EVLING THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUS:
A CLOSER LOOK AT THE OFFLINE ACTIONS OF THE ONLINE WORLD

Cindy S. Vincent
B.A., California State University, Sacramento, 2003

THESIS

Submitted in partial satisfaction of
the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF ARTS

in

COMMUNICATION STUDIES

at

CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY, SACRAMENTO

SUMMER
2009
EVOLVING THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUS:
A CLOSER LOOK AT THE OFFLINE ACTIONS OF THE ONLINE WORLD

A Thesis

by

Cindy S. Vincent

Approved by:

Committee Chair

Second Reader

Third Reader

Date

August 10, 2009
Student: Cindy S. Vincent

I certify that this student has met the requirements for format contained in the University format manual, and that this thesis is suitable for shelving in the Library and credit is to be awarded for the thesis.

Dr. Mark A. Williams
Graduate Coordinator

Date: August 10, 2009

Department of Communication Studies
Abstract

of

EVOLVING THE COLLECTIVE CONSCIOUS:
A CLOSER LOOK AT THE OFFLINE ACTIONS OF THE ONLINE WORLD

by

Cindy S. Vincent

This thesis applies Anderson and Meyer’s (1988) theory of social action media studies to examine whether social action occurs offline as a result of controversial topics discussed in online communities. One example of this is the blog PostSecret.blogspot.com. PostSecret is an Internet blog that encourages viewers around the world to mail in personal secrets in the form of a postcard for online posting. The blog potentially supports the development of social action through its allowance for open discussion of controversial and socially taboo topics. A hybrid media analysis will incorporate an ethnographic study, online discussion forum and semiotic analysis.

Currently, the communication field has extensive scholarship regarding online community building, the impact of such on local community building, online community communication methods and other facets of online communities; however there remains limited scholarship on the offline actions that occur in response to controversial or socially taboo discussions that develop within online communities.

Dr. S. David Zuckerman

Committee Chair

iv
DEDICATION

To my loving family for all of your support throughout the years; my good friend Robert for being my rock of support throughout graduate school; and my love for your help, endurance and affection throughout this entire process.
ACKNOWLEDGMENTS

My great appreciation goes to the members of the PostSecret community who trusted enough to confide in me their total experiences. Without their help this research would never have been possible. I would also like to express my deepest gratitude to Dr. David Zuckerman. His wisdom, encouragement and support have guided me through my entire graduate program and culminated throughout this thesis process, for which I am eternally grateful. Thank you Dr. Jaccie Irwin and Dr. Michele Foss-Snowden for being wonderful committee members and excellent graduate professors. Last but not least, I would like to thank my research assistants, Michael and Heather, for all of your help with the most laborious tasks of this research.
# TABLE OF CONTENTS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Section</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Dedication</td>
<td>v</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Acknowledgments</td>
<td>vi</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>List of Figures</td>
<td>x</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Chapter</strong></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1. INTRODUCTION</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The American Society: The Postmodern Society</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postmodernism: A Definition</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>The New Society: Online Community Habitation</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2. LITERATURE REVIEW</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>What is Community? A Few Perspectives</td>
<td>10</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Capital and the Internet</td>
<td>14</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Civic Engagement through Online Communities</td>
<td>17</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>A Theoretical Lens: Computer-Mediated Communication</td>
<td>19</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiotics and Semantics: A Visual Interpretation</td>
<td>25</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Action Media Studies and PostSecret Community</td>
<td>29</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Interpretation</td>
<td>31</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Production</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Transformation</td>
<td>32</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Community</td>
<td>33</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Interaction</td>
<td>34</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning as Involvement</td>
<td>35</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Research Questions</td>
<td>36</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3. METHODOLOGY</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Collection</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Participant-Observation</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostSecret.blogspot.com Website</td>
<td>37</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Observational Procedures</td>
<td>39</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In-Depth Interviews</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Section</td>
<td>Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>------------------------------------------------------------------------</td>
<td>------</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Sample</td>
<td>40</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Design</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Interview Procedure</td>
<td>43</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Semiotic Analysis</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Postcards</td>
<td>45</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Procedure</td>
<td>48</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Data Analysis</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Source Materials</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Qualitative Analysis, Coding, and Theme Development</td>
<td>49</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Interpretation</td>
<td>50</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Group Production</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Transformation</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Archetype</td>
<td>51</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meaning Restriction</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>External Actions</td>
<td>52</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4. FINDINGS</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Developing Open Fora Online</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostSecret Appeal</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>National Media</td>
<td>55</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect of CMC</td>
<td>57</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostSecret Communicative Tools</td>
<td>60</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Community Commitment</td>
<td>61</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Desire to Help</td>
<td>63</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Forum/Thread Effect</td>
<td>66</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Anonymity</td>
<td>68</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Media Format</td>
<td>72</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostSecret Values</td>
<td>74</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>PostSecret Member Interaction</td>
<td>77</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Administrator Perspective</td>
<td>78</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Effect on Member</td>
<td>80</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Connection with Secrets</td>
<td>83</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
# LIST OF FIGURES

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Figure</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Page</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1.</td>
<td>Suicide postcard shown April 1, 2007</td>
<td>100</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2.</td>
<td>Self-realization postcard shown January 21, 2008</td>
<td>105</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3.</td>
<td>Sexual abuse postcard shown October 7, 2007</td>
<td>110</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4.</td>
<td>Death and family postcard shown April 2, 2007</td>
<td>113</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5.</td>
<td>Interpersonal betrayal and family postcard shown August 4, 2007</td>
<td>117</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Chapter 1

INTRODUCTION

Beneath the covers, within the closets and hidden inside the backs of our minds, there is a voice: a small voice that rarely rises into the national spotlight, but a voice nonetheless. It whispers to us the atrocities we do not dare speak in public; the thoughts that we have about ourselves that are looked down upon in mainstream culture; the aspects of our society that are quickly ignored and violently oppressed. This is the voice that reaches to everyone on some level and ignored by everyone on another level as well. This is the voice of ambivalence.

This voice dwells within a society where nearly 11 percent of the deaths in 2004 occurred as a result of intentional self-inflicted injuries (Miniño, 2006). In 2002, over 4,000 males and over 6,000 females reported having sex with at least one person of the same gender (total surveyed for males was 61,147; total surveyed for females was 61,561 [Mosher, 2005]). In 2005, over 9,000 people reported having used an illicit substance (total surveyed for individuals over the age of 12 was 67,760 [Substance Abuse and Mental Health Services Administration, 2006]). But in this society, how many drug users openly admit their addiction at a board meeting? How many homosexuals are welcomed into the congregation of a Baptist church? How many suicide attempts and “successes” are reported on the evening news? Its life choices like these that our society is quick to hide within the closet, for it is much easier to ignore the socially taboo and controversial than to acknowledge, cope with and accept them.
Many outlets have been created for those that feel they are part of an overlooked, ignored or oppressed group. Although some of these groups are moving into a social movement for equal rights and representation, just as many are still struggling to accept their plight and cope with it. Along with support groups and other members of sub-cultural groupings, the World Wide Web is quickly becoming a haven for the ostracized and ignored. Through the World Wide Web anonymity has created the cloak with which to hide under; it facilitates the ease of hiding all of those characteristics about ourselves we would rather choose to ignore. Through anonymity, anyone can be perceived as anything they want or share with everyone everything that is looked down upon in our society. Anonymity has become both the guardian angel and the devil's advocate for those who want to acknowledge the aspects of their life but have tried to hide.

But within this cloak of anonymity is it possible to civically engage the ostracized? Provide hope to the stigmatized for a more socially accepting society? Are the conversations and social bonding that occur within this cloak strong enough to motivate people to take action in their community and make a change to benefit the greater good of society? It is within these ideals of a civically engaged virtual community this study seeks to examine the role of PostSecret.blogspot.com. This thesis examines whether social action occurs offline as a result of controversial topics discussed in online communities.

The American Society: The Postmodern Society

In postmodern society, ever-increasing fragmentation and isolation of the individual contributes to the breakdown of the interwoven fabric of society (Strinati,
1993). Some reasons for this include cultural transitions from an emphasis on community to an emphasis on individualism (Kramer, 1997); consumerist ideologies that decontextualize meaning which create an absence of a shared belief and value system (Baudrillard, 1995); as well as technological advances that attract people into isolationist environments through media convergence and computer-mediated communication (CMC) (Jenkins, 2004). Although an abundance of examples explore this phenomenon (McLeod, 1991; Cova, 1997; Mumby, 1997; Otomar, 1996), one example, PostSecret.com, is a product of a postmodern society that simultaneously seeks to amend the absence of physical communities through an attempt to establish a virtual community that unifies individuals through shared meaning and media convergence.

The fact that virtual communities have developed seems to directly correlate to the postmodern characteristics of the present society and the ever-increasing divide amongst peoples. According to Katz et al.:

Our traditional communities have become so large and dispersed, that the collective social bond must be imagined and created in the mind of each of its participants, rather than directly experienced through direct contact. Our conceptions of community must be imagined because we conceive of them as sovereign, limited, and having a horizontal equality among members. In real life, however, communities are constantly challenged, have only arbitrary chosen boundaries, and hierarchical structures. Thus, real community grounded in intimate, personal contact and concrete issues of integration has vanished, replaced by a mental construct. (2004, p. 322-323).

Although virtual reality is referred to as imaginary in this delineation (which could be said of any aspect of “reality”, the movie The Matrix serves as one example of an elaboration), this setting has become a very real response to the fragmentation of people and communities within the physical realm.
Postmodernism: A Definition

To better understand the fracturing tendencies and various aspects to this social ideology, a more concise look at what postmodernism is and how its effects apply to mass media is in order. Postmodernism has been a difficult term to define as some scholars view postmodernity as a time frame and others view postmodernism as a type of consciousness (Kramer, 1996). There are several definitions which apply to postmodern theory: the breakdown of the distinction between culture and society; the emphasis on style and aesthetic appeal in place of content and substance; the breakdown of the distinction between high culture and popular culture; and the confusion over time and space (Strinati, 1993, p. 2-3). The ideology behind the first definition is that:

Popular cultural signs and media images increasingly dominate our sense of reality and the way we define ourselves and the world around us. It is not anymore even a question of distortion since the term implies that there is a reality, outside the surface simulations of the media, which can be distorted, and this is precisely what is at issue. (p. 2)

Thus, postmodern ideals and the media create a perceptual domination of society members through the establishment of a simulacrum in place of any real symbolic meaning. This confusion in turn has lead to some scholars determining virtual reality as merely a simulation of the physical realm and therefore incapable of genuine intent and human connection (Beniger, 1987). Though a product of this postmodern atmosphere, PostSecret could in turn be perceived as making a transition from the simulacra to the genuine and real.

The second and third definitions can be viewed as being born of the same breadth in that high culture has historically been seen as substantially meaningful, whereas
popular culture is the absence of that, focusing solely on aesthetic appeal (Berry, 2005, p. 196). The argument is that we increasingly consume images and signs for their own sake rather than for their 'usefulness' or for the deeper values they may symbolize” (Strinati, p. 2-3). Popular culture can be seen as the point where “signs and media images are taking over, redefining our sense of reality . . . [where] style takes precedence over content [which then] becomes more difficult to maintain a meaningful distinction between art and popular culture” (p. 3). Popular culture is also seen to be “so bound up with mass production and mass consumerism that whatever authenticity it may have had has now been completely subsumed within the notion of mass, so that one can no longer distinguish between the two” (Berry, 2005, p. 196). This aspect of postmodern ideology is the point where as a society, authenticity has been lost and most things are determined to be a simulation of contextualized meaning, castrated from the originating context. Detachment from meaning occurs as well as detachment from others in a realm where societal members have become skeptical of even what their eyes behold. In this society, seeing isn’t always believing.

The fourth definition addresses the ambiguity over time and space. “Because of the speed and scope of modern mass communications, and the relative ease and rapidity with which people and information can travel, time and space become less stable and comprehensible” (Strinati, 1993, p. 3). This ambiguity fuels the necessity for some scholars to perceive the lack in spatial and temporal connection as also lacking in human connection and genuine interaction. However, this ambiguity lends media users the ability to expand their opportunities to interact with others outside of spatial and temporal
constraints, which in essence are irrelevant to the fostering of genuine human communication. If people can interact online at two in the morning from the comfort of their own homes, that doesn’t decontextualize the meaning of the content they are sharing or the range of human emotion and experience they are conveying; quite the opposite. This absence of time and space gives users a chance to utilize an opportunity not previously afforded historically. Now, through the online virtual realm, communities can develop and mature outside of the constraints of the physical realm to allow for more freedom to communicate.

The New Society: Online Community Habitation

To examine this phenomenon of online community building, many case studies have been conducted since the 1990s that look at the development of online communities, typologies, social interaction and implications to the overall society. In 2005, Nathaniel Poor examined the normative and coding mechanisms that assist in establishing the website Slashdot.org as an online community and public sphere. In this study, Poor determined an alternative definition for Jürgen Habermas’ concept of the public sphere (Habermas, 1962/1989) where virtual realities would be inclusive. His definition stemmed from criteria established by Habermas that would also be deemed applicable to the online realm and include the acceptance of public spheres as spaces of discourse, the allowance for new discussants in public spheres, the discussion of issues that are often political in nature, and the judgment of ideas and messages based on merit not the ethos of the communicator.
Some other studies that have impacted the course of online research include Howard Rheingold’s contribution to the definition of community through his 1993 studies of multiuser domains, Internet relay chats, bulletin board systems and other online forums. One case study conducted by Marc Smith (1999) looked at social structures within online communities, specifically Usenet newsgroups. In 2000, he expanded this research to examine the spatial uses of online communities through the use of avatar gesturing and positioning. Dean Krikorian and Toru Kiyomiya expanded Usenet newsgroup research in 2002 to examine self-organizing systems and interaction.

Through PostSecret, a community is developing where under the veil of anonymity, open communication of controversial topics occurs. For the purposes of this study, Allen Read’s definition of controversial, or “taboo” is used (Read, 2004). According to Read, taboo communication stems from a cultural or social necessity for scapegoats or symbols of the forbidden. Cultural aspects come to be deemed as controversial from a “hushed awe that surround [them], the refusal of information concerning them, or the punishment meted out for inadvertent use of them” (p. 445). Many of the topics discussed through the PostSecret forum fall within this definition of socially ostracized and stigmatized conversation that are all too quickly hidden in the skeletal closets of society.

The PostSecret site began as part of an art project where the founder, Frank Warren, handed out 3,000 self-addressed postcards to a random sample of people asking them to mail him a secret that a) had never been shared with anyone and b) is true (Warren, 2005, p. 1). Warren updates the site weekly by handpicking and posting 24 new
postcards. Although it is impossible to determine whether the secrets have fulfilled these requirements as they are mailed anonymously it is irrelevant because, regardless of the veracity of these secrets, they are presumably taken as true and connect with the receivers of these messages through the blog.

Reader responses posted on the site touch upon every human emotion and controversial topic imaginable, all done with the option of anonymity to allow users to share personal secrets without fear of retribution for controversial topics. This aspect of the blog supports the development of social action through its allowance for open discussion of controversial and socially taboo topics therefore contributing to “the formation of public opinion by bringing issues to the fore of public discussion.” Because of this allowance for open discussion many socially stigmatized issues that are rarely addressed in the public forum are now being addressed through this community, which could lead to offline discussions within local communities as well.

The site was initially a very basic design that established a two-day allowance for feedback through e-mail regarding the weekly postcard postings. However, on October 14, 2007, Warren unveiled a new aspect to the blog, which created an allowance for full community interaction with an emerging PostSecret Community (Warren, 2007). Through the Community website viewers were provided with a wide variety of communication options, including uploading video responses, audio responses, instant messaging responses to other viewers, chat room responses and traditional e-mail responses to the postcards as well as stories of how the blog has personally affected individuals. Currently there are two components to the PostSecret phenomenon: the blog,
in which postcards and select e-mail responses are displayed for viewer consumption, and the website, where viewers can go to respond to the postcards through textual, audio and video media.

Although the communication field has extensive scholarship regarding online communities (Rheingold, 1993; Ball-Rokeach et al., 1998; Wellman & Haythornthwaite, 2000; Ball-Rokeach & Gutierrez Hoyt, 2001; Shah et al., 2001; Norris, 2002; Matei & Ball-Rokeach, 2003; Kim et al., 2006; Boase et al., 2006; Dutta-Bergman, 2006; Williams, 2006); there is currently a deficit in scholarship regarding what controversial communicative meanings online communities address through visual communication and how these sub-cultural online discussions in turn impact mainstream national cultures with respect to developing civic engagement and social action. This study seeks to make progress in adding research that addresses specifically the relationship between online community discussions and offline civic engagement. This study applies Anderson and Meyer's (1988) theory of social action media studies to examine whether social action occurs offline as a result of controversial topics discussed in online communities. To analyze this phenomenon a hybrid media analysis is used, which incorporates an ethnographic study, in-depth interviews and semiotic analysis. This thesis concludes with the implications, limitations and conclusions drawn.
Chapter 2

LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review discusses the theoretical contributions of the fields of mass media studies, cultural communication, and sociology relevant to this study.

What is Community? A Few Perspectives

Within the field of communication, lengthy debate has progressed over the years as to the definition of community. Historically, one definition of community that is greatly accepted is that of Ferdinand Tönnies’ delineation between Gemeinschaft and Gesellschaft: community and society (Tönnies, 1887/1957). Within this comparison, community is determined to have several characteristics including intimacy, physical proximity, a common sharing of beliefs, and history, in essence, a “lasting and genuine form of living together” (p. 35). In contrast, Gesellschaft is synonymous with a mechanical structure, perceived as the “mere coexistence of people independent of each other” and as simply the public life: society (p. 35).

Many communication researchers have looked towards this definition of community and apply it to today’s society despite the contextual confinement it was originally constructed under. One such scholar, James Beniger, derived his definition of virtual community based on this idea of physical proximity, shared history and intimacy, in what he refers to as a “pseuddocommunity” (1987). Frank Weinreich also concurs with this definition and states, “community is a collective of kinship networks which share a common geographic territory, a common history, and a shared value system, usually
rooted in a common religion” (1997). This definition specifically recalls Tönnies’
association of Gemeinschaft with religion:

One becomes part of a religious Gemeinschaft; religious Gesellschaften
(associations or societies), like any other groups formed for given purposes, exist
only in so far as they, viewed from without, take their places among the
institutions of a political body or as they represent conceptual elements of a
theory; they do not touch upon the religious Gemeinschaft as such. (Tönnies,
1887/1957, p. 34)

This definition of community seems appropriate in times prior to the mass media and
especially the virtual communication realm; however, in attempting to apply this
definition to the media sphere of today, it is negligent at best as it fails to acknowledge
the various aspects of community building that today’s technology provides, such as the
ability to connect people globally as well as instantly. No longer do individuals find
themselves bound by time and space constraints, now they can instantly connect across
the miles.

In a 1982 comprehensive analysis of 94 definitions of community, three common
characteristics found within the definitions were social interaction, common ties and
physical colocation (Hillery). This definition moves from the restrictive Gemeinschaft
ideology yet is still contingent on the necessity of the physical. As stated in James Katz et
al.’s 2004 article, “Jones (1995) found that the majority of constructs rely on social
involvement and interaction; in essence, community is a social system” (p. 317). This
definition finally breaks from the historically contextual constraints but leaves the
problem of differentiating between what is a community versus a society. In more recent
accounts Craig Calhoun seems to have established a definition that would encompass
both the physical realm as well as the virtual by defining community as the sharing of
information, ideas, feelings and ideas amongst large groups of people (Katz et al., 2004). In 2004, Constance Elise Porter contributed to the body of definitions regarding virtual communities with the definition of “an aggregation of individuals or business partners who interact around a shared interest, where the interaction is at least partially supported and/or mediated by technology and guided by some protocols or norms.” In his research of social networks and communities, Barry Wellman found that nostalgic definitions of “tightly-bounded, densely-knit groups of broadly based ties” rarely exist. Instead his research showed that contemporary Western communities “are usually loosely-bounded, sparsely-knit, ramifying networks of specialized ties”, and therefore more networks and social groups like online communities would fall under the classification of community and social network (Wellman, 2001). No matter the precise definition, current meaning need to focus on the abstention of the necessity of geographic proximity as the same foundational necessities that can still meet through the virtual realm.

When looking at these modified definitions of community as they pertain to the online realm it is interesting to see the evolution of communication studies and how these definitions came to be established. Howard Rheingold was one of the first scholars to conduct an ethnographic examination of the extent of online communities through the WELL project, “a computer conferencing system that enables people around the world to carry on public conversations and exchange private electronic mail” (1993, p. 1). During this early examination of the virtual realm, Rheingold postulated that virtual communities would become more enticing to mass society in order to fill a gap in the availability of informal public spaces while affording the opportunity for strong-tie relationships with
others online (Fernback, 1995). Following this study a flux of scholarship emerged that examined all aspects of online communities, like the affect on offline community existence and whether or not it decreases offline, "real-world" (Nie, 2001; Nie et al., 2002; Wellman & Quan-Haase, 2004). Research has also focused on the transformations of offline community through the establishment of interest-based communities (Barlow et al., 1995; Wellman 2001; Wellman & Quan-Haase, 2004), or the supplementations of offline communities through the opportunity for various new media communication in (Wellman & Gulia, 1997; Wellman, 2001; Wellman & Quan-Haase, 2004). What also resulted during this time was a healthy debate that framed computer-mediated communication (CMC) in general, and online communities specifically (Bimber, 1998; Jones, 1995; J. Katz & Aspden, 1997; Rheingold, 1993; Kraut et al., 1998; Nie & Erbring, 2000; Stroll, 1995; Turkle, 1996; Shah et al., 2001). General consensus and assumptions from both proponents and opponents of the virtual realm were that individuals involved in online communities would become disinterested in other interpersonal pursuits and therefore become reclusive, and that individuals who communicated online would only communicate online, disregarding the multitude of communicative media available (Wellman, 2004).

