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50,000 Words to 500,000 Participants: National Novel Writing Month as a Growing Online Community

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50,000 WORDS TO 500,000 PARTICIPANTS: NATIONAL NOVEL WRITING MONTH AS
A GROWING ONLINE COMMUNITY

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Introduction

National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) is an online writing challenge and community that tasks participants with writing a 50,000-word novel in 30 days. The challenge began in 1999 between a group of 21 friends, but it has since reported nearly half-a-million participants in 2018. There are only a few rules: One must start a new novel project on the first of November, and no words may be reused from projects outside of NaNoWriMo. The writing takes place on the participant's choice of Word Processor, but the NaNoWriMo website provides online word count and word verification tools. In addition to the digital tools, NaNoWriMo provides the forums and region sections on their website, where a large portion of the community aspect of the challenge takes place. The forums are a sort of message board where participants can interact with each other via posts and replies. The region sections on their website are a subset of the forums, where participants can interact with each other within a specific region of the world. For example, Tallahassee has its own region, where people who live in Tallahassee can either talk to one another online through the "NaNoWriMo Regions" or even on the "Tallahassee NaNoWriMo Facebook Group." Typically, in-person write-ins are planned through either the regions or the Facebook group, or participants can chat with one another about writing tips, advice, or spaces around Tallahassee to write at.

While NaNoWriMo is portrayed by popular media outlets as an ambitious writing challenge, I contend that it is best understood as a massive online community with a writing challenge as its common endeavor. Attention-grabbing headlines, such as, "So you want to write a book? Here's how to do it in 30 days" and "How Do You Win NaNoWriMo? These 10 Authors Succeeded..." suggest that NaNoWriMo is primarily about writing a lot of words in a short amount of time or about trying to publish a novel; however, there is more to it than writing a lot of words very quickly. Behind the curtain of the writing challenge lies the NaNoWriMo

community, made up of hundreds of thousands of participants each year. This thesis argues that the community of NaNoWriMo functions as an affinity space or a discourse community, in that the participants share a common endeavor, have multiple points of access, and are inclusive of anyone – no matter their background or skill level. Recognizing NaNoWriMo as an affinity space and discourse community is important because it gives a theoretical structure to understand a community of this size and sustainability. In addition, my work allows scholars to see beyond the headlines about word counts and publishing to the people behind those words. Especially right now, as people turn to online communities during periods of isolation, it is important to use such frameworks to understand a group that encompasses so many people all year round, and prior to COVID-19, takes place both online and offline, depending on the participant.

NaNoWriMo, as an affinity space and discourse community, gives its participants the agency to choose how they want to participate and to what extent they want to participate, which I argue is unique in the writing community space. Focusing on the community aspect of NaNoWriMo is important for a couple of reasons: the sheer quantity of participants in the challenge and community; the utilization of community tools such as the forums or Facebook groups throughout the challenge and through the off-months; and finally, the organization's description of itself as a community. Much of the academic and media attention gravitate towards the monumental challenge, I contend that there is much to be learned about the community through the affinity space and discourse community frameworks. Specifically, we may learn what draws people to the community and what urges them to stay after November ends.

Upon researching the online challenge, I noticed that there is a lack of academic work surrounding the community, despite the large participant base. The limited academic work looks at academic libraries as prime write-in locations and evaluations of the writing workshops

offered by the organization's Young Writers Program. None of the articles discuss the challenge as an online community. Surely, these 500,000 people are not completing the challenge alone. Studying NaNoWriMo as a community centers around the following questions: How is the community sustained, even after November has passed? What would NaNoWriMo look like without the community? It is due to this lack of work that I intend my thesis to fit in.

My interest in NaNoWriMo is both academic and personal. I am a seven-time NaNoWriMo participant since 2011 when I discovered the challenge in sixth grade. While I was not successful that year, I am a six-time NaNoWriMo completionist from 2013 - 2019. In my time participating in NaNoWriMo and Camp NaNoWriMo, I have written a total of 503,040 words. Therefore, I am no stranger to NaNoWriMo as a challenge or an online (and in real life) community. Before 2017, my participation in the community was limited to watching NaNoWriMo YouTube videos, such as those by Kat O'Keefe, one of the movement's most active vloggers, and writing on my blog about my experience participating in the challenge. I was not a frequent poster on the forums, and I did not attend any in-person write-ins as I lived in a small town in Northern Illinois, where the NaNoWriMo region was small.

In November 2017, when I studied abroad in London, England, I met the London community of "Wrimos," the community's term for participants of the challenge. The group of 15 - 25 people met at various cafes around central London on Monday through Thursday for the general write-ins. On Saturdays, the municipal liaisons (region leaders) held special write-ins, such as the "Great Train Escape" where we wrote on the train to Brighton, England; "NaNoRilla," where we walked and wrote at different locations around central London; and the "All Night Lock-In," where we ventured to a cabin in East Croydon and wrote from 7 pm - 7 am the next day. These special Saturday write-ins usually drew in the most amount of people but

may have led to the least amount of writing done (it depends on the writer). The London region has approximately 2,000 writers, making them a sizable region. While one of the options for participation includes these in-person write-ins, participants are not required to attend. Wrimos of the London region can participate in multiple ways, whether in-person, on the forums, or through the region's Facebook page.

As a researcher and Wrimo myself, I intend my Honors Thesis to show that NaNoWriMo, as an online challenge, has a significant community presence that emphasizes inclusivity, allowing participants the agency to choose how they want to participate and to what extent. It is through the frameworks of the affinity space and discourse communities that we will gain a better understanding of what draws in hundreds of thousands of people and what compels them to stay after the main event has concluded. My research aims to show the wide applicability of the affinity space and discourse community theories and to apply it to this popular online community. This is a community that has not received this type of research before, in any previous academic work. First, I will provide my Honors Thesis' methodology, followed by a revisionist history of NaNoWriMo. Finally, I will combine my theoretical research with the interviews with NaNoWriMo municipal liaisons to fully unpack the community aspect of the challenge.

Literature Review

This project draws on my knowledge as a participant of the challenge, research conducted across NaNoWriMo's social media platforms, theoretical texts, and five original interviews with regional NaNoWriMo leaders. Due to the nature of the challenge taking place across online platforms, much of my archive is ephemeral and could be subject to deletion at any time. This

archive includes Instagram posts, Tweets, videos, and other social media posts. However, while my archive is ephemeral and the previous NaNoWriMo academic work is sparse, my project fills gaps in academic research by giving a deeper look into the online NaNoWriMo community.

Utilizing my ephemeral archive and my knowledge of the community, my project evaluates how NaNoWriMo cultivates their online community through these different platforms, during November and throughout the rest of the year. I am offering a comprehensive and revisionist history of the movement by analyzing their social media accounts, hashtags, and initiatives. This revisionist history details the organization's move from platform to platform to address the growing needs of their community, from 2001 to 2020. This is evidence that NaNoWriMo has been community-centric all along. An additional piece of my ephemeral archive is the online forums and regions attached to their official website, where much of the community congregates. I study the regions through both analyzing the forums and through interviews I conducted with Municipal Liaisons of the London region. These MLs shed light on how they strive to cultivate the NaNoWriMo community within the city of London, online and in-person. I chose London due to my offline participation in the region from 2017-2018 and because they are one of the largest regions, with 2,076 novelists who wrote over 39,000,000 words in November 2018 (Region/Europe/England/London). Additionally, I chose London because it is international, showing that the challenge spans across the world and because the London group is diverse and inclusive, which makes them a great case study for my project.

