 42–44]

In technical terms, in Examples 6.14, 6.16, and 6.17 we have *reported proposals* with imperfective projections: “acting”, “taking”, and “enlisting”, respectively. Example 6.15,

⁴⁸ Because imperatives are seen in SFL as the prototypical/bespoke grammatical form for making demands of goods and services in English, *projected proposals* wherein these demands are reported without any imperatives are considered cases of grammatical metaphor (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 702ff.).

on the other hand, can be seen as an instance of quoting, with the text in the bullet points being ostensible quotations of the admins' recommendations, and the phrase "the following" being a stand-in for the quotations before their listing.

At this stage, regardless of the projected proposals' realization, we can note that the continued representation of "(experienced) admins" as activated agents (mainly as subjects of "recommend") paired with the scant representation of Facebook's or the FC authors' agency gains a new significance when proposals are projected. Namely, as demands of goods and services that are "normally" realized in imperatives (cf. the bullet points in Example 6.15), proposals, unlike propositions, inherently involve modality, and specifically *modulation*, as they concern obligations (Thompson 2014, 71). That is, there is a deontic aspect to them: they are about what *should* (or must) be done. Therefore, the source of the proposals – (experienced) admins – is also (represented as) the source of normative views on the matter at hand (here, Facebook group moderation); i.e., the party who says what must be done. As Halliday and Matthiessen (2014, 702) put it, through projected proposals, "the speaker or writer shifts the modal responsibility embodied in subjecthood to somebody or something else". Through these projections, then, FC's authors construct not themselves (or Facebook/Meta), but *users*, namely (experienced) admins, as the normative center for actions taken in Facebook group moderation.

Striking is once again the similarity between the text voiced by FC's authors and the statements animated by the admin Jeff at the beginning of the page. Example 6.17 is essentially a restatement (with some elaboration: "so they can take appropriate action") of a "key tip" based on Jeff's words: see (T2) and (J2) respectively in Table 6.2. Similarly, the second bullet point in Example 6.15 is a rephrasing of (T3) from Table 6.2. The key difference between the tips based on Jeff's words examined earlier and these more recent examples is that the latter explicitly involve projection while the former do not. That is, in Examples 6.15 and 6.17 there are projecting clauses ("experienced admins recommend") that allow the reader to identify the admins as the source of these proposals. The "Key Tips" do not "cite their sources" in the same way, though.⁴⁹ This results in a blending of what

⁴⁹ The absence of projecting clauses in the "Key Tips" constitutes a significant lack of any marking of projection, since "the main function of the projecting clause is simply to show that the other one is projected" (Halliday and Matthiessen 2014, 513). However, it is possible for projection to occur in English without an explicit projecting clause when one can readily be surmised due to the immediate linguistic context. For example, projecting clauses are typically omitted in written English after they have been stated once (ibid.). This can also be argued to occur in the text from Example 6.11. "Unintroduced" quoted proposals immediately follow what I have labelled Examples 6.14 and 6.16 in the text – see (1) and (2) below, respectively – and a quoted proposition immediately follows Example 6.12 – see (3) below.

(1) Get involved before the situation escalates. [line 08]

(2) Model the behavior you wish to see in your community. [lines 21–22]

(3) Once things have cooled down, they'll turn post approvals off again. [line 35]

The difference between (1)–(3) and the "Key Tips" is that the latter are not preceded by a clause complex that includes a projecting clause, so projection is never marked linguistically (or indeed, through any other mode).

ostensibly is the admins' insights with the FC authors' writing. However, as mentioned earlier, FC's re-representation of some information originally voiced by another animator (Jeff) on this very same page is in keeping with constructing the admins as authorities on the "tips" provided. In other words, FC does not try to "pass off" the admins' insights as its authors' or "Meta's"; rather, this blending of boundaries has more to do with the (ostensibly) organic inclusion of users' voices on the website, which is a key design feature of FC (cf. Section 6.2.3).⁵⁰

In the end, Meta's webpage that is devoted to presenting how to deal with conflict between members, i.e., how to moderate one's Facebook group, including by using the report functions, seems to be self-consciously based on users' perspectives on how to do all this. In other words, it is admins that are constructed as the doers and the knowers vis-à-vis these actions.

When it comes to reporting in particular, we have seen that the above is the case for the *report to admin* function, which can be understood as a more "user-based" feature rolled out by Facebook. The *report to Facebook* function, on the other hand, which would be the most "Facebook-standard" feature, appears to be peripheral or additional when it comes to moderating Facebook groups. We have seen it presented once in Example 6.9, where the phrasing was such that Facebook's involvement in actually doing the moderation that reports call for was omitted, and Facebook was only represented as the recipient of complaints and the "owner" of "Community Standards". There is only one more mention of *report to Facebook* on this page, and it comes in lines 37–40 of Example 6.11, reproduced here:

Example 6.18

In extreme cases, such as something that goes against Facebook's **Community Standards** (nudity, hate speech or threats of violence), you or someone on your team can report the post to Facebook. Use the **report link** near the post, photo or comment to report it directly.

Example 6.18 exhibits the very same pattern as 6.9 in the representation of Facebook as a social actor: Facebook is the Possessor of "Community Standards" and the Recipient of the report users are asked to make. Further mention of what solution(s) Facebook provides by

⁵⁰ Another effect of recontextualizing admins' insights specifically in bullet-point lists as in the "Key Tips" has to do with the affordances of this form of visual representation (Ledin and Machin 2015). An argument could be made, for example, that the bullet points present all of the individual statements as being of the same order (and importance) as they "separate, abstract, and reify" them as list items (ibid., 469), obscuring the connections between them. Lists of bullet points also invoke a "scientific modality" in social semiotic terms as they "suggest that we are being presented with the fundamental, essential technical details" of a social practice (ibid., 470). These effects can be argued to be contributing to a more "marketized" representation of admins' statements, but this is an aspect that is beyond the scope of my analysis here.

taking action upon receiving the report is, again, omitted. Users (admins) are once again the active parties in this representation: “you or someone on your team”, “use” (imperative).

What is interesting in Example 6.18 is that *report to Facebook* is framed as a sort of last resort for reporting content in Facebook groups (“In extreme cases, [...]”), making this the more marked report function presented to FC visitors, with the standard one consequently being *report to admin*. Facebook’s intervention in the moderation of Facebook groups (through direct reports) is thereby constructed as a peripheral matter, which as we have observed in the rest of the page, goes hand in hand with the construction of admins (i.e., users) as the experts and active parties in the moderation of content. In this sense, the alternative to reporting transgressions directly to Facebook, the more ostensibly “user-based” option of *reporting to admin*, is presented here as the Facebook-standard option for moderating Facebook groups. This allows Meta to appear almost absent from the discussion of how content is moderated on its own platform. The activation of administrators (“Community Admins”, or even “Community Leaders”) could even be read as empowering in this regard – they are, supposedly, the ones who run things. Facebook’s role as a mediator is once again downplayed here, as elsewhere on FC (cf. Section 6.2.2). Yet, the mediatization of users’ practices in Facebook groups is a fact: As much as Facebook purports to have “cut out the middle man” when it comes to Facebook group moderation, it always remains the “middle man”, albeit one that is constructed as not controlling or oppressive – mentions of disciplinary actions are nowhere to be found here – and, consequently, one whose power and labor remain unseen.

In what follows, I examine modmins’ perspectives on reporting in Facebook groups. These accounts, being personal and not drawn from official texts authored by Meta, give insight into users’ perception of Facebook’s agentivity surrounding this Facebook groups function (reporting). They do so by touching on certain topics (e.g., what Facebook apparently does with reports) which, in the official Meta discourse examined, with its construction of admins as the main agents and authorities surrounding reports, are backgrounded or erased.

6.3.2. Reporting according to users: It’s a (problematic) Facebook thing

Some discussion of Facebook’s report functions and/or the relationship between the two types (*to admin* and *to Facebook*) occurred in most of my interviews with modmins. When developing my interview protocol, I had planned to ask only a more general question about how modmins deal with conflict (see Chapter 5, Table 5.2, thematic area 3). A related question about reporting (without a distinction between *to admin* and *to Facebook*) then typically arose as a follow-up. The question was based on my observation that the groups I had studied included guidelines that explicitly discouraged members from reporting content. Through this more specific question and the more general prompt on Facebook

group moderation, I ended up learning about modmins' perception of Facebook's report functions from all of my interviewed modmins except Mary and Wilson.⁵¹

As I did not make a distinction between *report to admin* and *report to Facebook*, it was up to interviewees to remark on the distinction as a salient matter. In contrast with FC's discourse about the report tools seen above, *report to Facebook* seemed to be assumed as the default type of reporting, with only three modmins bringing up *report to admin* (Simon, Kelly, and John). What is more, these mentions still pertained to the function's perceived similarity (or lack thereof) to the *report to Facebook* function vis-à-vis the extent to which it amounts to (not) "involving Facebook" (Simon, {1:00:07–1:00:08}) in matters of group moderation. Given my focus on the construction of Facebook's agency in interviewees' accounts, this angle was rather revealing.

Firstly, Simon cites a "theory" users have, according to which *report to admin* and *report to Facebook* amount to the basically same vis-à-vis consequences for the group:

Example 6.19 ((Simon, {57:45–24:41}))

- 01 S: THERE is a !THE!ory,
02 and i CAN'?,
03 i can'? answer whether or_no? it's TRUE;
04 [h° i th]ink at this point we all assume BETter-
05 I: [hm_HM.]
06 S: to: (.) asSUME that_it's-
07 <<perplexed> (.) we all asSUME that_it's better->=
08 =<<:-)> to asSUME that it's true.>
09 I: [HM_hm.]
10 S: [°h] UH:M,

⁵¹ Mary was the only interviewee who was not asked the more specific question on reporting because she presented her experience moderating Facebook group content as limited, saying that others in the team took care of this aspect. Thus, the topic of dealing with conflict was dropped before we spoke about reports. Wilson was asked about the "don't report to Facebook" ethos that I had observed, but the question was posed in relation to Facebook's (perceived) algorithmic intransparency that I had heard about in previous interviews (cf. Example 6.21). He ended up focusing more closely on the latter, citing cases in which no reports were submitted, but Facebook "auto-flagged" content of its own accord. While Wilson's perception of Facebook as an algorithmic actor with automated moderation functions is also relevant for exploring the construction of Facebook's agency by its users, it does not relate specifically to the use of report functions and their perceived effects for users, and therefore is not pertinent here due to my particular focus on reporting.

11 (-) () the theory is_THA:T==
 12 =when_you rePORT;
 13 (.) an ISsue:-
 14 (-) whether_you report to FACEbook,
 15 or whether_y' use the function that says report to ADmins;
 16 I: [hm_HM,]
 17 [(.) th]a? EItHer_way;=
 18 =FACEbook is getting some sort_of notification of_that.
 19 I: HM_hm.
 20 S: °h (.) AN'_that per!HAPS! ,=
 21 =THAT's what they're using-=
 22 =to sort_of TAlly_up which,
 23 (xxx) which_groups A:RE=
 24 an_isSUE?

So, according to Simon, it makes no difference whether one uses *report to admin* or *report to Facebook*, as either way Facebook is notified of the report and uses it to mark groups as potentially problematic (“to sort of tally up which [...] groups are an issue”, lines 22–24). Simon presents this theory held by users with some uncertainty, for example by prefacing his explanation with a statement that he does not know whether the theory is accurate or not, but thinks it is better for users (“we”, line 04) to assume that it is (lines 02–08). He also uses modalization, most strikingly through an emphatic delivery of “perhaps” on line 20. Further, Simon’s account already starts to frame Facebook as an agent whose (punitive) actions are based on the use of report features (“*they*’re using [the reports] to tally up [...]”, lines 21–22).

Yet, this anecdotal retelling of a user theory was partially countered by Kelly and Johm. Without me mentioning Simon’s theory to her, Kelly brought it up as “a very common misconception” about *report to admin* (Kelly, {22:17–22:19}). She explained the theory in her own words and clarified that, in truth, reporting to admin does not “flag” (Kelly, {22:27}) a group in the eyes of Facebook. Johm also mentioned and debunked this “false belief” (Johm, {1:11:39–1:11:40}) unprompted.⁵² Both Kelly and Johm did, however,

⁵² A statement dismissing this theory is also found in one of the titles collected in my corpus of tag group titles, which was analyzed in Chapter 4 (see Appendix A). Specifically, title 126 reads *No Brenda*,

suggest that *report to Facebook* may indeed have the effects erroneously ascribed to *report to admin* (cf. Examples 6.20, 6.22 below).

So, while on FC *report to admin* is presented as the main report function for modmins, with *report to Facebook* being more peripheral, the reverse seems to hold in the users' accounts based on the few quotes surveyed so far. Not all users who spoke about reporting in Facebook groups mentioned *report to admin*, and those who did, used *report to Facebook* as a point of reference for discussing *report to admin*. As seen earlier, focusing on *report to admin* as the reporting tool par excellence allows FC to present "dealing with conflict" in Facebook groups as a matter that predominantly involves admins as agentive parties. Interviewees, however, firmly focus on Facebook as an agent when it comes to reporting, only occasionally bringing up *report to admin*.

Still, there is considerable variability in users' accounts of *report to Facebook* in its own right. I will now analytically survey these accounts, starting from the one that diverges the least from Meta's construction of *report to Facebook* on FC. I will then continue with excerpts from different interviews, following patterns that emerge in the construction of Facebook's agency around reporting.

In my interview with Kelly, after she had clarified that a "distrust" of the *report to admin* function is rooted in a common misconception, I specifically asked whether a dedicated *report to Facebook* function may be creating perceived problems. She responded as follows:

Example 6.20 ((Kelly, {23:53–24:41}))

01 K: i THINK there is_like-
02 a report to facebook OPtion,
03 i don'? really use it OFTen,
04 unless it's for SPAHAM?
05 (.) uhm so THAT? one is an issue,
06 BU?;
07 (-) (e) it dePENDS,

reporting to admin does NOT magically get a group zucked. Two tag groups with this title existed at the time of corpus compilation (one large and one very small one), which together numbered over 3,900 members. This is an additional indication (alongside Simon, Kelly, and John's statements) that the user theory in question may be (or have been) quite widespread among ludic Facebook group users, considering that there is a dedicated response to it captured in the title of a tag group that thousands of people have joined.

08 o:n if facebook will take action or_NO?,
 09 (.) so if (.) YOU have a group,
 10 where post approval's 0:N-
 11 (.) and an admin or a moderator apPROVES i?,
 12 a member reports it to FACEbook,
 13 and it gets taken DOWN fr_a cmmunity standards violation,
 14 there might be a KNOCK against the group,
 15 °h (.) BU?.=
 16 =if it's maybe a COMment,
 17 THAT uhm didn't hafta be approved by an admin or a moderator-
 18 it WON'T be a knock against the group?
 19 °h uh bu? i DON'? regularly report things to facebook;
 20 unless they're like SPAM;
 21 or really_really BAD,
 22 but_luckly i_don'? come across too MUCH,
 23 that's worth rePORTing.
 24 directly to FACEbook.
 25 I: oKAY,

In this excerpt, Kelly opens with a statement on her awareness and personal use of the *report to Facebook* function (lines 01–04), and then explains that said function can be an issue for modmins and their groups, “but it depends / on if Facebook will take action or not” (lines 06–08). What she is essentially saying is this: Group modmins often use a feature called “post approval” in their groups (line 10), whereby they have to approve posts submitted by members before said postings can appear in the group’s feed. According to Kelly, if such modmin-approved content is reported to Facebook and then found to be infringing on its “Community Standards”, this may “stain” the group’s disciplinary record (“there might be a knock against the group”, line 14). Conversely, if reported content is something that does not go through modmin approval (e.g., a comment), it being taken down due to reporting does not have any ramifications for the group.

At first pass, Kelly’s assertion that Facebook’s actions following reports may lead to negative outcomes appears to be something that would not get thematised on FC, where as

we have seen, Facebook’s agency gets downplayed and there is no mention of what happens after reports are received. Then again, “Facebook will take action” on line 08 is the only activation of Facebook as an agent in Example 6.20. It may be significant in that it represents Facebook *doing something* as the condition (“if”, line 08) under which reporting to Facebook may or may not be “an issue” (line 05); but when Kelly elaborates, stating more conditions in the rest of the excerpt, Facebook is never again represented as an active party.