One of the more vocal views to emerge in this debate came from Robert Putnam (1995), in which he framed online communities as a factor in the dissolution of civic engagement and social capital. According to Putnam (2000),

Anonymity and fluidity in the virtual world encourage "easy in, easy out," "drive-by" relationships. That very casualness is the appeal of computer-mediated communication for some denizens of cyberspace, but it discourages the creation
of social capital. If entry and exit are too easy, commitment, trustworthiness, and reciprocity will not develop. p. 177

In response to this assertion, Claude Fischer (2001) argued that this should be taken with a grain of salt as the decrease in social capital noted by Putnam is inconsistent across varying measures, and the amount of decrease as being substantial is subjective and based on interpretation. Ball-Rokeach pre-empted this critique in her 1998 article in which she compares Putnam to that of a mass-society theorist whose ideas demonize new communication technology for fear of loss of individual control over mass media.

Social Capital and the Internet

The term social capital has been in use in various forms throughout the last century, but most recently has re-emerged through the debate of community and civic engagement (Putnam, 2000). According to Putnam, “social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (2000, p. 19). In this respect, social capital is something that communities work to achieve through values like civic engagement, interpersonal trust and reciprocity. It is through these efforts we see social action occur for the benefit of societies, communities or “social networks” as Wellman terms it (Wellman & Gulia, 1997). In response to this, with a particular interest in social capital and media usage, Shah, Kwak and Holbert (2001) analyzed patterns of Internet use and the production of social capital. For their study, the researchers conducted a secondary analysis of the 1999 DDB Life Style Study, in which they analyzed various components. These components consisted of the relationships between Internet use and civic engagement, interpersonal
trust, and contentment; the various forms of Internet use and the three variables; basic
demographic and contextual variables in relation to other forms of media; and the
predictive strength of each form of Internet use across three generations. In their analysis,
they found that informational uses of the Internet have a positive correlation with
individual differences in the production of social capital while socio-recreational uses
have a negative correlation.

When looking at the impact of Internet use on the quality of civic life, they
determined three indicators that set the foundation: civic engagement, life contentment
and interpersonal trust. “Trust and engagement—the ‘virtuous circle’ of social capital—
create the context for collective problem resolution, whereas life satisfaction—that is,
personal contentment—strengthens governmental legitimacy and democratic
functioning” (2001, p. 142). This study used Norris and Jones’ (1998) typology of
Internet users to give added support to their analysis. The typology consisted of
“researchers”, or those who primarily use the Internet for informational purposes;
“consumers”, or those who primarily use the Internet to shop or for financial reasons;
“expressives”, or those who use the Internet to communicate through blogs, bulletins, and
chat rooms; and “party animals”, or those who use the Internet for purposes of online
gaming and entertainment. Through this description, scholars reached the conclusion that
researchers and those who use the Internet primarily for information exchange are at a
greater advantage for civic engagement and increase in social capital. The research also
showed that users who primarily spend time in chat rooms may face a “deleterious effect
on trust and contentment” (Shah et al., 2001) in turn creating a loss of social capital and
decline in civic engagement. What this study fails to account for are users who do not neatly fall into one category. Researchers who seek information regarding medical treatment may wish to use a chat room forum for advice amongst peers. Likewise, an expressive that spends a considerable amount of time lurking on blogs may equally spend as much researching art history topics on Wikipedia. For example, Rheingold (1993) recounted in his experience with the WELL project a point in time where his two-year-old daughter picked up a tick and his wife and he were unsure of what to do. His wife immediately phoned the physician while he went to his online community at the WELL and within minutes received advice on how to remove the tick. By the time the physician returned his wife’s call, he had already removed the tick (p. 17). It is experiences like this that depict how difficult it is to draw the line of what is primarily an informative purpose of Internet use and what is primarily an expressive or socio-recreational use. Dr. Rheingold may have used the Internet for informative purposes in that one instance, but if he had not established those socio-recreational ties from previous encounters that would not have been an option for him in his search.

The analysis also falls short of accurately depicting contemporary Internet usage, as the data are nine years old. Even at time of publication, the authors admit the lapse in time could fail to accurately reflect current trends, “these relationships are often weak, which is not surprising if one recognizes that at the time of the survey the Internet was still emerging as a mainstream medium” (p. 153). Because “Internet use and social capital production may be mutually causal”, the researchers suggest “over-time analyses of panel data or thoughtful laboratory experiments to tease out the nature, magnitude, and
direction of these effects” (p. 155). Along with this, Shah’s analysis fails to take into account the role of bridging social capital in chat rooms. According to Putnam (2000),

Bridging social capital refers to social networks that bring together people of different sorts, and bonding social capital brings together people of a similar sort. This is an important distinction because the externalities of groups that are bridging are likely to be positive, while networks that are bonding (limited within particular social niches) are at a greater risk of producing externalities that are negative. (Norris, 2002, p. 3)

Putnam also states that bridging social capital is better for information diffusion and linkage to external assets in comparison to bonding social capital (2000). According to Dmitri Williams (2006), “social capital generated by online communities is moderated by relatively low entry and exit costs there compared to offline life. As a result, we should see more of the bridging function online than offline” (p. 611). In this respect, if online communities serve a type of bridging function where diverse groups of people can connect and communicate in a shared-interest environment, and bridging social capital accommodates information diffusion, it would seem that environments like PostSecret that attract individuals from varying walks of life to discuss socially controversial issues would contribute to a growth in bridging social capital, therefore potentially sparking an increase in civic engagement. The next section will delve further into the history of communication studies regarding civic engagement and community action.

Civic Engagement through Online Communities

In recent studies, Mohan Dutta-Bergman (2006) examined the role online communities played in engaging civic participation after the 9/11 attacks. In this study, Dutta-Bergman found that based on the theory of channel complementarity, which argues, “Channels that perform similar functions are likely to demonstrate congruency
with one another” (p. 481), that individuals who expressed their thoughts on the attacks and read others’ opinions online were more likely to communicate these thoughts with others offline in their local communities as well. The study also showed that those who participated in online community discussions about the topic were also more likely to attend meetings, volunteer in relief efforts, correspond with the local media, and sign petitions than people who did not participate in online communities regarding the topic.

In their 2003 study of media usage and local community building in Los Angeles through the Metamorphosis project (2003), Sorin Matei and Sandra Ball-Rokeach concluded “the Internet cannot have by itself a strong positive influence on the residential social fabric because it is only one of several possible social linkages in a residential community” (p. 654). Behrens, Glavin and Wellman’s research also concurred with Dutta-Bergman’s finding in their 2007 Connected Lives project where they introduced high-speed Internet to a rural community in North Ontario. In this study the researchers found that “non-users have a lower level of face-to-face contact than Internet users”, which may be due to the Internet “acting as a catalyst for engagement—a facilitating tool to enable a greater ease in scheduling face-to-face social interaction” (p. 1). Their study also showed that moderate users are more likely to participate in voluntary organizations, which leads to civic engagement as well as social interaction.

According to Dutta-Bergman’s study, “the common theme that joins online and offline community participation is the individual’s orientation toward participating in the community with respect to an important crisis” (p. 482). In other words, individuals are more likely to civically participate and engage in online and offline communities when
approached with multiple channels of media that are in congruence. PostSecret offers this to viewers through the availability of multiple modes of communication like postcards, e-mail, audio uploads and video. Dutta-Bergman also found that individuals who reach out to their local communities also reach out to their online communities for support as well as information, in turn fulfilling multiple roles within Norris’ Internet user typology. Through this study, the Internet was found to be used as a communicative tool for actively engaged individuals along with other varying modes of communication, which increased not only the civic engagement of the community but the social capital of the individual as well.

A Theoretical Lens: Computer-Mediated Communication

Although scholars have focused research on online communities for several decades now, it is only recently that the shift in focus has turned to online communities, anonymity and self-disclosure. In 2005, David Huffaker and Sandra Calvert conducted a study that examined how teenagers self-disclose through blogs on the Internet. This study revealed that teenagers are more apt to openly and honestly disclose personal information online and therefore remain congruent with their offline self-representations. “The online presentations of teenagers demonstrate that blogs are an extension of the real world, rather than a place where people like to pretend. For instance, teenagers reveal a considerable amount of personal information in their blogs.” In their research, Lisa Tidwell and Joseph Walther found that due to interactive strategies, that is, strategies that “entail direct interaction between communicator and target during which different tactics are enacted to elicit desired information”, “a greater proportion of self-disclosures and
interrogations in CMC than in FtF [face-to-face] encounters” occurred (Ramirez, 2002, p. 219). In a 2005 study, Jan Marco Leimeister and Helmut Krcmar also examined the benefit that anonymity provides users in online patient communities, noting, “There is a higher degree of openness among people interacting via the Internet than in face-to-face situations. This openness, especially concerning difficult topics such as life-threatening diseases or taboo themes, has been attributed to the anonymity of Internet users.”

When looking at the social interaction that occurs through CMC, many theories become useful in determining roles and hierarchical structures, analyzing content, and examining potential relationships. One aspect commonly critiqued is that of the social identity within the virtual realm. Kay Deaux’s model of social identity reflects the incorporation and acceptance of users with stigmatized social identities (Deaux, 1993). In this group, users who have been ostracized from socially acceptable societal norms due to personal beliefs, lifestyles or ethnic backgrounds (among other such groupings) are able to incorporate those aspects of their lives within the CMC realm. According to Clarissa David et al., the willingness to express personal opinion depends largely on communicator personality, but if not given a platform from which to speak from, even personality doesn’t help there (2006). Due to the relative anonymity and sanctuary, the Internet provides for stigmatized individuals these users are more motivated to join online, interactive groups that reflect their personal lifestyles (Bargh, 2004). For example, aspects of personal identity that are not concealable in face-to-face interaction like race, gender or age are much more concealable through CMC and allow for the creation of a virtual egalitarian society.
One of the more prominent perspectives on social interaction through CMC, the cues-filtered-out theory, addresses the absence of virtual hierarchies because of the anonymous nature of the Internet. This theory states that due to the anonymity and depersonalization of CMC, lack of social cues that are normally present within face-to-face interaction liberate users from social hierarchies and stigmas. This aspect of CMC usage has provided a “voice for the voiceless” (Kim, 2000). Through the reduction of social cues, anonymity facilitates the equalization hypothesis, which encourages the mitigation of social hierarchies and developing a medium that potentially creates a status of equality for all participants (Rains & Scott, 2007). In creating a virtual egalitarian society, stigmatized individuals are now capable of social acceptance for their own personal beliefs and lifestyles, even if anonymously. Whether or not a face or a name is on an individual, her/his personal social identity can be shared anonymously and be accepted through the CMC realm.

Another concept that addresses the relatively accepting nature of the Internet for personal freedoms is that of deindividuation. Festinger, Pepitone and Newcomb (1952) described deindividuation as the loss of inhibitions to repress personal ideologies and idiosyncrasies when hidden under the veil of anonymity. Studies have shown that individuals demonstrating deindividualized behaviors tend to do so in an anti-normative fashion. Postmes, Spears and Lea (2000) extended this concept through the development of the social identity deindividuation (SIDE) theory. SIDE theory posits that Internet communities are capable of becoming a psychological reality to users in spite of the lack of direct face-to-face interaction (2000). Through anonymity, users are able to “focus on
the content of a discussion as opposed to the identity of an individual contributor" (Rains & Scott, 2007, p. 66). Furthermore, SIDE theory allows individuals to hide behind the veil of anonymity in CMC usage and use it towards their advantage (High, 2006). Another theory used to explain how CMC users interact is the social information processing theory (SIPT). According to Ramirez et al.:

SIPT proposes that individuals not only adapt to the remaining cue systems, including conventional message content features and linguistics (Walther, 1992), but also draw on available chronemic factors, which force them to imbue their messages with social information, as well as instrumentally oriented content (in the context of task-related discussions at least; see Walther & Tidwell, 1995). p. 215

One of the benefits users gain in communicating through Internet cultural groups and the security of anonymity is the freedom for self-disclosure and addressing controversial topics without fear of retribution. According to Eun-Ju Lee and Clifford Nass, “by creating this pseudo-private communication environment, computer mediation is believed to minimize concerns about public evaluation by allowing complete anonymity among users. This, in turn, likely liberates people from the norms and regulations that govern their ordinary life” (2002, p.350).

According to Gary Marx (1999), anonymity allows for the open communication of controversial public issues. Consistent with SIDE theory, Marx states that anonymity encourages individuals participating in CMC group interaction to focus on the content of the discussion, leaving individual participants to feel protected from individual attention. Because their main interest in using anonymous fora is for individual protection, this aspect of SIDE theory seems to be relatively true. Individual protection is also important for this study as it assists in the examination of how and why users prefer to communicate
in a mass communicative forum and yet seek to remain fully anonymous. It also allows the communicator to feel as though their message is under examination and critique and not her/him personally (Marx, 1999).

Consistent with the model of social identity, Marx posits that anonymity helps stigmatized individuals to join collective groups as a form of social sanctuary and support. Examples of self-help groups available for groups anonymously through CMC are addicts, victims of abuse, individuals with diseases and other ailments (Kling et al., 1999). According to Davison, Pennebaker and Dickerson (2000) CMC users are more motivated to communicate anonymously due to anxieties or uncertainties they may feel in face-to-face communication, especially when the individual has an embarrassing illness, disfiguring ailment or any other stigma. Another aspect of anonymous communication that explains its usage is its availability for users to avoid persecution. For example, revolutionaries or protestors against repressive governments, individuals with varying sexual preferences in certain areas of the world, or writers publishing documents that are potentially harmful due to the document's content or group the document is targeting (government or corporate organizations) (Marx, 1999).

While both visual communication and anonymity through CMC have become separately, relatively prominent aspects of recent communication research, little research has looked at the influence of anonymity on visual communication through CMC. While recent scholastic research has in part attempted to address the visual aspect of CMC usage by analyzing the use of avatars and video communication, very limited focus is to the hybridization of visual as well as textual rhetoric that occurs on the Internet. In 2005,
Luc Pauwels pointed out this deficiency, pointing communication and cultural scholars to the overwhelming amount of visual hybridization through website pages. In his article, Pauwels identifies the fact that it's not that the content for research is not available, but instead a lack in focus on the part of the researchers who are narrowly limiting their studies to the direct connection between CMC users and the CMC aspects they choose to utilize. According to Pauwel, “The online environment in the form of websites uses many expressive means and calls upon many of our sensory faculties; it is therefore most remarkable that the textual bias is replicated even in website analysis” (2005, p. 608).

This point is highly relevant to the proposed study for the fact that the initial points of discussion on PostSecret, the postcards, combine both visual and textual elements that are each equally important aspects for the interpretation and reception of the message conveyed.

Another applicable theory to the proposed study, the theory of social constructionism, looks at media effects and construction of reality. Borrowed from the field of sociology and established in 1972, Peter Berger and Thomas Luckmann established the concept of the social construction of reality (social constructionism) to examine how social interaction constructs knowledge (Berger & Luckmann, 1966).

According to Gianfranco Cecchin as stated in Janet Yerby’s 1995 article:

The social constructionist view reality in not so much ‘shared’ as intersubjectively coconstructed through conversation. The evolution of knowledge is achieved through dialogue among alternative perspectives which themselves are not individual constructions but which have evolved through social interaction. The construction of meaning is viewed as an accomplishment of communication that evolves in a historical context, is based on the assumptions of those who have access to legitimized forms of discourse, and is influenced by constraints on the availability of alternative perspectives and narratives. (p. 349)
According to social constructionism, through the establishment of a shared environment (like PostSecret), users co-create existing realities which in turn validate the existence and legitimacy of this social construction through their interaction with one another and their messages. This connection is asserted even further through the introduction of the varying media like audio and video recordings, which incorporate even more humanistic aspects like vocal inflections and tones as well visual imagery. This theory is relative to the main theory this study will use, the theory of social action media studies.

Semiotics and Semantics: A Visual Interpretation

As visual communication can be seen as a more complex form of communication in comparison to verbal language, a semiotic approach is applicable to examine the various detailed and intricate elements that comprise visual language (Messaris, 1993; Moriarty, 1996; Messaris, 1998). Researchers have noted that it is worthy to research the adaptation of semiotics for users moving from one set of symbols to another (Walther, 2004). The theory of semiotics is defined to be the examination of the relationship of sign and symbol elements within language and communication (Agnes, 1999). Charles Peirce established one theoretical approach to the semiotics of visual communication that examines the receiver’s perception of a word or image sign in turn determining the meaning of another object or concept. In other words, this theory states that receiver knowledge of visual communication is mediated and framed through the usage of signs (Moriarty, 1996).

Stemming from the focus on the semiotics of visual language, research has also specifically focused on the rhetoric, pragmatics and semantics of visual communication
as well. All foci can be used to analyze visual communication, each looking at a different aspect, but this study will lean mostly on the visual semantic approach as it is the most applicable for the end goal of this analysis to determine the relationship between visual and textual elements in postcard suicide communication and how that relationship affects the overall message conveyed. The visual semantic approach looks at the grammar, syntax or logic that is used in imagery and design to determine the underlying meaning within the organization of the message. Although this approach has been greatly utilized in the art and psychology fields in prior years, it has recently come into the communication spotlight in the past five years as younger communication scholars seek to analyze visual aspects in new media (Barnhurst et al., 2004).

Because language metaphors tend to predominate the visual semantic approach, criticism has arisen stating that visual aspects of the imagery is subordinated to verbal aspects, although recent studies have successfully tied together both visual and verbal aspects in a cohesive analysis (Barnhurst et al., 2004). Some theorists argue that interpreting visual communication is in fact easier than interpreting verbal in that a period of learning the comprehension and meaning within the verbal is extensively longer than visual as well as the ability for visual language to permeate several cultures without the meaning being entirely lost in translation (Messaris, 1993). This visual semantic approach is therefore valuable for this study as it will assist in thoroughly analyzing the visual and textual relationships within the organization of the content and determine the latent as well as manifest meanings within them.
When examining the connection between the semantics of verbal communication and the semantics of visual communication, several similarities exist. Although they are mostly based on the same conceptual founding they are not entirely applied within the same manner. The relationship between semantics and verbal communication is based on the characterization of verbal language “by arbitrary, purely conventional relationships between individual elements (sounds or words) and their meanings” (Messaris, 1998, p. 71). The nature of this relationship is also restricted to established rules of ordering in regards to words or phrases, which creates a comparably inflexible syntax.

In comparison to this correlation, the relationship between semantics and visual language shows that imagery also follows certain semantic conventions; however, imagery is not reduced to arbitrary characterizations nor confined to such a rigid syntactic structure. Visual theorists, although in agreement with the correlation between semantics and visual communication, also acknowledge that this relationship can be so fluid at times that it may appear to be exempt from any semantic rules whatsoever (Messaris, 1998). According to Peirce, visual language is more available for interpretation in comparison to verbal because its relationships are not determined through arbitrary meanings but instead through personal experience and perception (Moriarty, 1996). The bond between visual and textual language and message interpretation was expanded upon in a 2007 article in which Susan Hagan states that various communication media intertwining both text and visual aspects:

Can potentially produce *cross-modal meaning* that clarifies, contradicts, or challenges ordinary meaning. Cross-modal meaning is defined here as shared understanding gained by an audience that must both look and read. Cross-modal meaning is communicated when concrete visual and verbal elements collaborate...
to challenge, contradict, or clarify the ordinary, or associative, meaning of isolated modalities. *Ordinary meaning* refers to the denotative and connotative understandings common to a particular audience. *Associative meaning* refers to individually held meaning. (p. 54)

The concept of cross-modal meaning is not new to communication research however, and has been effective in analyzing visual versus verbal affects when combined with semiotic and rhetorical concepts since the 1960s. In recent scholarship analyzing cross-modal meaning, theorist J.A. Blair discovered that when combined with text, images contribute to logical arguments and assist in the conveyance of messages (Hagan, 2007). When examining the visual content of the postcards through the PostSecret blog, most postcards are heavily dependent on both textual and visual elements to convey a message. Taking the cross-modal meaning into account when conducting this analysis will help to efficiently analyze the complexity of the messages and the various components involved, in turn ensuring a more thorough examination into the construction of the messages.

In reference to determining visual semiotics through *pre-texts*, Victor Burgin is quoted as stating, “responses such as ‘racist’ or ‘sexist’ are not in the photographs themselves, but rather they are a ‘complex of texts, rhetorics, and codes woven into the fabric of the popular pre-conscious’” (Moriarty, 1996, p. 179). This idea of pre-texts stems from Peirce’s focus on receiver perception, but takes it one step further in recognizing that these perceptions are drawn from pre-conceived notions as well as cultural inundations when encountering conceptual visual language. This particular theory is quite relevant to this study as it focuses on visual language conveying obscure concepts that not only touch upon human emotions but controversial topics like suicide.
In 1987, Donald Morley progressed visual perception and interpretation theories with the development of the subjective message construct theory (SMCT). SMCT is based off the same premise that the meaning within the sign or symbol resides within the receiver perception. Because receivers’ perception is likely to be determined by whether the message is comprehensible, this ability for message comprehension supports a subjective construct of meaning associated with communicative strategies and personal experiences (Parrott et al., 2005). This theory is supported by Moriarty’s assertion that:

"Because of the way the interpretant functions in sign interpretation, the responsibility for signification lies with the audience rather than with the text, and that is true for visual texts as well as written or spoken texts but is particularly important for visual texts." (1996, p. 179)

These theories are tied into the semiotic analysis of the postcards to determine the visual/textual relationship within the postcards as well as the underlying meanings. The next section introduces and explicates the main theory that was used for this study.