As a seven-time NaNoWriMo participant, my knowledge is valuable as a researcher and community member. I have crucial hands-on experience in many aspects of the online community and have personally watched the organization grow to become what it is today. Not only am I an annual participant, but I have engaged with the challenge's content across many, if

not all, of their social media platforms. Additionally, I have gone so far as to participate in person through the “Regions” as well as attending the organization’s official in-person event, The Night of Writing Dangerously. The Night of Writing Dangerously is a one-night event held at the Julia Morgan Ballroom in San Francisco, California, where participants mingle, dine, and compete in word-sprints and word-wars. Notably, those who cross the 50,000-word finish line during the event can ring the large “Winners” bell, receive a paper crown, and receive a shout-out on the NaNoWriMo Twitter page. Finally, I have created my own NaNoWriMo content, from my 50,000-word drafts to personal blog posts and even a few online videos. This knowledge and hands-on experience are important as a researcher, as I know many of the ins and outs of the online community already.

This project draws from theoretical texts about affinity spaces, discourse communities, and fandoms, such as J. P. Gee’s “Affinity Spaces,” Henry Jenkins’ *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*, John Swales’ “The Concept of the Discourse Community,” and Howard Rheingold’s *The Virtual Community*. These theorists primarily deal with developing a framework for understanding online communities and the interactions between participants in these virtual spaces. To apply these theories to NaNoWriMo is to dissolve the smokescreen that puts the ambitious writing challenge at the forefront of NaNoWriMo media and studies. It is to legitimize, so to speak, the community aspect of the challenge that is overshadowed by the challenge in the media and academic spaces. To apply and combine these theories is to look at online communities, specifically NaNoWriMo, in a unique way that puts the emphasis on community and what that entails.

The first theorist I draw from is J.P. Gee, who developed the theory of the affinity space. J. P. Gee coined the term “Affinity Space” in his chapter of the same title. He developed his

theory in the early 2000s to understand how people learn through their valued social practices. In the early 2000s, not only are we seeing the beginnings of NaNoWriMo as a growing online space, but also the rise of the fandom as well as video gaming, which is relevant to Gee's theory. Gee focuses on a "space" where people participate, learn, and interact. He identifies ten criteria for an effective affinity space, including, but not limited to, a common endeavor that is not race/class/gender/etc., multiple ways to participate, and encouragement of any skill or knowledge level. While Gee applies his theory to video game communities, where players come together to pool knowledge about lore, bosses, or other related topics, I argue that the theory also applies to writing communities, especially NaNoWriMo. Community members may not be sharing lore or game knowledge, but knowledge about the writing craft, advice, and tips on how to beat the 30-day challenge. Gee's ultimate argument is that it is in these casual spaces that people do the most learning. The affinity space theory is relevant to my project because it provides one of the two theoretical frameworks that I apply to NaNoWriMo to better understand how participants access the community and how the community is so inclusive and connected over one common endeavor.

Henry Jenkins is known for his works on fandom and media. Jenkins writes about his ideas of a "Participatory Culture" in his book *Confronting the Challenges of Participatory Culture: Media Education for the 21st Century*. His piece explores the rules of participatory cultures which he develops in 2006, based on his work on fandoms and online communities. The greater work revolves around these online communities that allow for informal learning. These spaces differ from traditional learning spaces which center around the traditional roles of "student" and "teacher," which are clear cut and carry their own set of rules and procedures. On the other hand, this informal learning space, such as the affinity space or discourse community,

allows participants to learn from one another through fandom, video games, or other topics. Jenkins writes that participatory culture is “one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one’s creations with others, informal membership, where members believe their contributions matter and they feel some degree of social connection with one another” (Jenkins 7). Jenkins’ participatory culture theory is typically used to describe fandoms, and it also fits hand in hand with the participatory aspects of both the affinity space and discourse community theories. I apply this theory to analyze the participatory mechanisms NaNoWriMo employs, such as the inclusion of multiple points of entry and a low barrier to entry. These participatory mechanisms, according to Jenkins, are found in many fandoms across the internet. NaNoWriMo, while it might not fit the typical format of a fandom (centering around a piece of media or a celebrity), the community fits the structure of fandom as it does center around NaNoWriMo, the writing challenge, and provides the community with places to interact with one another. The organization also describes NaNoWriMo as a fandom: “[NaNoWriMo is] internet-famous. It’s a community-powered fandom (before there was the Beyhive [Beyonce fans], or Nerdfighters [fans of John and Hank Green], there were Wrimos)” (NaNoWriMo, “What is NaNoWriMo”). NaNoWriMo is unique in that it could be a fandom for writing or a fandom for the writing challenge. Because the organization provides the participants with a platform (the website), it enables the participants to form a community that centers around the writing challenge.

The third theorist is John Swales, who develops the theory of the “Discourse Community.” Like Gee, he defines a set of criteria for how an online community is meant to function. The basic description of a discourse community, according to Swales, is an online community that centers around a set of common public goals that use communication to achieve

these goals. Many of the criteria are like the affinity space, and I believe that what the affinity space lacks, the discourse community makes up for, and vice versa. For example, the discourse community and affinity space theories include the following similar aspects: revolves around a common endeavor, welcomes all skill levels, offers multiple points of entry, and uses participatory methods to create content. Meanwhile, in terms of differences, the affinity space theory provides more about the types of knowledge that are encouraged in the space (intensive, extensive, individual, distributed, dispersed, and tacit) as well as provides a piece about leadership and status within the community and what that looks like. On the other hand, the discourse community theory provides the idea that these online communities have a set of lexis that are specific to the community. This is similar to Gee's different types of knowledge, but different enough that I would choose to include them in the differences.

To mention both the discourse community and affinity space theories begs the question: Why am I using both theories to study NaNoWriMo? It comes down to the similarities between the two and the differences. In my research, I did not find a scholar who combined both theories to understand an online community. Perhaps it is because the discourse community theory is used to analyze a wide range of online communities, whereas, the affinity space theory is used by scholars to look at fandoms, especially as its author, Gee, develops the theory around video games, in particular. The discourse community theory is broadly applied to a variety of online communities, which seems to make it much more widely known. Swales uses the theory to study the "Hong Kong Study Circle" community, which focuses on the stamps of Hong Kong. Meanwhile, Rheingold studies Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link (WELL), an online community that covers any topic/interest under the sun. However, there are more similarities than differences between the affinity space and discourse community theories, which makes it somewhat

shocking that I could not find any instances in which someone used both of the theories to study an online community. Both have their important differences that cannot be left out when discussing NaNoWriMo in particular. For example, NaNoWriMo is catered towards those of multiple skill and knowledge levels. While there is not a lot of knowledge that is required to understand or participate in NaNoWriMo, participants with different levels of knowledge are encouraged to participate and share their knowledge with others. In terms of the specific lexis, the community has a plethora of NaNoWriMo-specific terms, including the organization's acronym itself. To combine the two, supplemented with Jenkins and Rheingold's theories, is to create an all-encompassing theory with which to study NaNoWriMo in its entirety.

The final theorist I focus on is Howard Rheingold. Rheingold takes part in the discussion surrounding the discourse community and I have included him in this project due to the unique perspective that he brings to the theory. His overarching point about virtual discourse communities is that these communities emerge online when “enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 2). I think this is an especially important aspect to include about virtual communities, because while yes, the community has a goal to complete or a common endeavor that brings them together, but ultimately, community members form these webs of personal relationships that last longer than any community or challenge.

For my final aspect of research, I draw from self-conducted interviews with the London region's municipal liaisons to find out how they cultivate their community through online and in-person events. The importance of interviewing the MLs is that while the organization rules from above, the MLs lead from the ground – they have closer personal relationships with participants in their region, as they interact with them both online and at in-person events. Additionally, as

they are planning these in-person events, it is important to understand how they promote the ideals of the two frameworks that I have chosen to apply to NaNoWriMo, whether or not they are aware of their doing so or not.