Instead, the actions taken surrounding the use of the report and its ramifications are either (a) attributed to *users* as active parties, or (b) deagentialized. Namely, Kelly starts her further explanation with “if *you* have a group” (line 09), where the generic “you” (which stands for a hypothetical modmin) is activated in subject position (as Possessor of a group). In further qualifying the “if”-condition thus begun, users are activated again twice: “*an admin or a moderator* approves” a post (line 11); “*a member* reports it to Facebook” (line 12). Notably, in the last representation, Facebook is only the Recipient of the reporting, just like in the FC page examined earlier (see Examples 6.9, 6.18). “Post approval’s on” (line 10) is the only action presented here as a precondition that could be attributed to users but is not. Then, the actions that could be attributed to Facebook (taking a group down – i.e., deleting it permanently – and marking a group’s disciplinary record with a “knock” against it) are deagentialized: We have first a *suppression* of Facebook’s agency through passive agent deletion (van Leeuwen 2008, 29) in “it gets taken down” (line 13) and then an *existentialization* (modalized, too) for the result of the condition being fulfilled (“there might be a knock against the group”, line 14). Next, for the condition that leads to no problems (lines 16–18), users are activated a little less prominently, only seen as postposed agents in a passive structure (“approved by an admin or a moderator”, line 17), but still the disciplinary action that involves Facebook’s agency (again, the “knock”) is completely deagentialized through *eventuation*; that is, it is represented as an event, in a way such that “[t]he question “by whom?” cannot relevantly be asked in connection to it” (van Leeuwen 2008, 66): “it won’t be a knock against the group” (line 18).

Taking this all together, the backgrounding of Facebook’s agency in Kelly’s discussion of the report function echoes the backgrounding of the platform’s agency found on FC to a significant degree. What is more, by the end of the excerpt (lines 19–24), Kelly returns to discussing her own use of the *report to Facebook* function, restating that she uses it rarely and mostly for spam (as seen in lines 03–04 already) but also for content that is “really really bad” (line 21). Spam aside (which is not mentioned on FC’s page), the use of *report to Facebook* as peripheral to one’s engagement with Facebook groups and its employment for flagging only exceptionally objectionable content (what FC’s authors call “extreme cases” in Example 6.18) are again positions that align with how the feature is represented on FC. This is not to say that the view expressed here is not enriched by the user’s

perspective. In fact, the idea that reporting to Facebook may be a problematic course of action for one's group is a more critical media ideological stance, which speaks to one's engagement with the medium and would not be encountered on a Meta-owned site like FC – even as that site ostensibly hosts users' voices (like Jeff's).

A different, more pronouncedly critical view of Facebook's agency surrounding reporting was provided by Eos, when I asked them why some Facebook groups seem to discourage the use of the report function.

Example 6.21 ((Eos, {25:32–26:29}))

01 E: so THAT's becuz-
02 if <<clapping once> SOMEone->
03 (.) as !I! underSTAND it?;=
04 =now? this could be TO:tally wrong?
05 (.) beCU:z,
06 FACEbook isn't exactly very_transparent about;
07 how these things WORK.
08 °h and this is why we SAY this.
09 and_like (.) i_mean OBviously;=
10 =if_facebook was_LIKE,
11 (-) su:per CLEar abou?,
12 how they DID these things,
13 then maybe we !WOU!ldn' have to say THAT.
14 bu:? (.) becuz they !A!ren't transPARENT,
15 °h wha?_ha wha?_we see HAPpen?
16 is groups get BA:NNED,
17 and groups get shut_DOWN;
18 becuz people were reporting things to FACEbook;=
19 =instead of tagging <<clapping once> ADmins>.
20 A:N' so:-
21 (.) if people report things to FACEbook,

22 then they blame the GROUP.
 23 for being misMANaged.=
 24 =Rather tha:n °h blaming the !PER!son;
 25 (-) FOR being (.) a_!JERK!.
 26 (-) A:ND like;
 27 (--) i would rather someone TAG-
 28 me as_an <<clapping once> A:Dmin>-
 29 so_that <<clapping once> I> can bring_i?=-
 30 =to_my team of <<clapping once> A:Dmins>--
 31 =an' take_CARE of i? ,=
 32 =o:n_like a GROUP level;
 33 °h rather than facebook deCIDE-
 34 OH well.
 35 this_group is CLEARly;
 36 a BAD group.

Eos presents their reasoning for why *report to Facebook* is dispreferred in groups, and at first pass, their account shares the pattern of activating users as agents that we saw in Kelly's account: "*people* were reporting things" (line 18), "*people* report things" (line 21), "*someone* tag" (line 27) – perhaps even "if *someone*" (line 02), though that clause gets dropped before a verb is produced, so a user ("someone") is only the Theme. Still, Eos's construction of Facebook's agency significantly differs from Kelly's (and FC's), too.

For one, Eos interrupts the start of their explanation with a tangent (lines 02–13) on the perceived intransparency surrounding Facebook's actions, which leads them and other users ("we", lines 08–13) to speculate on what reporting to Facebook actually causes for groups. This echoes how Simon prefaces his theory on the ramifications of reporting (cf. Example 6.19, lines 01–08). More importantly, in the context of Eos's tangent as well as the rest of their account, Facebook is represented as an active party, both nominated and through the use of the pronoun *they*: e.g., "if *Facebook* was like super clear about how *they* did these things" (lines 10–12), "*they* aren't transparent" (line 14). There are also instances in which Facebook is personified as the subject behind verbal and mental processes, in

“they⁵³ blame the group” (line 22) and “Facebook decide” (line 33). The latter case is followed by a projected (quoted) thought attributed to Facebook, which includes inscribed (i.e., explicit) appraisal of groups by Facebook as an actor: “oh well this group is clearly a bad group” (lines 34–35). It must be noted, however, that the activation of Facebook in the recontextualization of actions taken by the platform is not ubiquitous in Eos’s account, as there are also suppressions of its agency through passive agent deletion (lines 16–17: “groups get banned and groups get shut down”, instead of, say, “Facebook bans/shuts down groups”) and an eventuation (or *naturalization*; cf. van Leeuwen 2008, 68) on line 07 (“how these things work”, as opposed to “how Facebook does these things”). All things considered, Eos’s focus on Facebook’s agency is still stronger in comparison to Kelly’s account, and it is significant in that it starts constructing Facebook as an actor who, through intransparent practices, critically appraises groups.

Further, an alternative to using the *report to Facebook* function put forth by Eos is the practice of tagging admins (in comments) so that they can engage in moderation (lines 27–32). This is significant, on the one hand, because it presents a *user-based practice* as an alternative to *report to Facebook*. That is, using Facebook’s tagging function for moderation purposes (here: bringing a post to admins’ attention) involves users appropriating mediational means in a non-standard way, assuming that tagging is prototypically meant to be used for hyperlink creation. Crucially, tagging admins is a true user-based practice as opposed to the *report to admin* tool, which has a similar function and is presented as a more “user-based” approach to moderation on FC (cf. Section 6.3.1), but is ultimately a Facebook-standard practice, and not recommended by Eos here.

On the other hand, perhaps more interesting is how in Example 6.21 the user-based practice of tagging admins for moderation purposes is made up of an *action sequence* (van Leeuwen 2008, 8) – i.e., a user tagging an admin, the admin bringing the issue to their team’s attention and “taking care of it” – part of which (the “taking care” part) is *positioned in space* through a circumstantial adjunct: “on like a group level” (line 32). In the immediate context of this specification, we see this circumstance of location juxtaposed to an action taken by Facebook: “and take care of it on like a group level *rather than Facebook decide*” (lines 31–33). The “group level” mentioned here can thus plausibly be seen as a *spatialization* (van Leeuwen 2008, 46) of the actors within the group who will be the ones

⁵³ Admittedly, there is some ambiguity regarding the referent of this “they” on line 22. Besides Facebook, another potential referent is “people”, as in: “if people_i report things to Facebook / then they_i [these people] blame the group” (lines 21–22). According to this latter reading, people, by reporting things to Facebook, are effectively also blaming the group. I find this reading less plausible considering that Facebook is established as the party engaging in appraisal of groups in this excerpt (see lines 33–36). Attributing the action of blaming to Facebook is thus more consistent with Facebook’s overall representation in Eos’s account.

to “take care” of things, as opposed to Facebook as an actor – who would pass judgement on the group.

In the end, Eos’s account captures a view of Facebook as an agentive party when it comes to the report function in Facebook groups, and this actor’s actions, fraught with judgement, appear to be in a kind of opposition to modmins’ agency. While modmins would moderate group content on “a group level”, Facebook would make unilateral, intransparent judgements on the group as a whole, which is deemed undesirable. In turn, Johm’s response to the same question I posed to Eos (why *report to Facebook* is dispreferred) doubles down on this division and further qualifies the perceived nature of Facebook as an agent:

Example 6.22 ((Johm, {1:16:09–1:16:38}))

01 J: so THA?_like-
02 don’? report to facebook FEA:ture-
03 IS like;
04 h° (1.4) (xxx) it is a PROduct of bo:th,
05 (1.3) wanting to deal with things yourSELVES,=
06 =an’_not Escalating them?
07 I: hm_[HM]
08 J: [B]UT also out_of fear that facebook’s-
09 !POOR! PRO<<:-)>gramming;>
10 (1.1) IS going to result;=
11 =in a very LARGE group being !SHUT!_down==
12 =out_of NOWhere. (1.5)
13 I: °h but do you FEEL,
14 that FACEbook has-
15 poor PROgramming?=
16 =or do you TRUST it to be like;=
17 J: =the VAST majority of the time-
18 it_has NO idea what it’s doing.
19 I: <<:-)> oKAY.>

According to Johm there are two reasons why one may not want to report Facebook group content to Facebook. The first one is given in lines 04–05 and it echoes Eos’s juxtaposition of doing things “at a group level” as opposed to involving Facebook: “wanting to deal with things yourselves and not escalating them” is how Johm puts it. The view of reporting to Facebook as “escalation” can be seen as sharing similarities also with Kelly’s and FC’s views that *report to Facebook* is to be used in “extreme” (FC) or “really really bad” (Kelly) cases. In both framings, turning to Facebook is constructed as an additional, exceptional layer of action, which aligns with FC’s view that the more standard way to deal with conflict in groups is within the group (specifically through *report to admin*, according to FC).

The second reason given by Johm for not reporting to Facebook is a “fear” that “Facebook’s poor programming” will act erroneously and cause a (“very large”) group to be “shut down out of nowhere” (lines 08–12). It is in Johm’s presentation of this second reason that we see Facebook as an agent in her account, but importantly, Facebook is here metonymically represented as “Facebook’s programming”. On lines 08–11, Facebook’s programming is the party whose agency underlies “a very large group being shut down”. However, it is only the subject of “is going to result in” (lines 10–11), making its involvement in the action of shutting down the group more oblique through a process of *naturalization*, whereby the action is recontextualized through an “abstract material process” (in this case, “resulting in”; van Leeuwen 2008, 68). The form lexically encoding the action of shutting down is then postposed as a passive participle (with agent deletion): “being shut down” (line 11). Still, in response to my question about Johm’s opinion of Facebook’s programming (lines 13–16), through the pronoun “it”, Facebook or Facebook’s programming were more strongly activated and personified in “it has no idea what it’s doing” (line 18). Consequently, Facebook emerged as a represented agentive party in Johm’s account too, and her account in fact retained a critical angle with explicit appraisal of Facebook’s programming as “poor” (line 09) and clueless (lines 17–18).

In the interview excerpts analyzed so far, Facebook is thus represented as an agent to varying degrees (e.g., in Examples 6.21 and 6.22 more so than in 6.20) and is also negatively appraised through talk of intransparency (Example 6.21) and poor programming (Example 6.22). In turn, Naomi’s account of Facebook’s agency below engages in more appraisal, but also provides some further nuance regarding the nature of Facebook as an agent (i.e., who or what “Facebook” is made up of). This latter aspect serves to specify the target of Naomi’s criticism and, through further qualifying the actions of different actors, justify said criticism.

Specifically, when I asked her about the *report to Facebook* function, Naomi was quick to point out that the process of reviewing content on Facebook is increasingly automated and

its results, also in the reviewing of reports, are inconsistent to the point that, as she puts it, “almost nobody has any faith in Facebook’s ability to determine what content is actually offensive” (Naomi, {14:34–14:42}). She follows up this statement by specifying the actors behind the moderating process at Facebook:

Example 6.23 ((Naomi, {14:43–16:05}))

01 (-) THE::-

02 (--) °h PEOple who_are reviewing the:se uhm-

03 (.) y’_know from the STOries i’ve read;=

04 =they have (.) !SE!conds to assESS;;

05 a COMment;

06 and try to deTERmine;

07 °hh if_it’s ofFENSive.=

08 =certnly we’re NOT blaming !THEM!.

09 we’re blaming (.) the HIGHerups at facebook who:-

10 (-) reFUse to spend (.) the money;;

11 (-) NEcessary to !A!dequately::;

12 [M0derate: the website:?]

13 I: [HM_hm (-) hm_hm (.) hm_hm,]

14 N: uh:m and who have PEOple in the:se;

15 y’_know (.) FARMS.=

16 =jus’ (.) scrolling through HUNderds_and-=

17 =!THOU!sands of things a DAY:.

18 uh:m °h (--) I?-

19 rePORT to facebook is::,

20 (2.5) THEY:-

21 !WILL! flag things that are completely inNOcuous;

22 they will (ign) they will tell that THINGS-

23 that_are B:LAntantly::-

24 (.) !NOT! okay are FI:ne.

25 I: (-) HM_[hm.]

26 N: [UH::~]

27 (-) I_dunno a !SI!ngle person==

28 =who thinks tha:t that FACEbook moderat(ion)==

29 =AND this goes for:,

30 °h (.) you_know certnly TWITter too:.

31 uh:m (.) IS in !A!ny way:

32 (1.1) FUNctional: o:r-

33 (.) or HELPful.

34 I: <<nodding> hm_HM.>

35 N: (-) because they are USing;

36 either: HIGHly overworked and undertrained and underpaid people,

37 (.) O:R !AL!gorithms which (.) just.

38 AREn'?.

39 <shakes head> A? the point where they can discern:-

40 in!TENT! for ONE thing.

41 I: hm_HM

In this excerpt, new agents are introduced for the actions taken in determining the outcome of reports. One party is what I will call *Facebook's workers*: “the people who are reviewing these” (lines 01–02), “people in these you know farms” (lines 14–15), “highly overworked and undertrained and underpaid people” (line 36). Another party is “the higher-ups at Facebook” (line 09) and yet another one is “algorithms” (line 37). Setting aside algorithms, which are only passivated (“they are using [...] algorithms”), of key interest is the distinction between the human participants, Facebook workers and higher-ups, and the roles allocated to them.

Facebook workers are represented as engaging in multiple practices vis-à-vis the reporting process and its review by Facebook. Importantly, in some of these practices they are the active parties in the labor related to Facebook content moderation, while other practices, they are subjected to. So, on the one hand, Facebook workers are “the people who are

reviewing these [posts? comments? reports?]⁵⁴” (lines 01–02). In the process of reviewing, then, the workers are activated in a relative clause which functionalizes them, i.e., presents them as actors in terms of what they do. In line 04, the workers (as “they”) are also activated as Possessors (“they have seconds”), who engage in actions expressed as goals here (“to assess a comment and try to determine if it’s offensive”, lines 04–07). On the other hand, later in the excerpt, Facebook workers are represented through *subjections*. In lines 09–15, they are the parties subjected to a process of possession by “the higher-ups at Facebook”, “who *have these people* in these you know farms”. Later still, in lines 35–36, the Facebook workers are being *used* by Facebook higher-ups (represented in “they” here). By being thus shown as partaking in multiple practices which are *antithetical to each other* when it comes to moderating Facebook content (on the one hand they are acting, on the other they are being acted upon), the Facebook workers are *overdetermined* in their representation through a process of *inversion*. Inversion is “a form of overdetermination in which social actors are connected to two practices which are, in a sense, each other’s opposites” (van Leeuwen 2008, 48). Here, we have two groups of practices: actively doing things and possessing things (e.g., time to act) versus being the subjects of possession or “usage”.

The agents acting on Facebook’s behalf seen so far in previous accounts (either “Facebook” or “Facebook’s programming”) have been the parties who are also negatively appraised in the accounts. While this holds in Naomi’s excerpt too (regarding Facebook higher-ups), the representation of Facebook workers as not only active but also a *passive* party arguably serves to justify these workers not being subjected to negative judgement. We see this unfold sequentially in Example 6.23. First, in lines 01–07, Facebook’s workers are presented as having active roles. Then, in line 08, which is latched onto line 07, Naomi states: “certainly we’re not blaming them”. This line opens with a high-probability modal adjunct to clarify that the workers (“them”) are not the object of blame *even though* they have just been represented as an active party in Facebook’s report reviewing process. Instead, the blamed parties are “the higher-ups at Facebook” (line 09), who are in fact subjecting the Facebook workers to a sort of possession/ownership (lines 14–15) and to “usage” (lines 35). The latter process is strongly framed as exploitation here, given that the workers are characterized as “highly overworked and undertrained and underpaid” (line 36).

The legitimation of Naomi’s judgement of Facebook’s higher-ups is then fully realized through an oblique moral evaluation in the subsequent segment: “the higher-ups at Facebook who refuse to spend the money necessary to adequately moderate the website” (lines 09–12). In a process of *abstraction* (van Leeuwen 2008, 111), the phrasing

⁵⁴ The referent of “these” is not easy to pinpoint, as its immediate antecedent in the interview is the word “content”.