Social Action Media Studies and PostSecret Community

The primary theory this study uses to analyze the phenomenon of PostSecret is social action media studies and was introduced to the communication field in the 1980s (Anderson & Meyer, 1988). The definition of “action” this study relies upon stems from Schoening and Anderson’s definition of social action in which, ‘actual’ forms of action derive through performance and coordination with others (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 100). According to their definition, this form of action in turn “emphasizes practices because these are the ways in which history, cultural form, and social structure become concrete, knowable and known” (p. 100). With this definition in mind, this study will
examine possible online communicative fora and topics that could contribute to and/or motivate offline actions to occur in result.

This theory posits that media audiences cannot be characterized as a single mass, but instead constitute many, complex and varying types of communities. Within these communities, media content is interpreted through shared meaning produced by the group, where individuals are most influenced by their peers. For the social action media studies theory, James Anderson and Timothy Meyer have developed six premises that:

Direct the social science researcher to examine the collective signifying behaviors—or routines—that characterize the collective resources for rendering order and stability to a constantly changing universe. As part of this universe, media content is subsumed and interpreted through the forms of signifying action upon which social actions draw in producing a routine (and, hence, how ‘reality’ is constructed and sustained) thus determines the ‘effects’ associated with media content. (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 99)

The first premise is that “the ‘world’ and its meanings (i.e., ‘reality’) must be both produced and maintained in consciousness, correspondingly, the meaning of media content has no autonomous existence and must be brought into being deliberate ways” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 99). The second premise is that “the interpretation of media content emerges through the performance of identifiable lines of action that signify ‘what is being done.’ As such, media and content, as with any material fact, will always be made ‘real’ in conjunction with some known and knowable activity (p. 101). The third premise is that “the ‘decoding activities’ produced by signifying lines of action shift as those lines are reinterpreted and performed in different routines (in the same way that a sentence changes its interpretive power by its position within a paragraph). As such, the meaning potential for both content and interpretive practices remain open-ended” (p.
The fourth premise is that "knowledge’ is made concrete in signifying practices and is, thus, necessarily relative to, and contingent upon, the here-and-now performance characteristics of a given social collective’s routine. The domain of a media effects is a cultural production, but an effect is known only in local settings” (p. 104). The fifth premise is that “all lines of action—including media-related behaviors—are dialogic and improvisationally enacted by local agents as a partial expression of a collectively held semiotic of action” (p. 105). And finally, the sixth premise holds that “the social scientist has an ethical obligation to contribute understanding about social practices to the social worlds investigated. The social action media researcher, therefore, is obligated to inform social groups about the potentials and consequences of their media practices” (p. 109). This paper will now look to examine how PostSecret Community fulfills these six premises as a media-dependent virtual community.

Meaning as Interpretation

According to Schoening & Anderson (1995), “social action holds that our understanding of the phenomenal world (and its available sense data) is a product of determined effort, rather than determinant relationships among that world, the human actors in that world, and our ideas about that world” (p. 99). So when looking at the discussions and reactions that are posted through PostSecret Community in response to the postcards (and other viewers’ responses), the wide range of interpretations and reactions make sense as the community attempts to establish its conception of reality through an interpretation of messages posted on the site. “Where content ‘exists’ for actors, it exists as part of some method which the actors have appropriated as their way of
relating to the world. Content cannot be understood outside of these methods and the relationships they produce” (p. 99). So in this respect, media meaning that occurs through the community is not explicit but derived through an interpretive process.

**Meaning as Production**

Because meanings are determined through an interpretive process, social action media theory posits that this determination is not made passively but instead through an active participation of users. “Social action scholars hold that actors must engage in particular, repeatable lines of action that allow ‘understood objects’ to be fashioned from the features of the phenomenal world. Such action is directive; it requires particular resources for its accomplishment and, hence, instructs actors to seek out aspects of the phenomenal world that can constitute the ‘objects’ for its fulfillment” (p. 101). This premise coincides exactly with the ritualistic tendencies that have developed as part of the communication process through PostSecret Community. Every Sunday approximately 24 new postcards are posted, after which a 48-hour window is available for viewers to send e-mails to comment where the comments can be seen adjacent to the visual referent. With the unveiling of the Community link, users now have an unlimited amount of time to comment and discuss through a multitude of formats. Through this opportunity, the users within the communal setting produce multiple meanings.

**Meaning as Transformation**

Along with active participation in the meaning making of the messages posted, the meanings that are determined continually change and transform as users provide their interpretations and insights into how they believe the textual or visual messages should
be read. “The interpretive work that can be undertaken, however, is collectively defined, constrained, and supervised. A full cultural understanding of any interpretation requires a recognition of all permissible lines of action” (p. 102). Therefore, in this respect, the meaning behind the messages is continually changing as users shape and re-shape the meaning and interpretation. Even when placed within the boundaries of cultural confinements, these norms are broken as virtual communities are open to global interpretation and readings, which then create even more interpretations.

**Meaning as Community**

To coincide with the previous premise (which stems from the prior two as well), because meaning is interpreted actively by an ever revolving group the meaning therefore becomes part of a cultural, communal artifact. The interpretations and meanings that connect with these images become part of a living archetype that documents the communication of the community as verification of its existence. “Everyone who enters a community—through birth or joining—necessarily enters into a historical sphere of tacit agreements about what can and cannot constitute ‘the known.’ One does not merely accept the ideas about the world; one also agrees to act accordingly, to ‘do things as we do them”’ (p. 104). Therefore, this act of communication seeks to affirm the existence and cultural traits that constitute this community. In this respect, PostSecret Community fulfills several of Tönnies’ characteristics for what establishes a community, like intimacy, a common sharing of beliefs and history (1887/1957).
Meaning as Interaction

Because the communication that revolves around the postcard is done in a community environment, it is by nature conducted through interaction of members. Whether communicated instantly through instant messenger, visually through video uploads or anonymously through a postcard, the meanings that are shared, interpreted and continually redefined on the blog are done so through the involvement and interaction of the varying members. “Without the mutual work between two or more actors to limit the range of meaning possibilities generated by signification, the interpreter of an expression is left to deal with a greater range of indeterminancy as to what ‘reality’ should be fashioned from an expression and how this fashioned ‘reality’ is to be understood” (Schoening & Anderson 1995, p. 105). Through this interaction, members not only create meaning in accordance with communal beliefs and routines but they also restrict meanings by establishing limitations for the production and acceptance of meanings. This interaction between members in turn serves to continually establish and re-establish the communal beliefs and routines through the enactment of communication in the community context, thereby constructing the reality of meaning for community members. The more members involved in the dialogue, the more concrete the reality becomes. This is shown in the PostSecret community in the chat forum as members dynamically establish communal meanings for the postcards as well as related topics of discussion. A single member’s interpretation is made stronger and more concrete through the contribution of other members in the chat threads as they define and delineate the acceptable meanings for posted secrets.
Meaning as Involvement

The sixth premise of this theory takes a meta-theoretical standpoint and examination at the involvement level of the researcher in the process of the analysis. According to this theory, the researcher has an obligation to join the community, become involved, and reveal insights and outcomes of the study to group members. This is an interesting aspect to the theory and one that is directly linked to ethnographic studies for the attainment of a more ‘insider’ feel to the study. Based on the very nature of this approach an ethnographic method would seem applicable to see first-hand accounts of meaning transformation through communal interaction.

So when examining PostSecret Community through the lens of this theory in relation to the vast amount of online community and civic engagement scholarship that have been established, we will be able to see how civic engagement could be possible amongst community members as well as the role that message and reality construction play in doing so. According to Ball-Rokeach, “individuals in enduring social networks or communities may optimize Internet potentials to create and sustain producer positions if they have requisite resources (e.g., time, scarce and prized information resources, and hardware)” (1998, p. 31). When given the availability of media resource and ingenuity that exist within this community and the possibilities for encouraging civic engagement (not to mention social capital), it would seem that communities such as PostSecret could go against Putnam’s critique and actually be beneficial for the increase in civic engagement through online media.
Research Questions

To examine this possibility and determine the extent to which members are encouraged and inspired to become civically engaged within society, this study will seek to specifically answer the following questions:

RQ1: How do online communities facilitate the development of open fora to discuss controversial topics?

RQ2: What controversial communicative meanings do online communities address through visual communication?

RQ3: Do offline social actions result from online controversial discussions?

The next chapter will detail the methodologies used in answering the questions for this study.
Chapter 3

METHODOLOGY

Data Collection

Based on what Pauwels refers to as a hybrid media analysis this study incorporated multiple methods of analysis to ensure thorough analysis of both message effects through online content and the resulting actions that occur in the offline realm (2005). To coincide with this approach, this study used three methods: a participant-observer ethnographic approach to study the daily and weekly interactions of community participants; in-depth interviews with voluntary community participants to obtain direct feedback from members regarding their online and offline reactions to the blog content; and a semiotic analysis of selected postcards throughout the past year that address a wide variety of controversial subjects, which adequately portray community-acceptable discussion topics and feedback.

Participant-Observation

*PostSecret.blogspot.com website.* The PostSecret.blogspot.com website was chosen as a case study for this analysis as it encompassed all of the aspects this study intended to focus on: an online community forum where members share and discuss controversial topics. I first encountered this site through a friend’s recommendation and upon first visit realized that the forum was even more interesting as it included not only text-based discussions but visual ways for members to disclose information as well. Along with the visual representation of postcards, users eventually became empowered to
communicate through audio and video media as well making the site a true point of media convergence, which enticed a vast amount of feedback from participants.

I conducted participant-observation for one full year between February 25, 2007 and February 24, 2008. Both the PostSecret blog and the PostSecret Community website were analyzed to study the content of the discussion topics as they were originally revealed to the community as well as the discussions that unfolded in response to the postcards within the chat forum, video uploads and audio uploads. Because the Community website was not available until October 2007, the first eight months of the study focused on the postcards that were posted on the blog and the e-mail responses that resulted. After the unveiling of the adjoining website, the chat forum discussions and audio and video uploads were only minimally taken into account to maintain the consistency of the original analysis format.

The blog is updated once a week (approximately 12 a.m. EST), while the website chat forum is available for online discussion 24/7. Because of this open availability, access to the website was never a problem and inevitably ended up facilitating a more flexible schedule to obtain field notes and screen shots of the blog. As part of the hard data that were gathered for this study, I took weekly computer screen shots of the blog after the closing period for e-mail commentary in order to capture the environment of the discussions for future in-depth analysis. This proved to be quite beneficial for the research as detailed field notes did not have to be taken at the time of observation and data were able to be stored on a hard-drive throughout the duration of the study.
Observational procedures. Due to the anonymous and static aspects of the blog, I took a more observational role during the first eight months of the study. After the introduction of the Community website I switched to a more participant role, creating a part-observational, part-participatory role overall. When undertaking an observer-as-participant role in general qualitative research scholars have critiqued that “researchers who observe with minimal participation run the constant risk of reading too much of their own conceptions into what they see” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 149) and that “one of the strengths of ethnography is its emphasis on dialogue with respondents” (Bell, 2001, p. 198). However, scholars have also conceded that when researching in computer-mediated communication realms lurking is beneficial when gathering initial site data (Garcia et al., 2009) and that “the limited role of ‘lurking’ is preferred, so as to minimize the impact on ‘naturally occurring’ interaction” (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002, p. 265) (“lurking” in this reference stems from the CMC denotation of CMC users who “observe activities but do not interact with other users” [p. 260]). Based on this explanation, an observational approach was more appropriate for the initial examination of the blog prior to the development of the interactive portion. Even after this development, very few instances occurred where participation was directly undertaken in the online chat forum (except when soliciting for interview participants, to be explained further below).

I conducted the initial observational approach by visiting the blog every Monday (after the e-mail comment-period had closed), taking a screen shot of that week’s blog and archiving it for future analysis. When using the participant-observational approach (after October 17, 2007), weekly screen shots were still taken and archived; however, I
made minimal contact through the online chat forum as well during this period. In order to participate in the online chat forum, registration to the community was required, which simply consisted of providing a username (user-defined), e-mail address and password. The registration process also consisted of optional information such as name, age, location, but disclosure of this data was on a strictly voluntary basis. Given such minimal registration requirements, the Community website ensured that the option for anonymity was still available for those who sought to use it.

This methodology sought to observe the general format and environment for member communication, how participants communicated with one another regarding controversial topics and how participants reacted to controversial topics displayed on the blog. I spent approximately 26 hours over the course of the year collecting field notes and data for this methodology.

In-Depth Interviews

Interview Sample. Given the anonymous character of the community, the exact demographics of the subjects remain unknown, although some details were ascertained by those who provided such information. One disadvantage of this aspect of anonymity as identified by Wright (2005) is the inability to hold participants accountable for information provided and verification of accuracy. The benefit of this approach versus traditional survey methods is the ability to develop a dialogue with community participants and clarify any vague questions or concepts in real time to ensure accurate and concise feedback regarding participant interpretation as well as online and offline actions.
In order to solicit participation from community members for the interview portion, contact was made with one of the Community website moderators. In contacting this person, consent was received to post a thread through the chat forum to solicit voluntary participation. Based on preliminary data from the ethnographic portion of this study, one of the more popular threads in the chat forum for all ages, Secrets & Stories, was used to post the initial solicitation. Also based on input received from the moderator, it was decided to initially post the solicitation later in the week (Friday, February 8, 2008) in the hopes of attracting community regulars and avoiding those who’s “commitment to the project may be questionable” (Moderator interview, February, 5, 2008). The moderator also suggested “bumping” the thread up once in awhile to ensure it remains near the top of new topics posted in order to attract the most views by users. This technique was employed on February 9, 2008 and February 12, 2008. Total views received as of July 26, 2008 were 153.

On February 12, 2008 another solicitation was posted in the Ages 35 and Over forum by the recommendation of the moderator. The bumping technique was not used for this solicitation as it did not yield any replies in the post but still gathered 90 views as of July 26, 2008. Through these solicitations, contact was made with 15 respondents, partial interviews were made with 12 respondents (three were dropped due to non-consent), and completed interviews occurred with nine respondents: one moderator and eight community members (two interviews were terminated prematurely due to non-response).

*Interview Design.* Due to the limitation in direct-participant access, the interview process took place through the Community’s internal personal messaging (pm) system,
which is essentially an electronic-mail system designed specifically for the community.

Two sets of questionnaires were prepared in advance: one for community members to examine effects of the blog and website and member reactions, and one for the administrator to examine the community from an oversight perspective (see Appendix B for the community member questionnaire, Appendix C for the administrator questionnaire). Both sets of questions were designed to get an individual perspective and reaction to the PostSecret community and determine whether or not social actions resulted from discussions occurring through the blog and website.

The community member questions were prepared prior to initiating the interviews. The sets were broken into four categories and included the following: five introductory questions to determine general site usage and participation; five questions addressing postcard impressions and how community members responded to postcard content; five questions addressing online community building and how community members perceived their role within the PostSecret Community as well as their motivation in participating and discussing controversial topics; and finally five questions addressing member offline actions and whether or not participation in the PostSecret Community encouraged members to become civically engaged offline. The moderator questionnaire was also prepared in advance and broken into four categories that included: five general introductory questions to determine the role and responsibility of the moderator; five questions that addressed content impression and the impact the community had on the moderator and vice versa; five questions addressing online community building and how the PostSecret Community appeared to be developing from
the viewpoint of the moderator; and finally five questions addressing offline actions and ways in which the moderator had identified interaction between members that would suggest a progression towards civic engagement.

The questions were sequenced in a structured manner yet still allowed for participants to guide the discussion as the interviews became more in-depth. According to Lindlof and Taylor (2002), this type of interview structure is beneficial as it allows “the participant [to] raise issues the interviewer did not think to ask, suggest other ways of navigating a topic, ask to clarify a point, and so on” (p. 185). Because of this, the interview questionnaire became flexible as some interviews expanded beyond the simplistic structure initially developed.

Interview Procedure. As previously noted, all interviews occurred through the PostSecret Community pm system. The entire interview process lasted approximately five months, between February 1, 2008 and July 2, 2008; however, some interviews were completed as early as March 28, 2008. Initial contact with the moderator was made on February 1, 2008 in order to receive consent to solicit voluntary participation from community members. Once consent was received, solicitations were made, and contact was achieved with community members, consent forms were e-mailed to interested participants (see Appendix A for consent form). The consent forms assured interested participants that participation was strictly voluntary and all information provided would be treated in a restricted, classified manner, to be used for the purposes of this study. Of the 15 consent forms e-mailed, 12 were returned, with two of the 12 marked as underage participants. To comply with the Human Subjects Committee policy for underage
participants, e-mails outside of the PostSecret Community pm system were received from the guardians of the interested individuals giving consent for participation. [As a side note: one consent form was declined from an interested participant because the individual was underage and did not want to disclose to her/his guardian that s/he was involved in the PostSecret community.]

Once consent forms from interested participants were received, the interview process began with the introductory questions from the questionnaire. All interviews were temporarily stored in the PostSecret Community pm system until e-mail capacity was reached, after which, e-mails were then copied and pasted into a Microsoft Word document and stored on a computer hard drive for future analysis. All consent forms, consent e-mails and solicitation posts were stored on a computer hard drive for future reference as well (screen shots were taken of the solicitation posts to account for all conversations posted on the thread). A tracking sheet was also created in a Microsoft Excel spreadsheet to organize participant communication and dates of responses/drops.

Due to the nature and limitation of the CMC realm, certain factors may have contributed to the three interview drops that occurred. Although the questions were e-mailed in sessions, consisting of five questions for each session e-mailed over four e-mail sessions, to avoid transforming the interview process into a survey this technique may have increased the possibility of “bored or distracted interviewees [investing] their time and attention elsewhere before completing the interview” (p. 267). This possibility was partially confirmed by one of the participants due to her active involvement in sports, which left her little time to contribute to the study. Other possible factors may have been
global time difference or nonverbal cue deficiency as suggested by Lindlof and Taylor (2002). Despite these limitations, nine interviews were completed successfully through the PostSecret pm system.

Semiotic Analysis

The final methodological approach used for this study was a semiotic analysis of the postcards shown on the PostSecret blog. This approach was used in order to deconstruct the image and trace how the meaning of the message works in relation to the broader system of meanings (Rose, 2001). A detailed account of the exact ways meanings of an image are produced through the chosen images was achieved through the analysis in order to determine what communicative meanings online communities address through visual communication.

*Postcards.* Approximately 24 postcards have been shown on the PostSecret blog every week since the blog's inception (earlier posts were not as consistent with this number, ranging between 20 and 25 but subsequent posts remained consistent through the latter portion of the study). In order to set realistic parameters for the purposes of this study, a time-frame between February 25, 2007 and February 24, 2008 was set in which to select and examine the postcards to be used for this study. This selection is a snapshot in time to examine how the content of the postcard messages reflect the current social norms and standards as well as concerns and issues that may be hiding beneath the social landscape. In this 52-week period, approximately 1150 postcards were posted from which to choose for the analysis.
In order to determine which postcards were used for this study, all 1150 postcards were printed, cut out and sorted into categories by a research assistant. In order to determine categories, a modal instance sample was used where the postcards were sorted into genres of topics based on frequency. The research assistant was briefed on the possible genres to be used but was allowed to create genres as determined to be necessary. Sixteen genres were determined after the initial examination of the postcards: interpersonal relations, familial relations, social relations, self-identity, international (based on foreign language used), suicide, violence, addiction, morality, religion, fear, death, race, politics, sexuality, and one “wild” category for indeterminable. The eleven postcards that were chosen to be in the “indeterminable” category either did not fit within the other categories or the meaning of the postcard was indecipherable. Although some postcards determined to “fit” into a specific category applied to multiple genres, the overall meaning of the message was chosen despite universality of genres to certain postcards.

Once these initial genres were determined, each genre was re-examined by the lead researcher to select postcards that were most representative of that genre. Personal selection bias was reduced through the use of two varying view points in examination and re-examination of the postcards for genre categorization. Criteria for the selection of most-representative postcards consisted of: if the card contained both visual and textual elements, if the card was open for analysis and not obscure beyond interpretation, and if generalizations could be drawn from the card that would accurately reflect the group as a whole. Upon re-examination of the genres, the overall categorical system shifted slightly.
Among these shifts, the “fear” genre was split amongst the other genres as more prevalent meanings were found to overlay the postcards, making them more applicable in different genres. Also among these shifts, a new category for homosexuality was added.

Within the determined genres, sub-genres were created for categories that exceeded 10% of the total amount of postcards. Of these, five categories were split: interpersonal relations (15%), familial relations (14%), social relations (14%), self-identity (19%), and sexuality (11%). The interpersonal relations category was broken down further into positive interpersonal relations (consisting of topics addressing love, romance, marriage or interpersonal honesty) and negative interpersonal relations (consisting of topics addressing divorce, betrayal, jealousy or separation). The familial relations category was broken down further into familial acceptance or familial rejection. The social relations category was broken down further into social acceptance or social rejection. The self-identity category was broken down further into self-image (how the author views her/himself), self-acceptance/rejection and self-realization (to include hopes, fears and dreams the author has for her/himself). The sexuality category was broken down further into sexual abuse, sexual identity and sexual behavior.

After the finalization of categories and determination of the most representative postcards from each genre, five postcards were chosen for the final semiotic analysis. The number five was chosen as a representative number to ensure all of the criteria for postcards had been met (if the card contained both visual and textual elements, if the card was open for analysis and not obscure beyond interpretation, and if generalizations could be drawn from the card that would accurately reflect the group as a whole) as well as the
overall criteria of addressing controversial topics and encouraging communal discussions. This number of postcards adequately represented the vast number of topics addressed as well as simultaneously meeting the criteria for controversial and frequent topic. The final topics chosen were: suicide, self-realization, sexual abuse, death and family, and interpersonal betrayal and family.