The previous academic work on NaNoWriMo does not touch on its function as a community. In his editorial, “Lessons from NaNoWriMo,” Larry D. Burton reports on his experience participating in the challenge alongside his daughter, an annual Wrimo completionist. He reports his findings that some of the key principles of NaNoWriMo are relevant in scholarly writing: the tight 30-day deadline, the fact that one must schedule time to write, and that the quality of the first draft is less important than putting words down on the page. His piece does not tackle the community aspect of the challenge because he views NaNoWriMo and its principles as beneficial processes that he and other scholars can use in drafting their academic work.

Laura Magalas and Thomas G. Ryan explore NaNoWriMo’s Young Writers Program and compare its writing workshops to traditional writing workshops for children. The Young Writers Program (YWP) functions in two different ways: people under 17 years old can sign up to participate in the YWP NaNoWriMo, where they can set their own, individualized word goal and connect with other Young Writers on the website. The second way it functions is that educators can sign up to receive workbooks and a NaNoWriMo curriculum for their students. The lesson plans are “Common Core-aligned,” and the program allows educators to set up their virtual classroom where they can “hold classroom discussions, monitor students’ novel progress, read and edit students’ novels, and set class-wide writing challenges separate from official NaNo events” (Magalas and Ryan 15). Magalas and Ryan evaluate the YWP based on whether it has a theoretical-based foundation and if it is worthwhile to implement in the classroom. They

conclude that the YWP lacks the structure needed to implement it in the classroom and that it needs modifications for the “different learning abilities” present in the classroom (Magalas and Ryan 20). They state that YWP is a good start for beginning a writer’s workshop in the classroom; however, it needs more structure to be a successful tool for young writers. Magalas and Ryan approach the YWP from the angle of educators evaluating how to implement writing workshops into the classroom as a tool to promote writers: “They must develop the concept of the YWP into a workshop format that the students can follow and adapt into a routine since a large part of their becoming writers relies on their independence at following the structured format” (Magalas and Ryan 20). What Magalas and Ryan only briefly touch on are the Young Writers Resources, where students can connect across classes to share work, encourage, or critique one another. Thus, while Magalas and Ryan have focused on NaNo as something that helps young peoples’ growth as writers, I want to shift focus more towards the community dynamics through the main program itself. These dynamics further help improve young peoples’ writing through connection with others, as well as the main program is not grounded in a school curriculum.

In “NaNoWriMo in the AcadLib: A Case Study of National Novel Writing Month Activities in an Academic Library,” Alex P. Watson evaluates academic libraries as a venue for in-person “write-ins.” His reasoning behind choosing an academic library as a venue is because of the resources it can provide to writers. He researched by putting on a kick-off write-in at the University of Mississippi’s library of the 12 participants interested, 5 participants showed up and all 5 of the participants were associated with the university. Watson writes, “Both the kickoff and write-in were attended mainly by students. This is not surprising as students tend to have more flexible schedules and are often already on campus for other reasons” (Watson 144). Watson

expresses his interest in not only attracting new students to these write-ins but also to connect with non-student participants. He concludes that academic libraries are not as popular as school libraries, public libraries, bookstores, and coffee shops. There could be any number of reasons for the low attendance for write-ins held at academic libraries, which all depends on the region and its accessibility. Watson's piece is relevant as NaNoWriMo is unique in that it is an online community that offers occasional in-person events through the regions. These in-person events are typically write-ins, where participants meet at a venue (typically a coffee shop, library, or bookshop) and work on their novels for a set amount of time. So, in his piece, Watson evaluates the academic library as a potential venue location, which is directly relevant to regions and Municipal Liaisons who typically do the same kind of evaluations when they plan their in-person events. This source, out of all of the academic sources about NaNoWriMo, is the closest to touching on NaNoWriMo as a community, online and offline, but it does not go so far as to evaluate the online side of the community, where I intend my work to fit in. However, Watson's evaluation of the real-life meetups is still narrow in scope, as his work only revolves around academic libraries as venues.

Of the three sources regarding NaNoWriMo, there is a lack of discussion about community and how it takes place across different forms of social media as well as in person. My goal is to provide a framework to understand NaNoWriMo, by using adjacent frameworks to do so. As there is very little academic work about the challenge and community, I am building off primary sources, my own experiences, and an ephemeral social media archive.

History

In 1999, Chris Baty, a freelance writer in Oakland, California, founded National Novel Writing Month (NaNoWriMo) "by accident," according to Baty, by convincing 21 of his friends

to write 50,000-word novels with him in just 30 days (Baty). What started as a small group of his friends has grown into a large online community and challenge that boasted nearly half a million participants in 2018 (“What is NaNoWriMo”). Their social media presence spans across nearly all of the most popular platforms, including Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and YouTube, but conversation regarding the challenge (and tools for the challenge itself) primarily takes place on their website, NaNoWriMo.org. Before NaNoWriMo’s present-day success can be acknowledged, it is important to delve into the roots of the popular online challenge.

“Originally Baty just wanted company, figuring he’d never finish a novel-length manuscript – not necessarily a *good* novel; perhaps even a very bad one – unless he had plenty of friends to egg him on,” Kara Platoni writes in her article published only 2 years after Baty started the challenge (Platoni). NaNoWriMo, even from its beginnings, centered around both the writing challenge itself and a participating community – a community that, ideally, would encourage each other to finish their novels. The community aspect of this challenge would eventually grow into a coordinated effort to cultivate the community, through regions, municipal liaisons, and the social media platforms the organization utilized.

After the group’s first successful year, Baty started a website for participants to submit their word counts and then eventually submit their finished novel for “word verification.” While the website functioned as the group’s primary accountability device, Baty started a Yahoo group to “facilitate socialization between participants” (Platoni). This facilitation was important, for NaNoWriMo, as the community grew from 21 local friends to 140 participants to 5,000 participants across the world. The community was no longer confined to California, but Finland, Pakistan, and New Zealand, among other places, so the utilization of a Yahoo group was necessary to continue to cultivate the community (Platoni). The expansion of the community and

challenge across the world suggests that NaNoWriMo, even from its beginning stages, not only enticed but united people. NaNoWriMo is not a fandom in that it revolves around a pop culture icon, but it has an equal effect in that it can unite people from all over.

It was not until a few years later that the challenge began to gain some traction on online blogs, and then, the national news. In an interview with John Ydiste for NPR, Baty says, “That’s part of the goal of National Novel Writing Month, is essentially to create local communities throughout the world. We have people who are able to go together to cafes and turn on those laptops and sit down and not get up and go to the bathroom until they’ve written their daily word counts” (Baty, 2002). This quote shows that Baty and the organization have focused on the community aspect since its beginning. The significance is that Baty and the organization created space for a community and continued to cultivate the local communities throughout the world. In 2002, the challenge attracted around 13,000 participants from around the world.

As the community grew, they soon outgrew the affordances of the Yahoo group, which was then replaced by the forums in 2002. A community must adapt its tools to preserve its function as a community. Yahoo groups are an older, but similar version of Reddit, where members sign-up with their Yahoo email and ask to become members of the group. Users could post threads asking questions or about anything related to NaNoWriMo. But, like Reddit, as people post threads, the older threads get pushed to the bottom of the page, making them difficult to find if you were not the original poster. Forums, in comparison to Yahoo groups, allows for more organization throughout the community. So, for example, anything that wasn’t directly related to NaNoWriMo or writing could have its own section or anything related to asking for or giving advice could have its own section, instead of having one big, unorganized feed of related or unrelated topics. In addition, forums make the threads searchable, so threads are not as easily

lost as in the Yahoo groups. The switch from an old platform to a new platform, better suited for the community's needs in terms of organization and scale, is important because it shows that NaNoWriMo has put an emphasis on the community from the beginning. If NaNoWriMo were truly a self-challenge with no need for community interaction, it would be easier for the organization to set up a simple webpage that stated the challenge and rules. However, because they put forth the effort to adapt to new platforms to better fit their community, it shows that the community has been at the heart of the challenge, even back in 2002.