“adequately moderate the website” is morally charged as positive through a discourse of “due diligence”. That is, the underlying idea here is that moderating one’s website, or more broadly, showing care for the space one (Facebook) offers, so that no harm may come to other involved parties (users), is good. Facebook’s refusal to show this care or diligence is thus morally objectionable. Specifically, the action the higher-ups are refusing to take is the spending of money (line 10) characterized as “necessary” (line 11) in a kind of modulation, which has an inherently deontic character. That is, money must be spent for a good cause and Facebook’s higher-ups are to blame for refusing to spend it. Further, the instances of “they” in lines 20 and 22 arguably also have higher-ups as their referents given the large pause on line 20, which may serve to re-establish reference at a point where, in the talk, the last immediate human antecedents where the “people in these, you know, farms” (lines 14–15).⁵⁵ In these lines, then, Facebook’s higher-ups are represented acting in ways that are explicitly negatively loaded from a moral standpoint: “flagging completely innocuous” things and saying that “blatantly not okay things” are fine (cf. lines 20–24).

Also of note, though it does not necessarily relate to social actor representation, is an additional form of legitimation in lines 27–33, in which Naomi appeals on the *authority of conformity* in van Leeuwen’s (2008) terms, whereby an action (here, a judgement of Facebook) is justified by virtue of “everyone” doing things this way. In this case, Naomi states that she knows of no one who would judge Facebook’s moderation positively – or indeed Twitter’s either, suggesting that Naomi’s critique does not only extend to Facebook but also to other social media platforms. Notably, Naomi has also made another appeal to the authority of conformity to legitimate her criticisms, just before this excerpt, in a quote I brought up earlier: “almost nobody has any faith in Facebook’s ability to determine what content is actually offensive” (Naomi, {14:34–14:42}).

All in all, Naomi’s account compacts the emerging view seen in modmins’ statements that Facebook’s agency is central when speaking of reporting, and it mostly leads to problems. Even in Kelly’s account, which appears to be the most moderate one as it partially aligns with FC’s discourse, reporting can be an issue depending on “if Facebook will take action or not” (Example 6.20, line 08). So far, Facebook has been painted as an (algorithmic) actor, whose decision-making and judgement (Eos) is intransparent (Eos, Simon) and poorly informed (Johm). Naomi introduced more nuance by clarifying that the real problematic agentive party within Facebook is “the higher-ups”, hinting at their exploitative practices in the context of Facebook’s operation as a company.

⁵⁵ Besides, “they” has been used also by Eos to summarily refer to Facebook as an agent. Additionally, the pattern concerning the allocation of blame in this excerpt (in which Naomi “certainly [is] not blaming” Facebook workers) would make the workers an unlikely referent for a pronoun that introduces highly moralized negative judgement.

The discussion of reporting I had with Simon provides some additional insight in this direction. After presenting users' theory on the effects of reporting (cf. Example 6.19), Simon laid out alternatives to using the report function, which he framed as better options "not involving Facebook" (Simon, {1:00:07–1:00:08}). One of them is the practice of tagging admins, a user-based practice also mentioned by Eos. He follows up this statement about ways to keep Facebook out of the moderation process with an enlightening metaphor:

Example 6.24 ((Simon, {1:00:09–1:00:33}))

```

01  S:  it's KIND_of like,
02      when my neighbour is LOUD;
03      h° do i WANna::?
04      (.) let the LANDlord kno:w?=
05      =or do_i wanna go KNOCK;
06      on my neighbor's DOOR.
07      if he's loud aGAIN,
08      do_i wanna_let my LAND(lord)-
09      LANDlord kno:w?
10      or do i wanna BANG on the ceiling.=
11      =<<:-)>you know like? °h>
12  I:  hm_[HM,]
13  S:      [you] WANna do as much as you !CA:N!;
14      before you inVO:LVE-
15      (-) <<:-)> the auTHOrities.>=
16  I:  =<<:-)> the auTHORities (.) yah:-> °h
17  S:  the MARK zuckerbergs of the world;
18      and all his LITtle,
19      (.) DRONES.

```

In this extended simile (cf. "it's kind of like", line 01), Facebook is represented lexically through the metaphors of one's "landlord" and "the authorities". The latter is then qualified as "the Mark Zuckbergs of the world and all his little drones" (lines 17–19; cf. Example 6.6 where Simon again names "Zuckerberg" as the figure behind Facebook as an actor).

On the level of agency attribution, this excerpt differs from previous ones in that users, represented through Simon as “I” here (lines 03, 05, 08, 10) and a generic “you” (line 14), are the activated parties, and Facebook, through its new lexical representations, is subjected to various actions by the users, as in “let the/my landlord know” (line 04/08–09), where “the landlord” is a Beneficiary. Likewise, “the authorities” are subjected to the action of “involving”: “you involve the authorities” (lines 14–15). In this excerpt, Simon thus recontextualizes, through his metaphors, the practice of reporting as something that users undertake as *a way of addressing Facebook* and having it “involved”, whereas in previous excerpts users have focused on the perceived actions of Facebook once it has received reports. This is a recontextualization also found on FC’s statements of reporting (cf. Examples 6.9, 6.18), but Simon’s lexical choices are indicative of his own discursive stance that greatly differs from Meta’s.

Specifically, these lexical choices actualize the metaphors of “Facebook is a landlord”, suggesting ownership of the space the users inhabit as “neighbors”, and “Facebook is the authorities”, suggesting the (disciplinary) power held by Facebook. In a remarkably similar metaphor, Johm likens reporting to Facebook to “calling the police” (Johm, {1:13:53–1:13:54}). Elisa – though not a modmin of ludic groups – also uses the same metaphor of “Facebook is the police” in her interview, saying: “we’re starting a little society and if anyone commits a crime, *you don’t go to the cops*, you go to us” (Elisa, {56:48–56:54}).

These metaphors also underline the perceived division between what we have previously seen as the “group level” of things (Eos), or a “neighborhood” of users in Simon’s words (cf. Example 6.24, lines 02–06), and the external powerful actor that is Facebook, reporting content to whom becomes an “escalation” (Johm). Simon later elaborates on this division, even with an original phrasing of Facebook as “the enemy” (Example 6.25 below, line 02). Most interesting in this excerpt from his account is that users and Facebook are simultaneously represented as owners:

Example 6.25 ((Simon, {1:04:19–1:05:02}))

01 S: so (2.1) yah: (.) in a WAY,
02 facebook does become the Enemy==
03 =or become the auTHOrity.
04 tha? you don’t necessarily WANT to:-
05 (1.5) have encroach upON-
06 what <<:-)>feels like YOUR space?>
07 i was thinking YESTerday actually_like-

08 facebook owns the SITE-

09 but i own my FEE:D.

10 I: [hm_HM.]

11 S: [a:nd] when people COME an:d==

12 =fr_instance start arguments on my FEED?

13 or share (.) uh:m (.) COMments that i find-

14 just downright probleMatic,

15 i will TELL them like;

16 (--) you can disCUSS_that in your space.

17 but you're not discussing it on my WALL. [((laughs))]

18 I: [hm_HM.]

19 S: °h so (-) there's this idea that we own the SPACE;

20 we own our FEEDS;

21 or we own our GROUPS:.

22 a:nd we don'_want FACEbook-

23 <<:-)> coming INTO that.>

smiling: “what *feels like* your space”. Example 6.25 is thus very telling of the dynamics of personal investment in social media-based ludic practices, and how platform ownership can be perceived as clashing with what users see as belonging to them due to their dedication to it, which manifests in – among many other things – moderating the space.

Taken together, interviewees’ accounts of reporting show a consistent preoccupation with the extent to which Facebook is involved in the use of this platform function. This strongly contrasts with the discursive framing of reporting found on FC, where Facebook’s involvement in the process (and in content moderation in general) is erased in favor of presenting admins as the ultimate doers and knowers surrounding Facebook group moderation and reports. To avoid Facebook’s involvement, users may turn to user-based practices like tagging administrators, as Eos and Simon mention. Tagging admins can be seen as a practice related to Facebook’s own *report to admin* feature, which ostensibly removes Facebook as a regulating agent from the moderating process. The difference is that the latter is a practice configured and offered “pre-packaged” by Facebook, which makes it, in our terms, a *Facebook-standard practice* masquerading as a user-based practice. It therefore stands to reason that *report to admin* would be at the core of FC’s presentation of reporting. On a website that is consistently constructed as “by users, for users”, this pseudo-user-based practice allows Facebook to once again obfuscate its role as the de facto powerful mediator of all Facebook-based communication (and reallocate labor).

This narrative seems to not be accepted wholesale by ludic group admins, however, as they do not refrain from stressing and negatively appraising Facebook’s active involvement in reporting, i.e., its passing judgement on what users feel are *their* groups. All in all, what one may characterize as “subversive” in users’ ludic engagement with Facebook groups is their appropriation of Meta’s semiotic software for practices that are discursively constructed outside “the company line”, so to speak – either because they constitute reinterpretations of how to use Facebook’s tools or, relatedly, because they are regimented by media ideological stances that recognize Facebook’s agency (and critique it) while Meta’s discourse seeks to obfuscate it.

6.4. Summary: Clashing perspectives on Facebook groups and agency

The social media corporation Meta and modmins of ludic Facebook groups are parties with fundamentally different ties to the semiotic software of Facebook groups and fundamentally different interests. Against the profit-driven motives Meta has for offering and promoting Facebook groups, ludic group modmins devote a lot of their time to their groups for no material gain other than conviviality. In this chapter, I have attempted a

comparison of these two parties' perspectives on Facebook groups as semiotic technology, first endeavoring to understand Meta's official discursive construction of their product.

To elucidate Meta's public discourse on Facebook groups as it pertains to admins, I started with a multimodal discourse analysis of sampled pages from the official Meta website titled "Facebook Community" (FC). As its title suggests, the website strongly associates Facebook groups with the signifier of "community", and it is characterized by a hierarchical structure that facilitates browsing pages on Facebook group features, presenting the latter in terms of "doing things with/in" Facebook groups. In Section 6.2.1, I demonstrated that the adherence to the theme of "community" is symbolically strengthened through the ample depiction of people on the website, who also embody *diverse* characteristics, constructing an inclusive image of Facebook groups and Meta's ethos as a corporation. Further, as seen in Section 6.2.2, people on FC are mostly represented in larger groups, interacting amongst themselves, but in the vast majority of cases in my sample, no devices can be seen in their depictions. In fact, mediatization is systematically obscured on FC, leading to: (a) a construction of "community" as a predominantly face-to-face affair, and simultaneously (b) a normalization of digital infrastructure as an organic part of life. Following trends found in the discourse of ICT companies, FC's presentation of Facebook groups adds up to an effort to naturalize the use of Facebook groups, promoting their adoption in a way such that it does not invite reflexive awareness of the mediatization at play when one interacts with and through this social media software.

What is more, this discursive representation is constructed (as if) "through the voices" of users. As shown in Section 6.2.3, FC is replete with voices of group admins, meaning that statements ostensibly made by group administrators are embedded in the website. This creates a sense of user participation in the content of FC, which is strengthened by the website's interactivity. Interactive sites/signs invite the website's visitors to actively engage with FC in order to "hear from" users like them. However, the embedded voices of users amount to admins speaking only on behalf of Meta and the website's interactivity actually provides limited options to users, mostly redirecting them back to this same website or other Meta-affiliated ones. All in all, though it is represented as "democratic" and even as having a peer-to-peer character through its polyphonic and interactive make-up, FC is ultimately a website with a closed structure, wherein Meta is the ultimate authority in determining the content and thereby the discursive orientation of the website.

Following these more general findings, I honed in on one particular Facebook groups function, that of *reporting*. Given that ludic Facebook groups users creatively reinterpret the platform's semiotic software, even qualifying their stance as being opposed to Meta's vision for the platform, I was interested in seeing if this ostensible clash is reflected in the way Meta and the modmins construct agency surrounding report features in particular.

Reporting is a revealing aspect of the platform to investigate in this regard because it involves “Facebook” (the platform’s agency) in decisions about whether content is acceptable and welcome on the site.

Starting again from Meta’s perspective as revealed on FC, in Section 6.3.1 I showed how Facebook group administrators are constructed as the predominant agents surrounding reporting and content moderation more generally. Following the trend observed earlier concerning the embedding of admins’ voices on FC, I found that the site’s take on how reporting should work ostensibly relied on admins’ testimonies. Facebook’s agency in this regard was minimized, leaving Facebook and the authors of the website almost entirely passivated in the recontextualization of how Facebook groups are moderated. In fact, FC presents a *report to admin* function as the main tool for reporting content in Facebook groups, as opposed to *report to Facebook*, which more actively involves the platform in moderating content. In fact, Facebook’s decision-making after receiving reports was never discussed by the authors of FC. Instead, Facebook group admins were cited as the main authorities and agents driving Facebook group moderation by being presented as the apparent authoritative sources of information, despite said information being ultimately curated by the website’s authors. This was found to be in line with FC’s general tendency to downplay mediatization.

The modmins I interviewed, by contrast, provided a substantially different perspective on reporting in Facebook groups, as presented in Section 6.3.2. They seemed to view *report to Facebook* as the main reporting tool, and they consistently focused on the role of Facebook as an agent. Facebook was represented as an actor who passes judgements on groups and their content, with its decision-making processes remaining intransparent and characterized by perceived faultiness or incompetence. My interviewees’ own judgements of Facebook focused on its active role in content moderation as purveyed by “higher-ups”, who were framed as “the authorities” and “owners” of the space. By intervening on Facebook groups’ content through the report function(s), Facebook appears to be perceived as encroaching on what modmins may also view as “their own” spaces. User-based practices such as tagging admins instead of using the *report to admin* tool were cited as alternatives to the Facebook standard, which presumably circumvent the platform’s involvement. Taken together, through their accounts, the modmins I interviewed appeared to hold a critical view of Facebook/Meta as an agent with regulatory power on the spaces they habitually use. This stance is at odds with Meta’s self-representation through FC as a passive actor, who ostensibly facilitates the coming together of users by minimizing its own mediating work.

In the end, even for users for whom it is routine, playful engagement with Facebook groups does not preclude a critical awareness of Facebook’s agency in mediating their practices.

In fact, an argument could be made that users consciously differentiate their own practices from Facebook's (perceived) normative standard. Facebook's authority appears to be something that users do not wish to see encroach in their ludic engagement with Facebook groups.

CHAPTER 7

DISCUSSION: PLATFORMS, PLAY, AND CRITIQUE

Welcome to the Internet! What would you prefer?
Would you like to fight for civil rights or tweet a racial slur?
Be happy! Be horny! Be bursting with rage!
We've got a million different ways to engage
Bo Burnham (2022 "Welcome to the Internet")

This project's examination of Facebook groups as semiotic technology adopted by users for ludic practices set out to explore how social media infrastructure can be imbued with meaning by users who use it "just for fun". This focus was articulated with the fundamental consideration in mind that social media platforms operate as business that profit from users' engagement, and as such, they design their products in ways that align with their business model. Adopting a variety of conceptual tools for a critically oriented analysis of social media discourse, I articulated three more specific questions on this topic, which I engaged with in Chapters 4–6.

RQ1: *How do users' actions figure in the playful mobilization of the Facebook groups software as a communicative resource for coherent interactions on the platform?* (Chapter 4)

RQ2: *How do users seem to perceive and discursively construct their agency vis-à-vis practices that arise through the playful creative mobilization of Facebook groups?* (Chapter 5)

RQ3: *How do users' discursive constructions of agency (theirs and the platform's) surrounding the routine use of Facebook groups compare with the discourse that Facebook's parent company Meta publically endorses for their product?* (Chapter 6)

In response to RQ1, Chapter 4 examined the phenomenon of tag groups, wherein users re-design the Facebook groups feature to deploy it unproblematically in conversation. Creating groups whose titles facilitate their use to construct utterances, users were thus observed to re-configure the purpose of the Facebook groups software for their own playful purposes. The artifacts that resulted from this process, tag groups, were imbued with meaning in their own right, becoming subject to categorization and cataloguing by users themselves in dedicated spaces and showing an adherence to a range of topics that the users can presumably show interest in by displaying tokens of their "tag group collections". Such

collections can be viewed as a kind of “pool of resources”, or *semiotic repertoire* (Kusters 2021), that allows users to engage in the playful practice of group tagging.

Chapter 5 examined users’ perspectives on group tagging based on interview data, in an attempt to respond to RQ2 above. The focus was on users’ perception of their own agency in this playful practice. The project’s interviewees appeared to conceptualize themselves as the main actors behind the creation and use of tag groups, viewing Facebook’s semiotic infrastructure as a means to an end. Group tagging involves an appropriation of Facebook’s techno-cultural tools as mediational means, which is tied to reflexive meta-awareness on the users’ part. The way in which users articulated this meta-awareness also provided evidence regarding how the ludic practice of group tagging is slotted more broadly into their habitus.