Procedure. In order to conduct the semiotic analysis of the postcards, the signs within each of the postcards were identified as well as their significations within the postcard context. The signs were also examined to determine their meaning both from a syntagmatic viewpoint (meaning derived through its relation to other signs within the image’s context) and a paradigmatic viewpoint (meaning derived through its relation to other signs outside of the image’s context) to analyze how they relate to other signs (Rose, 2001). One aspect of this that will be noted is that of the interpretation on the part of the viewer. Because PostSecret is an international website and includes foreign postcards as well as international viewers within the blog, various interpretations of the signs may be drawn depending on the level of the studium (the extent of the culturally-informed reading of the image) as well as the punctum (Rose, 2001). The punctum will be very important when looking at the PostSecret postcards as it is the interpretation of the sign that disturbs or changes the viewer while leaving her or him unsure as to why she or he is disturbed. Many semiotic relationships created within the PostSecret postcards tend to touch upon this very concept.

The denotive and connotive meanings derived from the signs were also examined to analyze whether codes (meanings specific to particular groups) were established and
what possible interpretations could be extrapolated through those codes. Finally, the signs were re-examined through their established codes to determine what greater ideological themes could be identified.

Data Analysis

Source Materials

Interview transcripts, blog archives, field notes, and postcards were considered source materials for this study. All source materials were treated as qualitative data and analyzed accordingly as noted in the following sub-section.

Qualitative Analysis, Coding, and Theme Development

A grounded theory approach (Glaser & Strauss, 1967) was used for the qualitative analysis and relied on existing theory by Anderson and Meyer (1988) through their social action media studies theory. Interview transcripts were collected through the PostSecret pm system and then saved into Microsoft Word files. These transcripts were then printed and analyzed through open coding, which consisted of a close textual reading line by line to determine portions of text that could develop potential categories (Lindlof & Taylor, 2002). Throughout this process a constant comparison of categories was conducted in which each new code was compared against former codes to ensure consistency of coding and reliability in data (Strauss & Corbin, 1990). From this, 117 categories were initially determined. A research assistant then inserted the data into a codebook based on the highlighted portions of text that referenced the potential codes.

A second close reading was conducted, consisting of axial coding, in which the 117 categories were re-analyzed to find connections where codes could be formed that
either merged existing categories or identified categories as irrelevant to the overall goals of this study and abandoned. This phase resulted in the creation of 15 codes: Administrative perspective, connection with secrets, effect on member, community commitment, desire to help, member effect, anonymity, effect of CMC, thread effect, media format, PostSecret Community values, community connection, community interaction, national media, and offline repercussions.

At this point, codes transitioned from the previous descriptive form of coding to a more analytical/theoretical coding process by re-examining the data under the lens of the social action media studies theory. From this, the 15 codes aligned within the five premises of this theory plus an additional theme to account for the repercussions of offline social actions that occur outside of the community. These themes consisted of: meaning interpretation, group production, meaning transformation, community archetype, meaning restriction, and external actions. The basis for the findings of this study is formed from these 6 themes and 15 codes.

*Meaning Interpretation.* As shown previously in the literature review, meaning interpretation according to the social action media studies signifies how a community interprets and defines media content in establishing its conception of reality and validation of community. For PostSecret, this was shown in multiple ways: initially through members interpretations of the national media; the role the media format (CMC) played in member’s interpretations; the administrator’s perspective; the effects of the postcards, blog, chat forum and interaction with others on members; and member connections with postcard secrets as shown through the chat forum.
Group Production. According to the social action media studies theory, group production signifies the active participation of users in establishing the meaning of media messages. For PostSecret, this was shown in multiple ways: through user commitment to the community, the effect of the chat room topic threads in helping or hindering controversial discussions, and the ability for users to help one another while establishing a bonding community through interaction.

Meaning Transformation. Social action media studies theory states that meaning transformation occurs as members use media in different ways. As meanings are established within the community they are continually altered and changed as various perspectives interact and reinterpret established meanings. For PostSecret, this was shown in two ways: through the role anonymity plays in member’s perception of trust and honesty and the effect members have on one another within the community.

Community Archetype. Along with how meanings are established and transformed within the community is how members establish tangible forms of these meanings with which to establish a community archetype of knowledge. Meaning is interpreted actively by a revolving group which then becomes part of a cultural, communal artifact. This archetype sets the foundation for community cultural context in which new members must adhere to and abide by in order to be accepted into the group. For PostSecret, this was shown in two ways: through the media formats the members prefer to interact through and through the values and morals upheld in the chat forum by members, administrators and moderators.
Meaning Restriction. The fifth theme established in Schoening and Anderson’s Social Action Media Studies theory (1995) addresses how community members create meaning in accordance with communal beliefs and routines while also restricting meanings by establishing limitations for the production and acceptance of meanings. In this sense, language is seen as action in which the interaction between community members helps to restrict the infinite possibilities of meanings through engaged dialogue. As members interact they “monitor, interpret, and direct their own and others’ uses of a signification system” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 105), which in this case are the community values established through the community archetype. For PostSecret, meaning restriction was shown in two ways: through the connection established between community members and through the communicative patterns used in member interaction.

External Actions. In addition to the five themes established in Schoening and Anderson’s Social Action Media Studies theory (1995), this study proposes a sixth theme, external actions outside of the community, to account for the repercussions that extend outside of the community based on the foundational lines of action established within the community. This final theme seeks to determine the effect of meaning construction outside of the community by group members using the signification system constructed within PostSecret. As members interact with others in their local community they do so with the structural reality constructed within PostSecret, which in turn impacts how they interact and the repercussions that result from that interaction. For PostSecret,
external actions were shown through the offline repercussions that resulted outside of the PostSecret community.
Chapter 4

FINDINGS

This chapter describes the findings of this study as they address the three research questions posed in chapter 2. The first section addresses how online communities facilitate the development of open fora to discuss controversial topics and uses qualitative data from ethnographic field notes and in-depth interviews for detailed explication. The second section identifies the controversial communicative meanings online communities address through visual communication by semiotic analysis. The final section addresses the impact online controversial discussions have on the offline realm through ethnographic field notes and in-depth interviews.

Developing Open Fora Online

The first research question for this study sought to determine how online communities facilitate the development of open fora to discuss controversial topics. To address this question an ethnographic inquiry was conducted to analyze field notes and community member interviews and the perceptions they hold of the PostSecret phenomenon. This section details these analyses while under the lens of the social action media studies theory. The five main themes based off this theory were used for analysis in addressing how open fora are developed. From this analysis it was determined that online communities like PostSecret facilitate development in two ways: with communicative tools and through communicative interaction within the community. How these methods are specifically implemented within the PostSecret community is detailed in the following sections.
PostSecret Appeal

Prior to individuals engaging in controversial discussions or even participating as members they must first hear of the community, connect with it and make a commitment in order to transition from lurker to member. In PostSecret, the appeal to visit the site and eventually transition to become a member was shown through the role the national media play in addressing or failing to address the controversial social issues that are important in members’ lives. The appeal to visit the site was also shown in the connection with the computer-mediated format and the benefits that go along with it like anonymity, reduction of social cues, and diminishment of fear of retribution for shared thoughts or beliefs. By first attracting individuals to the community, PostSecret can then develop the community to facilitate open communication fora for controversial discussions.

National Media. The PostSecret community was established due to the lack of coverage of important, albeit controversial, issues in the national media like suicide, sexual abuse, domestic violence, etc. Members perceive national media to either largely ignore these controversial topics or address them through a specified media frame, which in turn loses the aspect of humanity that touches on a personal level:

It's sad; but eating disorders, suicide, self-injury--they're all still the punch line of so many jokes. People hear of a suicide, and it's just another name in the obituaries to them. And maybe I take it too seriously, and am a bit over dramatic. Maybe you really haven't overcome it until you can laugh at it. But what about the life behind it? They were, are, people too. And that aspect seems to be lost. (Member interview, March 19, 2008)

Along with this, some members believe there needs to be an overall acceptance from audience members of the national media in order to even have a meaningful discussion of such topics to begin. Many members inevitably joined PostSecret because of this
substantial lack of meaning and depth of controversial topics, which has also been noted in current research as well (Pirkis et al., 2007; Chesebro & McMahan, 2006). This lack of substantial and meaningful national coverage in turn establishes the foundation for the PostSecret community’s conception of reality by accepting and addressing these topics.

The effect of national media coverage within the theme of meaning interpretation looks beyond the media content exposure within the community to the external media content that shape the predispositions of the members and the reasons that may influence their interaction within the community. Through this, community members establish their “common methods of understanding” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 99). By having a lack of exposure to meaningful coverage, this in turn sets the stage for how members will bring these issues “‘into human experience’ as an interpreted text” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 100).

According to Schoening and Anderson’s theory, media content has no meaning by itself and therefore its meaning is derived through community interpretation (1995). Because members interact in the community with a lack of preconceived methods for interpreting meaning regarding these issues, they construct methods within the community to establish communal meanings and interpretations. This is done through the chat forum where members are allowed access to the forum to discuss issues 24 hours a day, seven days a week. In this forum, the issues are addressed, dissected and meanings are determined through live, real-time interactions among members. “I also discuss [controversial issues] in Real Life, but here, I get a better forum to display my ideas,
more people hear them, so I might be able to reach at least one more person” (Member interview, March 11, 2008).

As a result of the lack of coverage of controversial issues in the national media, members sought an alternative media format, such as PostSecret, to be able to discuss the issues they find important. Through creating an alternative medium to the national media, PostSecret directly established a community that could be more conducive to open discussion. Without the restrictions placed on the community like corporate oversight or viewer ratings, PostSecret is able to focus on the issues that matter most through user-generated content. This in turn helps to facilitate the development of an open forum.

**Effect of CMC.** Like the category of national media, the effect of the CMC format establishes reasons why members initially look to participate in the PostSecret community as well as examines how members are able to interact and what affects how they interact within the community. There were various ways the format of the forum affected members, from ability to trust to diversity of people. All of these influences play a role in how members establish meaning interpretations and how they determine the communal conceptions of reality.

As was noted in the literature review, many scholars have analyzed the role of trust and honesty in Internet relationships (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005; Ramirez et al., 2002; Leimeister & Krcmar, 2005). A consensus among these scholars is there is a higher degree of openness among Internet users than in face-to-face communication situations.

If people lie or present a different aspect of themselves that the people who know them in real life don't know, I still think that is real. It is how people want to portray themselves, and for whatever reason, they want it to be something
different than what they are. And maybe that is the real them and the people who know them see the fake them. (Administrator interview, April 1, 2008)

This opportunity for openness and honesty provides members the comfort and ability to discuss controversial issues, which in turn establishes their communal environment for meaning interpretation and reality conception.

Along with openness and trust, the role of appearance perception and acceptance affects why a member may choose to participate in the PostSecret community. Theories like cues-filtered-out theory (Culnan & Markus, 1987) and the equalization hypothesis (Rains & Scott, 2007) assert that individuals are more easily accepted in CMC realms through the reduction of certain visual cues that would otherwise be a detriment to individuals in face-to-face communication situations. Members of PostSecret tend to agree with this perspective and cited it as a reason for motivation to participate as an effect of CMC. “Well, I've met a lot more people here, than I normally would in the Real World, and here, it's just their personalities. I can't judge because of looks, or clothing, or anything like that. I get to know THEM” (Member interview, March 11, 2008).

Another reason for member interaction and participation is the ease of communication through personal preferences of the CMC format. This format allows individuals who may naturally be very shy or anti-social the opportunity to interact openly with others because of aspects like anonymity. It also provides the ability to communicate through written text, which allows more time to thoughtfully develop ideas prior to communicating them as well as and the opportunity to easily enter and exit conversations freely with no obligation to continue if the member feels uncomfortable or awkward. “It has provided me a constructive way to interact with others, as I am
normally not very social” (Member interview, March 27, 2008). Research has shown that for people like this the Internet proves to be better for interaction outcomes in comparison to traditional media like face-to-face interaction (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Davison et al., 2000; McKenna & Bargh, 1998).

Through the increasing availability of the Internet world-wide more people from varying walks of life are able to interact, in turn creating a dynamic atmosphere for important social conversations to occur. Through this environment a freedom of speech is born nearly unhindered where differing mindsets can interact and be brought against one another that help to evolve the discussion of controversial issues. By allowing exposure to multiple perspectives the site accommodates possibly conflicting ideologies in a non-confrontational environment, in turn creating a ‘bridging’ community that is diverse and open to varying points of view (Williams, 2006). The open forum that has been created in PostSecret continues to grow as the ability to hold these discussions is very limited elsewhere within society. Because of this, PostSecret provides a sense of acceptance for members to become more comfortable in holding these discussions offline within their community. “I also discuss them [controversial issues] in Real Life, but here, I get a better forum to display my ideas, more people hear them, so I might be able to reach at least one more person” (Member interview, March 11, 2008). This coincides with Tidwell and Walther’s findings that “As a result of [CMC] use, more effective communicators exchange more intimate questions and disclosures than they would in similar FtF [face-to-face] contexts, and acquaintanceship develops in CMC as it does FtF” (2002, p. 342).
The last reason cited for interaction as a repercussion of CMC preference is the wide variety of people members can interact with, which affords a more diverse outlook on meaning interpretations. This diversity coincides with Williams (2006) findings that depict diversity as a sign of bridging social capital where individuals connect and interact based on information diffusion, which in turn facilitates a more meaningful discussion of controversial issues addressed. Within PostSecret this diversity assists the role of meaning interpretation by providing a variety of views and interpretive methods members appropriate “as their way of relating to the world” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995).

Overall, the effect of the CMC format draws individual interest and member participation by affording the possibility for openness and honesty, diversity in interaction, the ability to filter out undesirable aspects of self, and the opportunity to overcome social phobias that may deter interaction in face-to-face communication situations. These possibilities attract individuals to not only visit and lurk within the site but also commit and interact within the site as well. These benefits lay the foundation for why members interact, how members interact and the repercussions that result through the development of an open, engaging forum.

PostSecret Communicative Tools

Once individuals encounter the site and make the commitment to enroll as members they are afforded unique communicative tools that allow them to engage in an open forum. Without the availability of anonymity, community or the CMC format among others, members would not have the foundation for a safe, open environment in which controversial topics are not only allowed but encouraged for the purpose of
addressing important social issues. The communicative tools PostSecret offers through the development of an open forum are: a commitment to the community and from the community, the effect of the chat forum threads, the desire to help others and be helped by others, the opportunity for anonymous interaction, the benefits received through media formats, and the upholding and reverence of community values. These tools ensure that members can communicate openly and honestly in a safe environment with minimal negative repercussions. This in turn provides the opportunity for important social issues to be addressed, analyzed and discussed in a positive and constructive manner.

Community Commitment. One of the most important factors in maintaining a thriving community, whether virtual or not, is the commitment of members to the community. Commitment was determined through member interviews as a display of interaction and participation. Commitment was also established through length of time visiting the site and frequency of posts to the PSC chat forum. Through their commitment and active participation members contribute to the group production of message meaning.

In order to display their commitment to the PSC forum most members interviewed choose to frequently post comments in the PSC chat forum. The chat forum provides a medium for members to instantly engage in the community and provide feedback to the discussion for group production. It also allows multiple members to contribute to the dialogue simultaneously, in turn allowing them to engage in a group production and transformation of meaning. Although some members were technically considered to be deemed frequent posters by the site ('chat regular' status is achieved at the 100th post [Member interview, March, 10, 2008]), some members did not perceive
themselves to be that involved within the community. In spite of this perception, most members interviewed did perceive themselves to be frequent posters and participants within the community. “I’ve only been really active for a few weeks and I’ve racked up over 2600 posts. I’ve pulled a couple of all nighters; just to stay on and post some more” (Member interview, March 4, 2008). However, perception of quantity versus quality differed amongst members. Although some viewed high posting frequency to display a stronger commitment to community, others were skeptical of the quality of the posts in turn emphasizing quality of posts over quantity to display strong community commitment. “I post almost every day, but I only post in the +35 forum, and I don’t post just to keep my thoughts flowing or to beat a dead horse. There are many posters who will have a post count of over 2000 but when you look at their posts, many of them are just an emoticon or inane ramblings” (Member interview, March 11, 2008).

While the PSC chat forum provides an instant medium for community members to engage in dialogue, it is harder to determine community commitment from those individuals who merely visit the site to view the postcards and not engage in the chat forum. As of April 14, 2009 over 230 million people had visited the PostSecret blog and 66,120 people had created online accounts to participate in the chat forum. Data like these show that although many people interact in the PSC forum to establish community, there is an even greater percentage of people that serve as “silent” community members, interacting only through visits to the blog and postcard mailings of secrets that fuel the discussions held in the chat room. Aspects of community commitment like this make it harder to concretely determine the impact silent community members have on group
production. What can be ascertained is the extent of dialogue that is sparked from the postcard secrets from silent members in the chat forum through active members.

Commitment to community, although perceived in different ways by different members, supports group production of meaning through the engagement of members in dialogue, frequency of participation, and dedication to the overall community. Through this dedication PostSecret has created a welcoming environment for members where they feel connected with other members and can openly communicate and be encouraged to openly communicate without fear of retribution.

 Desire to Help. In addition to community commitment members engage in group production through the desire to help others and be helped by others. This establishes PostSecret as an open communicative forum as the site is predisposed to laying a foundation advocating members to help one another and seek help from one another through the availability of discussion through postcards, private messages and chat rooms. In addressing secrets and attempting to make them more ‘Real’ members seek the interaction and advise of others to help guide them in their search. This form of interaction supports group production of meaning through the open dialogue members create with one another in the meaning-making process.

At inception, PostSecret was a simple blog designed to post secrets and invite visitors to the site to ponder their meaning and reflect on personal connections made with the secrets. Over time as members viewed the postcards and commented through e-mail to the webmaster, the desire to reach out to and/or help the postcard creator became so overwhelming that the chat forum and video messaging center evolved and formally
established the PostSecret community. Although this extension was created for community members to contact one another, there is still a void between postcard viewers and postcard creators. “Sometimes I wish I could reach out to some of the postcard senders and let them know that their secret doesn’t need to be kept in the dark . . . and reassure them that they’re only human and it’s alright to feel the way they do” (Member interview, March 10, 2008). In an attempt to connect with the creator of the postcards members find themselves helping other members who can relate or who share similar secrets.

Most members in the community interviewed said the motivation for their participation within the community was to help others and/or be helped by others. Through enacting this search for interaction, members create a type of bonding community where near strangers are brought together and find a connection with one another that would not have been possible offline. This bond is established through the discussion of personal secrets and show of support for one another. This type of bonding contradicts the concept of bonding Putnam (2000) refers to where “networks that are bonding (limited within particular social niches) are at a greater risk of producing externalities that are negative” (Norris, 2002, p. 3). Within the PostSecret community members from varying walks of life who are complete strangers evolve from a network of bridging to that of bonding through the content of the dialogue they create and the impact they have on one another through their desire to help each other and grow as a community. “Well, I basically received a lot of emotional support, and love, which I really needed. I was in a low point in my life, and that coupled with a downswing in my
bi-polar had me feeling REALLY down, and then I encounter this outpouring of love, from people I ain't even met" (Member interview, March 10, 2008).

Through members’ desire to help one another and the enactment of that desire, new and varying facets to controversial and complex issues are suddenly realized, shared and analyzed by members through group production of meaning. Many members interviewed stated that they simply aren’t afforded the opportunity for this type of dialogue and opportunity for action offline, which is why they participate within the PostSecret community. This attempt at community connection, desire to help and interest in group production of meaning signifies a community striving to be more than the “expressives” and “party animals” defined in Norris and Jones’ (1998) typology of Internet users. Instead a community is developing that reaches out for one another, cares for and strives to help one another.

I see it on the forum all the time, complete strangers reaching out to others just to lend an ear. For the audience of PostSecret, I think it causes us all to think twice and to invest more effort into listening to a person or getting to know a person than we may have initially. (Member interview, April 15, 2008)

The desire to help and effort to show compassion for one another provides a necessary foundation for the community in which members feel they can share and expose dark secrets, creating a more open community to engage in meaning interpretation. Group production is not possible without the support of trust and honesty this community strives to establish through actions of help and compassion. With this, the community evolves to bond together in a manner that is conducive to meaning-making through open, honest dialogue that refrains from self-interest motivation.
Forum/Thread Effect. The creation of the chat room established and extended the media options members could choose to contact and engage with one another. Through this creation an invisible gatekeeper was established that effects not only how members interact with one another but also with who they can interact. Along with this, various thread topics establish multiple dialogue environments that impact the tone, language and syntax members use when communicating with one another. Depending on member’s personal ideologies some threads become more controversial based on what members consider to be acceptable or appropriate. All of these aspects in turn impact the group production that results from these interactions and affect how open-ended the forum can be.

Different forums create different discussion environments and therefore construct differing realities for the members that are engaged. This impacts how group production is established when varying viewpoints conflict and become disjointed from the overall goal of the group in the meaning-making process. “I’ve ventured to the ‘For Fun’--and that just doesn't have the same . . . reality to me. Secrets and Advice automatically make me feel like I'm under some sort of pressure--but not in Secrets and Stories. I feel accepted, appreciated, and welcomed there” (Member interview, March 4, 2008). Within the PSC chat room seven forums currently exist, although those change from time to time depending on the dynamics of the community members. Each forum is designed to attract and cater to specific needs of members and types of members. For example, the Secrets of Ages 35 and Over forum targets those members who match that age description. Whether this demographic is strictly adhered to is indeterminable due to the anonymous
nature of the community; however, based on the shared respect and community values that have been established and maintained within the community a mutual understanding is developed where the demographic is loosely adhered to.