The switch to the forums allowed for subsets of the overall NaNoWriMo group to break off while also remaining on the challenge's website overall. While one cannot see these forums from 2002 anymore, the new forums continue to exist on the NaNoWriMo website. The forums have a plethora of different subgroups, some pertain to ages (i.e. College WriMos, Senior WriMos), some that deal with plot holes or "adopt a character," some that do not even directly relate to the challenge (i.e. Gamers & Gaming, Fans & Critics), among many others ("NaNoWriMo Forums"). These subset groups allow the community to not only connect over the writing challenge, but to connect over shared interests in pop culture, swap writing tips, or meet other people in general. The swap to the forums is crucial, not only to fit the growing community but to allow the community members to talk to one another about unrelated topics. Allowing participants to talk to one another about unrelated topics, especially by giving them a space for these discussions, is important in growing a community. Rheingold's theory fits in here about "public discussions carrying on long enough" to become a community (Rheingold 6). Rheingold's theory is unique in that these public discussions do not need to revolve around a common endeavor, but that the conversations must carry on for a substantial amount of time. By providing participants with this "off-topic" space, it keeps people on the website to talk amongst

themselves rather than branch off into their own groups when they want to talk about non-NaNoWriMo related content. People are multi-faceted, they may be Wrimos, but they may also be in other fandoms, they may be parents or students, and they have interests other than NaNoWriMo or writing. To give them a space to discuss outside topics, it shows that NaNoWriMo cares about cultivating a community that expands beyond the writing challenge.

In 2003, Municipal Liaisons (MLs) were introduced to the scene. Municipal Liaisons, as they stand today, are volunteer leaders within a specific region of the world, tasked with running online or in-person write-in events. They handle the on-the-ground work of running a community that functions both online and in-person. Andee Hochman writes in her article, “The Insanity and the Inspiration,” “Big Blue Marble [a bookstore] had agreed to host three write-ins over the course of the month: casual gatherings where NaNoWriMo disciples could sip tea, compare word counts, and find kinship in the solitary slog of writing a book” (Hochman 25). For those motivated by being around others for kinship or comparing word counts, these write-ins could prove to be helpful. It is hard to say, without concrete numbers, the rate of success of those who participate with the NaNoWriMo community (online or in-person) and those who do not. Wrimos might get more out of participating in the community than just a higher word count. Baty was on to something when he invited 21 of his friends to participate in the challenge for both encouragement and accountability, so to grow and cultivate the community is an important step that NaNoWriMo takes at its very beginnings. Even in its early days, it began to not only cater to those online but those who want to meet up in person by beginning these regional groups and putting MLs into place. Social media, in 2003, is still yet to exist on the scale that it does today, so the organization only provides these two ways for participants to get involved. An important point from both Gee’s Affinity Space theory and Swales’ Discourse Community

theory is that these communities must have multiple points of access for participants to get involved. As NaNoWriMo develops from 2003 until 2020, they expand their presence on social media by creating NaNoWriMo pages on Twitter and Facebook (among other social media platforms), which opens more points of access for participants to become involved. In addition, MLs and regions have since created region-specific pages to connect with more Wrimos across social media.

MLs from different regions, usually those centered around large cities, have gone a step further, developing their own contests or other write-in events beyond merely meeting at a coffee shop to all write together. A few examples include the Seattle region's contest, where the Wrimo who wrote the most words during the month would win a role in an upcoming Star Trek episode (Grant). NaNo London hosts the "NaNoRilla" where the writing begins at a location in London (typically a landmark building) and the group walks across London, stopping at notable locations to write along the way. Notable locations include the Millennium Bridge, the National Gallery, and the National Portrait Gallery (@LondonNano). An important point to note about the NaNoRilla is that participants can show up at any point in the trip, even tune in virtually with the constant Twitter updates from the NaNo London account. While hosting larger contests or other write-in events is not required of the municipal liaisons, they are tasked with the basic premise of cultivating the community within their region – both online and in-person. The MLs and the forums have existed from the very early beginnings of the challenge and have continued to evolve with new social media platforms. They not only utilize the forums as provided by the NaNoWriMo website, but use platforms such as Facebook, Twitter, and Instagram. The same goes for the NaNoWriMo group at large.

NaNoWriMo boasted nearly half-a-million participants in November 2018. While bloggers and the national news reported on the challenge as some sort of crazy feat that only the brave might attempt, news outlets across the Internet today post tips and tricks to completing NaNoWriMo every November. From websites like the Writer's Digest to the New York Times, the internet is now riddled with articles about the online writing challenge – whether they're introducing their readers to the challenge or giving tips to completing the challenge, or motivational writing podcasts that might help one complete the challenge. There is no shortage of information about the challenge online and anyone well-tapped into the online writing spheres across the Internet is bound to know about NaNoWriMo. Another important aspect of NaNoWriMo is its move away from just the month of November. In their early years, they were bound to see some participation or activity fizzle out during the off months of the challenge. Thus, they began to host other writing challenges in the spring and summer called “Camp NaNoWriMo” in April and July which centers around the “camp” theme. This, in addition to the organization adapting to new platforms, shows that they intend for NaNoWriMo to be a community that engages with one another year-round, rather than for one month during the year. By adapting to new platforms and creating year-round content to engage with participants throughout and outside of November, it shows that it is important to think of NaNoWriMo as a community, rather than primarily a writing challenge. This connects to Rheingold's theory, specifically that conversations must go on for “long enough,” which would not happen if the community were confined to only the month of November (Rheingold 6). In this case, it additionally relates to fandoms, who thrive off new content – the organization must put forth the effort to keep the community engaged. Adding “Camp NaNoWriMo” attracts different types of participants as well, as the challenge allows the participant to set their own word-count goal. So,

the challenge might be helpful for budding NaNoWriMo participants who have not yet successfully completed or participated in the November event. Or it might be helpful for those wanting to push themselves to write all year-round. It can even help those who want to edit their work – Camp NaNoWriMo does not state that participants must or should write a novel during the month, they can write anything that they desire. Through “Camp NaNoWriMo” participants are encouraged to write and talk to the community all year-round.

In addition to providing their participants with challenges to participate in all year round, NaNoWriMo utilizes multiple social media platforms such as Twitter, Instagram, Discord, and Facebook. They exist across multiple platforms, which is important for engaging with a community that not only spans a wide variety of ages and backgrounds, but also a wide variety of social platforms. The bulk of the work is done on the NaNoWriMo website, including submitting your word progress, the forums, and the word verification at the end of the month – so participation is recommended and sometimes required if you want to officially complete the challenge. At the very least, participating with the word progress tool and submitting your novel for word verification at the end of the month is ultimately required. Participation in regions or on the forums is completely up to the participant and how they want to interact with the community. The social media platforms that NaNoWriMo engages with are Twitter, Instagram, YouTube, Facebook, and Discord. As of right now, there is no official NaNoWriMo TikTok account, though participants still use the hashtag “NaNoWriMo” to share information about their experience participating.

On Twitter, the organization runs two different accounts: @NaNoWriMo and @NaNoWordSprints. The first of which is to distribute general content: Information about Virtual Write-Ins, Countdowns (X amount of days until NaNoWriMo!), motivational advice, pep

talks, etc. They have 200,400 followers as of October 16, 2020, and frequently post updates regarding NaNoWriMo/Camp NaNoWriMo during the “on-seasons” and during the off-seasons, they post motivational advice, memes, and countdowns. The main account receives more engagement with their posts, in terms of retweets, likes, and comments. On July 2nd, 2020, they tweeted, “Tell us about how day one of Camp NaNoWriMo went for you with a GIF!” (@NaNoWriMo). The tweet received 233 likes, 31 retweets, and 80 comments. The comments consist of GIFs from Camp NaNoWriMo participants, as was prompted in their original tweet.