Finally, Chapter 6 engaged with RQ3 above, which necessitated an additional examination of Meta’s discourse on Facebook groups. Drawing on data from an official Meta website targeting group administrators, Meta’s discursive construction of Facebook groups as tools for creating “communities” was unpacked. In Meta’s discourse, users appear to empowered, diverse actors, who are experts on Facebook groups, and rely on them to fulfil social needs. At the same time, Meta’s role as the authority that provides the software is minimized. I juxtaposed these company-endorsed positions to interviewed modmins’ perspectives, focusing in particular on the function of reporting content within Facebook groups. Where Meta sought to minimize Facebook’s role in this process, presenting users as the empowered experts instead, users thematized and actively took issue with Facebook’s involvement in the process of reporting. They painted a critical view of Facebook as an untrustworthy actor with the power to pass judgement over platform content, leading to various perceived problems. So, while Meta’s discourse placed a strong focus on user agency, limiting the representation of the platform’s own involvement, the interviewed users conversely discussed the platform’s agency as a significant problematic factor vis-à-vis reporting.

Having thus provided a summary of this dissertation’s findings, in this the present chapter, I want to critically expand on them through broader materialist considerations. As a first step, I will recast my findings from RQ1 regarding tag groups as user-generated interactional resources, focusing on emergent patterns of convivial ties based on semiotic conduct (Section 7.1). My aim is to illustrate how ludic activities involving Facebook groups can expand our understanding of social media technologies in a way that considers their materiality both as techno-cultural artifacts offered for profit by corporations and as mediational means that (groups of) people meaningfully integrate in their daily playful practices.

Then, in an effort to explore the critical undertones of users' perspectives on their ludic activities, I will first re-examine my findings from RQ2 concerning users' views of group tagging as an agentive practice for them, and juxtapose them to Meta's corporate discourse on Facebook groups, as scrutinized in Chapter 6 (Section 7.2). To fully realize my point, I will then turn to users' takes on *reporting*, as revealed in my analysis addressing RQ3, which seem to more explicitly break with Meta's discourse (Section 7.3). Through this discussion, I aim to highlight the particularities of the *user-based critiques* I have explored in this project and interrogate how they relate to ludic engagement with Facebook groups, from both the users' and the company's perspective. The chapter will then conclude with a summary of its key points (Section 7.4).

7.1. From “groups” to interactional resources to groups

Chapter 4 illustrated how Facebook groups can be re-made into tag groups, an interactional resource. Users were found to be able to engage in coherent conversations by constructing their turns entirely out of repurposed semiotic material: a particular kind of tagged Facebook groups. This involves layers of semiotic work that presupposes expert involvement with the platform's infrastructure.

That is, engaging in coherent tag group conversation is not something that happens on the spot; design on the users' part is necessary, and it has a longitudinal aspect. While social media platforms are materially designed based on their owners' interests, this does not preclude that individual features, such as that of Facebook groups, can be, in a sense, *re-designed* in their employment. By creating groups, giving them titles that – as shown in Chapter 4 – largely allow these groups to function as interactional turns, and by also joining groups created by others for the same purpose, avid Facebook users can shape semiotic repertoires (Kusters 2021) consisting in repurposed platform-based semiotic material. This involves a kind of know-how that can be conceptualized as a form of *digital literacy* (Jones and Hafner 2012), shaped by a history of social practices, which ultimately affords users participation into a loosely defined, play-based *interpretive community* (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) that understands tag groups and the work that goes into them. On the one hand, the *production* – i.e., the material realization – of tag groups entirely relies on Facebook's software (its group, tagging, commenting features, etc.), and thereby involves a level of technical skill on the users' part (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001) – concerning only expertly navigating a user-friendly platform, though, not constructing it from scratch. On the other hand, the design that goes into the transformation of Facebook groups into an intersubjectively recognizable and ratified resource (tag groups) to be used in a particular playful semiotic practice also reflects the users' interests.

What is remarkable in this regard – as I have noted repeatedly throughout my text – is that tag groups are deployments of Facebook groups in ways in which they are (supposedly) *not meant to* be used. This suggests a clash between users’ interests and the normative assumptions baked into the semiotic software users draw on (Djonov and van Leeuwen 2017). But even as they are ostensibly subverted, these assumptions remain present, and users’ practices can only be defined against and/or alongside them: No matter how much one uses them for interaction, tag groups remain “groups”, materially – also by name. In fact, many tag groups still also function as “bona fide groups” which people join to interact within them; at the same time, users also seem to reinterpret the function of “joining” and exploit it to add tag groups to their repertoire.

So, in the emergence of tag groups, we see a development that begins with platform features seen as “group features” (boyd 2011) and thereby commonsensically treated as being “for groups” of people; from there, we get to these same features being turned into interactional resources (or “commenting features”; boyd 2011), which also retain some vestige of their original “groupishness” (e.g., in the functioning of some tag groups as bona fide groups, or surrounding the use of “joining”). I would describe this development as going from a state of having “*groups*” to one of having *interactional resources* with “groups” characteristics. The scare quotes around “groups” are meant to suggest that this is a characterization of the infrastructure adopted directly by its makers’ discourse; i.e., the term “groups” here does not necessarily stand for social formations materializing.

Ultimately, it can be argued that, from the users’ perspective, what we find in the process described above is a discourse of creative *re*-interpretation of platform features which unavoidably have their own “standard” interpretations. In other words, there is a view of doing *a new thing with(in) a given frame*.

This creative push-and-pull around the repurposing of semiotic software has also been observed on other platforms. Barton’s (2015) analysis of tagging on Flickr as a social practice is a case in point. On the image- and video-hosting site Flickr, users add – beyond a title and comments – *tags* to posts. While their function varies across websites, tags on Flickr apparently relate to an idea of sorting content for its more efficient grouping and/or retrievability. Barton (2015) explores the linguistic creativity exhibited in tags, which are appropriated as a “writing space” for aims that go beyond any one idea of what *should* be done with tags. Users draw on their digital literacies to construct tags in ways that deliberately make said tags into contributing parts of the multimodal compositions of users’ postings; for example, tags can serve to anchor posted images to various, sometimes novel, linguistic formations found in the post’s tagging area. Barton (2015, 51) points out that website designers offer “the space which people act within”, which comes with some particular normative expectations about how features should be used, and these ultimately

constitute “possibilities [the designers] envisage for the site”. He continues: “People act within these possibilities, taking up some opportunities, ignoring others and creating new activities which the designers never dreamed of. It is this *creative space between the designer and the user* where the unexpected can happen which constitutes the affordances of tagging” (Barton 2015, 51–52, my emphasis). This brings us once again to a flexible view of affordances (cf. Hutchby 2001), which I want to further qualify here by focusing on the *ludic* aspect of reinterpretation practices in this “creative space between the designer and the user”.

Barton (2015, 64) observes that potentially unexpected, creative uses of the tagging writing space on Flickr may be taken up by other users “[i]n a meme-like way”. This phrasing that casts Flickr tagging practices as quasi-memetic captures at once their *spreadability*, a key characteristic of memes (cf., e.g., Marino 2015), and their “*bounded*”, *autotelic nature*, whereby their semiotic functioning is nestled outside conventional life and morality (cf. Milner 2013) in a way that can be described as carnivalesque in Bakhtin’s (1984) sense, as argued by Häkkinen and Leppänen (2014). This framing is consistent with a view of (quasi-)memetic practices as ludic in Huizinga’s (1949) sense (Procházka 2020). Tag groups embody a similar quasi-memetic status. Consider, for example, the intertextual ties observed between many titles in the corpus examined in Chapter 4. These speak to a kind of spreadability “with a twist” that is typical of the intertextuality inherent in memes too: Unlike in simply “viral” phenomena, in memetic content individual users do not just share, but also put a twist to that which is spread wide (Shifman 2012).

As for the tag groups’ “boundedness” as a practice, this follows from its ludic nature that sets the practice apart from the pursuit of day-to-day necessities. Of particular interest is that such bounded practices are also characterized by *order* in a way that can be seen as contrasting “the confusion of life”, “an imperfect world” outside the play frame (Huizinga 1949, 10; Blommaert 2017). We can observe the orderliness of play involving tag groups not only in the systematics of coherent tag group-based conversation, but also in the archiving, folk-taxonomical activity users engage in, which was examined in Chapter 4 as well. So, a by-product of the re-design of Facebook groups into tag groups is their (re)construction into semiotic artifacts that are tied not only to interactional activities (engaging in conversations through them) but also to a kind of play involving archiving practices like those exemplified in *A guide to TGs*, the tag group-archiving Facebook group I drew on in this study.

In Huizingian ludic fashion, this orderliness underlies the incipient building of a ludic *community* with vague boundaries. This understanding is glimpsed in the terms my interviewees use to capture the social space in which tag groups are recognized and presumably situated, mentioned in Chapter 6: “weird Facebook” (Mary), “meme groups”

(Mary, Johm), “weird and meme groups” (Eos). In line with a view of social groups that does not presuppose their existence but identifies it on the basis of shared patterns of communicative behavior (Blommaert 2019b; cf. Chapter 1), we can thus speak of the formation of “*light*” communities around tag groups (Blommaert 2018). “Light” communities are formed not by the convergence of people with shared “thick” identity characteristics (e.g., ethnicity), but as a result of patterned practices that people loosely perform in the online-offline nexus in ways that align with other people’s doings – and these are practices that can be as phatic and seemingly inconsequential as the “liking” of posts on social media (ibid.). Members of the loose community of – for lack of a better term – “group taggers” can be said to be voluntarily joining this community through their actions (tagging, collecting tag groups, etc.), but importantly, algorithmic mediation also plays a role in their joining, which users are not actively in control of. According to Blommaert, “light” communities

are formed by individuals voluntarily and actively joining them to perform entirely novel forms of social practice. Membership of such groups is experienced by many of its members as indispensable in everyday life, even if the practices performed in such groups would not always be seen as vital or indicative of one’s core identity – these are ‘light’ groups and practices. But in addition to these voluntary communities, the internet generates *involuntary* communities through its algorithmic functions, bringing people together in networks of perceived shared interests and profiles, of which members are often unaware.

(Blommaert 2018, 69, original emphasis)

In practical terms, being a member of the “light” community of group taggers may result from algorithmically “stumbling onto” tag groups in one’s experience of navigating the Facebook platform, where the user does not have total control over what exactly will be encountered, as that is decided based on intransparent algorithmic workings. In this sense, “light” communities like that of group taggers are “focused but diverse *occasional* coagulations of people” (Blommaert and Varis 2015, 54, my emphasis). They are “occasional” by outside prompts, such as the encountering of a post with tag groups in it. In the case of tag groups specifically, we are dealing with a kind of *ludic membership*, which involves learning (definable as digital literacy), but is not necessarily viewed as a learning experience (Blommaert 2017) in addition to lacking hard boundaries. While this membership is entrenched in day-to-day life, as Blommaert (2018, 69) puts it in the quote above, “the practices performed in such groups would not always be seen as vital or indicative of one’s core identity”. This is because what we see group taggers doing amounts to the performance of a social media-based “ludic self” in Deumert’s (2014) terms.

In these terms, it is thus possible to see Facebook groups as constructing communities even in their tag group guise; but importantly, this happens in a roundabout way, which does not presuppose that a number of people coming together in the given structure of “a Facebook

group” are a de facto community. As my analyses have suggested, tag groups per se are less about *inhabiting* the Facebook groups infrastructure (being *in* groups), and more about being an expert in the infrastructure’s creative deployment for phatic purposes: The fact that a comment appearing as a hyperlink in bold or in a blue font *means something* to particular users is what brings these users together in their “hanging out” on social media. So, when examining the Facebook groups infrastructure through the lens of my research, we can go from a commonsensical understanding of Facebook groups as “groups” – like the platform prescribes – to an empirically based view of them appropriated as *interactional resources* – still involving their “groups”-oriented function to an extent – and finally to a view of them as constructing *groups* based on the ludic activities arising around them; i.e., shaping “light” communities of people who engage in common practices on social media for fun.

This has two implications. First, the a priori treatment of the Facebook groups software as “groups” may be ultimately supported by empirical analyses of how, say, “affinity spaces” in Gee’s (2004) sense obtain within Facebook groups, but such a treatment ultimately starts from *the platform’s built-in assumptions* surrounding this piece of software. As this project has shown, this is not a necessary stance for one to take at the inception of their study, but is in fact ideological – as any stance is – specifically in that accepts the assumptions embedded in semiotic software. Second, the observation and analysis of practices that draw on a piece of infrastructure like Facebook groups can lead to the discovery of “light” community formations around this infrastructure, which also do not necessarily align with the assumptions baked into it vis-à-vis how “groups” should materialize. This is because the software’s affordances do not determine user action, but rather, there is a “creative space” in Barton’s (2015) terms, in which affordances are co-defined through users’ semiotic activity – especially ludic activity, which is undertaken in structured ways for its own sake within its own boundaries.

All in all, by taking this critical view of platform features (which acknowledges the assumptions inherent therein) and then examining users’ practices (which appropriate the given features), we can come to see the Facebook groups software as constructing groups through a series of *reinterpretations of its assumed aims*. Still, the platform’s view on what its software is for is not exactly escapable: it remains pervasive – in the software’s name, the functions it has been programmed for, and the algorithmic environment in which it is nested, where “encounters” with the software are occasioned in ways the users have little control over. Yet, inescapable though it may be, the platform’s view can be filtered through playful practice, appropriated, and made to give rise to forms of sociality that do not align with the platform’s implied normative frame – but, importantly, are still exploited by the platform for profit.

Regarding this last point, the observation that even as users reinterpret social media technologies in playful practices, these practices still constitute platform-based engagement generating profit for the platform's owners, can lead to a more critical understanding of the "creative space" within which affordances are shaped. While user creativity may diverge from what platform developers envisage for their product, this divergence ultimately is (for the developers) not a bug but a feature, so to speak. Users can get "creative" in this space, yes – the word "creative" suggesting a positive framing of user practices – but this does not shake up the platform's business model or get in the way of its profit-making: Users' agency still falls in line with the commodification of their online sociality (cf. Fuchs 2011). But before this point can be developed in full, we must consider: what do *users* have to say about their agency?

7.2. Agency in social media play: Personal and corporate views

Focusing on interviewed users' perspectives on group tagging as a practice, Chapter 5 revealed that, in the users' accounts, it is them, the human actors, that are the agentic parties in group tagging, with Facebook's semiotic software being constructed as a tool. At face value, this finding suggests that the commonly theorized position in materialist approaches to technology that views tools as having a more active role in shaping practices, perhaps even their own agency (cf. Lievrouw 2014), is not echoed in users' own accounts of said practices. For example, the ANT-based understanding of platform technology as a mediator (sensu Latour 2005) that transforms human action (cf. van Dijck 2013b) does not seem to be present in my interviewees' accounts of group tagging.

Keeping in mind the point above, consider also this. The users I interviewed – all well-versed in the use of Facebook groups, including their appropriation as tag groups – tended to focus on the *function* of tag groups when asked to explain the phenomenon. In other words, they constructed a *purpose* for the practice of group tagging, which often served to legitimate it, to morally justify its existence. This can be attributed to the fact that group tagging is not a practice recognized by Facebook's platform and Meta's discourse: There are no official sources one could read up on to learn more about tag groups – tag groups seemingly do not exist as far as Meta is concerned. Users may thus reasonably orient themselves towards explaining the existence of this practice as fulfilling some goal, given that it involves adding something to what one can do with Facebook, or going "off the manual" of a social media site, so to speak.

Still, the interviewees' ideas that (a) users are the main agents behind their practices, and that (b) something done through Facebook's tools is to be explained fundamentally as something done *for a purpose* suggests an apparent alignment with Meta's discourse regarding its platform's (and Facebook groups' in particular) own purpose.

As examined in Chapter 6 with data from the Facebook Community website, Meta's discourse on Facebook groups constructs a view of this infrastructure, in which: firstly, users are an empowered, diverse body of people that hold the expertise surrounding the software; and secondly, Facebook's own role as a mediator is systematically backgrounded. Further, in this view, Facebook groups serve the purpose of fulfilling users' supposed innate need to connect with other people, to build *communities*. The promotion of this kind of discourse by ICT companies serves to naturalize the mediatization of social practices, implicitly constructing a necessity for acquiring the companies' products (cf. Fast 2018). In the end, there seem to be points of agreement between my interviewees' and Meta's perspectives: In both Meta's and the users' discourse, we find a construction of users as empowered agents and a presentation of Facebook infrastructure as serving a purpose.