Due to the development of specified forums, users choose which forums they engage in based on personal preferences, which restricts who and what types of people they will interact with. For example, by only sharing advice with people within a specified age demographic the lived experience and shared knowledge is stifled to a chosen few, restricting interaction with others. This in turn impacts the group production of meaning by limiting the interaction of members based on thread topics, demographics and personal preferences. When determining appropriate forums to solicit upon initial inquiry for potential interviewees, the PSC administrator stated, “You could also post this in the 35+ forum, but it would be different because the people of the Secrets and Stories forum don't usually interact with the 35+ forum, so that might impact your studies” (Administrator interview, February 11, 2008); in turn showing the impact that ripples through the community when determining forums to engage.

Along with forum impact, some threads within the forums become more controversial based on member ideologies of what should/not be allowed within a forum. Some forums created for the community are designed by nature to address sensitive topics like the Sexual Secrets forum, which targets members seeking to discuss issues related to sexual topics (this forum has since been dropped from the forum listing). When dealing with naturally controversial subjects such as this, topics become even more controversial when determining a common acceptance for how to address them. When
combining conservative viewpoints with more radical ones discussions are more apt to become volatile or unproductive in the meaning-making process as emotions flare. “The only forum that has caused the most conflict for me is the Sex forum because so many people have different ideas of what it should be, what should be allowed, what shouldn't etc. . . We have definitely experienced the most turmoil with that forum” (Administrator interview, March 28, 2008). In this sense, PostSecret adheres to its identity as a bridging network even while members are bonding through discussion, in turn producing “externalities that are negative” (Norris, 2002, p. 3) or at least unproductive in this sense, which contradicts Putnam’s generalization for how bridging and bonding networks can affect social capital and in this case meaning-making.

Through forums and topic threads discussions are formatted in an accessible organization for members to determine what dialogues they can/should engage in to contribute to the overall group production of meaning. When examining the affect of forum and thread topics, group production is susceptible to hindrance through restriction of interaction and acceptance of differing viewpoints within highly controversial forums. In spite of this, the forums work to achieve group production by allowing closer-knit communities within the overall PostSecret community to establish a communal understanding of media messages. Because members can engage with one another on a deeper level and communicate accordingly they in turn are more likely to self-disclose and discuss personal issues in an open forum.

Anonymity: One of the main motivations for member participation is the opportunity to hold open discussions regarding controversial topics without being
persecuted for doing so. In holding these dialogues under a veil of anonymity many factors come into play that affect how members interact, the establishment of trust and honesty in what they are communicating, and how the meanings they establish are in turn impacted. Depending on the degree to which members feel connected with a topic or secret, their reluctance to disclose and dependency on anonymity varies. Even within the anonymous realm PostSecret has created some members feel the need to develop an anonymous identity within their anonymous identity, in turn creating the ‘private identity’ allowing them anonymity from even their online persona. All of these aspects plus others impact how meaning is determined and transformed within the PostSecret community.

As anonymity plays a large role in motivating interaction within the PostSecret community most members limit their communication to only discussing controversial topics under the veil of anonymity. Members feel this aspect of the community creates a safer environment to establish open communication than in face-to-face encounters. This is due to a perceived reduction in judgment based on the elimination of external factors such as age, gender or ethnicity, which coincides with Kay Deaux’s model of social identity (1993) and Postmes et al’s social identity deindividuation (SIDE) theory (2000). “If I were so openly open with my friends, in real life; there’s no question of the backlash I could receive. But the mere fact that it’s online and you know me by only a name and an avatar... it helps. Plus the fact that others are so open--it’s encouragement” (Member interview, April 1, 2008). Along with this, users also feel the anonymity provides more value to their words as they are not discriminated against by any outside factors. Through
the reduction of judgment and discrimination members feel as though the focus of the meaning construction and transformation can be placed on their words where the true value lies.

With this sense of safety, some users feel they can hide within the anonymity to avoid an effect on their personal lives. This occurs when users interact in the community on an entertainment level versus an informational level. It also occurs when users share personal secrets that they are not yet able to confront in a more realistic setting like with friends and family where they may be held accountable for their secret. “I believe I have total anonymity, as in no matter what I post or say, no one is going to recognize me in the street and it will not effect my personal life in any way, unless I choose to let it” (Member interview, March 12, 2008). This mindset of accountability avoidance is counterproductive to conflict resolution within secrets but is a step towards that through acknowledgement and confrontation.

Another aspect of anonymity that contributes to meaning transformation within the community is the creation of the private identity. Although the entire site is anonymous (unless a members chooses to share her/his personal information), within this anonymity some members have determined a need for an anonymous-within-anonymous profile referred to as the private identity. The private identity is essentially where a member establishes another account under a different identity to post and make comments within the community. Members do this because as community personas are created and members regularly use these personas to interact within the community, they in turn establish an actual identity where other members come to know them by, develop
certain expectations from and feel as though they can relate with on some level. To avoid tarnishing this identity or from fear of backlash to this identity based on controversial comments made or some other form of disharmonious dialogue, members create an alternative persona to post these types of comments. “I have on an occasion made a separate account to make a statement, in case someone were to actually figure out who I was. I don't want to be publicly judged for being myself” (Member interview, April 8, 2008).

The creation of this identity affects the meaning transformation within the community through the contribution of conflicting or potentially controversial statements. As initial identities interact and establish community meanings, alternative or private identities also interact and transform the communal meanings previously established to contribute to the continuous cycle of meaning exchange. Overall, the aspect of anonymity shapes the meaning transformation within the community through member perceived trust and honesty. If members feel they can trust one another through their anonymity they are more likely to feel safe in interacting in the community and contribute interpretations and ideas in the meaning-making process. However, if members do not feel as though they can trust one another they are less likely to feel safe in interacting and providing constructive interpretations. Through the interaction of both of these types of members, the meanings transform and evolve in a continuous cycle. This coincides with Schoening and Anderson’s theory where “no line of interpretive activity is fixed in a static state but must itself be contingently re-produced” (1995, p. 102). The reproduction
of meaning ensures the dialogue does not become static but instead remains a dynamic, cyclical process.

**Media Format.** In establishing the community archetype, members have a variety of media formats to choose from when determining how they want to express themselves and communicate with one another. Members can share secrets and engage in dialogue through video uploads, anonymous postcards, audio uploads, the chat forum, and private messages. This variety in turn creates multiple artifacts throughout the site as they are saved/posted through the blog and website. The media format members choose to use effects how the message is not only conveyed but received by other members and plays an important role in how the community archetype is shaped and how future members interact within the community. Reflective of Marshall McLuhan’s famous phrase, “the medium is the message” (McLuhan, 1964), the medium certainly expands and restricts the ways meanings are conveyed and conceived in this community.

Each individual medium offered through PostSecret has both benefits and detriments that members must weigh when choosing the best medium to send their message. According to some members, the postcard provides a small window of learning opportunities into other people and into humanity in general. Nowhere else are such raw emotions and controversial secrets displayed and inviting for people to share and comment. And as dialogue unfolds surrounding these postcards members not only learn about other people, humanity and themselves but they also learn about the community and establish formalities in how to engage in such discussion while still upholding community values. One detriment to the usage of the postcard is the lack of guarantee
that the postcard will even be shared due to the role of the gatekeeper picking and choosing from several thousand a week. “I find it satisfying to create a secret that visually expresses my emotions and is aesthetically pleasing for myself and hopefully to others, should others see my postcard” (Member interview, March 11, 2008).

The next popular medium is the chat room, which gives users a chance to meet new people to seek help or give advice as well as comment on postcards and others’ secrets. Through their interaction with one another in the chat room, explicit and implicit guidelines for interaction are established and monitored by moderators and administrators. This monitoring is integral in maintaining the value system established by active members so the integrity and validity can be adopted and assimilated to by new members as part of the community archetype. Within the chat forum, in spite of the anonymous aspect, users are still able to connect through an established familiarity between online personas. One detriment of the chat room is the possibility for negative feedback, which deters some members and actually serves as a catalyst for others. “I have even posted a few times where I knew I would get a lot of negative feedback, but I was curious and I don’t feel that just because my own thoughts and feelings are not normative, I shouldn’t have to be quiet” (Member interview, March 12, 2008).

Despite the open invitation on the website to “confess a secret, share a story about PostSecret, create a montage or do something completely original” (Warren, 2007) by creating a video and uploading it to YouTube, only four videos have been uploaded to the PostSecret website. It is hard to determine whether the lack of video uploads is due to a lack of interest on the part of the community members or whether there is a backlog of
videos waiting to be uploaded by the website gatekeeper. Another medium that was offered but not frequently used is the audio upload. This feature was available until 2008, at which time the webmaster decided to take the feature off of the website. Another medium offered by the website for interpersonal, not mass, communication is the private message, which allows members to privately e-mail one another through the website. This medium, although available for members to use, does not contribute to the communal archetype as messages sent through private mail are not displayed for other community members to view and comment.

Members have a multitude of media to choose from when determining how they want to communicate with one another. Each medium affects how messages are conveyed and received by other members, in turn transforming the meaning of the message. The medium chosen also assists in the establishment of the open forum by community administrator efforts to develop an archive that new and future members can reference for tangible, concrete evidence of communal behavior and communication patterns. According to Schoening and Anderson, “Such forms help actors maintain a sense of commonality and normality” as well as a guideline which to adhere to when communicating with others within the community (1995, p. 105).

PostSecret Values. How members are accepted in communal interaction is dependent not only on their choice of preferred media but also on their adherence to the values established within the PostSecret community. Values are established and maintained in the community through the communal archive and direct observation of behavior between members. These values are upheld by members, moderators and
administrators throughout their interaction with others, in turn creating a dynamic archetype to coincide with the static archive. Values are passed on to new members through interaction and create communal bonding, roles and expectations for all members to abide.

One of the basic values of the PostSecret community is that of support, non-judgment and respect. Because of the very nature of the site to reveal personal secrets and discuss controversial topics, it is necessary for members to communicate with one another while still respecting each others' opinions and beliefs in order to yield productive versus destructive meanings. Because PostSecret addresses controversial, personal secrets that hit close to home for some users there is always the possibility that members will communicate out of a defensive communication style versus a sympathetic or empathetic style that is conducive to productive meaning making. As a result, it is hard for administrators and moderators to determine how liberal the site can be allowed to be.

"PSC is very liberal, but the question arises of how liberal can we be, where do we draw the lines, especially in terms of the age of some of the users on the forum" (Administrator interview, March 28, 2008).

To ensure PostSecret values are upheld within the community administrators, moderators and members do not tolerate derogatory comments or slander and act appropriately when such communication is used. Members will contact the administrator if they encounter derogatory behavior and the moderators constantly monitor the behavior of members to ensure negative communication styles are not used.

It is my responsibility to step in if a user is harassing another. On the PSC, we do not tolerate name-calling or derogatory comments aimed towards other users.
People are allowed to disagree with the opinions of others, but they are asked to do so in a constructive manner. (Administrator interview, March 13, 2008)

If negative communication like slander is used the administrator will restrict offensive members from posting in certain forums and if too many complaints are made against a particular member that person’s account will be terminated from the community.

The maintenance and assurance that PostSecret values are upheld is important not only for current members but also for new and future members as values like respect, non-judgment and constructive dialogue are what entice online lurkers to join the community. In capturing the dynamic archetype of dialogue exchange through living communication, members and future members see the exchange of respect between people as well as learn how to interact within the community. According to Schoening and Anderson, "'Knowledge' is made concrete in signifying practices and is, thus, necessarily relative to, and contingent upon, the here-and-now performance characteristics of a given social collective's routine" (1995, p. 104). These performance characteristics are embodied in every community interaction through the upholding of communal values. These characteristics also change depending on the preferred media chosen by the user to communicate. Community communication rules change between a postcard being mailed in (total anonymity) and a post on a chat forum (partial anonymity contingent upon frequency of posting within the forum developed over time). These actions in turn develop the community archetype for how members should and do interact, which not only validates the existence of the community but also provides tangible guidelines for members to abide. By creating such validation PostSecret asserts
the communal connection of members that is necessary in order to develop an open forum in which other individuals feel they can interact.

Overall, in order to facilitate the development of open fora, a community must first have the appropriate communicative tools like community commitment, values and anonymity to set the foundation for a safe communicative environment. When members feel they can discuss important social issues without fear of retribution then the community has asserted and established an open forum conducive to engaging and motivating dialogue. Through the tools provided by PostSecret, an open forum is established where such controversial issues can be addressed and constructively discussed. Based on the foundation of a community equipped with such tools, the next section will discuss how members actively and positively engage in controversial discussions through the open forum.

PostSecret Member Interaction

Member interaction occurs in the PostSecret community when members feel they can safely discuss controversial topics without holding back. As was discussed earlier in this chapter, members are drawn to PostSecret because few media are available to them for them to constructively discuss important social issues. Because of this lack of availability members use the communicative tools provided by PostSecret to actively engage and interact with other members. It is through this interaction the PostSecret facilitates an open forum for controversial discussions. Members not only encounter new perspectives but are encouraged to broaden their understanding of taboo topics based on their encounters with other members who have lived experiences. The ways member
engage in PostSecret was shown through the following ways: the effect of the site and other members in general on a particular member, the administrator’s perspective of the PostSecret phenomenon, the connections members have with the secrets revealed through the site, the effect specific members have on other members in general, the connection members create within the community, and the various ways members interact with one another. All of these displays of interaction affirm the existence of the community and facilitate an open forum where important social issues can be discussed.

Administrator Perspective. The administrator for the community holds a very specific, important role for the success of the overall function of PostSecret. Like community members the administrator can discuss controversial topics with others to create communal meanings through the blog and website. However, unlike members the administrator serves as the liaison between the webmaster (Frank Warren) and the community members. This role performs many functions to include the power to ban users, terminate accounts, resolve issues between members, and create new forums. The administrator acts as the executor for the webmaster by consulting with him before making any final decisions that may affect the community. The administrator also facilitates the day-to-day conversations that occur on the website by keeping the forum running and performing administrative tasks.

As an administrator, I oversee everything. I pick the mods, create new forums that Frank requests, ban users, terminate accounts, change usernames. If there is a recurring problem, I notify Frank and suggest ways to fix the problem. I am the liaison between Frank and the users on the community. Frank still makes the decisions for the community, and I execute them. (Administrator interview, March 13, 2008)
Through the performance of these functions the administrator plays a specific role in the meaning-making that occurs within the community. The power of forum creation allows the administrator to determine how users are allowed to interact and what they are allowed to communicate about. Because each forum targets a specific audience, each forum in turn ostracizes some while welcoming others. For example, the intent for the 35+ forum is for people over 35 years of age to have a specific place within the community to chat, although because the community is anonymous how strictly this is followed is unknown. This influences the types of conversations that occur and how users interact with one another. Whether or not they coincide with these established norms also plays a role in the organization of the overall community structure.

The administrator also has a special capability in the community that most do not: the ability to physically locate and track users offline through the user's Internet Protocol (IP) address. According to the administrator:

I have the ability to look up the person's IP address and track down their location. Only in the event of homicide do I feel that obligation because it is something bad that can be prevented from happening and the victim has no choice in the matter, were the action to take place. (Administrator interview, April 15, 2008)

The ability to remove the veil of anonymity is not common in this community as it would undoubtedly cut the thread of trust that each member has invested in order to ensure the ability to speak openly and honestly about controversial issues they might not otherwise speak openly about.

The administrator role also differs from other community members by the inherent need for distance and impartial bias in community discussions. “I started out participating in conversations, but as time went on and my role became more demanding,
I recognized the importance of keeping a distance” (Administrator interview, March 28, 2008). This need for distance stems from the administrator’s responsibility to resolve issues between community members and prevent harassment from occurring. This responsibility creates a barrier for the administrator getting too close to users and topics while at the same time influencing how users address these topics and the resulting meaning that occurs. When conversations become too heated or users start harassing others it is the administrator’s obligation to step in and maintain community order either through banning users or terminating accounts. This is one way the community maintains order and structure to ensure safety and protection of openness for controversial discussions. Through the administrator’s perspective and role in the community meaning-making is created, enforced, restricted and influenced.

Effect on Member. One of the main ways meaning interpretations are established in the PostSecret community are through the effects on the members themselves, which consist of how the blog, postcards, and interaction with others impact the individual members’ lives. Meaning interpretations stem from members’ lived experiences, which they share through the chat forum with other members in reaction to secrets displayed on the blog. The effects on the members specifically fall within several areas: the personal impact made on the member from topics/postcards; what members learn from others through shared meanings; how the topics/postcards affect members’ views in regards to controversial topics; the ways in which the connection with other members encourages openness, acceptance, and meaning-making; and the ways in which the connection with
the overall community may create dissonance for members with real world connections with others.

As the next section will explicate in further detail, members initially join the community because of personal connections and impacts with the postcard and forum secrets. Members connect with topics based on their own personal experiences and then share that connection with others to create communal meanings. Whether members have a positive or negative connection with the postcards/topics, they draw from their previous experiences in life to determine their initial meanings for how they will interpret and connect with the media content. This initial establishment of meaning correlates to the first premise of the social action media studies theory by embodying how “the meaning of media content has no autonomous existence and must be brought into being in deliberate ways” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 99). By first constructing initial meanings of media content through their own lived experiences the members are setting the foundation for which to share and construct communal meanings with others. In order to establish communal meanings, members then share these connections with others and elaborate on them in a social dialogue through the chat forum. As the topics/postcards impact and make an impression on members’ lives, members in turn make personal reflections and self-realizations before sharing their experiences with others. In this respect, the site serves as a personal therapeutic session in one aspect. “As for an individual therapeutic session, I had initially seen Postsecret as a form of entertainment, and didn't expect the site to bring the reflection on my own experience as it did” (Member interview, March 12, 2008).
Another aspect of how the effects on members contribute to meaning-making in the community is what members learn from others through shared meanings and vice versa. After individual members reflect on personal connections with the secrets they then share these connections with other members in the community, which in turn can have strong impacts on their own sense of self and identity as has been shown in other Internet research studies as well (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; Spears et al., 2002). “I was touched that someone actually found something helpful and was glad they found the validation they may have been missing on some level” (Member interview, March 28, 2008). As will be shown in further sections, members’ desire to help others and seek help from others also drives their motivations for participation within the community as well. There is a marked display of effort to connect with, share and help others throughout the communication between members on the site. This attempt in turn contributes to the establishment of communal meanings that develop through these interactions.

The final effect on members that helps to establish communal interpretative meanings of media content is the possibility for the connection with the overall community to create dissonance for members with their real world connections. For some members, their online persona, community and life consumes more of their personal interaction with others than their offline lives due to various reasons stemming from social ineptitude to social stigmas (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna & Bargh, 1998). For other members, however, their online life may only consume a fraction of their personal interactions (Gross et al., 2002; Wellman et al., 2001; Katz et al., 2001), which in turn can create a dissonance for some in trying to find a common ground between both
worlds. “I find myself liking PSC more than being at school, or the people more than I like people I call friends. It makes me quieter, and less willing to share. . I'm still trying to find that ever-important balance” (Member interview, March 4, 2008).

This dissonance may end up having a negative effect on the member’s interaction with others both online and offline, which inevitably impacts the meaning-making process. This effect was not shown in a large percentage of members but was shown to have an affect on some members’ interaction with others in the community. For the interpretive meaning-making process, the effect of the site, postcards and other members on members plays a role in how communal meanings are established, maintained and transformed in the PostSecret community. This effect in turn affects how open the forum is perceived to be by members and whether they decided to engage with others as a result.

Connection with Secrets. One of the main reasons visitors to the PostSecret blog eventually join the PostSecret community is through their connection with the secrets themselves. Secrets posted on the site touch upon every range of human emotion and members’ connections with the secrets in turn range across the spectrum of human emotion as a result. Through in-depth interviews with members detailed accounts of how the postcards impact members and with what connection were documented. This connection adds to the communal interpretive process by connecting members to the site, identifying self-reflections and realizations stemming from the connection, and providing an opportunity to share these initial impressions with others in the community to establish formal communal meanings. Member connections with secrets were displayed in the
following ways: the emotional connection with the secrets, which span the spectrum of human emotion; the ability for the postcards to become too personal for the members; the perception of the secrets as being too controversial to discuss in the public sphere or only discussed within social restrictions; the transformation of members' perspectives after initial interpretation; the acknowledgment that meanings/interpretations differ between members; the affect of visual aspects in the secrets on members; the possibility of "limitless" interpretations of meanings stemming from the visual aspect; and the realization of the reality of the secrets.

Members are initially drawn to the site for the postcards and maintain a commitment to the community through their established connections with the postcards. "I felt some 'healing' looking at these old posts. Relating to some, crying over some that touched nerves, laughed over some others. I got some epiphanies, too" (Member interview, February 19, 2008). In conjunction with these initial connections and interpretations members also share these with others on the site to create meanings. This is done through the chat room in open and frank dialogues for some, and through private mail and instant messaging for others. By doing this members are creating what Schoening and Anderson refer to as "actual forms of action" where the action is "given concrete performance and coordinated with others" (1995, p. 100). By enacting these actions in a way that fosters open dialogue members are creating communal meanings stemming from their own initial meaning interpretations.

Although these connections form the fabric that ties members together within the community, for some members the secrets within the postcards can sometimes affect
them too personally, which could cause them to turn away from the community as opposed to invite them. In this respect, although it is the connection with the secrets that draw individuals to the website and to the community, if the impact becomes too overwhelming there lies the possibility for turning members away versus attracting them to the community. At the same time, this sense of vulnerability adds to the reasons why members choose to interact in the community. When confronted by inner secrets or even personal demons not yet recognized, the ability to be able to address, analyze and resolve these issues is invaluable for some members and encourages them to continue the social dialogue initiated in the community. These realizations and confrontations contribute to the interpretative process for the community by providing insight, individual meaning and interpretations to the communal dialogue.