The second account, @NaNoWordSprints, is used to run what is called “word sprints” which are timed writing sessions where you attempt to write as many words as possible, as quickly as possible. Word sprints can range from anywhere between 5 to 25 minutes. Through this account, they also created the #1K30 challenge, where you attempt to write 1,000 words in 30 minutes. This account has 47,600 followers, as of October 16, 2020, but does not receive as much engagement as the main account, because there is no substantive content posted. During the on-seasons, which are November (NaNoWriMo), April, and July (Camp NaNoWriMo), the account is constantly posting word sprints for people to participate in, at all hours of the night. This is facilitated through municipal liaisons from regions across the world signing up for slots to run these word sprints (“NaNoWordSprints”). The account, due to its frequent Tweeting, has amassed over 180,000 tweets as of October 16, 2020, since the account’s creation in 2009. An example of what this account tweets is, “Let’s keep going with a sprint from :45 to :15. Yep, it’s a #1k30min challenge! Optional prompt is ‘revenge’! This is your chance to crank up that drama to eleven!” (@NaNoWord Sprints).

The NaNoWriMo page on Facebook, which has 259,600 likes, as of October 16, 2020, mainly posts updates and substantive content similar to that of Twitter, but with more characters.

A recent and popular status update that they posted asked their followers to tell them about their Camp NaNoWriMo writing project. The post amassed 150 likes, 21 shares, and 27 comments (NaNoWriMo, “Camp NaNoWriMo Participation”). Additionally, they have an official NaNoWriMo Facebook group linked to their page, which was created in June 2018 and has 24,937 members. The content of the group is tips/advice (providing and looking for), memes, events, excerpts, and more. Finally, because they are a non-profit organization, Facebook users can host “Fundraisers” for the organization, which takes place on the Facebook platform.

They post content curated for the Instagram platform, in that their posts conform to the square picture with a caption and hashtags at the bottom of the post. They tag their posts with general hashtags that relate to writing or the writing process, as well as #NaNoWriMo. Additionally, NaNoWriMo has created some of their own hashtags, including the #InstaWrimo 30-Day Instagram challenge, where there is a prompt for what photo to post each day. Prompts include posting a picture of “writing friends,” “cover design,” and your “noveling music” (NaNoWriMo, “InstaWrimo Challenge”). Using original hashtags and creating the 30-Day Challenge is a great way for NaNoWriMo to grow their participant base, as it serves as a sort of free marketing tool as participants post their photos every day. Along with this challenge, they post some of their participants’ 30-Day challenge pictures on the NaNoWriMo Instagram as well.

In addition to the #InstaWrimo challenge, they created another hashtag, #StayHomeWriMo, which is new as of the current COVID-19 pandemic. According to NaNoWriMo, this hashtag is “an initiative to help your physical, mental, social, and creative well-being in the coming days” (NaNoWriMo, “StayHomeWrimo Day 1”). The first post of the initiative includes tips and prompts for one’s physical, mental, creative, and social well-being.

As part of the initiative, they posted 7 days of tips from NaNoWriMo, and then in the following days, they posted tips from writers and municipal liaisons from the community. These posts lasted from the initial day of posting on March 23 to June 1, when they wrapped up the initiative. In addition to that, they hosted 5 Instagram live streams during this time, for “people to write, chat, and hang together” (NaNoWriMo, “StayHomeWriMo Live stream”). The comments on the initial #StayHomeWriMo post are overwhelmingly positive, mainly thanking the organization for posting this kind of content. This shows the importance of NaNoWriMo especially in 2020, as an online community that people can use to connect with one another from anywhere in the world. Isolation is a growing concern in the pandemic, so NaNoWriMo’s initiative is thoughtful and shows that they care about the well-being of their community. I touch on NaNoWriMo and its relation to COVID-19 in its own section at the end of this Honors Thesis.

On their YouTube channel, which has nearly 1,000,000 channel views, they live stream Virtual Write-Ins, where they provide prompts to the viewers and host word sprints and Q&As. They also post videos, talking about general writing advice and the like. Their videos average around 1,000 views. In addition to their initiative on Instagram, they posted #StayHomeWrimo videos on their YouTube channel as well. These are short, one to five-minute videos, where NaNoWriMo staff “[give] brief virtual tours of our home office spaces, as well as sharing writing prompts that you can use on your Camp NaNoWriMo projects!” (Nelson). During the first video, posted on April 10, NaNoWriMo intern, Jubilee Nelson shows off her desk and gives a writing prompt about creatively including nature. Notably, however, at the end of the video, she invites everyone to share photos of their home writing spaces on Twitter or Instagram, using the hashtag #StayHomeWrimo (Nelson). This shows how NaNoWriMo attempts to post across all different platforms and encourage others to engage on multiple platforms, which connects to both Gee and

Swales' theories. By providing content on their own and through their participants creating content on YouTube or other websites, it allows participants to engage with the challenge in a unique way and across multiple platforms. Additionally, the #StayHomeWrimo hashtag is utilized on YouTube as well, with not only NaNoWriMo posting videos but other users on YouTube talking about their NaNoWriMo and #StayHomeWrimo experiences. Not only is this a writing challenge, but it is a community with organization- and user-generated content that allows for participants to connect with more NaNoWriMo content and one another on a platform other than the website itself.

The community engagement on YouTube takes place in a few different ways – whether that is through the YouTube comment section or through users posting their own content that interacts with the organization. Most notably, many “BookTubers,” or those YouTubers who engage with the book community on YouTube, create NaNoWriMo “Vlogs” – for example, BookTuber Kat O’Keefe (Katytastic) posted daily videos in 2011 and 2012 talking about the NaNoWriMo challenge. For a few years, before the beginning of NaNoWriMo, she would post extensive NaNoWriMo survival guide videos to help her viewers prepare for the 30-day challenge (“How to Prepare for NaNoWriMo”). As a result of engaging with this community and posting other book-related content for the other 11 months of the year, O’Keefe built herself a lofty YouTube career with 251,000 subscribers, as of October 16, 2020. It is not clear if or how NaNoWriMo engaged with these videos at all at the time of their publication in 2011 and 2012; however, in 2016, O’Keefe was a speaker at the annual Night of Writing Dangerously (NOWD) event. By creating these videos O’Keefe engaged with the existing NaNoWriMo community and she might have influenced others to join the community. In turn, by inviting her to speak at the NOWD event in 2016, NaNoWriMo acknowledged her work as a community member. Many of

those who spoke at the NOWD were published authors, so for O'Keefe to be recognized for her impact on the community is important in demonstrating that the organization values the community.

For the most part, NaNoWriMo as an organization engages with many of the most popular platforms and continues to explore new platforms, such as Discord. Discord is relatively new as of 2015 and serves as some sort of an online, organized chat group. For example, in the NaNoWriMo Discord, they have channels for word wars, writing sprints, pep talk, writing soundtracks, writing help, and every genre you could name. It is kind of like a forum but is much more comparable to an online chat group. Since the platform is new, their participant base on their Discord server is only about 1,500. Plus, it is important to recognize that, for a group that encompasses a variety of ages, backgrounds, accessibilities, not all participants will engage with the same platforms. However, it is important to see NaNoWriMo expanding across newer platforms. The expansion to Discord shows NaNoWriMo's commitment to the idea of community because not only are they allowing those with Twitter accounts, Instagram accounts, and Facebook accounts to participate, but they are also catering towards those who use Discord (typically a younger audience who enjoys gaming). The organization seeks to reach community members in as many new ways as they can, especially in ways that allow participants to interact with each other – Discord is an online chatroom that appeals more to a younger audience who might not have Facebook or might not want to use the forums. So, not only are they reaching a new and potentially younger audience, but they are also expanding to new platforms to accommodate their community in other ways. This directly connects to points in both Gee and Swales' theories that, by expanding to these new platforms, it allows participants to connect in

any way that they choose to the extent that they choose. I delve into this aspect in the “Argument” section of my Honors Thesis.