Nevertheless, despite this superficial similarity, the way in which users present their own accounts of group tagging cannot be self-evidently related to corporate discourse and its functions, but is instead indicative of the users' personal histories with the practice. As shown in Chapter 5, Johm (cf. Example 5.5), an experienced Facebook group modmin, started responding to my question on tag groups by acknowledging that she has experience answering this question, and then proceeding to make direct statements without any hedging (viz. modalization). By contrast, Wilson (cf. Example 5.9), an interviewee who holds an academic degree on digital communication and culture, when asked to explain a digital communicative practice, produced a heavily modalized account characterized by limited subjective commitment to the truth of his statements – like an academic expert's account would be ...*potentially*.

What this shows is that Facebook group aficionados approach their explanations of their ludic activity involving social media technology in a way that harks back to their habitus, and hence to their experiences learning about this technology as historical subjects, and thereby appropriating it as mediational means (Scollon 2001). This aligns with a view of play (with social media features, in this case) as serious business (Blommaert 2017); i.e., as an activity that involves affective engagement on the playing subjects' part, which ultimately gives people's ludic commitments an important position within the wider frame of their socialization. Returning to my earlier point about an emergent "light" community of "group taggers" (cf. Section 7.1), here we can observe how this "light" involvement with a playful appropriation of Facebook's features may well be "bounded" as a ludic activity, but still constitutes an aspect of the users' habitus and a side to their online-offline socialization in the context of their "media-saturated lives" (Hine 2009, 7).

From this perspective, it becomes evident that the superficial similarities between Meta's corporate discourse and users' accounts of group tagging are underlain by different interests. In Meta's case, there is a business-oriented motivation for articulating

promotional corporate discourse that constructs users as empowered and the platform as barely involved in mediatization. In the users' case, the foregrounding of themselves (and other users) as the agentive parties in the ludic practice of group tagging is reflective of their own investment in this kind of play, which is an integral part – however small – of their social lives.

Still, while there may be different plausible interpretations for these similar discursive threads, the similarities at hand may also have something to do with the nature of group tagging as a “user-based” and not “Facebook-standard” practice (cf. Chapter 6). To illustrate this point, we must first consider the instances in which users' discourse becomes overtly critical; i.e., clearly clashes with Meta's discursive orientation.

7.3. Meta's discourse and users' critique

In Chapter 6, after exploring the salient patterns in Meta's discourse on Facebook groups summarized above, I examined reporting as a Facebook groups-based feature around which users' and Meta's positions are in stark opposition to each other. Contrasting with the Facebook Community website's discursive strategy, which tended to obscure Facebook's agency in handling content reports, interviewed modmins consistently focused on Facebook's involvement, ultimately constructing it as *the* problematic factor when it comes to reporting. Interviewees represented Facebook as an untrustworthy actor, who acts without transparency or much competence, and holds the ultimate power of passing judgement over users' practices. Metaphorically, Facebook was presented as a landlord or the police, even “the enemy” (cf. Example 6.25, Chapter 6).

The users' critical stances sketched above, seen alongside Meta's own discourse on reporting, can serve to pinpoint the normative promises implicitly made by Meta (e.g., that modmins are in charge of reporting) and the inconsistencies noted by users regarding the fulfillment of these promises. This amounts to an approximation of immanent critique in Herzog's (2016) sense. Further adopting Herzog's terminology, we can qualify users' critique as one that functions inside the Facebook-imposed normative system – what Herzog calls *correcting critique*: “A correcting immanent critique is every critique that refers to normative concepts crystallized in our social institutions but without questioning these institutions themselves” (Herzog 2016, 283).

Specifically, the interviewed modmins' critiques of reporting in Facebook groups target Facebook's intransparency, perceived incompetency, and quasi-authoritarian actions as a content-regulating mediator. These critiques implicitly accept the premise that Facebook – or Meta as its owner – should be enforcing some kind of content moderation; they only take issue with *how* this enforcement takes place. The institutional norms surrounding Facebook as a privately owned digital platform are thus not fundamentally challenged. Only the

betterment of Facebook's functioning is sought by these critiques; for example, in Naomi's statements (cf. Example 6.23, Chapter 6), where we find an underlying discourse of "due diligence" supporting her claim that Facebook is not "*adequately* moderating" its own space (e.g., by investing more money into this). That said, Naomi's view also has elements of what Herzog would call *transcending critique*, which challenges the institutional status quo in a way that would invite systemic backlash. This seems to be the case when Naomi takes issue with the exploitative conditions under which Facebook workers are employed for content moderation. Exploitative labor practices, particularly for content-moderation workers, underlie the functioning of many tech companies and they result from systemic aspects of global capitalism (Roberts 2019; cf. Fuchs 2021, chap. 4).

To characterize my interviewees' critiques of Facebook as mostly "correcting" instead of "transcending" is not to diminish them. Rather, this point illustrates the pervasive normalization of the institutional norms involved in social media platforms' functioning – a normalization regimented by and perpetuated through discourse such as that seen on Facebook Community. Even when encountering highly self-aware and explicitly articulated critique by avid social media users, said critique operates against a normative backdrop that accepts that social media platforms should function as they do: as privately owned enterprises with the ultimate power over the spaces they offer. Users may re-appropriate these spaces, as Simon suggests when he speaks about feeling like he "owns" his own Facebook feed, while Facebook "owns the site" (cf. Example 6.25, Chapter 6). Likewise, users may re-appropriate specific features for playful semiotic practices, as seen in group tagging. But these semiotic practices, even viewed through a critical, self-aware lens by users, cannot be seen as challenging the socio-economic status quo that shapes the material conditions under which social media companies operate.

With all this in mind, let us return to the point I made in the previous section: Considering that the interviewed modmins seemed to be diametrically opposed to Meta's discourse when it came to reporting, how can we explain these same critical users aligning themselves to Meta's discourse vis-à-vis user agency when it came to group tagging? Aside from users' personal investment in group tagging as a ludic activity (cf. Section 7.2), an additional possible answer may lie in the qualitative difference between these two practices involving Facebook groups, whereby – to use the terms I introduced in Chapter 6 – one (reporting) is "Facebook-standard" and the other (group tagging) is "user-based". That is, to report content is to use a feature offered by the platform in a way that the platform endorses, whereas to engage in group tagging is to use a platform feature in accordance with norms that users have made up, which ostensibly do not align with what is intended, recognized or promoted by the platform.

Adopting this framing, it can be argued that users may – in what seems like a paradox at first pass – come to align with *company-endorsed* discourse on user agency when talking about *user-based* practices, because they implicitly view said practices as somehow diverging from the platform’s prescribed norms. My interviewee Simon (cf. Example 6.6, Chapter 6) in fact explicitly frames group tagging as subversive because it allegedly goes against the designs of the platform’s authority (“Zuckerberg” in his words). In Facebook groups-based play, people can do a platform-based thing *in their own way*, with their own twist vis-à-vis platform norms, and they can thus see themselves as exercising more authentic self-expression (cf. Blommaert 2017, 4), “freed” by the platform’s norms, as it were. An understanding of their own agency as increased may thus follow from this.

By contrast, the modmins interviewed in this study seem very much aware that they are not “free from” the platform’s norms when it comes to reporting – a Facebook-standard practice which can indeed be seen as a very strong case of the platform exercising some sort of authority. This is despite Meta’s efforts on the Facebook Community website to frame everything around reporting as a process that empowers users as agents and experts (cf. Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1). In fact, Meta has also implemented a *report to admin* function for Facebook groups, which constitutes a pseudo-user-based alternative to *report to Facebook* in that it ostensibly reduces Facebook’s involvement in handling reports, as argued in Chapter 6. Users appear to remain suspicious also of this function to a certain extent (cf. Simon’s theory that *report to admin* is just as bad as *report to Facebook*, expressed in Example 6.19).

Seen side by side, these findings suggest that users’ critical awareness of a platform authority that pursues its own interests in intransparent and ultimately problematic ways *does not extend to users’ discursive framing of user-based practices* like group tagging. In those cases, users construct themselves as agentive parties, just like the platform owners have an interest in doing for all practices. This latter point about the vested interest of platform owners has been theorized from a Marxist perspective by Fisher (2012).

According to Fisher (2012, 176), who uses Facebook as a case study in his analysis of social media, “Facebook epitomizes a new form of production relations, where value is created not primarily by workers of the company, but by the audience. And the most important thing that Facebook users produce – the primary source of Facebook’s value – is communication and sociability”. In this sense, people’s use of the platform amounts to value-generating labor done by the platform’s audience. The way in which the platform owners can exploit such user labor is by ostensibly affording some *de-alienation* for users. Alienation as a concept captures a process whereby workers lack control over their work, which gets objectified and ultimately seen as divorced from their selves, and hence from “self-realization and authentic expression” (Fisher 2012, 173). Social media platforms

promise opportunities for authentic self-expression through their infrastructure, which creates spaces where users' autonomy can supposedly be exercised in ways chosen by the users (cf. Papacharissi 2009). Through the discursive construction of increased user agency (i.e., of more control over the work done) and of the fulfillment of fundamental social needs like community-building through platform software (Facebook groups), the Facebook Community website effectively makes "a promise for de-alienation" (Fisher 2012, 179): Users are said to be in control of the things they do here (i.e., their labor), and through this work they are said to be able to connect with other people, thereby contributing to their self-realization as human beings.

The interview excerpts examined in my analyses suggest that the modmins I spoke with ably deconstruct such discursive undertones to their use of Facebook, as evidenced in their critical view of reporting. But when it comes to a practice that is not Facebook-standard and is also ludic – thereby involving personal investment – the same users seem to internalize *the promise of de-alienation* that the platform promotes to exploit user labor. In the end, users' engagement – whether through Facebook-standard or user-based practices – always materially benefits Facebook's owners, but in the context of the ludic user-based practice of group tagging, the critical edge in users' accounts of their engagement appears to be lost, as it is obfuscated by the idea that they are using Facebook's features in a non-standard way, or a "creative" way in Barton's (2015) sense.

It is in this sense that we can also more fully understand why practices developing in Barton's "creative space between the designer and the user" are "not a bug but a feature" for the platform (cf. Section 7.1). Meta may not officially acknowledge group tagging as a practice, but it also does not crack down on it, presumably because it still generates engagement (i.e., user labor and hence value in Marxist terms). This inaction, this discursive non-coverage of user-based practices like group tagging, leaves open a space for user-based innovation that is "creative" in more than Barton's sense. It also creates opportunities for agency-affirming discourse on the users' part, which circumvents their critiques of what they negatively perceive as the platform's authority and thereby comes full circle to align with the platform's interest in promising agentive, authentic, self-fulfilling work through its products.

I have argued earlier (cf. Section 7.1) that the normative assumptions built into platform software are inescapable even when "unexpected" uses of said software manifest – i.e., user-based practices. In light of the most recent part of this discussion, these assumptions can be seen as inescapable in more than one sense. Namely, because *design* is a stage in the articulation of meaning-making that realizes *discourse* (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001; Kress 2010), in the *re-designing* of platform material whereby users remake it into "novel" resources for "user-based practices", the platform's design remains present, and thereby,

so does its discourse of providing tools for agentively fulfilling social needs (cf. selling “connectivity”; van Dijck 2013b). The users’ “re-design” process thus remains in contact with the platform’s discourse even as it seeks to creatively subvert it. Then, in the discursive *interpretation* of the semiotic products that result from this process (viz. tag groups) – which we can observe in users’ recontextualizations (van Leeuwen 2008), as I have done in this study –, users seemingly can read *their own interest to subvert* in the practice that has materialized, but apparently do not read the interest of the platform, which is still there. In other words, the focus on how they have done things “unconventionally” creates the possibility for users to ignore how they have still done a conventional thing; i.e., they have used social media infrastructure for social purposes, and thus engaged in the commodification of their own sociality. This argument suggests a reason why it may be fruitful for Facebook to not officially recognize user-based practices like group tagging, as to do so would amount to them becoming Facebook-standard practices, and thus more readily subjected to critique.

7.4. Key takeaways

This discussion may be seen as painting a rather dire picture of the significance of ludic practices based on appropriating social media infrastructure. In truth, it has simply sought to connect an examination of how users playfully (re)construct platform affordances with a critical consideration of platforms as businesses embedded in a larger socio-economic reality. The latter is what may be seen as killing all the joy associated with play. But it’s not all bad.

This study’s findings and their present discussion have first and foremost shown that social media affordances are subject to creative appropriations by users. Platforms constitute a material setting within which users are provided with opportunities to act in some pre-determined ways, but how these opportunities are realized is, to a large extent, up to the users. For example, users can choose to exploit a platform’s affordances to give rise to practices that were not necessarily envisaged by the platform’s creators but are quite meaningful as ludic activities for the users themselves. This demonstrates that, even as privately owned products, social media platforms can acquire personal significance for users, becoming an integral part of their online-offline social lives.

At the same time, because platforms remain privately owned products, we should be careful not to adopt too celebratory a view of such phenomena. While illustrating users’ creativity and socio-interactive adaptability (cf. Virtanen 2017), “user-based practices” like group tagging on Facebook may also result in a framing of users as the main agentive subjects behind social media activity, which is to the detriment of more critical views of social media platforms. Indeed, platforms may be plausibly seen as welcoming new and “unexpected”

uses of their software, as not only do these keep engagement up and thereby generate profit, but they also obfuscate the platforms' own role as authorities prescribing normative frames.

Still, it is imperative to highlight that users I spoke with in this project seem to have an outspokenly critical awareness of how the platforms on which they engage in meaningful play operate. However, the users' critique seems not to fundamentally challenge the systemic realities that support the functioning of platforms-as-businesses. So, not only does using social media platforms not preclude a critical stance towards them, but also vice versa, a critical view of these platforms does not preclude their use, as not all critique challenges the very premises of social media platforms' existence as bastions of tech oligopolies.

While critical (discourse analytical) studies of social media platforms cannot change the sociopolitical realities that have shaped and supported the growth of tech megacorporations, it behooves such studies to problematize how profit-driven motives figure in people's everyday use of these platforms. In the following chapter, which concludes this dissertation, I reflect on some limitations that the present project may have had in the pursuit of its goals, and suggest some possible directions for future (critical) discourse approaches to social media infrastructure.

CHAPTER 8

CONCLUSION: IMPLICATIONS AND LIMITATIONS

At the most fundamental level, this study has shown that the semiotic software provided by social media platforms is amenable to creative repurposing by users, as observed in the practice of group tagging. Social media technologies thus do not straightforwardly determine what is done with them, although they encompass normative assumptions about how they should be used. This project's findings suggest that avid social media users may be keenly aware of this and seek to subvert platform expectations for fun. Ostensibly subversive ludic practices like group tagging emerge among users and are rooted in their Facebook groups-related expertise. Yet, even as highly invested users of particular platform features, people may remain critical of the platforms they are socializing on in complex ways.

Specifically, users I interviewed in this project showed a critical awareness that Facebook is not a neutral actor, and that its interventions as an authority may be problematic. I have shown them expressing this critique particularly when talking about the standard practice of reporting content in Facebook groups. At the same time, my interviewees also tended to view their own agency as central when it came to the more "unexpected" playful deployment of Facebook groups in group tagging. A possible interpretation for this, proposed in Chapter 7, is that in practices like group tagging, because there is an implicit idea of subverting the platform's built-in expectations, the platform's role as an intervening authority comes second to a view of one's own agency as the factor that drives a novel semiotic activity, wherein the platform's infrastructure functions as an appropriated tool.

Overall, these observations indicate that critical attitudes towards social media platforms as authorities and owners of the space in which users interact may coincide with avid engagement in social media-based play. Even in such cases, however, users' sociality is still exploited by the platforms, as engagement is still taking place. The users' critiques examined in this project generally did not seem to target the fundamental premises of Facebook's business model; i.e., the socio-economic reality in which privately owned social media platforms commodify users' sociality. In the end, even as users get creative in their social media-based ludic activities, developing affinities for particular platform features and imbuing them with new meanings as part of their online-offline socialization, the profit-driven motives that underlie the functioning of social media are not thwarted and the platforms' power as businesses and authorities is not materially challenged. In fact, users' activity on the platforms – whether critically filtered or not – functions to sustain this state of affairs. As Dean (2010, 114) eloquently puts it:

We contribute to the networks as creative producers and vulnerable consumers because we enjoy it. In fact, the open architecture of the internet enables and requires the capture of enjoyment insofar as it is premised on users' contributions, alterations, and engagement. [...] For the internet to function at all (as is abundantly clear in Web 2.0 and 3G mobile networks), people have to use it, add to it, extend it, play with it. Our participation does not subvert communicative capitalism. It drives it.

These broad conclusions vis-à-vis platform mediation, play, and critique have resulted from my engagement with a diverse set of empirical data in this project, which was fraught with decision-making at its every stage, from the study's theoretical framing to its practical implementation. Specifically, this study was conceived as a digital ethnography (cf. Chapter 3) focused on how Facebook users make use of the platform's "groups" infrastructure. My orientation to the subject matter was critical and drew on concepts from various disciplinary traditions (cf. Chapter 2), aiming to problematize how platforms mediate communication as businesses while remaining fun spaces for users. In the end, the choices I made over the course of the project led to a necessarily delimited view of the project's subject matter. In this final chapter, I therefore want to first acknowledge and discuss the limitations of this study (Section 8.1). Subsequently, I will conclude the chapter and the dissertation by turning to the significance of my project's findings, which I want to relate to possible future directions for social media research in a (critical) discourse analytical vein (Section 8.2).