Along with the realization that certain secrets may be too personal for some members is also the perception that these secrets may be too controversial to discuss in the public sphere altogether. Looking back at the previous section on national media, many members are drawn to the site based on the fact that the national media and the public sphere in general do not sufficiently address controversial issues openly (Pirkis et al., 2007; Chesebro & McMahan, 2006). This adds to the fact that not only is there a lack of substantial dialogue, but when there is a dialogue it only occurs within social restrictions where the context of conversation or physical location of dialogue constrains the flow of dialogue and suffocates the point of controversy (Phillips, 1999; Olson & Goodnight, 1994; Habermas, 1962/1989). “Secrets are secrets because no one talks about them, or if they are spoken of, it’s in such manner that social construct guides how we are
told we ‘should’ think about them. This then, of course, influences how the general public sphere creates dialogue surrounding issues” (Member interview, March 10, 2008). Because of these confines, restrictions and rejections, members choose to turn to this site specifically where they can create open dialogues and frank discussions to develop communal interpretations of controversial messages.

Once interpretation meanings are defined for members the postcards have the ability to alter members’ perspectives of others and controversial issues. Not only do members establish connections with the secrets and internalize personal meanings for them, once these meanings have been shared and communal interpretations are defined these definitions in turn alter member perspectives through a continual processing of meanings and definitions. Although the initial connection may be established on a deep-rooted, personal level members’ views are opened to altering perspectives that change their internal definitions and connections with the secrets. “The individual postcards I had referred to previously were temporary in the initial reaction they conjured, but brought about a healthier perspective after considering why the postcard elicited the response they did” (Member interview, March 12, 2008). In this respect, once the members have a chance to communally discuss the secrets they develop a new understand of the meaning within the media context.

Along with this, as members engage in communal conversations with others they gain the acknowledgement that meanings and interpretations differ between viewpoints. This is necessary in order for communal meanings to be established: respect for varying viewpoints and an open and safe environment in which to hold controversial discussions.
As community discussions unfold, conflicting views and opinions occur as well as harmonious and agreeing opinions. The key for the success of this particular community is treading the fine line of balance between the two to create a mutual-respecting community for these conversations to occur. “Some secrets may hit home once in awhile and spark a nerve for a person personally, but it’s up to a person to take a bit of this or that from it. What might be meaningless to one person might have great impact for another” (Member interview, March 12, 2008). Members not only reflect on their own interaction with others in the site but also on their perceptions of others outside of interaction, including perceptions of secrets as well as the authors of secrets. “I thought about it and realized that that’s what the secret is there for… clearly the person isn't proud of it and is just trying to release it, I also realized that people shouldn't be judged no matter how terrible or shocking their secret is” (Member interview, March 28, 2008).

One aspect of the site that differentiates it from similar places on the Internet is the co-existence of both visual and textual secrets. As will be explicated through the semiotic analysis, the interrelationship between these two aspects plays a dynamic role in the conveyance of meaning and message to members as well as the effect this conveyance has on members. Along with this, the visual aspect adds a “limitless” dimension to the quantity of meanings that can unfold during meaning interpretation due to the implicit, intuitive nature of the visual (Messaris, 1993; Moriarty, 1996; Messaris, 1998). Visual language has been perceived by scholars as more available for interpretation in comparison to verbal because its relationships are not determined through arbitrary meanings but instead through personal experience and perception.
(Moriarty, 1996). “I also love the freedom to use not only words but visuals to depict your secret. While it can be overwhelming because the possibilities are endless, I find it satisfying to create a secret that visually expresses my emotions and is aesthetically pleasing for myself and hopefully to others, should others see my postcard” (Member interview, March 11, 2008). Because of this connection with personal experience and meaning interpretation the sheer quantity of meanings grows exponentially by the combining factors of multiple experiences and multiple viewpoints through the website and community. In this respect, communal meaning interpretation can become a longer process as members work together to establish a cohesive definition.

The final aspect of secret connection amongst members is the realization of the reality of the secrets and the lives behind the secrets. It is this fantasy of the unknown and the perceived connection with complete strangers that entice members to visit the site and connect with one another in the community. Members are intrigued by the idea that as a human race we are all connected somehow, even if it is through our secrets. With this realization, members are then invited to confront their own secrets and either address them or not. However, because of the anonymous aspect, it is relatively easy for secret authors, lurkers and community members alike to confront or be confronted by their inner turmoil and simply ignore them. The anonymity affords members escapism from accountability where although they may realize what their secrets are and what connects them with humankind, no one else is aware of this realization unless the member chooses to share that information and be taken off “the hook” of accountability for resolving their conflicts. “At first, when you spell out your secret, see the words and send them out, you
are forced to confront the truth of what you just wrote. But recognizing and realising you have a secret is not the same as actually taking action and curing yourself or the situation” (Member interview, March 31, 2008).

This absolution of responsibility in turn affects how members connect with the secrets. If they decide to share their connection with others to seek advice and resolution they will then confront their inner afflictions. However, if they instead decide to ignore their connection and not share their personal lived experiences they will be denying the community a valid perspective and interpretation. Therefore, this avoidance creates a negative contribution to the interpretative meaning process within the community and restricts how open the forum is and how well the site is perceived to facilitate open communication.

Member Effect. Because there is a dynamic cyclical exchange of meaning members not only have an affect on other members but are also affected by other members simultaneously. Members are individually motivated to interact with one another based on a variety of personal reasons. One factor that influences this motivation is the effect other members have on one another and whether that effect results in a negative or positive repercussion. The effect of others contributes to the establishment of a communal reality through shared experiences and feelings of connection and bonding. Meaning transformation results as members maintain a continuous dialogue in which new ideas and personal interaction affect individual members.

By openly sharing inner secrets and controversial conversations, members feel connected to one another through a bond that could not be established by strangers in an
offline, real world setting. The willingness to share by some members influences and encourages others to become actively involved in the dialogue, which in turn supports the continuous exchange of ideas and transformation of meaning. Through interaction with one another in the community, members also have the ability to provide support for one another through encouraging dialogue intended to positively affect other members while engrossed in difficult or controversial discussion. “Sometimes, others have already voiced what I was thinking or wondering already, and I still learn much by just reading the thread without direct participation” (Member interview, March 12, 2008). One reason why members actively participate in the community is because of the considerate, safe environment that is created by the other members. This effect between members entices some people to share as they view the dialogue as more inviting and comfortable than offline interactions. This effect also accommodates self-realizations for members by offering varying perspectives that counter and reinforce their own.

Although members for the most part strive to uplift and support one another, aspects of human nature such as cruelty and self-centered interests are inevitable by the very act of human interaction. This aspect of the community negatively impacts the creation of dialogue by either creating defensive dialogue or by stifling dialogue from apprehensive members:

I've seen 'social bullying' happen on some threads whereby what looks like a 'clique' seem to 'gang up' on one person and their conduct seems to fall into a 'groupthink' condition. In the midst of it, they leave one another posts which, to me, makes it look like they are almost 'high-fiving' one another in a tag team effort. Ugh! This doesn't make me eager to post: Sometimes no amount of diplomacy will rescue a person from another, who under the pretense of their 'right' to their opinion, is just being plain mean! (Member interview, March 10, 2008)
In an attempt to uphold community values, administrators and moderators watch for these actions and respond accordingly either through reprimand or banishment from the community. Conflicting and disharmonious dialogue prevents the possibility for a community-wide ideology to form and consequently impacts the transformation of meaning.

Another effect is how the topics/postcards affect members’ views in regards to controversial topics. As some interview responses have shown, through the established connections with the postcards/topics members’ views on controversial topics and their views on interaction with others changes as they go through the interpretive meaning process. In accordance with the premises drawn out by the social action media studies theory, member interaction and connections alter the interpretative meanings that are established through broadening of views and ideas on the controversial topics that are discussed. According to the theory, “no line of interpretive activity is fixed in a static state but must itself be contingently re-produced” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 102). Meanings do not remain static and the effect of the topics/postcards to alter and open members’ views of certain ideologies is one way, which contributes to not only the establishment but transformation of meaning in the community as well. “Some of the funny [postcards] lift you when you feel down, some of the sad ones touch you and make you feel empathy for your fellow man” (Member interview, March 10, 2008).

Not only does the connection with topics/postcards encourage openness, acceptance and meaning making within the PostSecret community but the connection with other members does as well. The effect members have on each other is one of the
main ways in which communal meanings are established through individual member’s interpretations of each other and each topic of discussion. Through this interaction, encouragement for respect and sensitivity of others’ views is created, which contributes to the open atmosphere and established trust that provide the core foundation for the community. Through this encouragement, members are then able to productively establish communal meanings by being more eager to accept others’ points of views and possibly alter their own as a result. “I'm more aware of the kinds of secrets others may have (including the similarity to some of my own), and it inclines me to be more sensitive to others I interact with” (Member interview, May 19, 2008).

Members’ effect on one another impacts how meaning is transformed within the community by triggering “continual alterations, abandonment, recuperation, renegotiation, merger, division, etc. as social actors move within and between myriad forms of social action” (Schoening & Anderson, 1995, p. 104). The resulting social action occurs in the embodiment of social change and impact on each individual member’s lives and the reintroduction of the impact back into the continual dialogue within the community. This cyclical motion ensures that dynamic and new meanings are introduced into the community and that the community in turn facilitates an open, engaging communicative environment.

Community Connection. Members create a community connection through bonding and bridging within their interaction. As illustrated in previous sections, community connection occurs through the bonding that results from honest communication, the ability to foster in-depth discussions in an attempt for conflict
resolution and the sense of community that is established in spite of conventional definitions.

I don't think [that a sense of community be established in order for controversial conversations to occur] is as important, but with PostSecret I think it is different. A lot of people on here strive to be supportive and non-judgmental. I think it is important in the sense that a person can share a problem, people can give their opinion. But to take it to the next level, it is important that there is community. (Administrator interview, April 1, 2008)

In order to establish a community connection members are also enticed by the camaraderie and expectancy that no matter how alone they may feel there are others within the community that can empathize and relate on some level. PostSecret also establishes an environment that is conducive to people connecting on personal levels that would not normally interact offline. “For me, it is a place where I talk to and interact with people whom I would normally not interact with. I get a different perspective” (Member interview, May 12, 2008). Depending on the level of sharing, some members do not feel a sense of connection; however, other members become so involved they begin to view the community as an extended family. By establishing this community connection, it provides a foundation and reality for the interaction that occurs between members to create restrictions for what will be allowed within the community. Without this established reality the community would not have the connection between members necessary to create such restrictions. Through the creation of meaning restriction and acceptance the community ascertains the boundaries by which it can be perceived as open and accommodating to controversial discussion or not.

_Community Interaction._ The ways members interact determines the restrictions and acceptances that are permitted within the community. Reasons for motivation to
participate influences the acceptances that are permitted within the community while alternatively, individual fears within each member deter participation or limit styles of interaction, indirectly impacting the meaning restrictions that are established. Along with this, communal feedback plays a role in frequency of participation, motivation to participate and participation restrictions. All of these factors contribute to the established communal process of determining acceptable meanings as well as the process of restricting meanings to fit within established meaning parameters.

The opportunity to communicate openly and honestly has been discussed in length throughout this study and is a main factor in motivation for members to participate. Along with this, lonesomeness has been a factor for some members' motivation in participating. For those members who do not have an active social life offline, PostSecret provides an alternative style for community participation and satiates a desire for some members to be able to interact with other people who project values of caring, respect, and a desire to help. Through this interaction, members attempt to learn from others' mistakes as well as their own, which helps in developing a sense of understanding of self and others. "We can't learn from our mistakes very well if we can't talk about them, and we can't understand ourselves and each other very well if we have to keep so much hidden" (Member interview, May 11, 2008). Conversely, the opportunity to object ideas as well as show support for ideas also motivates members to participate. Along with these reasons for motivation, some members also choose to participate simply to avoid a sense of lurking in the community.
In spite of the many reasons of motivation for members to participate within the community, one of the main factors that restrict member participation is the fear of acknowledging, addressing and sharing personal secrets. Despite the aspect of anonymity some members feel their secrets are too personal to share and have difficulty engaging in dialogue within the community as a result. Along this same line, some posts hit too close to home for members, which also restricts participation due to vulnerability.

Some of the post topics and postcard secrets hit too close to home for me: they bring up memories of sexual abuse, domestic violence etc. (among other things). The sadness this brings for me simply makes me not want to think about my own personal experiences, let alone offer posts on them (it just feels like some things are 'too personal' to put up, if that makes sense, despite the anonymity...it just feels too vulnerable, I guess). (Member interview, March 10, 2008)

These self-imposed restrictions in turn affect which members participate in the communal restrictions of meaning. If a member chooses not to participate due to fear and apprehension the community loses valuable insight as a result.

Another factor that impacts how and why members interact is the feedback that is provided and received by members. Positive feedback fuels members' desire to initially participate and continue to participate. On the other hand, negative feedback can encourage members to refrain from participating for fear of rejection and criticism although some members have not been deterred by the possibility of negative feedback when they feel strongly enough about a topic. Some members also refrain from providing feedback if it tends to be negative, which is another way members self-restrict participation. “I will refrain from posting if what I have to say is only negative, people don't need to hear that” (Member interview, March 12, 2008).
All of these factors influence whether members choose to participate in discussions within the community. Through the active participation and motivation to actively participate, members determine what meanings will be acceptable to the community and how interpretations of those meanings will be restricted within the community for dynamic constructs of meaning. When members self-restrict interaction they affect how meanings are restricted and accepted through their absence when valuable insight could be provided. Feedback also influences the styles of interaction that occur depending on whether the feedback provided encourages or discourages members to motivate. Through this interaction members develop not only the constructs of meaning that shape the foundation for their communally constructed reality but they simultaneously impact the way the community forum operates and is interpreted by other members.

The PostSecret community establishes itself as an open forum and facilitates the continual development of open fora through the active engagement of community members through member interaction. Through the ways members interact, meaning interpretations are created, dynamic evolutions for meanings are transformed and boundaries for meanings are established, all of which facilitate the development for an open communicative environment. How controversial topics are allowed to be and who is allowed to discuss them regulates how open the community is able to be. Through the tools available to members, members create interaction that yields the most constructive result for active and open dialogue to occur. This in turn establishes a community that is readily available to facilitate open fora and engagement in important social issues.
Communicative Meanings through Visual Communication

The second research question for this study sought to address what controversial communicative meanings online communities address through visual communication. To answer this question a semiotic analysis was used to analyze the visual and textual relationships within five postcards from the PostSecret blog. This analysis showed a broad spectrum of emotion was conveyed through the postcards, although the majority of them centered around five basic topics: familial relations, social relations, self-identity, sex and interpersonal relations. Despite this small category, how these messages were conveyed and more importantly how members perceived them was based on the textual/visual relationships within each postcard. Through the visual component for each card, controversial messages evolved from a two-dimensional message to a multi-dimensional, complex subject matter that encouraged member discussion for analysis.

Postcard Secrets and Controversial Communicative Meanings

When looking at the messages displayed on PostSecret, the primary characteristic that binds all of the messages together is the form of the postcard. Despite varying content, images, linguistics and topics every message conforms to the guideline requirement to create a 4 x 6 postcard mailed through a public postal system to be posted onto an even more public World Wide Web. According to Jan-Ola Östman, “The postcard is a meeting place, not only for cultural phenomena . . . but also for several different semiotic modes, and for a plurality of language varieties” (2004, p. 437). These postcards however, can’t be viewed as simply postcards because as in traditional postcard format they are initially mailed to one sender, but unlike traditional postcard behavior
they are then scanned and posted on the Internet for anyone with an Internet connection to view. No longer private or even semi-public as Östman posits, but entirely public and available for mass consumption.

The other aspect of the digital postcard that differs from the traditional is the fact that the viewer cannot hold the postcard, turn it over in her or his hands, view both sides, or even see who the sender is or where it is being sent from. These aspects are reserved solely for the Webmaster and whomever he decides to share them with in hardcopy. Regardless of this loss of physical interaction, viewers online can still be emotionally touched as well as virtually connected to the message. This connection is supported by Walther’s hyperpersonal communication model (Walther, 1994) that states that “the absence of nonverbal cues, as well as editing capabilities, identity cues, and temporal characteristics may prompt CMC users to engage in selective self-presentation and partner idealization, enacting exchanges more intimate than those of FtF [face-to-face] counterparts” (Tidwell & Walther, 2002, p. 319-320). Although Walther found that intimacy is conveyed more over time, it is still capable of being transmitted through CMC and anonymity.

The following sections present the semiotic analyses of the five postcards chosen for this study. The final topics chosen were: suicide, self-realization, sexual abuse, death and family, and interpersonal betrayal and family. These cards were chosen as a representative selection of the 1150 postcards collected in total as they met all of the selection criteria for analysis: if the card contained both visual and textual elements, if the card was open for analysis and not obscure beyond interpretation, if generalizations could
be drawn from the card that would accurately reflect the group as a whole, if the card addressed a controversial topic, if the card was representative of the topic frequency, and if the card encouraged communal discussions.

_Suicide Postcard._ The first postcard in this analysis was posted on April 1, 2007 (see Figure 1). This postcard consists of a black and white image of a suspended bridge with hand scrawled lettering in black ink on the upper right portion that states, “I TOLD MY DEPRESSED EX GIRLFRIEND THAT I DIDN’T CARE ANYMORE. THAT SHE MIGHT AS WELL JUMP OFF A BRIDGE.” In the bottom right-hand portion in slightly smaller lettering it also states, “AND SHE DID.” The message reaffirms its postcard origination with a postal barcode that was affixed to the left side of the image by the post office for mailing. No images or clues are provided which might give indication of the creator’s identity within the postcard. The handwriting could be interpreted to be in the scrawl of a male’s penmanship, especially given the verbiage stated, but given the openness of same-gender relationships and the amount of speculation that would impose it is hard to determine further gender identification from the handwriting.

The first sign identified in this postcard is that of the bridge. The syntagmatic meaning (meaning derived from surrounding signs within the image [Rose, 2001]) for the bridge is a manifest correlation to the textual verbiage, which suggests a reference to suicide from a bridge. The paradigmatic meaning (meaning derived in contrast to all other signs outside of the image [Rose, 2001]) is established through a comparison to other bridges outside of this postcard. Because other bridges exist in the world and the origin of the author is unknown, it cannot be indefinitely determined that this is the exact
bridge of the suicide. However, because this is not a picture of a famous or easily recognizable bridge, the obscurity of the bridge makes it more reasonable to believe that there is some significance of this bridge to the author. The textual message provides anchorage of all of the other possible paradigmatic meaning derivations for the bridge by the explicit connection to the bridge.

Figure 1. Suicide postcard shown April 1, 2007.

Due to the lack of metonymic (how the sign relates to greater ideologies [Rose, 2001]) and synecdochal (whether the sign is representative of a larger sign [Rose, 2001]) meanings within the bridge image this shows that the bridge serves as simply a visual aid to the textual message. The relationship between the image and the text seems to have manifest meanings in that the image of the bridge directly corresponds to the statement, which shows the relationship of the image to the text to be one of reinforcement. The punctum (the lack of culturally-informed readings [Rose, 2001]) derived from this image results if the viewer envisions that this is the bridge the girl jumped from. It provides the
visualization that is inserted into the viewer’s mind that makes the overall image that much more disturbing for the viewer.

The second sign within the postcard is the textual message itself. The denotive meaning derived from the text is simply that the text conveys the message of suicide and the implied direct role of the author. This message addresses the topic of suicide indirectly by not explicitly stating the word suicide but instead depicting an example of suicide that directly impacted the author. Without the context of the situation or knowledge of precursor it is difficult to determine whether the author used this medium to express anguish, remorse, shock, guilt, peace, content, joy or any other range of emotion to deal with the suicide. The syntagmatic meaning is established through the grammar, syntax and choice of words. The author has created a tragic story inclusive of a cliffhanger by physically separating the beginning from the conclusion by space and the image of the bridge. The words are made more real for the viewer through the complementary association with the visual image of the bridge.

The paradigmatic meaning is ascertained when comparing these words to words that are carried out in everyday conversation, especially when examining arguments. Research has shown that negative behaviors, including hurtful statements to others, results in negative conclusions (Julien et al.; 2003; Gottman et al., 1998), which the meaning within this message seems to support. The synecdochal meaning from the text could be representative of the larger idiom “be careful what you say to others for it may come true”. The text is also representative of the larger overall crisis of suicide and sends a message of warning to the viewer. The studium (the culturally-informed reading [Rose,
within the message shows that a culturally informed reading of this message spans cultural restrictions as a suicide of this nature is looked down upon in many cultures (Schneidman, 1998; Schneidman, 2007). The fact that this message can cut across cultural lines with relatively little miscommunication (barring language barriers), makes it a more successful communicative message for the PostSecret format due to the international presence of members on the site.

Overall, the negative space used within the postcard calls into question whether this is a photograph, a photocopy of a photograph, a clipping from a newspaper or something else of that nature. Also, it is uncertain from just viewing the digital version whether the markings on the outer edge of the postcard are a result of the webmaster’s scanning of the postcard or if the original postcard included those markings. This is important to address in order to determine the purity of the card and what outside influences may impact how the viewer inevitably perceives the postcard. In other postcards shown on the site, text that has been glued onto the card originally had fallen off at some point during transmission of the message and altered the final meaning of the message, in some cases obscuring it beyond comprehension.

If the message were viewed with only the image portion it would not convey the association with suicide that the text provides and is therefore dependent on the text for meaning. On the other hand, the text alone could sufficiently convey a message regarding suicide but the image provides a more distinct and cultivated perception on what the situation may have entailed. In this respect, the image is wholly dependant on the textual
portion of the postcard for its meaning to the viewer while the text remains largely independent though is made stronger with the accompanying visual referent.