While they do not currently have a NaNoWriMo TikTok account, there are those on the platform who use the #NaNoWriMo hashtag on the app. There may not be an official NaNoWriMo presence on TikTok, however, the fact that there are community members making videos related to the challenge goes to show that the community expands beyond even the official platforms that NaNoWriMo resides on. One of the points of both the affinity space and discourse community theories is that the challenge must have multiple points of entry for participation – while this might not be a direct way that people can participate, it can lead those from TikTok to the challenge and their official platforms. TikTok has a large and young user base, so NaNoWriMo’s presence, though it is through participants of the challenge, is crucial here for attracting a younger audience to the challenge. It is important to mention that I found out about NaNoWriMo, on Tumblr when I was 13-years-old and I began to participate in the challenge in 2012 when I was 14-years-old and have been participating throughout half of my life. So, this word-of-mouth “advertisement” of the challenge that you see on TikTok from participants is important to expanding the community-base to a much younger audience. With the news regarding TikTok’s ban in several countries in October 2020, it is unknown whether the organization will expand to include an official TikTok account. However, they do not need to expand to TikTok, as the NaNoWriMo participant-base already exists on TikTok and creates content that “advertises” the challenge. The #NaNoWriMo hashtag has nearly 1,000,000 views across all the videos posted with the hashtag. It seems to be a mix of people posting a video of their progress or making NaNoWriMo or writing memes with popular sounds/songs. For example, user @helpmenaomi, posted a TikTok using a popular sound from the television show,

Friends, talking about how she finished her NaNoWriMo book, but she has nobody to celebrate with because of quarantine (“NaNoWriMo in Quarantine”). It does appear to have the same group of 10 accounts creating these videos in the hashtag and while they do not go viral (gaining views in the hundreds of thousands), they do get a fair amount of views in the hundreds to thousands and likes in the hundreds as well. #NaNoWriMo seems to be a subgroup among many on the TikTok platform. Again, while there may not be any plans for the organization to make a TikTok account, it is important to acknowledge how the community is engaging with the platform on their own, without the prompt of an official NaNoWriMo account.

NaNoWriMo has a huge social media presence, amassed across several of the most popular platforms right now, and have come a long way from Chris Baty’s original 21 friends who participated in the challenge. It is across these social media platforms that the organization cultivates its community, as each platform or multiple platforms connect with people of different backgrounds, races, ages, abilities, etc. Their span across multiple platforms allows them to engage with many people, as can be seen through their follower account across all platforms. However, the community and the challenge are still separated by a smokescreen in both academic works and popular media, as they continue to focus on the ambitious challenge that seems to overshadow the community of 500,000 people who encourage each other, hold each other accountable, and discuss a wide array of topics from NaNoWriMo to popular culture. Through overlaying these adjacent theories of affinity spaces and discourse communities, I will dissolve that smoke screen, at least in the academic realm.

Argument

Since I am studying NaNoWriMo as an online community, it is important to first define, at its most basic level, what an online community is. Howard Rheingold describes an online

community as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold 6). Rheingold identifies a few key criteria to online communities: public discussions that are carried on “long enough”, human feeling, and webs of relationships. These criteria are important because they describe in basic terms the who, what, where, and why of online communities. These online communities, which take place either on a website or social media, often center around a common interest or hobby. Many might be familiar with fandoms, which are online communities that center around a piece of popular media, such as a television show or movie. I compare the NaNoWriMo community to a fandom because fandoms, too, fit into the discourse community and affinity space theoretical frameworks in the way that they operate. So, in that case, why might people want to be part of an online community like a fandom? Lari Tanner, in their article “Fans, Fandoms, and Participatory Culture” writes that people join fandoms to have a place to share their love for a piece of popular media, and to have a place where they are “accepted for their self-expression” (Tanner). This idea of acceptance ties especially well to Rheingold’s criteria that online communities must consist of “sufficient human feeling,” which is shared with others. Perhaps people join the NaNoWriMo community to participate in the writing challenge but stay for the webs of personal relationships that they built along the way – participants may feel as though they are accepted for their self-expression. Gather thousands or hundreds of thousands of participants connecting with one another and thus, a community is born. This gathering and connecting of participants has been at the heart of NaNoWriMo from its beginnings, as I have shown in the revisionist history of the community.

An online community must center around public discussions, typically sparked by the common endeavor of the group. In both the affinity space and discourse community theories, a common endeavor is crucial. It refers to a common goal or shared interest that unites the community in their conversations. It is important, according to Rheingold, that this common endeavor can sustain the conversations long enough to become an online community. In the case of NaNoWriMo, the main writing challenge in November is the common endeavor that brings the community together. It is the main writing challenge that sustains the community's conversations, at the very least, during the month of November, when the challenge takes place. Whether people turn to the forums, Facebook groups, Discord, or Twitter pages for advice, inspiration, or motivation, the conversations are sustained by the online challenge and how to write 50,000 words best and quickly in 30 days. However, the community must be sustained for the other 11 months of the year, to be considered a community by both the affinity space and discourse community theories. There is no requirement for time, but the conversations must be sustained beyond the months surrounding November, which scholars and journalists tend to focus on. What is the importance of the sustainability of a community? The importance is that, because the challenge only lasts during November, conversations can easily fizzle out once the month is over, which would not make NaNoWriMo a community. The key point I attempt to touch on here is that the virtual communities emerge when the people in those communities "carry on those public discussions long enough" – which, in the case of NaNoWriMo, needs to be longer than merely the month of November.

As I have shown about NaNoWriMo's history, the community has always been a driving aspect of the challenge that extends beyond November. Within the last few years, NaNoWriMo has expanded its official events to be year-round. First, I will touch on October, deemed

“Preptober” by both the organization and the community, when NaNoWriMo puts out their preparation content for their community to get ready for November. So, for example, this is when they post the 30-Day #InstaWriMo challenge, mentioned in my work on NaNoWriMo’s history. Additionally, they post their free “NaNoPrep 101” course, where they provide participants with 5 weeks of preparation content such as Story Idea prep, Character Development, Plot Development, World Building, and Time Management. These “courses” are designed to give participants a structure for their NaNoWriMo novel. October is also when NaNoWriMo begins the debate between those who are “Planners,” “Pantsers,” and “Plantsers,” which is a way that the organization attempts to build camaraderie between community members. For clarity, “Planners” are those who plan out their novel projects down to the last detail. “Pantsers” are those who “fly by the seat of their pants,” so to speak, and they do not plan out their novels. “Plantsers” fall somewhere in between Planners and “Pantsers.” These identities are great for starting conversations on the forums, social media, and in the regions, to form bonds between participants. By identifying these identities, NaNoWriMo directly encourages participants to interact with one another and potentially form personal relationships that Rheingold discusses in his online community criteria.

The other notable event outside of November is Camp NaNoWriMo, which I briefly discussed in the history section. Whereas the main event does not require interaction among participants, Camp NaNoWriMo turns the tables. Camp NaNoWriMo takes place in April and July, which carves out March and June as preparation months. The main difference between the two, besides participants being able to decide their own goal, is that participants are organized into “cabins” with other participants. Participants may choose to set up their cabin with their friends or they may opt to be placed in a random cabin with participants they do not know.