8.1. This study's limitations

In an effort to produce a situated account of users' practices with the Facebook groups software, this project adopted a digital ethnographic perspective. On a broader level, this choice aimed to strike a balance between the examination of social media technology as a material factor on the one hand, and people's actual uses of it on the other. Yet, in attempting to combine both perspectives, some depth in the treatment of each individual parameter (the platform's design and the users' practices) had to be sacrificed. For example, a more thorough overview of the features offered within and around the Facebook group infrastructure could amount to an analysis that deconstructs the normative assumptions embedded in the platform's tools more systematically. This would also more closely align with the social semiotic framework for the study of semiotic technology (cf. Poulsen and Kvåle 2018).

Nevertheless, the decision to draw on diverse tools rather than stick to a particular established framework increased the project's analytical strength as a study in applied linguistics that programmatically adopted a particular interdisciplinary perspective. According to this perspective it is the empirical problem at hand that should drive the selection of the most illuminating theoretical framing (cf. van Leeuwen 2005b). A pitfall

in this regard is that the more eclectic one's ad hoc framework becomes, the more it risks internal inconsistency. While I have tried my best to curtail this by reconciling the onto- and epistemological assumptions of individual approaches I drew on to the best of my ability, conceptual conundrums may remain. What is more, the study may give the impression of making a contribution that is not directly targeted to "one field". This is not viewed as an adverse effect, however; rather, I consider this a product of my commitment to reflexively construct my study as a critical endeavor which may challenge narratives on the strict delineation of fields, frameworks, and disciplines. It is hoped that, while the study cannot fit closely into one narrowly conceived research field, other researchers may take up and expand on its insights from multiple angles. Scholars adopting a similar interdisciplinary ethos to research may additionally address any potential shortcomings of the theoretical blend this study has been rooted in, which would in turn be beneficial in setting more nuanced standards for other researchers – especially those in the early stages of their academic work.

Concerning matters of methodology, this project engaged in situated, qualitative analyses, featuring only few quantitative observations which were subservient to the broader research frame. For this reason, and also considering the study's non-positivist grounding, the broader conclusions drawn from my analyses are aimed towards validity rather than generalizability. I may have examined only an emergent "light" community (Blommaert 2018) of people who have fun with Facebook's infrastructure, but it is hoped that these situated insights can inspire broader explorations that trace comparable patterns of creatively assigning meaning to social media structures.

The situatedness of my focus also relates to an analytically underexplored facet of this project; namely, the fact that much of the data that shaped my ethnographic process, particularly in its early stages, came from within Facebook groups which were specifically "private" and not "public" ones. Apart from the practical challenges tied to such an engagement with private groups, which led to the development of a bespoke ethics protocol for this study (cf. Chapter 3), the platform-supported "privateness" of the groups in question may also be related to the kind of semiotic work that users undertake within and around these groups. This is a point that the present study has not systematically problematized. Some indications of users' differential treatment of private and public groups were found in my interviews. Anna and Simon, for example, mentioned that the gatekeeping aspects that private groups afford make them preferable to public ones for a few reasons: Facebook friends cannot see one's activity in these groups by default (as Anna stressed), and potentially disruptive users can be kept out, particularly in groups centered around people with marginalized identities (as Simon remarked). Relatedly, Kelly argued that increased gatekeeping and content moderation also render private groups more resistant to spam and bots. It is thereby plausible that the status of these groups as more "curated" has some

bearing on users' semiotic conduct. For instance, different considerations of audience (or context) design may come into play, compared to what users take into account when posting on their profiles (cf. Androutsopoulos 2014; Seargeant and Tagg 2019). In many ways, the perceptual space of a private Facebook group is not the same as an "ego-centered network" based on one's Facebook friends – which is what users address through their profile-based posts. Compared to posting to their Facebook friend crowd, in private Facebook groups, it is logical that users may assume different kinds of common ground with the rest of the group's "curated" member base (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2), as people gather in these structures prototypically due to shared interests. This may be part of what gives rise to and sustains "niche" communicative phenomena like tag groups. Future studies could address this open issue empirically, for example by working to expand existing understandings of audience/context design on Facebook, which has been a topic of interest in extant sociolinguistic research focused on Facebook profiles.

Returning to the situatedness of my project's data collection, there is another issue that could be seen as a limitation of this study. Specifically, my situated focus combined with the ephemeral nature of Internet data and the ever-shifting normativity of individual online practices may also cast doubts on the timeliness of my findings. Even among the users I spoke with in interviews, media ideological stances seemed to emerge regarding the increasing obsolescence of practices like group tagging, which – in the users' experience – may be on their way from being cool to becoming "cheugy", as my interviewee Johm put it, meaning rather uncool but not quite "cringe" (cf. Ntouvlis and Geenen 2023). The dynamic shifts in the indexicality of digital practices are, however, not a deterrent to conducting situated studies of patterns observable at one point in time. Even as group tagging may fade away as a practice, its significance as an example of user creativity on social media will remain, and it is hoped that it will inform future treatments of platform-based ludic activity.

Further, it must be acknowledged that my own positionality actively shaped the empirical scope of this dissertation. The sites and phenomena I chose to examine originated from my own algorithmic filter bubble. For this reason, my findings cannot be considered a definitive account of group tagging as something that a given population of users engages in, much less as a generalized Facebook phenomenon. It is entirely possible that group tagging (in some comparable form) crops up in other niches of Facebook, involving diverse users that vastly differ from those I spoke to and whose practices I observed in the present project. In our interview, Johm mentioned the existence of an "explicitly nazi-related" (Johm, {17:08–17:10}) tag group, for example, which is not only something I have never come across, but also something that appears to contrast with the ideological undercurrents represented in the tag groups I have examined (cf. my tag group corpus in Appendix E). Still, looking at only a particular side of things is an unavoidable limitation in the

ethnographic study of Internet-based phenomena, especially since the experience of the researcher-as-participant is, like all users', entrenched in algorithmic structures that filter content. Holistic examinations of online cultural phenomena are also conceptually unattainable, given that what we call "the online realm" cannot be seen as giving rise to some sort of distinct, cohesive "life world that might characterize a vast population" (Coleman 2010, 490). It is for this reason that I have chosen to focus on specific *practices* as instantiations of social dynamics that emerge in semiosis involving particular sets of resources in particular contexts (Kress and van Leeuwen 2001). The findings of this study thus need to be understood as first and foremost an account of *some practices* as well as the discourses that regiment said practices and the material resources that all of this is rooted in.

More broadly, the practices analyzed here need to be seen as facets of diverse social actors' online-offline lives rather than as a snapshot of "online culture" – if such a singular concept is tenable at all. Despite my choice to empirically focus chiefly on "online data", this project supports neither an essentialist understanding of "onlineness" nor a strict conceptual division between "the online" and "the offline". Given the study's focus on digitally mediated communication, screen-based data were a suitable empirical source to draw on as they allowed me to organically engage with the practices at hand as users themselves would encounter them. This was in line with the study's overall conception as an ethnography and thereby as characterized by an interest in describing participants' perspectives. While interview data constituted an essential additional component to my empirical corpus that enabled me to explore discursive understandings of the mediated practices I explored, it may be advantageous for future research to consider methods that encompass data both on and beyond the screen (e.g., participant diaries). Such methodological choices could lead to accounts that more actively reflect how practices undertaken and observed online are an integral part of people's online-offline lives.

Having reflected on some of this project's shortcomings, I now want to turn to its contribution to (critical) studies of social media and digitally mediated communication, exploring research avenues that are opened up by this study's findings.

8.2. Implications and future research directions

One of this project's key contributions is an illustration of socio-interactive adaptability in digitally mediated communication (cf. Virtanen 2017). Through the example of group tagging, this study has highlighted how the proliferation of digital media technologies brings with it opportunities for semiotic creativity, whereby the (relatively) new tools people are presented with on social media platforms can be taken up in unpredictable ways for social purposes. On the one hand, this finding suggests the importance of rejecting

technologically determinist views holding that digital technologies like social media platforms have unilateral effects (sometimes painted as negative) on the ways in which we communicate in today's online-offline world. On the other hand, a consideration of these technologies as techno-cultural constructs designed for specific purposes that translate into normative frames for user action necessitates a treatment of mediatized communication that goes beyond a celebratory view of users' creativity.

Creative though it may be, users' engagement on social media platforms still amounts to an engagement with the systems that prop up such platforms as lucrative business ventures. Drawing inspiration from materialist approaches to technology as I have done in this project offers a fruitful angle that avoids simplistic treatments of media in communication as neutral tools. While this is an established concern in critical discourse studies (see, e.g., Bouvier and Machin 2018), the empirical objects on which such critical perspectives can (and should) be applied abound. The present project contributes to this body of research an examination of ludic practices, which people undertake "for fun" and for no material gain, even as these practices constitute an important aspect of sociality, characterized by significant affective investment (Huizinga 1949). As this study has shown, ludic involvement with social media platforms does nothing to disrupt their continued functioning as business ventures with an interest in commodifying users' sociality. In fact, I have argued that playful practices that ostensibly break with the normative expectations built into platform features like Facebook groups may provide fertile ground for less critical engagement with social media on the users' part. The idea that one is playing around with a medium in presumably transgressive ways can obfuscate the fact that one's agency is still transformed by the medium's material infrastructure and that thereby one's labor on the platform (which generates value) is still being exploited. Future studies could expand on this preliminary conclusion by more closely examining the ways in which critical views of social media are reconciled by users with their undeniable personal investment in "playing around" with these media.

Another salient aspect of this study's approach concerned the allocation of analytical attention to *the users'* critical views of social media platforms. Critique is not the prerogative of scholars only, and as this study has shown, users' engagement with social media platforms does not preclude these same users being critical of the platforms' functioning and the authorities behind it. Future research on social media in a critical vein should thus avoid assuming naïveté on the users' part.

In fact, a fruitful research direction may lie in tracing how critical understandings of social media platforms may have longitudinally developed within individuals and populations as social media becomes less and less "new". As academics have broadly moved on from treatments that exalt the novelty of and the ostensible participatory possibilities promised

by “new media”, it seems that so have users. It thus behooves researchers interested in critiquing aspects of social media to also consider these grassroots critiques as they may well exemplify significant historical shifts in public opinion in diverse social contexts. It is also imperative to track people’s opinions on the megacorporations that own the means through which we communicate daily, as such corporations constitute major actors in today’s neoliberal socio-political landscapes (Machin and van Leeuwen 2016). These corporations sometimes have to (performatively) answer to governments in the face of scandals resulting from the misuse of their considerable power over data and data flows (see, e.g., Beekmans, Maly, and Van Hout 2023), but the fact that such scandals occur in the first place can reasonably be expected to have an effect on public opinion.

Further, users’ critiques of the platforms they spend time on have the potential not only to be an important empirical object of inquiry but also to de-centralize critique in discourse analytical research, so that the source of critique is not situated only within the researcher and their work (cf. Nonhoff 2019), but participants’ voices can also be heard for the enrichment of analytical accounts. Ethnographic approaches may be particularly well suited to exploring users’ critical perspectives on their own practices, and they may also illuminate the extent to which these perspectives may be in a dialectal relationship with the shaping of such practices.

The latter remains an open question. Despite having observed the normative undercurrents to some social media practices by taking into account the participants’ perspectives, my interviewees’ critique of Facebook emerged only serendipitously. For this reason, it was not possible to systematically explore how or whether this critique may play into the kinds of playful practices these users engage and have historically engaged in on Facebook. Future studies could thus take users’ critique as a starting point for empirical examination and uncover the layers of self-reflexivity that may drive what people do on social media platforms.

In the end, this study’s findings speak to a struggle between, on the one hand, liking what one can do on social media platforms, and on the other, being critical of these same platforms as exploitative and alarmingly powerful businesses. This is a struggle that I also feel on a personal level. It is only at the end of this study and the entire research process that went into it that I am in a position to reflexively recognize just how much this feeling may have shaped the direction of my project. For me – like for many, many other people who have access to them – social media platforms and the opportunities they afford for connecting with others have sentimental significance. And this sentiment often clashes with one’s rational understanding of the problematic socio-economic realities that underlie how these platforms are developed, owned, and offered. But what can one do about it? – Maybe research, for one thing

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APPENDICES

Appendix A: Tag group title corpus

Below is a numbered alphabetical list of the titles that made up my tag group title corpus in its final form. The groups' names are presented in their original spelling, with the exceptions of emojis, ASCII-based modifications, and one group title that is redacted on ethical grounds: Because the pseudonymized group *I can't stop joining tag groups!*, in which I did part of my fieldwork, is also tagged in my collected screenshots (cf. Chapter 4, Section 4.3) and thereby appears in the corpus, it is presented in the list below under its pseudonym. This is done to avoid compromising my cloaking strategy for protecting group members' privacy (cf. Chapter 3, Section 3.2.2). The pseudonym appears in square brackets and is hence first in the list below (cf. number 1). The real name of the group has been taken into account for all analyses of the tag group corpus.

Finally, next to each title, I provide in square brackets the group's rough member count at the time of observation (considering all identical or near-identical group titles together). If any of the titles correspond to Facebook pages instead of or additionally to groups, this is also noted in the square brackets. In three cases (titles 88, 190, and 239), an older name of the group is enclosed in round brackets.

- 1) [I can't stop joining tag groups!] [31,100]
- 2) "One more group won't hurt", whispers the tag group dragon [12,100]
- 3) "Psst, hey kid." <opens trench coat> "You like tag groups?" [8,200]
- 4) *his fragile masculinity shivers in the wind* [36, 102, 11]
- 5) *Laughs in Brat* [3,200, 98]
- 6) *stares in 40% spousal abuse rate* [1,000, 125]
- 7) *stares in CPS again, but harder* [28,300, 1,300, 2,700]
- 8) *touches ground and looks up grimly* Something Boomer happened here
[9,100, 2,300]
- 9) 1, 2, 3, 4, I declare a Tag Group War [24, 31, 3, 5, 76, 4]
- 10) a man with an unwashed ass has an opinion [18,800]
- 11) a tag group for promoting your tag groups [3,400]
- 12) Ah yes, the potato. An excellent choice of camera. [1,600]
- 13) and just like that I suddenly forgot all 300+ tag groups I'm in [225]
- 14) And the Join Button moaned, "Harder, daddy!" [9,200]

- 15) as a connoisseur of groups, this will make a fine addition to my collection.
[37,600, 1,900, 25]
- 16) as a sommelier of tag groups, may i offer a suggestion: [6,400]
- 17) As long as the join button consented, I have no qualms with your actions [9,900]
- 18) At this point I need my own librarian to keep track of all my tag groups [3,000]
- 19) Being blinded by bleach is better than this [210]
- 20) Birds Aren't Real [page, 87,200]
- 21) brb, tiddy slapping that join button [197, 21, 3]
- 22) Call me out like this again and you'll be hearing from my lawyer [80,400]
- 23) Christ, these tag groups are getting too specific [404, 654]
- 24) Circle was not red. No idea what to read, dick got caught in the ceiling fan
[21,700]
- 25) conservatives getting mad at things they made up [43,700]
- 26) Dank Memes [39,600]
- 27) DeLeTe iF nOt AlLoWeD [775]
- 28) Did I just watch someone get unalived? [7,400, 3,300]
- 29) Did you fail sex ed or did sex ed fail you? [20,200, 12,300, 539]
- 30) Did you tag this group? Is it blue for you? [213]
- 31) Do you really want to start a tag group conversation? [1,400]
- 32) Every conservative accusation is a confession [13,900, 33]
- 33) Ew, a public group. [3,700]
- 34) Fetch My Baseball Bat, I've Found Someone With Too Many Teeth [16,900,
507, 5]
- 35) First of all, how dare you. Second, you're not wrong [2,400]
- 36) Freyja, fetch your cat chariot. This m*n demands to be blood eagled. [10,200,
154]
- 37) Fucks sake... I can't join ANOTHER TAG GROUP!... *Joins another tag
group* [7,800]
- 38) Get away from me with that creepy asterisks roleplay [8,400, 736]
- 39) god has the worst fan base [105,700, 29,200, 240]
- 40) Greg Abbott is a shameless fuckhead. [246]
- 41) haha that's the sex number [56,600, 8,600]
- 42) Haha, you responded with text not a tag group, you peasant.. [292]
- 43) HE'LL YEAH BORTHER!!!!11111 [23,400]