In comparison to the larger cultural systems of meanings, this postcard represents a controversial topic that is rarely addressed in the national media. According to Pirkis et al.'s study of national media:

On the one hand, it does seem reasonable that only a small proportion of suicides should warrant reporting, given all that is known about the potential for media reports to detrimentally influence the actions of others. On the other hand, there is an argument that the suicides that are reported present a somewhat skewed picture. This media depiction is at odds with reality and may influence public opinion about suicide and suicide risk. (2007, p. 282)

In response to this deficiency, postcards like this one are shown on the PostSecret blog at least 3% of the time, which allows this controversial subject a space in alternative community media to be addressed and discussed among those it affects. Another reason this topic is so controversial is the cultural implications that have been placed on it throughout history. According to Schneidman (1998), in the earliest accounts of the Encyclopedia Britannica (1777) the cultural definition for suicide, or in this edition self-murder was:

SELF-MURDER: the pretended heroism, but real cowardice, of the Stoic philosophers, who destroyed themselves to avoid ills which they had not the fortitude to endure, though attempting it seems to be countenance by the civil law, yet was punished by the Athenian law with cutting off the hand which committed the desperate deed.” (1998, p. 97)

The definition continues on with the religious forthright that was characteristic of the time. Further editions of the Britannica evolve this definition and transfer the causal factor from the individual to the society, then remove all blame from the definition and merely give statistical data of the times, then address it as a field of study and finally
insert the ideology that this is a “response to individual human suffering, a tragedy that befalls real people” (Schneidman, 1998, p. 102).

Although the Britannica is just one cultural reading of this phenomenon that addresses Western societies, studies from Asian cultures have focused on the factors for suicide and have noted that “Social and situational factors appear to play a relatively greater role than psychiatric illness in self-harm and suicide in Mumbai, as in other Asian studies, compared to Europe and North America” (Parkar et al., 2008, December, p. 1). Japanese studies have shown a rise in suicide among Japanese youth and have addressed cultural implications that affect the enactment of suicide through Internet suicide pacts (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008). These studies have shown a classification of more existential suffering among Japanese than mental illness and a desire to not die alone (Ozawa-de Silva, 2008), which could be an extension of their collectivist cultural heritage (Hofstede, 2005). These cultural implications and methods of addressing the topic of suicide have made it controversial in the public sphere of discussion, which in turn entices people across the world to discuss it in alternative forums like PostSecret.

*Self-Realization Postcard.* The second postcard in this analysis was posted on January 21, 2008 (see Figure 2). This postcard consists of a black and white image of a woman and a child presumed to be her son. The image looks old by the fashion and style of the people within the image as well as the actual image itself, black and white photography with tears on the edges of the picture. A typed sentence is pasted onto the photograph in four pieces: “I’m afraid that I won’t be strong enough”, “to raise my son”, “to be the man that his”, and “father failed to be.” As with all postcards on the site, the
identity of the author is unknown although the person is assumed to be a woman because of the correlation with the image.

Neither was my mum... but now I'm taking care of her and it's the most enriching thing I've ever done. Don't give up.

*Figure 2.* Self-realization postcard shown January 21, 2008.

The first sign to be analyzed within the postcard is the image of the mother. The syntagmatic meaning for the image stems from the proximity of the woman’s face to the son’s, which conveys motherly qualities of nurturing and caring. The woman’s eyes compared to the eyes of the child convey her older age, a look of weariness in her struggle and a sense of hopelessness in light of the adversities she faces. This aspect of the image correlates to the textual portion of the postcard, as it seems to convey the fear
described. The image also conveys a determination of the mother to care for her son through the proximity of the bodies in a protective gesture.

The paradigmatic meaning for the image is established through the correlation to historical imagery of mothers in general as protectors of children, which is also conveyed through the proximity of the bodies in the image and the look of determination in the woman’s eyes. The metonymic meaning for this image is established through the overall symbolic meaning for mothers in general having qualities of strength and nurture in the face of adversity. The synecdochal meaning stems from a greater meaning of strength for women and the courage to raise and protect their children (Jung, 1921; Krafft Sherlock, 1984; Sapiro, 1993). The image of the woman provides a visual reference for the viewer to imagine the look of determination and fear the author may have in her eyes as she endures her struggles and fears.

The second sign within the postcard is the image of the child. The syntagmatic meaning for the child stems from the age of the child in the image, which conveys youth, innocence, naivety and vulnerability. The proximity of the mother conveys the necessity for the protection of a mother. The child’s eyes compared to the woman’s convey a carefree essence, happiness, youth and vigor. Due to the child’s age of innocence his eyes lack the hard lines of stress and worry that the woman’s have. The paradigmatic meaning stems from the clothes and haircut of the child, which reflect an older generation and historical sense, which in turn lacks modernity afforded by today’s society. The image of the child also correlates to iconic imagery commonly depicted of children: youth,
innocence and vulnerability. The metonymic meaning is established through this correlation to iconic children imagery as well.

The third sign is the text within the postcard. The syntagmatic meaning for the text stems from how the message of the text is made stronger through the association with the imagery. In this relationship, the image is dependent on the text for contextual anchorage whereas the text is independent but gets further clarification and visual support through the association with the image. The text explicitly states the insecurity of a single mother and a self-realization of the author. The syntax of the statement breaks the sentence into four key thoughts: the author’s fear of not being strong enough, the worry of ineptitude to properly raise her child, the struggle to evolve her son to be a good man, and the struggle of a failed relationship and disappointment of a failed father-figure for her son. An interesting aspect of the syntax of the sentence is that the portions of the sentence that pertain to the mother are located over the image of the boy and the portions of the sentence that pertain to the son are located over the image of the woman, which continues the conveyance of the interdependent relationship between mother and son.

The synecdochal meaning for the text stems from the correlation to the larger single-mother plight; the struggle for a woman to successfully raise her child(ren) by herself outside of the historically common and expected two-parent household. In American society single parents are increasingly more common than what was seen even thirty years ago (U.S. Census Bureau, 2007), therefore increasing the applicability of this struggle to the mass audience of viewers that visit the PostSecret blog. The text also touches upon the general desire for parents to be good protectors and caregivers for their
children (Ogaki & Johnson-Divecha, 1993; Keller & McDade, 2000). The punctum of the text is established through the acknowledgment of disappointment of the father and the struggle to overcome that adversity by raising the child to be a better person.

Like some postcards every week, this postcard had an e-mail response attached to it on the blog forum that the Webmaster decided to provide to blog viewers. The response was sent within three hours of the postcard being posted, which shows the dedication of members and motivation to be part of the conversation. The response states, “Neither was my mum . . . but now I’m taking care of her and it’s the most enriching thing I’ve ever done. Don’t give up.” The syntagmatic meaning of the response reaffirms the message within the postcard and attempts to reassure the author through a message of hope of potential positive outcome. The paradigmatic meaning is established through the terminology used in the response, which is reflective of British idiom and shows the global influence of the site. The metonymic meaning stems from the fact that the response is posted as a sign of hope for author and viewers who can relate. The synecdochal meaning is established through the response as a representative voice for the children of single mothers to assure them they will be okay. The studium reflects a cross-cultural relativity to the message through the idiom used.

Overall, the image reinforces the text by visualizing the message. The image would not reflect the same message without the text and is therefore dependent on the text for anchorage of meaning. The cultural systems of meaning established in this postcard are representative of the struggle of a single mother to successfully raise her child alone and the struggle of all mothers to raise their children to be good people.
Sexual Abuse Postcard. The third postcard in this analysis was posted on October 7, 2007 (see Figure 3). This postcard consists of a colored image of a girl on a bed clutching a pillow and the figure of a male in the background. It is indeterminable as to what the medium of the image is although it could be a watercolor painting or a Photo Shopped digital image with a watercolor overlay or similar effect that makes the image slightly blurry and unrealistic in nature. Juxtaposed over the image is a sentence in three pieces: “I submit to my boyfriend’s”, “Rape Fantasies” and “It’s just pretend . . . right?” The first and third pieces are hand-written in green ink over a white background, while the second piece is made mainly of cut out letters of different typefaces in white ink over a red background except the letter “i” in the word fantasies, which is red ink over a white background. The choice of font for this piece is significant for its historical reference of usage associated with people who specifically want to keep their identities hidden as in cases of kidnap or ransom. The author is assumed to be a girl based on the correlation of the image of boy and girl and the textual reference even though it is not explicitly stated.

The first sign to be analyzed in this postcard is the image of the girl. The syntagmatic meaning is established through comparison to the rest of the imagery where the girl appears ostracized and alone. The shadow over her eyes exemplifies that point and masks her identity even further creating a feeling of identity absence. The medium chosen obscures the reality of the image by creating an impressionistic effect. The posture of the girl conveys a sense of violation and insecurity; she clutches the pillow as if for protection from some unknown. Unlike the other postcards, this image is not dependent on the textual element to accurately convey the message. Through the
relationship of the girl and the background imagery a sense of violation is generally conveyed where the textual message in turn conveys the specific message of rape. The paradigmatic meaning is established through the girl’s isolation and posture, which correlates to other images of victims that have been violated or of girls emotionally or physically distraught.

Figure 3. Sexual abuse postcard shown October 7, 2007.

The second sign in the postcard is the background image. The syntagmatic meaning is established through the proximity between the two people, which conveys alienation. The half of the image that takes place in the bedroom provides the setting for the textual message. There are no defining features on the image of the boy in the background, which creates an absence of identity for him as well. This lack of identity for both individuals creates the sense of alienation and isolation within the postcard like two strangers interacting. This isolation provides the visual support for the textual message
"Rape Fantasies" as it visualizes the isolation and victimization that would be associated with that. The paradigmatic meaning is established when comparing this bedroom image to any other bedroom, except the natural setting is made tense or unnatural in this image through the individuals lack of interaction. The punctum is created through the unsettling feeling evoked due to the alienation and isolation the image conveys in a seemingly ordinary setting. In conjunction with the text, the image is made more unsettling by the context provided.

The third sign within the postcard is the text written in green ink. The syntagmatic meaning is established through its dependence on the text written in red to clarify what the submission is, although the green text located at the bottom of the postcard signifies the author's uncertainty of whether she is pretending to be raped or not. The first half of the message inclusive of the red text provides a sexual fantasy secret in general without judgment or value given. The bottom statement establishes the punctum through clarified value/judgment ascribed to it by the author. The paradigmatic meaning is established in when comparing this secret to other sexual fantasies. The first half of the statement could be perceived as seemingly ordinary depending on the cultural reading. However, the metonymic meaning is established through the bottom statement, which is almost an afterthought but very much the center of the meaning for the message, which explicates a larger problem within the relationship in that it is not just a sexual fantasy but the author might actually feel victimized by her boyfriend. The studium is established as the secret could be read as a common type of sexual fantasy (Leitenberg & Henning, 1995), where
the punctum is established through the bottom statement, which evokes a sense of unsettlement within the viewer.

Overall, both the image and textual messages accurately convey the same message, although the image conveys it in a general sense and the text provides it specifically. The cultural systems of meaning established address the acceptance and secretiveness of sexual fantasies and the depth to which those fantasies remain fantasy versus breaching reality and the impending impact that may create.

*Death and Family Postcard.* The fourth postcard in this analysis was posted on April 22, 2007 (see Figure 4). This postcard consists of a colored image of a cigarette ashtray and a single, lit and still smoking cigarette. The ashtray is centered within the middle of the postcard, consuming the majority of the space of the postcard, with an off-centered white border similar to ones associated with Polaroid pictures framing it and a black background consuming the remaining negative space. The use of the negative space in the postcard is interesting as it is hard to determine the original context of the image, although multiple options are possible. If the image is a scan of a Polaroid, further questions are raised as to whether the Polaroid is of an ashtray associated with the textual message or if it is a clip found in printed material with personal significance applied after the fact. The composition of the postcard is arranged in such a way that the image is framed through a black edge and a white edge, which centers the image and draws the viewer’s eye towards the angle of the cigarette, leading into the ashtray and landing onto the first piece of the text. The textual statement is broken in two pieces overlaid atop the image of the ashtray. The statement reads, “I was glad when my father died.” And “I
think he was too.” The postcard does not give any indication as to the author’s ethnicity, gender, age or any other discerning feature to ascertain the person’s identity. All that is known is that this person’s father has passed away.

Figure 4. Death and family postcard shown April 22, 2007.

The first sign within the postcard is that of the cigarette and ashtray. The syntagmatic meaning stems from a possible visual representation of the manner in which the father died as referenced in the text. Due to the recent stigma applied to cigarettes and smoking in American advertising from the cancer society and other anti-smoking advertisements (Wakefield et al., 2008; “Poster Art”, 2009; “About Us”, 2009), cigarettes by themselves have now become representative of death and dying. Previous associations attached to cigarettes consisted of the ideologies of being “cool”, “sexy” for women, or “manly” for men (Broder, 1992; Large & Dennis, 1993; Sansores et al., 2002). These were usually conveyed through the association of the cigarette with a character or
representative like an attractive women smoking to represent femininity and sexiness or a rugged man in the mountains on horseback to convey manliness and masculinity. With the restriction on pro-cigarette advertising established in 1971 through the Public Health Cigarette Smoking Act (Alpert et al., 2008), anti-smoking and anti-cigarette commercials established a prominent presence in American media and created a new perception of cigarettes by associating them with cancer patients, death rates and addiction ("Anti-tobacco", 2005; Biener, 2006; Ibrahim & Glantz, 2007; "About Us", 2009). This in turn changes the cultural reading of this image of a cigarette and ashtray to be associated with death and dying as opposed to sex and attractiveness. This stigma also establishes the metonymic meaning for this image through the association with the greater ideological concept of death and dying.

Another metonymic meaning stems from the fact that the cigarette is lit and still smoking, which conveys that the cigarette is still burning. This is significant as conventionally the American cultural reading for a fire going out is associated with death and dying but in this image the cigarette is still burning, signifying a life in continuance in spite of the father’s death. This could in turn be representative of the life of the child left behind to address the father’s death or it could represent the impact of the father’s death having a life of its own that is still continuing through the people that knew the father. The ashtray can also be seen as a metaphorical representation of the child having to hold the burden of the father’s death just as the ashtray holds and supports the cigarette. Because the cigarette is representative of death and dying, as such the image itself will convey a sense of death even without the textual message based on an
American cultural reading. The limitation to this of course is that other cultures may perceive cigarettes differently and may not make this association, leaving the image subject to cultural reading as to whether it is dependent on the textual image for contextual anchorage.

The second sign within the postcard is that of the text. The syntagmatic meaning is established as the textual reference of the father's death is given imagery through the associated picture of the cigarette. The text provides anchorage for the image to keep it in the context of death and dying. The paradigmatic meaning is determined as the phrase "I was glad when my father died." is compared to socially accepted forms of grievances, which would consist usually of sorrow versus joy (Bowlby, 1980; Shuchter & Zisook, 1993). In this light, this statement establishes its punctum as the text could be seen as shocking as social norms across the globe reflect cultural ideologies that respect, admire and honor the father (Hofstede, 2005). The text is also intriguing as it is unknown whether the author is glad because of the negative relationship with the father or if it due to the fact that the father's assumed suffering through dying has ended. The second sentence supports the latter meaning as it conveys the father's perceived acceptance for death as well.

Overall, the image is dependent on a cultural filter whether it is seen as dependent or independent of the textual statement for anchorage of meaning. The cultural meaning of systems established address the postcard as representative of the struggle children go through dealing with the loss of a parent no matter their age. How the child deals with the death may vary from sorrow to joy to any other range of emotion. Regardless of the
relationship with the deceased, the child must still endure the loss of a parent, which lays impact on the child.

_Interpersonal Betrayal and Family Postcard._ The fifth postcard in this analysis was posted on August 4, 2007. This postcard consists of a black and white image of a nude girl shown from her mouth to her chest, with her right arm stretching to the front of the picture as if holding the camera taking the picture and her left arm wrapped under her chest pushing upward to create a cleavage effect. Any signifying features of the girl’s face have been cut off from the picture but it can be ascertained that she is a younger woman. Also within the postcard are two sentences printed in red ink: “Even though I’m 48 and married and she’s 21 and single, my lover and I still have GREAT sex together” and “And neither one of us cares that her mother is my sister”. There is no discriminating evidence within the postcard to determine the author’s identity other than the age. Not even a gender can be ascertained from the information provided.

The first sign within this postcard is the image of the girl. The syntagmatic meaning is established as the image of the girl provides visualization for the textual message. Given the photographic quality of the postcard it is possible that the image could be of the girl referenced in the textual message. The nudity of the girl provides a more sexual representation of the message than is provided in the text. The youthfulness of the girl conveys a sense of carefree, vitality in reference to her age in the text. The paradigmatic meaning is established through the conveyance of the free, uninhibited, youthful spirit from the image of the girl. The nudity within the image also provides an embodiment of sexual prowess attached to the image of the girl as well as the textual
reference. The angle of the face and the fact that it is cut off conveys a sense of anonymity and mystery as to who the girl is. The head tilt and hidden face also show a sign of insecurity and awkwardness.

![Image of a postcard with text: Even though I'm 45 and married and she's 21 and single, my lover and I still have GREAT sex together and neither one of us cares that her mother is my sister.]

----- Email Message-----
Sent: Sunday, August 05, 2007 4:50 PM
Subject: Does your mom know you are having sex with her grand-daughter?

... 

Figure 5. Interpersonal betrayal and family postcard shown August 4, 2007.

The metonymic meaning stems from the association of the girl with sexuality, freedom and youthfulness. The punctum stems from an American cultural reading where nudity and sexuality are mainly seen as shocking and improper for public viewing.
(Foucault, 1978; Rubin, 1993; Burgett, 2008). Other cultures around the globe are more comfortable with the exposure of the human body, seeing it as natural and a part of life (Foucault, 1985). The pose itself is held in a provocative manner, conveying a sense of sexuality and allure, which could add to the American reading of the image. The image is not dependent on the text to be shocking or arousing but is dependent for contextual anchorage and accurate establishment of meaning.

The second sign within the postcard is the first half of the text. The syntagmatic meaning for this statement provides anchorage for the image and affirms the youth of the girl by providing her age. The text correlates the sexuality and freedom conveyed by the image to “21 and single”. The syntax within the statement is contradictory as it is written as an exception statement when it concludes as an expectance: she wouldn’t be his lover if they didn’t have great sex. The synecdochal meaning affirms the stereotypes of a mid-life crisis individual cheating with a person half her/his age (Jung, 1921/1976; “D. Min”, 2003; “Mid-life”, 2009). The metonymic meaning affirms the perception of youth as carefree, unattached and uninhibited. The cultural reading for this statement revolves around the American perception of cheating as breaking the vows of marriage and is generally disapproved of.

The third sign within the postcard is the second half of the text. The syntagmatic meaning for this affirms the dependence of the second statement on the first, which provides contextual anchorage. This part of this statement, however, is independent of the image although it gains visual imagery for message effect. The metonymic meaning calls to question the socially accepted familial roles for an uncle and niece. Modern cultures
generally denounce incestuous relationships for many reasons including health reason should the two decide to procreate (Aberle, 1994; Janeway, 1994; Turner, 2008). The punctum for this statement is derived from the combination of all signs when associating the image of the young girl, with the infidel person and the incestuous relationship. Although an alternative reading is also possible for this postcard: The majority of this analysis assumes a husband is cheating on his wife with his niece although the text does not confirm this. An alternative meaning could be a wife is cheating on her spouse and having a lesbian, incestuous affair with her niece. This interpretation would be socially disapproved of in most cultures as the majority of most cultures in general disapprove of same-gender relationships of any kind.

Like a previous postcard analyzed, this postcard also has an e-mail response, although this response was not posted until almost 17 hours after the unveiling of the postcard. The body of the e-mail simply shows three ellipses; however, the subject for the e-mail states, “Does your mom know you are having sex with her grand-daughter?” The response affirms a negative cultural reading of this postcard in which the viewer has twisted the perspective of the involved to entice the author to question her/his actions and decide whether that person’s mother would approve. This motherly influence and affect to the postcard reinforce a cultural disapproval for incestuous relationships even more than the marriage infidelity.

Overall, the image is dependent on the text for anchorage of meaning, the second statement is dependent on the first for contextual anchorage and the first statement independently and accurately conveys the secret although the second sentence and image
provide punctum. The cultural meaning of systems established address issues of incest, infidelity, contrasting phases of life and conflicting familial roles. How these issues are raised and addressed within the postcard create a conflicting punctum within the viewer regardless of most cultural readings.

These postcards represent a small sample of the number of secrets shown on PostSecret every week. However, despite this these cards accurately represent the types of issues that are addressed as well as the inner symbolic relationship of meaning within each that are displayed through the site. The visual communicative aspect of these postcards is more conducive to member interaction through the greater ideological themes conveyed and the member connection achieved through each. Through this conveyance and approach to hidden social issues, members feel they can openly discuss these matters within the safety of the PostSecret community. Controversial issues spanning the spectrum of human emotion are conveyed through PostSecret and because of the interdependent relationship between the textual and visual components within each postcard these issues are addressed in such a way that impacts members to react, engage and discuss openly. The repercussions of this impact will be discussed in the following section.

Offline Repercussions from Online Discussions

Both research questions addressed thus far have been building up to the third and final question of how online controversial discussions impact the offline realm. Ethnographic inquiry and in-depth interviews were conducted in which the data showed that online discussions have minimal impact on the offline realm. Through the facilitation
of an open forum and visual communication of controversial messages, PostSecret sets the stage for civic engagement to occur. However, the site currently lacks the virtual catalyst to bridge the digital and actual realms but does create a civic enlightenment of social issues for those topics the national media currently ignores.