Participation is not explicitly required; however, this is an attempt here by NaNoWriMo to encourage the community aspect of the challenge. Participants of all skill and knowledge levels are placed in a group to encourage, motivate, and talk to one another. This directly connects to Rheingold's point about communities having sufficient human feeling: By placing participants in cabins to directly interact with one another, participants may develop relationships surrounding the overall success of the cabin. The other participants' word counts are displayed on the "Cabin" webpage, which could encourage friendly competition with one another. In addition, participants may feel a sense of camaraderie, that the challenge is not a self-challenge, but a community challenge where they can encourage their "cabin-mates" to hit their word goals for the day. The "cabins" appear to be a direct nod from the organization, realizing that they have hundreds of thousands of participants. By placing participants into these cabins, participants can work together through completing these "common and public" goals they set for themselves in the challenge. It also enables participants, who may not participate in the forums, to talk to one another, which works towards fulfilling the "webs of personal relationships" criteria of Rheingold's piece. This evidence is the most ephemeral, as the cabin conversations are not logged anywhere after the month is over. Additionally, it would require further study to find out if participation in the cabins directly correlates to success in the challenge. I would like to further reiterate here the challenge that comes from studying an online community that is made up of so much ephemeral evidence.

NaNoWriMo must provide tools and structure for various months throughout the year. A community can be self-sustaining, but when it comes to a community that revolves around a one-month challenge, it is important that the organization steps in to give the community something to work with. Additionally, this comes back to John Swales' idea of a discourse community. He

writes that these communities center around a common public goal that use communication to achieve these goals (Swales 21). NaNoWriMo provides a structure that enables its participants to achieve their goals. The participants take it to another level, encouraging, inspiring, and providing advice to help other participants achieve the goal. London ML, Sarah Bazeley, writes, “For [those who do not interact with the community] it might be all about self-discipline and proving they can do it. But the encouragement and moral support you get from the community, even if you’re only able to participate via the forums, makes it, if not an easier experience, a much more fun and rewarding one. There’s a shared excitement and passion for the challenge that is practically palpable on the forums throughout October and November” (Bazeley).

The second key aspect of both the affinity space and discourse community theories is that communities must have multiple points of access for participants. J. P. Gee writes, “People can participate peripherally in some respects, centrally in others; patterns can change from day to day or across longer stretches of time” (Gee 79). The beauty of providing these multiple points of access for participants is that they have the choice of how they want to participate and the extent of which they want to participate, whether that is “peripherally” or “centrally.” As we know from the previous discussion of TikTok in the history section, NaNoWriMo does not necessarily need to expand to every platform for their participants to interact with or create NaNoWriMo-centric content, some participants will do that on their own.

One unique aspect of NaNoWriMo is that it allows for participation both online and in real life, through the regions. Whereas fandoms have conventions like fan meetups or conventions once or twice a year, NaNoWriMo regions provide consistent, regional, in-real-life events for participants during November. Participation in real life is not required, since participants can interact with others on the forums or social media if the regions decide to make

social media accounts for the region. In a typical, pre-COVID November, the Municipal Liaisons (regional leaders), plan and host different events for their regional participants. They plan events ranging from write-ins at a local cafe to special events, for example, the London region's All-Night Lock-In event. MLs plan their events ahead of time and specifically put a focus on cultivating their community and encouraging them to complete the goal. For those who cannot make it to events for any reason, the London region's new Discord server allows online-only users to participate in virtual write-ins. In these times, since in-person events are prohibited by the NaNoWriMo organization, the London MLs plan to utilize their Discord server to run online write-ins and events. This kind of accessibility for regions is important, because it potentially allows for more people to get involved with the events, as there is no physical barrier to participation, additionally, it allows for more peripheral participation, as Gee mentions in his criteria. This idea of peripheral participation, which Gee adopts from Jean Lave and Etienne Wenger's study on communities of practice, refers to the "process by which newcomers become part of a community of practice" (Lave and Wenger 29). The point is that there must be a way for newcomers to participate in this space if they do not want to participate as centrally or directly as veteran participants. Peripheral participation goes together with Gee's point that all knowledge and skill levels are welcomed in the community, which I will touch on later in my work.

Participatory culture is central to fandoms, which Henry Jenkins discusses in his book about media education. Jenkins writes, "A participatory culture is one with relatively low barriers to artistic expression and civic engagement, strong support for creating and sharing one's creations with others, informal membership, where mentors believe their contributions matter and they feel some degree of social connection with one another" (Jenkins 7). Since the

NaNoWriMo community operates in a similar way to that of fandoms, it is important to unpack Jenkins' assertion about participation in online communities as it relates to NaNoWriMo.

In evaluating NaNoWriMo as a participatory culture, we must start with the first criteria: the low barrier to artistic expression and civic engagement. Informal membership falls into this category as well. People need not be published authors or creative writers of any kind to participate in the challenge. NaNoWriMo's mission statement states, "NaNoWriMo believes in the transformational power of creativity. We provide the structure, community, and encouragement to help people find their voices, achieve creative goals and build new worlds - on and off the page" (NaNoWriMo, 2018, 2). NaNoWriMo provides the tools necessary, through "Preptober," so that there is no barrier to entry for those who have never written a novel before. Also, they have a presence across multiple platforms, which allows participants to connect with the community on the platform of their choice - further lowering the barrier to entry. It is important to have such a low barrier to entry because the challenge is aimed towards ordinary people - so it must have familiar points of entry (accounts on social media sites) and a low barrier to participation. The second criteria of Jenkins' Participatory Cultures are the support for creating and sharing one's creations with others. Jenkins writes, "Not every member must contribute, but all must believe they are free to contribute when ready and that what they contribute will be appropriately valued" (Jenkins 7). By providing the challenge, NaNoWriMo strongly encourages their participant base to tell their stories through the creation of their novel. The sharing aspect is optional, however, there is a place on the forums for sharing and receiving feedback on one's work - so, while available, it is optional. This encouragement of participants to create and share tells the community base that their work is valuable and important. Not only that, but it also pertains to the common endeavor that both Gee and Swales bring up in their

respective theories: participants are encouraged to complete this common endeavor together, not alone.

By being encouraged to complete the common endeavor with others, participants may develop personal relationships with one another. This connects to the final point of Jenkins' theory: participants must feel a degree of social connection with one another. This goes directly back to Rheingold's point that an online community must have "sufficient human feeling" and that participants build personal relationships with one another. This emphasis on feeling is important in recognizing that the 500,000 participants are more than just a statistic on the screen. They are humans, sitting at their computers or notebooks, creating their novels, and connecting with other participants in their town or across the world. The writing challenge, as portrayed by the media and academic scholars, fails to paint the picture that these 500,000 participants are not writing alone – participants are not only creating novels but life-long friendships with people on the internet, who share the joy of writing. As I mentioned in the history section, the community has always been at the forefront of NaNoWriMo as they adapted from one platform to the next as the community grew. It was not only to accommodate the large number of participants they amassed each year but to allow for a better way to facilitate communication between the participants.

Another piece of the participation puzzle, which connects to Gee's original point, is that these points of access can present themselves as content generators. He writes, "The portal allows people to generate new signs and relationships among signs for the space...That is, the portal is also a major generator" (Gee 77). While he specifically refers to a video game when he breaks down each of his points, I contend that this occurs in the NaNoWriMo community as well. By utilizing Instagram, NaNoWriMo created the previously mentioned #InstaWrimo

challenge. This Instagram-based challenge encourages participants not to write, but to post images and videos every day for the 31 days of October based on prompts related to the challenge. Not only does it allow participants to interact with their novel projects in a way that is different from writing or outlining, but it also serves as content generation. This content is generated through the participants, as they are posting their content inspired by their novel projects. User-generated content is an important aspect of fandoms as well as communities that are adjacent to fandoms (such as NaNoWriMo). In her piece, “Language, Culture, and Identity in Online Fanfiction,” Rebecca W. Black writes about English language learners who write fanfiction: “new technologies now afford fans the opportunity to ‘meet’ in online spaces where they can collaboratively write, exchange, critique, and discuss one another’s fictions” (Black 172). These texts are crucial for the fanfiction community in continuing the “write, exchange, critique, discuss” cycle. Fanfiction texts allow fans to generate their meanings together about their popular culture fascination. While NaNoWriMo allows participants to create their own, original work, participants may create content for others’ novels, as seen through the 30 Days of Cover Design or offers on the forums for artists to draw other participants’ characters. NaNoWriMo and fandoms do differ, in that the originality of the content comes into play, but there is still a benefit from analyzing these ideas of user-generated content, as it allows participants to create their meanings of relationships, as Gee suggests in his piece.