- 44) hello fellow group member [21,600]
- 45) Hello fellow tag group hoarder [226, 11, 4]
- 46) heteros are making me upsetero [2,700, 100, 31, page: 2,200]
- 47) Hey I admin that group [692, 232, 107]
- 48) Hey I'm in that group [73,600]
- 49) Hey I'm in that screenshot! [33, 194, 7]
- 50) Hey, I'm banned from that group! [16,300]
- 51) Hippity hoppity your meme is now my property [19,600]
- 52) Hitting that Join Group Button Harder than a Cop Hits His Wife [1,800]
- 53) hold up, that's my kink [247]
- 54) How come Carrie Fisher died and this füçkér gets to live? [119]
- 55) How the hell do you remember all these god damn tag groups [3,500]
- 56) I ACCEMPT THIS PEET OFFERING [106,800]
- 57) I am a wizard who speaks only in blue text [5,400, 2,400]
- 58) I Am But A Humble Tag Group Collector. Here To Collect Your Tag Groups
[139]
- 59) I bet you're fun at parties. [541, 2, 62, 3, 2, 2, 40]
- 60) I came here to say this, but knew in my heart it had already been said [115,500,
14,000, 38,600]
- 61) I can explain it to you, but I can't understand it for you [139]
- 62) I chime in with, havent you people ever heard of, citing a godd*mn source
[3,400]
- 63) i crushed that join button into dust and put it up my nose [18,700, 27, 99]
- 64) I don't even know what group to tag, I'm so distraught [11,000]
- 65) I don't even think Jolene wants to take this man. [359]
- 66) I don't know where you're going with this but it's not inside a woman. Ever
[2,400, 8,200]
- 67) i don't remember all of my tag groups, but basically you're a fucking idiot
[16,500, 4,600, 31]
- 68) I feel like men aren't sending us their best people [26,100, 5,200, page 6,400]
- 69) I had to wash my thumb because it touched this while scrolling [52,700, 1,100,
679]
- 70) I have a solution, but it's a felony. [fēlony.] [8,300]
- 71) I have a tag group addiction and you're enabling me. [14,900]

- 72) I hit that join button like it was a join button [182]
- 73) I join a lot of tag groups and then forget they ever existed [369]
- 74) I Joined So Many Tag Groups, If A Comment Isn't Blue, It Looks Wrong [2,700]
- 75) I just type an "@" symbol and say what I wish was already a tag group [117]
- 76) I know I am losing this argument, but I can't back out now [115]
- 77) I know I have a perfect tag group for this, but I just can't remember it [2,800]
- 78) I know, I know. I run a Facebook group not a country, but okay. [155]
- 79) I like dark humor but holy fuck [2,700]
- 80) I run a Facebook group that IS a country - so there! [103]
- 81) I run most Facebook groups, a country, and a train on your mom but ok. [1,300]
- 82) I see this post more often than I see my parents [26,700, 72]
- 83) I slammed the join button harder than a mantis shrimp can punch [box glove emoji] [1,900]
- 84) I slapped that join button so hard, I cooked a chicken [4,500, 40]
- 85) I smashed that join button like it was my ex's hot dad. [95, 24, 64, 40]
- 86) I survived the zuccening of 2019 and all I got was this shitty tag group [2,200]
- 87) I will beat this man with a pair of bloody tampon nunchucks [277, 741]
- 88) I will PERIOD SHIT in this Person's PLAYSTATION (I will PERIOD SHIT in this man's PLAYSTATION) [25,300]
- 89) I wish I had the confidence of a man offering an opinion no one asked for [457]
- 90) I wish I was Jared, 19 [8,100]
- 91) I wish you would step back from that EDGE my friend [795]
- 92) I'd make that tag group but I don't want to moderate it [13,100]
- 93) If men have nothing else, they have the audacity [9,700, 577, 556]
- 94) If science was easy, we'd call it your mom. [190]
- 95) If That's Not A Tag Group, It Should Be [4,100]
- 96) If you put all of my tag groups together, they form one long cry for help. [1,500]
- 97) If you support what's going on in Texas, get the fuck out of my group. [9,700]
- 98) I'll try to join your group damn well knowing I don't fit the criteria [8,800]
- 99) I'M A NICE GUY, BITCH [10,400, 43,700, 4,100]
- 100) I'm in so many tag groups I can have whole conversations with them [588]
- 101) I'm just here to see what all op can suck start [1,900]
- 102) I'm not reading all of that but I'm happy for you or sorry that happened [1,200]

- 103) I'm not saying Bowie held the Universe together but... have you seen this?!
[268]
- 104) I'm this cat's lawyer and they're innocent [19,300]
- 105) Imagine announcing to everyone you weren't raised right. [15,900]
- 106) Imagine telling on yourself like this [4,000, 25,800]
- 107) is a transphobe with an unwashed ass [560]
- 108) is google broken at your house? [2,200]
- 109) Is This A Jojo Reference? [113,500]
- 110) Is this cum? [3,700]
- 111) is this item still available? [1,400, 1,100]
- 112) it's 2005 and this is cool as hell [146,500]
- 113) just fucking @ me next time, damn [14,600, 563, 2,600]
- 114) Laughing at this moved my seat in hell another inch closer to the fire. [3,800]
- 115) Let Max into the library [196]
- 116) Look, I love cum as much as the next guy, but this is too much cum. [103]
- 117) Looks Like Another Fuckin Group I Gotta Join [29,600, 4,200]
- 118) May Aphrodite curse this man with an overwhelming desire to fuck a blender
[3,700]
- 119) Men [1/5 stars] Do Not Recommend [5,400, 615]
- 120) Men can't find the clit, but they can find the audacity [1,100, 4,500, 9]
- 121) My entire fb feed is tag groups, I wonder how my friends & family are doing
[5,200]
- 122) My peepee, my rules, it's going in there. [41,000]
- 123) My therapist says I'm not allowed to join more tag groups [3,500]
- 124) My vagina just caved in on itself so far that a black hole was formed [342]
- 125) No blue text. Instructions unclear. Got ceiling fan caught in dick. [432]
- 126) No Brenda, reporting to admin does NOT magically get a group zucked [3,900,
17]
- 127) No one cares what sky daddy says [33,100]
- 128) No, I am not fun at parties. [225]
- 129) Now the group will perform the piece "dragging the OP", in C minor [55,200,
1,300]
- 130) Oh great, another tag group I gotta join [25,900, 58, 28]
- 131) oh great.... looks like another fucking tag group i gotta join [12,800]

- 132) oh look, a man with an unwashed ass has an opinion again [13,800, 3,100, 3]
- 133) Oh look, another tag group to add to my ever growing list of tag groups [302]
- 134) oh my god what a fucking cat [62,100]
- 135) Oh no, it's not blue [4,900]
- 136) oh wow, thanks! just what I needed, another tag group [2,500]
- 137) oh, no thank you that sounds terrible. [1,300]
- 138) Oh, That's a Public Group. No Thanks, I've Got A Reputation to Keep Up
[4,100, 161, 8]
- 139) Oh...that's a page, not a tag group. No thanks, I have standards. [22,400]
- 140) Once again, Satan is the logical and compassionate choice [56,200, 3,400,
2,400]
- 141) One more tag group won't hurt, mumbles the tag group goblin [5,700]
- 142) Oooo! I have a tag group for that in here somewhere.... [108]
- 143) Op Could Enter A Pussy Eating Competition And Still End Up Sucking A Cock
[251, 424]
- 144) OP get back here you fucking pinecone so we can bully you [23,700]
- 145) OP gives off "I drop common loot when defeated" energy. [3,800, 80]
- 146) OP is getting dragged harder than Joe Exotic in a tiger cage [15,100, 110]
- 147) OP really misread how the group would take this and it's wonderful [hug emoji]
[367]
- 148) op should have been queefed into a truck stop toilet [19,600, 76]
- 149) Op sucks his dads dick from the back then spits in his moms pussy [3,300]
- 150) OP, you fucking lukewarm off-brand cola [13,600, 23]
- 151) Pages are for rugged individualists. [121]
- 152) Personally attack me harder, Daddy [8,900]
- 153) please be gentle with the join button thank you [12,500]
- 154) please do not the cat. [46,300]
- 155) rare insults [2,800, 1,300]
- 156) Shit like this is why Jesus changed his middle name to Fucking. [15,200]
- 157) Slow down there, Commander Waterford [6,600, 401]
- 158) smashed that join button harder than a toe on a bedframe [966]
- 159) smashed that join button harder than Alabaman cousins during a fam reunion
[590]
- 160) Smashed that join button like avocados for guacamole [6,100]

- 161) smashed that join button like it was the patriarchy [301]
- 162) Smashed that join button like the 32 dudes that banged my ex while deployed [3,100]
- 163) Smashed that join button..... respectfully [162]
- 164) So no one told you that your post would go this way [four clap emojis] [17,000, 1,000]
- 165) Some people don't get tag groups and I don't need that kind of negativity. [574]
- 166) someone already tagged that group [139, 13]
- 167) Sometimes I worry that men ARE sending us their best people [12,600, 367]
- 168) Sorry, Mom [26,700]
- 169) Sounds like a weirdly specific question but ok [66,600, 2,500, 44]
- 170) Sounds like another fucki.. Oh wait, I'm already in that group [12,600]
- 171) sounds like another fuckin group i gotta join but ok [56,400]
- 172) Sounds like another group I need to avoid like the plague, but ok. [160]
- 173) Sounds like another tag group I gotta join but ok [1,800]
- 174) Sounds Like Fae Propaganda [1,400]
- 175) sounds suspiciously like something a bat would say but ok [173]
- 176) sounds suspiciously like something a pigeon would say but ok [56,400]
- 177) Source: Dude, trust me. [25,600, 18,300]
- 178) SPEAK IN BLUE OR NOT AT ALL [444, 36]
- 179) survived the Facebook outage of 2021 and all I got was this lousy tag group [473]
- 180) Tag group for tagging tag groups so we can all tag tag groups in tag groups [8,500]
- 181) Tag groups are my love language [9,200]
- 182) tag groups are the superior form of communication [9,900]
- 183) Tag groups spawn tag groups. It's the circle of life [3,300]
- 184) TAG GROUPS!! GET YOUR TAG GROUPS HERE!! [2,100]
- 185) taggers be taggin... [213]
- 186) Thanks for the Hot Take, Serena Joy [3,500]
- 187) That's definitely a asshole [1,100]
- 188) That's it, I'm hair shaming [105,800]
- 189) That's it, I'm lipstick shaming [133,100]
- 190) That's it, I'm Nail Shaming 2.0 (That's it, I'm Nail Shaming) [7,300]

- 191) That's It, I'm Piercing Shaming [53,000, 326,900]
- 192) That's it, I'm tattoo shaming: well done but otherwise shame worthy tattoos [46,300]
- 193) That's the dumbest shit I've seen today.... but please, continue. [1,700]
- 194) That's this group but I'm tagging it because I forgot where I am. [37,800]
- 195) That's this group but I'm tagging it for extra emphasis [75,000, 11, 930]
- 196) The bar for men is so low it's a tavern in hades [23,900, 8,900]
- 197) The cult with the sky daddy kink is at it again [31,500]
- 198) The Join Button Apparently Needs A Safe Word You Fucking Animals [609]
- 199) The join button may press charges for how hard I just hit it [8,400]
- 200) The Sky Daddy Cult Is At It Again [993]
- 201) The Straights Are At It Again [10,900]
- 202) There's no hate like Christian love! [51,600, 194]
- 203) These tag groups are getting a little out of hand, and oddly specific [13,800]
- 204) this is the internet, not america [27,700, 1,500]
- 205) This Is Why We Can't Have Nice Things [794]
- 206) This isnt an airport; no need to announce your departure [105,400]
- 207) This makes me facepalm so hard I hit the factory reset button in my brain [1,000]
- 208) This Pigeon Has Been Appreciated [2,000]
- 209) this should be a tag group but I'm far too lazy to make it [16,300, 917]
- 210) This tag group addiction is getting out of control [138]
- 211) Time to play zucced, secret, or banned [25,500]
- 212) Transphobes need to make like the helicopters they claim to be and fly away [666]
- 213) Twisted Tea I call to thee, smack this dude immediately [458]
- 214) Unlike You SJWs, I'm not Offended and Don't Care At All: A Novella [41,900]
- 215) use your tag groups you godless heathen [464]
- 216) we are all god's children and he left us in a hot car [fire emoji] [4,900]
- 217) We bout to tag war? Cuz BOY HOWDY it sure seems like we're bouta tag war. [126]
- 218) WE GET IT you're very unfamiliar with, and possibly even afraid of, vaginas [44,800, 1,900, 1,400]

- 219) We here at Men regret the inadequate service offered by your Man agent
[10,300]
- 220) We run a Facebook group, not a country. We don't have to put up with you.
[5,000]
- 221) Weird hill to die on, but at least you're dead [3,000, 1,000, 476]
- 222) Welcome to the ShitShow [672]
- 223) What a terrible day to have eyes [8,300, 2,700, 2,800, 2,100, 2,300]
- 224) What in the hillbilly yeehaw john deer tractor confederate flag is goin on
[28,000, 2,300, 374]
- 225) What in the meth smoking cousin fucking, duct taped car window is going on?
[2,400]
- 226) Who is making these tag groups?! Why are we like this!? [418]
- 227) Who Made This Sign Necessary? [535]
- 228) Why are men *gestures vaguely* like this? [3,000]
- 229) Why did you make all these nice people read this? [227]
- 230) why is everyone talking in blue [1,100]
- 231) Wow, there really is a tag group for everything [6,500, 2,400]
- 232) Wow, you straight up just told everyone you were garbage without hesitation
[10,500, 17]
- 233) Yeetus that fetus [8,400]
- 234) Yikes Wazowski [715, 156, 7]
- 235) You could have just said "Hi. I'm transphobic" and saved us some time. [5,600]
- 236) You need LESS Jesus [54,500]
- 237) You run a Facebook group not a fucking country but ok [3,200, 21,600, 2,100]
- 238) You want oddly specific? I got your oddly specific right here! [239]
- 239) Your "super straight" Flag is Literally Grindr Colours. So STFU (As someone
part of the LGBTQIA+ community, STFU and sit down) [863]
- 240) Zuckerberg give us the Vomit React you Nipple Hating son of a bitch [7,900,
12,100, 229]

Appendix B: User-generated categories from *A guide to TGs*

All unique tag group categories found in *A guide to TGs* are listed in the table below using their respective topic-hashtags. Word-initial capitalization has been added to the hashtags to facilitate reading. For categories featuring multiple topic-hashtags, all of them are presented together, with one appearing at the front and additional ones following in brackets. The table also includes short descriptions in italics below some categories, the content of which is deemed difficult to decipher based on the topic-hashtag(s) alone. The number of entries is also listed next to each category, along with information as to whether at least one of the relevant topic-hashtags was pinned in the group by the administrators (cf. “YES” for pinned categories, empty space for categories not pinned).