The repercussions of PostSecret outside of the online community and the lack thereof, were detailed through interviews with PostSecret members. The major repercussions centered on a microscopic effect that focused on individual life changes, which provides the stepping stone for larger social changes. Macroscopic repercussions were noted as occurring rarely amongst members, again with the focus leaning more towards a microscopic effect. Intercultural factors affected the impact of offline repercussions for some societies depending on cultural definitions of what is considered taboo.

One of the main effects PostSecret has on members is the ability to raise awareness of controversial topics to plant the seed for discussion and social cognition. Through engagement in these dialogues, members establish an understanding that better prepares them to address issues in dialogue outside of the community. Members not only become more knowledgeable of controversial topics but also receive a humanistic perspective of topics that sensitizes them to the fact that real people are afflicted by these issues. Because of this sensitization some members have become inspired to be active in organizations both online and within their local communities.

i followed a link to a video of the industrialized processes of animal husbandry and animal processing for slaughter. the cruelty was unbearable. now i'm becoming a vegetarian. also, i followed links to several sites where clicking
generates donations to good causes, and I still visit the sites regularly. (Member interview, May 19, 2008)

The design of the PostSecret community is unique in that it establishes a stepping stone approach to address humanistic issues at a microscopic level while disseminating this approach at a macroscopic level simultaneously. This microscopic approach does not dehumanize or sensationalize issues like the national media, which makes them more impacting on members who can personalize them through community interaction. The repercussion that results from this is the potential to effect how members interact with others in society with more consideration, compassion and awareness in general.

I think [PostSecret has] made me more sympathetic to people. When I'm dealing with people, I try to remember that each one of them could be the person who sent in a card that touched me in some way, that beneath whatever exterior they show the world, there could be a beautiful, or funny, or brave soul beneath. (Member interview, March 10, 2008)

Along with a self-reflective approach to sensitivity towards others is a realization that others can be sympathetic in return, which reverses older media theories like the mean world syndrome that states that because people are inundated with so much negativity in the national media they begin to see the world as a negative place (Gerbner et al., 1986). This optimistic perspective undertaken by members in turn establishes a sense of connection with complete strangers encountered offline. “[Post Secret s]tarted me feeling a little bit connected to...people, strangers, out there in the world whom I understood as they showed very personal feelings” (Member interview, March 14, 2008). This feeling of connection makes conversations addressing controversial topics more conducive to being started at a grassroots level among friends, family and peers, which
again, makes communities like PostSecret a successful stepping stone to begin making greater progress in increasing civic engagement on larger social levels.

Although PostSecret is seemingly successful for building these bridges, a large factor for success is the intercultural influences that affect global members in the PostSecret community. PostSecret audiences vary depending on culture, with a smaller following found outside of the U.S. border. Because of this, the effect varies depending on the cultural reading and interpretation of secrets and what is or is not deemed taboo. “I come from a culture that is more open than the American one, so many of the taboo topics discussed on these boards are not that taboo where I live. Abortion and sex before marriage to take two examples” (Member interview, May 12, 2008).

With respect to macroscopic effects, half of interview respondents said they did not see a greater offline repercussion resulting from PostSecret in their local communities or in greater social spheres. According to Robert Putnam (2000), this could be because many of the PostSecret community members view the site as a form of entertainment versus a form of information. According to Putnam, for these members, a greater civic impact is not possible because they do not use the community in a manner that is conducive to increasing civic engagement although the possibility for such usage does exist. Because of this form of usage some members view the site as not progressing greater social discussion within society and instead view it as a safe environment for the discussions to be held in the first place. This again confirms the idea that PostSecret is providing a transitional phase from an individual, grassroots level to hopefully a greater civically engaged level further down the road; it creates a member awareness of
responsibility to take action outside of the community in order to raise greater social awareness.
Chapter 5
DISCUSSION

This chapter discusses conclusions for this study as well as the limitations and implications for future research.

The results of this study show that online communities facilitate the development of open forums in two ways: with communication tools like anonymity and a shared value system and through the communicative interaction within the community displayed through universal social action and a communal reality. The results also show that controversial topics that span the spectrum of human emotion can be and are addressed through visual communication in online communities, although half the topics shown center around five basic topics: interpersonal relationships, familial relationships, social engagement, self-identity and sex. And finally, the last focus of this study showed that although anonymous, online communities like PostSecret do not directly promote offline civic engagement but do provide a stepping stone towards civic enlightenment of social issues with the possibility for future opportunities for direct promotion with the proper organization and engagement efforts.

Using an artillery of communication tools, online communities like PostSecret are well equipped to foster open communication and dynamic dialogues. In accordance with previous online community research, PostSecret has conveyed the general foundations necessary for an open communicative environment: the ability to build trust (Huffaker & Calvert, 2005), the encouragement for self-disclosure (Ramirez, 2002), the lack of judgment based on superficial characteristics (Deaux, 1993), the accessibility to a
medium for those who have social phobias (Bargh, 2004), and the possibility for a diversity of perspectives to engage and interact (Williams, 2006). The main component of PostSecret that attracts such a large following is the possibility for anonymity. Because of this aspect, users feel they can disclose personal information without fear of rejection or repercussions and because they feel they can openly self-disclose dynamic dialogue is created that openly addresses controversial topics not normally addressed by the national media.

Because of the open forum that online communities develop, a wide spectrum of controversial topics is addressed. In the PostSecret community over fifteen general topics are addressed, with only five of these addressed nearly 50% of the time, which shows that even though a wide spectrum of human emotion is conveyed, it falls within a small area of human interaction and communication. Within these topics greater ideological themes are addressed that enforce cultural systems of meanings surrounding concepts of incest, the struggle for parents to raise good children and the dissonance that exist for some between fantasy and reality to name a few. These ideological themes reflect the controversial social issues hidden within the national public sphere. Not only because these issues are addressed but also the manner in which they are addressed through visual communication a significant impact is created for most community members where members are then afforded the opportunity to create dynamic dialogue with others.

The Subjective Message Construct Theory (SMCT) explained previously in the literature review (Morley, 1987), helps to explain this connection between visual communication meaning interpretation and the dynamic dialogue created between
members throughout meaning construction. Members rely on communicative strategies and personal experiences to ascertain message comprehension through interplay of feedback with other members as they subjectively construct meaning interpretations (Parrott et al., 2005). This meaning construction in turn validates the existence of silenced social issues while simultaneously deconstructing the issue, analyzing the signifiers and signs on an individual basis, and reconstructing meaning through co-established definitions. The presence of visual elements is an important aspect to member connection with secrets as shown through member interviews as it helps to make abstract concepts more tangible for viewers as well as contextualize visual/textual relationships of meaning within the postcard.

Based on the fact that these open forums exist and actively promote engaging discussions on controversial social issues it would seem that the next natural step would be for these communities to also foster civic engagement to actively address these same issues within the offline public sphere. However, as PostSecret has shown a catalyst is needed to link the offline and online realm for civic involvement to increase. Although PostSecret does not directly contribute to offline civic engagement, it does provide a stepping-stone for civic enlightenment to increase individual awareness of important social issues. Member interviews revealed that although consciousness is raised on an individual level, few members take action on them outside the community. This is in part due to social anxieties by some members to engage with people offline as well as from a personal fear to be held accountable for views and opinions held on controversial topics that are deemed as socially unacceptable within the greater public sphere. Some members
choose not to let the community pervade their personal offline lives and see the community as a separate part of their lives to be engaged privately. Because of these reasons for non-motivation, no collective action was noted offline in members’ local communities from those interviewed, although the possibility for such action does exist.

To follow up on the bridging versus bonding relationships addressed from the literature review (Putnam, 2000; Shah et al., 2001; Williams, 2006), it seems that online communities like PostSecret fall somewhere in between. In one respect, they attract a wide diversity of perspectives and cultures, thereby creating a bridging relationship, while simultaneously engrossing these diversities in in-depth conversations regarding important social issues through self-disclosure of personal secrets, which in turn would create a bonding relationship. Although these relationships have been proven to be important foundations for increasing civic engagement (Putnam, 2000; Williams, 2006), the role of anonymity effects whether members perceive the community to perform an entertaining versus informative role. Because most members viewed the community as serving an entertainment function a lack of cohesive effort was raised between members offline. However, what did result was a social cognition raised at the individual level for important issues.

Overall, PostSecret is making progress towards an increase in civic engagement by providing awareness of important issues and providing a forum for people to engage in constructive dialogue to address them. On a microscopic level, individuals are reaching a higher consciousness of awareness and are being equipped with the understanding, sensitivity and compassion to engage in meaningful discussions in local communities.
From this engagement future grassroots actions can take place once a more collective, organized effort is initiated.

Communities like PostSecret have developed a niche in the online world that has a possibility of breaching the digital boundary. Individuals who feel ostracized from engaging with others in the offline realm have a place to interact with others in a constructive manner that builds social awareness for ignored issues. Because of this, the conversations and bonding that result create an enlightenment for people who may not have the opportunity in other facets of communication. Communities like PostSecret that engage the outcasts of society provide hope for the stigmatized and a medium where their silenced voices can be heard and accepted.

Members of society craving to engage in constructive dialogue addressing socially ignored issues have a way to do so through alternative media in online communities. Through the development of open fora, online communities serve as a safe haven for those afraid of retribution for their thoughts and opinions. Important social issues ignored by the national media are addressed openly through these fora, in turn creating a more involved, enlightened citizenry that could engage their local communities with the right organization and communicative tools. Future research should determine what communicative tools would be necessary to breach this divide and increase civic engagement through alternative media like online blogs and communities.

Limitations

One limitation in conducting the online discussion forum was the inability to verify accuracy in information provided and hold respondents accountable for responses,
which is a common problem when gathering sample groups through online communities (Dillman, 2000; Stanton, 1998). Another limitation in using this type of method is the possibility of self-selection bias (Wright, 2005). By allowing users to anonymously decide whether they would like to participate or not there is the possibility that those who decide to participate may be either new to the community and unfamiliar with its goals and history or what is referred to as an online community “lurker” or viewer who does not actively participate in the discussion and progression of the community. There also lies the risk that those who are normally very active in the community may not get a chance to participate in the discussion and would therefore not be included in the study. Despite these weaknesses, the benefits of using an online discussion forum (as noted by Wright, 2005) include the ability to contact an anonymous community that would otherwise be unreachable as well as a savings in time and cost to reach a mass audience.

Another limitation that is inevitable with this study is to fully examine the PostSecret phenomenon. This study examined different postcards posted over a one-year period through the PostSecret blog. However, these postings are a comparatively small snapshot in time that they may not accurately depict or examine the full extent of the phenomenon or goal the site is trying to achieve. Aspects of this phenomenon that could be ascertained as being coincidental in meaning could have this doubt reduced given a longer length of time with more data to examine. This research is limited to the few aspects currently examined here given the sheer magnitude of data that can be accumulated through analyzing the PostSecret phenomenon in general, like the subsequent books that have been published with postcards and follow-on book tours,
Copycat efforts in offline realms, and college lectures. Another limitation distinct to this study is the inability to verify how truthful the secrets or members are on the site. Members and secret creators could have different motivations when they self-disclose purportedly hidden aspects of themselves. However, whether they are fully honest or not is more or less irrelevant because the secrets revealed and perspectives shared are true for the person reading it or commenting on it. The people choosing not to share could be the very ones the secrets are true for the most. In addition, the very foundation of the site is reliant on the fact that members believe the secrets to be true in order to construct their foundation of honesty and open communication; without this belief the community would fail to be as communicatively successful as it is.

Implications

This study sought to examine how online communities foster open communication to address important social issues normally ignored within the national media. It also examined the repercussions these important dialogues have in offline communities and whether or not civic engagement is increased through these online discussions. The results here have shown that through fundamental communicative tools like anonymity, established perceived trust and communal meaning construction, open forums online help foster both bridging and bonding relationships within online communities. This is important for future research endeavors that seek to determine how these relationships in turn impact other communal activities like self disclosure and offline relationship formation.
By determining the impact visual elements make in controversial topic discussions, future research can account for this when examining the role visual elements play in forms of controversial communication such as political propaganda or terrorist media messages. The fact that controversial discussions occur is not new, but identifying how they occur, the types of media used to convey meaning, and what people take away from the discussions is necessary for practical implications of social relations, civic engagement, and an increased proactive citizenry within society. Analyzing how members of society discuss issues that impact society at large is important if society is going to evolve beyond the hushed whispering of controversial topics to addressing them in the national forefront through constructive communicative media. The current study serves to be one step in addressing how society addresses important social issues but also seeks to show how it does not and in what ways communication researchers can look to apply what is already known to start effectively engaging a knowledgeable, active citizenry for the next step in civic engagement.

Areas for Future Research

This study began an examination into how societies use alternative media to address hidden social issues. The next steps in this examination need to focus on the types of alternative media used to serve this purpose, the types of people who actively engage in alternative media for this purpose and how communities build bridges between the offline and online worlds to tangibly bring these conversations into the public sphere. In looking at types of alternative media, it would be most beneficial to not restrict this analysis to any one country and instead erase the national divisions and focus on the
variety of alternative media available in various countries. In doing so, media forms not yet available in the U.S. may be discovered or new ways to use old media like radio stations may be identified. By examining how people all over the world simultaneously seek to address the social issues that bind us and force to hide within the alternative media sphere, communication scholars can determine new ways to increase active citizenry for civic engagement. It is also beneficial to identify the availability of alternative media sources within and across national borders as well.

By looking at the types of people who engage in alternative media usage for controversial discussions, researchers can determine the current standing of active citizenry for future comparison to increased/decreased civic engagement. By identifying the types of people who engage in these types of media practices, it will be useful in determining how to target other people who may be interested in becoming active citizens but currently are not. It will also be helpful in determining the reasons why citizens become engaged and more importantly why they do not for future efforts of increasing civic engagement. Through identifying user demographics of alternative media usage future research will be able to determine which types of media are effective at sustaining users and which are not.

Lastly, and most importantly, it is necessary to continue the research on how communities use alternative media to build bridges between online and offline realms for the purposes of increasing civic engagement and building a knowledgeable, active citizenry. This study identified one possible shortfall for how online communities fail to span the virtual realm to offline communities, but it also important to identify other
possible ways these communities fail as well as succeed in order to more accurately determine better ways to secure virtual bridges. Computer-mediated communication offers a limitless amount of resources for interested individuals to become civically engaged. Future research that taps into how, in what ways and through what forms that span the virtual realm will provide invaluable insight into how engaged citizenry can be increased.

Conclusions

This study sought to identify how online communities foster open forums in which controversial discussions can be held and thrive. Communities like PostSecret are highly sought after for many reasons to include being a safe haven for people with social phobias as well as a medium in which people will not be judged based on superficial attributes like ethnicity, speech impediments, or gender. While online communities have been thriving over the past few decades since the advent of the Internet, it is only in recent years that the Internet is being used as an alternative media source in which people can engage with others to discuss important social issues without fear of retribution or remorse. In future studies, it will be interesting to see how these online communities converge with their offline counterparts to continue the dialogues that are necessary for the evolution of global societies.

This study also sought to determine how online communities engage in controversial discussion using visual communication. In the PostSecret community members are drawn into the community through the secrets conveyed in postcards. Through the visual/textual relationship in each card, a secret transforms from a hidden
personal shame into a living, contextualized, visually compelling artifact to be consumed by members for interpretation, analysis and discussion. Through this interaction secrets are no longer hidden in the closet of society but instead are brought into a pocket of the public sphere for active engagement. The combination of both visual and textual elements in alternative media creates an impact on members and transforms previously seen static media like postcards into a living relic to be experienced.

The final aspect of this study sought to determine the offline repercussions that stem from the development of open forums that use visual communication to address controversial social issues. If societies are to evolve and secrets are to transition from out of the closet, discussions like those held in the PostSecret community need to be held in a larger format within the public sphere. A virtual bridge needs to be built stemming from the online realm to the offline communities where digital conversations can pulsate within living, breathing communities. PostSecret is one online community starting the process of civic enlightenment, which is necessary if it is hoped that society at large will become civically engaged at a larger level. From this study, the field of communication can ascertain that online communities that provide open fora to discuss controversial social issues do not directly increase civic engagement but do create a civic enlightenment necessary to engage individuals into greater ideological thought. For it is through civic enlightenment that society can hope to increase civic engagement and no longer feel compelled to hide its darkest secrets within the closets of humanity.
APPENDICES
APPENDIX A

Consent Form

I agree to participate in research which will be conducted by Cindy Vincent, a graduate student in the Communication Studies Department at California State University, Sacramento. The purpose of this study is to examine the actions that occur offline due to discussions that occur in online communities.

This study will entail an online interview session to be conducted through the PostSecret Community private message system, a type of electronic mail system specific to the community. The interview will be held through four separate private messages entailing five questions each that address the following topics: general site usage, postcard impressions, online community building, and offline actions. The research will require no more than four accumulated hours of my time. To maintain the subject confidentiality, demographic questions like name, age and location will not be asked. All conversations will be stored on the researcher's computer hard drive and will be kept in a password-secure location, only to be accessed by the researcher and solely used for the purposes of this proposed study.

I understand that my participation in this research is entirely voluntary. I may decline to participate now, or I may discontinue my participation at any time in the future without risk. I understand that the researcher may terminate my participation at any time. I also understand that I will not receive any compensation for participating in this study.

If I have any questions about this research I can contact the researcher, Cindy Vincent, at cindy.s.vincent@gmail.com. I can also contact Dr. David Zuckerman, Assistant Professor, California State University, Sacramento, at sdzuck@csus.edu.

In order to participate in this study I agree that I am over the age of 18 or have the written permission of my parents.

IF YOU CONSENT, PLEASE RETURN THIS FORM WITH THE TYPED STATEMENT: I give my consent.

________________________________________________________________________ Date: ________________
APPENDIX B

Community Member Questionnaire

General Usage
- How did you first hear of PostSecret.blogspot.com?
- How long have you been visiting the site?
- When did you sign up for PostSecret Community?
- Would you consider yourself a frequent poster to the PostSecret Community chat forum?
- What medium do you most prefer to communicate through on PostSecret? (i.e. postcard, chat forum, audio upload, video upload, e-mail, etc.)

Postcard Impressions
- How has PostSecret affected your life?
- What were your initial impressions the first time you visited the site?
- Have there ever been any postcards that have left you feeling disturbed or conflicted? If so, what was the issue being addressed within the postcard?
- Please describe the postcard(s) that has made the biggest impact on your life. How did you react to the message conveyed through this postcard?
- Do you think the issues addressed through PostSecret are sufficiently discussed in the national media or general public sphere? If so, what role do you think PostSecret plays in the overall social conversation of these issues?

Online Community Building
- In what ways, if any, do you feel this website has created a sense of community that could not have been possible offline?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel like you are part of a community that is helping to progress social discussion of topics that would not otherwise be openly discussed?
- What aspects, if any, of the PostSecret Community do you feel allows you to openly discuss potentially controversial issues?
- In what ways, if any, has the anonymous aspect of the website helped or hindered you to openly communicate potentially controversial issues?
- Why do you discuss potentially controversial issues online?

Offline Actions
- What types of issues, if any, have been introduced through the website that you felt compelled to take action for/against offline? Please describe.
- What type(s) of action, if any, have you made offline in response to a secret shared through PostSecret? Please describe.
- Please describe any attempts you have made to contact another PostSecret member with the intention of offering advice, conflict resolution, or consolation.
• In what ways, if any, have you noticed an impact from these discussions offline? Please describe.
• In what ways, if any, have you noticed an impact in your local community from these discussions, either through collective action or individual efforts/concerns expressed to address an issue? Please describe.
APPENDIX C

Administrator Questionnaire

General
- How did you come to be an administrator/moderator? I know you said Frank had asked you, but do you know him personally offline or did you meet through PostSecret?
- As an administrator, what are your responsibilities for the site?
- How has the responsibility of administrator changed your view of PostSecret?
- Do you ever feel obligated to "step in" if you see posters "bullying" up on each other?
- On a side note, have you ever mailed in a secret and if so, was it posted?

Content Impressions
- How has being involved in PostSecret changed your life?
- What were your initial impressions when you first started working on the site?
- Have there been any forums that have left you feeling disturbed or conflicted? If so, what was the issue being addressed?
- Do you ever feel compelled to join in discussions on the forum or do you try to maintain a distanced role? Why or why not?
- Do you think the issues addressed through PostSecret are sufficiently discussed in the national media or general public sphere? If so, what role do you think PostSecret plays in the overall social conversation of these issues?

Online Community Building
- In your experience, do you think the PostSecret Community has established a valid community or do you think because of the anonymous aspect that it is instead a type of pseudo-community? Why or why not?
- In your experience, do you think that a sense of community is important to establish in order for these conversations to occur? Why or why not?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel this website has created a sense of community that could not have been possible offline?
- In what ways, if any, do you feel like you are part of a community that is helping to progress social discussion of topics that would not otherwise be openly discussed?
- What aspects, if any, of the PostSecret Community do you feel allows users to openly discuss potentially controversial issues?
Offline Actions
- What types of repercussions have you seen ripple through society because of PostSecret?
- In what ways, if any, have you noticed an impact in your local community from these discussions, either through collective action or individual efforts/concerns expressed to address an issue? Please describe.
- Have there been moments where you felt compelled to take action offline in response to a secret shared through PostSecret? Please describe.
- Have you ever noticed discussions/posts regarding civic engagement or social action stemming from issues posted to PostSecret? Please describe.
- From your experience, what impact do you think PostSecret has on social action participation? Why?
REFERENCES


community. Retrieved from


http://www.pewinternet.org


Retrieved December 1, 2006 from the EBSCOhost: Academic Search Elite database.


http://oas.samhsa.gov/nsduhLatest.htm