Table B.1. User-generated tag group categories from *A guide to TGs*

#	Category topics	Entry count	Pinned by admin
1.	#ACAB <i>Short for “All Cops Are Bastards”</i>	12	
2.	#Acceptance (#GroupAcceptance)	8	YES
3.	#Admin (#GroupAdmin)	61	
4.	#Adult	10	
5.	#AGroupWhere <i>Groups named “a group where...”</i>	69	YES
6.	#AhYes <i>Group titles starting with or including “ah yes”</i>	13	
7.	#Animals	30	YES
8.	#Anime	2	YES
9.	#AreYouOk (#OK, #RUOK) <i>Group titles starting with or including “are you okay”</i>	3	YES
10.	#Art	8	
11.	#ASCII <i>Group titles featuring “ASCII art”. ASCII is a form of character encoding for computers, which netizens have mobilized creatively over the years. ASCII art is also an object of study (see, e.g., Xu, Zhang, and Wong 2010).</i>	38	
12.	#Audacity	19	
13.	#Autocorrect (#Translate) <i>Tag groups about mistakes made by automatic typing correction software as well as AI-generated mistranslations, which are found to be comical</i>	4	
14.	#Banned	29	YES
15.	#BattleTags (#Insults, #Insulting)	46	
16.	#BodyParts <i>Specifically, private body parts</i>	24	YES
17.	#Boomer (#BoomerHumor) <i>“Boomer” is a shortened form of “baby boomer”, which has been popularized as an Internet meme mocking (typically older) individuals who are seen as unfamiliar with new technologies.</i>	28	YES

18.	#Cats	36	YES
19.	#ConditionalAcceptance	7	YES
20.	#Corona (#Covid_19)	4	YES
21.	#Debate <i>Groups in which debates take place</i>	7	
22.	#Departure	23	
23.	#Dogs	5	YES
24.	#Doxx (#Uncover) <i>“Doxxing” refers to revealing (hence “#uncover”) individuals’ private information (e.g., phone numbers, residence addresses) on the Internet as a form of harassment (see Eckert and Metzger-Riftkin 2020).</i>	12	YES
25.	#Drugs	6	
26.	#Editing (#Photoshop)	10	
27.	#Florida <i>The US state of Florida has acquired Internet meme status (particularly through the “Florida man” meme), whereby it represents an ill-reputed place where odd things happen.</i>	3	
28.	#Following	11	YES
29.	#Food	17	YES
30.	#Games (#Trivia) <i>Groups in which games are played</i>	6	
31.	#Gaming (#Videogames) <i>Groups thematically related to gaming/videogames</i>	5	
32.	#Gay	11	YES
33.	#Imagine <i>Group titles starting with the word “imagine”</i>	12	YES
34.	#ImHigh <i>Group titles starting with the phrase “I’m high”</i>	15	
35.	#Incel <i>Incels (standing for “involuntary celibates”) are an extremist Internet subculture involving men, centered around misogynistic sentiments (see O’Malley, Holt, and Holt 2022).</i>	15	YES
36.	#JoinButton	38	YES
37.	#Jokes (#DadJokes)	13	
38.	#Kids	2	
39.	#Kinks (#Kinky)	15	YES
40.	#Lesbian	2	YES
41.	#LGBT (#LGBTQ, #ShareWithPride)	3	YES
42.	#Lomg <i>A subculture of Facebook groups where the letter n is systematically replied by m and the groups are thematically focused on the concept of length (see lemghbook.com)</i>	9	
43.	#Loss <i>An Internet meme based on a 2008 webcomic strip titled “Loss” from the comic Ctrl+Alt+Del</i>	9	
44.	#Men (#Man)	41	YES
45.	#Memes (#StealingMemes)	11	YES
46.	#Misc	29	YES

47.	#MLM <i>Short for “multi-level marketing” businesses, also known as pyramid schemes</i>	6	YES
48.	#Movies	13	
49.	#Music	8	
50.	#Mute	20	YES
51.	#Name (#Names)	9	YES
52.	#Offensive	3	YES
53.	#OP	25	YES
54.	#OpenComments	2	YES
55.	#OurGroups <i>Groups run by the administrating team of A guide to TGs</i>	68	
56.	#Photography	5	
57.	#Picture	5	YES
58.	#Political (#Politics)	25	YES
59.	#Polls	5	YES
60.	#Pretend (#PretendToBe)	26	YES
61.	#RantGroups	4	YES
62.	#React (#Reactions)	175	YES
63.	#Reaction (#ReactionImage) <i>This category would be merged with #React if not for the specification of #ReactionImage as an additional topic. This is a hapax instance of two almost identical categories that were both kept online (and not deleted) by group administrators/moderators.</i>	20	YES
64.	#Redneck (#RedneckThings)	4	YES
65.	#Relatable	5	YES
66.	#Religion	26	YES
67.	#Repost	8	YES
68.	#Retort	135	
69.	#Screenshots (#Screenshot) <i>“Groups about getting/having screenshots”. Screenshots provide a way to widely circulate content that was posted in Facebook groups (e.g., conversations in comments).</i>	12	YES
70.	#SoundsLike	97	YES
71.	#SpecificDate	3	
72.	#Sprout <i>This appears to be some form of meme that is especially popular among certain Facebook groups (judging from the entry count). It involves reference to sprouts (of a plant), and the word “sprout” is playfully spelled “sprout”.</i>	101	
73.	#Support (#Supportive)	8	
74.	#TagGroupsAboutTagGroups	74	YES
75.	#Tea <i>Groups about “tea” as in “gossip”</i>	13	
76.	#ThreateningAuras <i>Groups that include the phrase “threatening auras” in their title</i>	20	
77.	#TimeSpecificJoin	6	YES
78.	#Unsee	19	YES
79.	#Video	2	YES

80.	#W33D <i>Alternate spelling for "weed"</i>	8	
81.	#WhatTheFuck	16	
82.	#Wholesome	11	YES
83.	#WishAds	2	YES
84.	#Women	6	
85.	#Wow	7	
86.	#Writing	3	YES
87.	#Yikes	12	YES

Appendix C: Coding sets

A full list of my coding sets is given below, which spells out the subcodes belonging to every code (in italics). The original orthography of the subcodes has been retained with some additions for clarity in square brackets.

1. SET 1: Tag groups & group tagging
 - 1.A. Tag groups (reified)
 - 1.A.1. *TG [tag group] definition*
 - 1.A.2. *(not) posting within*
 - 1.A.3. *TG spin-offs/meta-TGs*
 - 1.A.4. *TG title form*
 - 1.A.5. *TG topics*
 - 1.A.6. *TGs vs. 'regular' groups*
 - 1.A.7. *TG collection*
 - 1.B. Group tagging (act)
 - 1.B.1. *conversation*
 - 1.B.2. *metaprag[matic] function/indexicality*
 - 1.B.3. *frankentagging*
 - 1.B.4. *ad hoc TG creation*
 - 1.B.5. *tagging NOT-groups*
 - 1.C. Tag groups/group tagging comparison [to other platforms and their features]
 - 1.C.1. *vs. Reddit*
 - 1.C.2. *vs. Tumblr*
 - 1.C.3. *vs. Twitter*
 - 1.C.4. *vs. Spotify(!)*
 - 1.C.5. *vs. TikTok*
 - 1.C.6. *vs. hashtags*
2. SET 2: Facebook infrastructure & critique
 - 2.A. Infrastructure [elements on the use of which interviewees expanded on]
 - 2.A.1. *Group Expert badge*
 - 2.A.2. *EQs [entry questionnaires]*
 - 2.B. Critique of Facebook
 - 2.B.1. *Metaphors for AUTHORITY*
 - 2.B.2. *FB [Facebook] disciplinary action*
 - 2.B.3. *The Algorithm*
 - 2.C. Facebook (groups) comparison [to other platforms and their features] – 6 subcodes
 - 2.C.1. *vs. Reddit*

- 2.C.2. vs. *Tumblr*
- 2.C.3. vs. *Twitter*
- 2.C.4. vs. *Discord*
- 2.C.5. vs. *Instagram*
- 2.C.6. vs. *WhatsApp, Slack*

Appendix D: Transcription conventions

Transcription conventions used in the interview transcripts, based on the GAT 2 adapted for English (Selting et al. 2011):

=	Latching (immediate continuation with a new turn/segment)
:	Lengthening, by 0.2–0.5 sec. approx.
::	Lengthening, by 0.5–0.8 sec. approx.
:::	Lengthening, by 0.8–1.0 sec. approx.
ʔ	Glottal closure
SYLLable	Focus accent
!SYL!lable	Extra strong accent
ʔ	Final pitch movement, rising to high
,	Final pitch movement, rising to mid
–	Final pitch movement, level
;	Final pitch movement, falling to mid
.	Final pitch movement, falling to low
[]	Simultaneous talk/overlaps
(.)	Micro-pause, up to 0.2 sec. approx.
(-)	Short pause, 0.2-0.5 sec. approx.
(--)	Intermediary pause, 0.5-0.8 sec. approx.
(---)	Longer pause, 0.8-1.0 sec. approx.
(1.2)	Pause longer than 1.0 sec., duration in seconds and tenths of a second
have_to	Underscore marking cliticization
hm_hm	Bisyllabic continuer
hehe	Syllabic representation of laughter
((laughs))	Description of laughter
((coughs))	Description of non-verbal action/event
<<laughing> and uh>	Speech-accompanying laughter, with indication of scope
<<coughing> and uh>	Speech-accompanying non-verbal action, with indication of scope
<<perplexed> and uh>	Interpretive comment with indication of scope
<<:-)> and uh>	“Smile voice” with indication of scope
()	Unintelligible passage
(xxx xxx)	Unintelligible passage with marking of syllables; xxx = 1 syllable
(and i)	Assumed wording in barely intelligible passage
((20 sec. omission))	Omission in transcript with indication of time covered

Orthographic modifications indicating phonetic variants found in the transcripts, in alphabetical order:

'ffect	effect
abou?	about
an'	and
a?ing	ating
becuz	because
bi?	bit
bu?	but
can'?	can't
certnly	certainly
cmmunity	community
communicve	communicative
don'/don'?	don't
dunno	don't know
eand	and
fr	for
hafta	have to
innerview	interview
i?	it
jus'	just
kinda	kind of
luckly	luckily
no?	not
sommun	someone
sordof	sort of
spaham	spam
th'	the
tha?	that
unquo?e	unquote
wanna	want to
wanned	wanted
wha?	what
wouldn'	wouldn't
y'	you
yah	yeah

Appendix E: Screenshots of transcribed texts from Facebook Community

Below are screenshots of verbal text that appears on Facebook Community's "Managing conflict between members" page. The text in the screenshots has been transcribed and presented in the form of Examples 6.8 and 6.11 in Chapter 6, Section 6.3.1. Figure 0.1 corresponds to Example 6.8, and Figures 0.2 and 0.3 correspond to Example 6.11.

Audio transcript

"Our community is so big, we rely on the members to moderate the community. We encourage people to use the report function to report [to admin] posts that need moderation. If someone does break a rule, usually we will make a comment in the comments [stating] what rule they broke, why it's not allowed, and ask them to read the rules, and then we'll close comments on the thread. That way the person that posted it is definitely going to see it, but there are going to be others that also read that and can be educated about that.

If you have a person in your community that is malicious towards other people and you don't do anything about it, the other members, they're going to say: 'Well, if this community is like this then I don't want to be here anymore,' and they'll leave." - Jeff, Community Admin

Figure E.1. Screenshot of the transcript of Jeff's voice clip; from the "Managing conflict between members" page. Corresponds to Example 6.8, Section 6.3.1, Chapter 6

From time to time, your community may experience conflict between members. Conflict can arise from a difference of opinion, misunderstanding, confusion or controversy. Respectful disagreement and debate can be part of a healthy community. If a disagreement turns disrespectful or breaks your community rules, your admin actions can help get the community back on the right track.

Figure E.2. Screenshot of the first paragraph of continuous verbal text from the "Managing conflict between members" page. Corresponds to lines 01–06 of Example 6.11, Section 6.3.1, Chapter 6

When conflict occurs, such as a heated conversation in a thread, admins recommend acting quickly. Get involved before the situation escalates. Speedy action helps reset the tone of the conversation and lets community members know you care by being present.

If you see a thread that has gone off track, experienced admins recommend the following:

- Engage with the member in the comments and try to reset the tone of the conversation.
- If needed, restate the rules in the comments of the thread, and turn off commenting.
- Leave the thread visible so others can learn what happened.

Community members take your actions seriously. When tensions and emotions run high, admins recommend taking a moment to think about how a new member would react to what you are about to say before posting. Model the behavior you wish to see in your community.

If moderation isn't working, consider temporarily muting the member. Allow some time for the discussion (and the member) to cool down. When all else fails, feel empowered to remove members from your community.

Many admins we spoke to told us that they were initially unsure about removing people from the community, but realized it was sometimes necessary. As an admin, you uphold the culture and rules of your community. Members appreciate your moderation, including removing other members who aren't following your community's rules. For more on how to deal with difficult members, check out our article [here](#).

Some admins we spoke with said they'll temporarily turn on post approvals to calm things down. Once things have cooled down, they'll turn post approvals off again.

In extreme cases, such as something that goes against Facebook's [Community Standards](#) (nudity, hate speech or threats of violence), you or someone on your team can report the post to Facebook. Use the [report link](#) near the post, photo or comment to report it directly.

It is unlikely you can watch your community all the time. Experienced admins recommend enlisting members' help by asking them to report heated conversations to an admin so they can take appropriate action.

Figure E.3. Screenshot of the remaining paragraphs of continuous verbal text from the “Managing conflict between members” page. Corresponds to lines 07–44 of Example 6.11, Section 6.3.1, Chapter 6

ABSTRACTS

Abstract (English)

This dissertation presents a critical discourse study of Facebook groups as semiotic technology. Theoretically, the project adopts a multimodal perspective to digitally mediated communication and is critically oriented towards assessing how Facebook groups, as pieces of digital infrastructure, are imbued with meaning in their routine playful usage, while being owned, developed, and offered by social media giant Meta.

Methodologically, the project constitutes a digital ethnographic study, mainly characterized by immersion in particular Facebook groups and in-depth interviews with playful Facebook group administrators, moderators, and aficionados. Data were also drawn from Facebook's dedicated website for group administrators (facebook.com/community) to examine Meta's public discursive construction of their product.

Based on this ethnographic corpus, the project examines in particular: (a) users' appropriation of the Facebook groups software for interactional purposes in the playful practice of "group tagging"; (b) users' discursive construction of their and the platform's agency surrounding this playful practice; (c) Meta's public representation of Facebook groups as semiotic software juxtaposed with users' views vis-à-vis where power and agency lie in their routine engagement with Facebook groups.

Through critical discourse analytical tools rooted primarily in systemic functional linguistics, social semiotics, and interactional analytical approaches, the project highlights how users' appropriation of social media technologies dynamically reconstructs platform affordances, resulting in novel communicative practices. In these "user-based practices", users seem to perceive themselves as the chief agentive parties, while platform infrastructure is primarily viewed as an instrument. These practices may also be understood as being in opposition to Meta's "standard" understanding of Facebook groups technology and its intended use. While prescribing standard uses, Meta minimizes its agentive role, instead constructing group admins as the ultimate, empowered Facebook group experts, who build communities. Users contradict this framing, illustrating how active engagement with social media technologies can coincide with a critical view of said technologies. However, users' critiques do not address the institutional realities that underlie the functioning of social media platforms as businesses. In fact, it is argued that engaging in non-standard uses of social media infrastructure for playful purposes may result in a decreased awareness of the exploitation of users' sociality by social media corporations.

Abstract (Deutsch)

Diese Dissertation unternimmt eine kritische Diskursanalyse von Facebook-Gruppen als semiotische Technologie. Den theoretischen Rahmen bildet eine multimodale Perspektive auf digital-vermittelte Kommunikation, wobei der kritische Fokus darauf liegt, wie Facebook-Gruppen durch den spielerischen Gebrauch von Nutzer:innen Bedeutung als digitale Infrastruktur erlangen, während sie dem Megakonzern „Meta“ gehören und von diesem entwickelt und vertrieben werden.

Methodologisch handelt es sich um eine digitale Ethnografie, hauptsächlich basierend auf Immersion in Facebook-Gruppen sowie auf Tiefeninterviews mit Administrator:innen, Moderator:innen und Liebhaber:innen von ludischen Gruppen. Außerdem wurden Daten von Facebooks Webseite für Gruppenadministrator:innen erhoben (facebook.com/community), um Metas öffentliche diskursive Konstruktion ihres Produktes zu untersuchen.

Auf Grundlage dieses ethnografischen Korpus befasst sich das Projekt besonders mit folgenden Themen: a.) die Aneignung der Facebook-Gruppen-Software durch Nutzer:innen für interaktionelle Zwecke im Rahmen der ludischen Praktik des „group tagging“; b.) die von Nutzer:innen diskursiv hervorgebrachte Konstruktion ihrer eigenen Agentivität sowie der Agentivität der Plattform bezüglich dieser ludischen Praktik; c.) Metas öffentliche Darstellung von Facebook-Gruppen, die der Perspektive der Nutzer:innen in Bezug auf die Verteilung von Macht und Agentivität bei ihrer täglichen Nutzung von Facebook-Gruppen gegenübergestellt wird.

Mit kritisch-diskursanalytischen Instrumenten hauptsächlich aus der Systemisch Funktionalen Linguistik, der Soziosemiotik und interaktionsanalytischen Ansätzen zeigt meine Arbeit, wie die Affordanzen von Social-Media-Plattformen dadurch dynamisch rekonstruiert werden, dass Nutzer:innen sich diese Technologien zwecks neuartiger kommunikativer Praktiken aneignen. In diesen „Nutzer:innen-basierten“ Praktiken wird von den Nutzer:innen die eigene Agentivität in den Vordergrund gestellt, während die Plattforminfrastruktur vor allem als Instrument angesehen wird. Diese Praktiken können als gegensätzlich zu Metas „standard“-Verständnis von Facebook-Gruppen und deren beabsichtigten Verwendungsweisen aufgefasst werden. Obwohl Meta die standard-Verwendungsweisen der Facebook-Gruppen-Software vorgibt, minimiert der Konzern seine Agentivität und stellt die Gruppenadministrator:innen als primäre, selbstwirksame, gemeinschaftsfördernde Expert:innen dar. Nutzer:innen widersprechen diesem Framing, was zeigt, dass eine aktive Nutzung von Social-Media-Technologien vereinbar ist mit einer kritischen Haltung gegenüber diesen Technologien. Die Kritik der Nutzer:innen scheint sich allerdings nicht gegen die institutionellen Realitäten zu richten, die der kommerziellen Funktion von Social-Media-Plattformen zugrunde liegen. In diesem Zusammenhang

argumentiere ich weiter, dass nicht-standard-Verwendungsweisen von Social-Media-Infrastrukturen das Bewusstsein dafür verringern könnten, dass die Sozialität der Nutzer:innen von Social-Media-Konzernen ausgebeutet wird.