User-generated content is important because it allows participants different methods to participate and communicate with one another. Black writes, “Texts from the [Fanfiction] website also illustrate fans’ strong allegiance to popular culture and emphasize the value of communication, social interaction, and pluralism in this online space” (Black 172). This communication and social interaction that Black identifies is the key element for online

communities such as NaNoWriMo. It directly relates to Rheingold's point that participants form webs of relationships with one another through communication and social interaction. User-generated content also shows, especially with the 30 Days of Cover Design example, that the community is multi-faceted and expands beyond the scope of writing 50,000 words.

NaNoWriMo allows its participants to come together and engage with non-writing content, so they can utilize their skills outside of writing to not only create content but also to interact with other community members. It wraps back to Jenkins' point that there must be support for the creation and sharing of one's creations with others in the community. Through hosting the 30 Days of Cover Design event and giving participants a space to share playlists about their novels, draw each other's characters, and share non-writing content, NaNoWriMo encourages their community to expand outside of the writing challenge and connect in different ways. As a result of sharing one's creations, participants can make meanings among each other and form personal relationships that connect to John Fiske's point that fans engage with semiotic productivity which "consists of the making of meanings and social identity and of social experience from the semiotic resources of the cultural commodity" (Fiske 37). Participation in online communities, especially through content generation or other forms of productivity, allows participants to shape their own social identities and social experiences by interacting with other participants and content. While content-generation is not required for Rheingold's criteria of an online community, it is a way that participants can form meaning to build personal relationships amongst one another.

The third aspect of an online community is that it is inclusive towards everyone. Gee writes, "[in affinity spaces] people relate to each other primarily in terms of common interests, endeavors, goals, or practices, not primarily in terms of race, gender, age, disability, or social

class” (Gee 77). These communities are meant to bridge the gaps between race, gender, age, disability, or social class, by focusing on a common endeavor. Also, these communities bridge the gap among people of different skill levels. Participants of all skill levels are even encouraged, in both the affinity space and discourse community models. In the case of fandoms, it is valuable to have knowledge about different characters of a TV show or have different skill levels when it comes to a video game. This is not to create a divide between people of different skill levels, but to encourage them to work together to accomplish a goal. In being part of a fandom, it allows people, especially young people, to develop their identities. Black writes, “many youth in this space are able to take on identities, not as immigrants, struggling writers or readers of English, or native or non-native speakers of one language or anything, but rather as learners and users of multiple social languages and Discourses” (Black 173). Discourse communities are not meant to erase the identities of the participants, just to act as a bridge for inclusivity that would allow everyone, no matter their identity, to participate. Inclusivity is an extremely important point of online communities, though it is not explicitly called “inclusivity” in any of the theories, it is important because it all goes back to Tanner’s point about why people participate in online spaces, to be accepted for their self-expression.

For NaNoWriMo, and the affinity space and discourse community theories, inclusivity takes place in a few different ways. At the organization’s level, they provide different resources about diversity and inclusivity on their Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion webpage, writing, “We believe the practice of creative writing can deepen and expand a person’s empathy and community. We believe this power should be shared by and made accessible to people of all ethnicities, genders, cultures, belief systems, class backgrounds, ages, abilities, and sexual orientations” (“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion”). Not only do they have this webpage that links

to many different resources that deal with diversity and inclusivity, but they also provide spaces on the forums for members of different identities, backgrounds, etc. These spaces include specific forums for LGBTQIA+, Teens, and Writers of Color (“NaNoWriMo Forums”). The important thing to mention here is that these communities revolve around the common endeavor of the challenge, rather than race/class/gender/etc. but that does not mean that these identities/backgrounds are erased. Black writes about a popular fanfiction website, “Instead, literate and social engagement in this space involves a great deal of communication and a fluid process of meaning-making and identity negotiation that traverses national, linguistic, and cultural borders” (Black 183). While she writes specifically about a fanfiction website, which still pertains to fandoms, the same can be said about NaNoWriMo’s online community, especially as an organization that strives to be inclusive at all levels. If we recall Rheingold’s statement about virtual communities, we remember that it is not about the public discussions or the common endeavor, it is about “sufficient human feeling” and “webs of personal relationships” (Rheingold 6). Communities are truly about the people that make up the group, rather than the common endeavor that unites them. So, the organization’s support and conscious efforts towards creating a diverse and inclusive space are important for all participants. NaNoWriMo can be a space for activism as they strive to create an inclusive space. The Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion webpage state, “NaNoWriMo’s staff, volunteers, and community leaders model inclusion by acknowledging our limitations and biases, taking feedback seriously, and striving to make writers of different ethnicities, genders, cultures, belief systems, class backgrounds, ages, abilities, and sexual orientations feel safe and included at all levels of our community” (“Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion”). To create a space that does not merely cater to the dominant demographics in the writing space, that emphasizes cultivating a

space that is inclusive of everyone, no matter their background is activism. The organization is a non-profit, which means while they do need donations to run, they are not a brand or company that may claim they are inclusive and diverse for the sake of positive financial performance.

At the next level, under the organization, but above the participants themselves, the Municipal Liaisons, or the regional leaders, do most of the on the ground, face-to-face work that the organization does not get to do as regularly. They, like the organization, oversee ensuring that their regional community is inclusive. The London MLs aim for their events to be as inclusive as possible, both online and offline. ML Sarah Bazeley writes:

“NaNoWriMo always talks about every single person having a story within them, and offering the support needed for many people to explore writing, telling stories, and being creative. I feel like that is the basis for everything we do in the London region too. We focus on providing that support and structure for people in our region, encouraging people of all ages, races, religions, genders, sexualities, and physical and mental abilities in taking part in NaNoWriMo and in writing in general” (Bazeley).

The London MLs attempt to do this by making sure their physical meetups are physically accessible to their participants, as well as ensure that they do not use venues that discriminate against different identities/sexualities. As mentioned in the “Methodology” section, I specifically chose the London region as it is both inclusive and diverse, made up of participants from all different backgrounds, races, sexual orientations, abilities, etc. This on the ground and face-to-face work from the MLs is incredibly important, especially as big as the NaNoWriMo community is, there is no possible way that the organization could carry on all the face-to-face work that the MLs take on in each of the hundreds of regions across the world. It is valuable to have these MLs to not only plan events but to make sure that they are cultivating an inclusive community for their members.

The other aspect of this is that people of different skill levels are encouraged to participate. John Swales writes, “survival of the community depends on a reasonable ratio between novices and experts” (Swales 27). This is important because a community relies on communication between its participants to achieve or complete a common endeavor. Therefore, people of all skill levels are encouraged to communicate to achieve this common endeavor. Mary F. Ziegler, et. al writes about online communities, “Community members made meaning together as they noted their experiences, reinterpreted these experiences together, theorized by creating abstractions and explanations, and questioned the assumptions of others” (Ziegler et. al 74). The community base of NaNoWriMo spans from first time writers to the “Overachievers.” As we know from NaNoWriMo’s mission statement, the organization encourages everyone to sign-up for the challenge, regardless of skill level. In addition, they provide a section on the forums called “Newbies” which is meant for new NaNoWriMo participants to introduce themselves and their projects. NaNoWriMo even goes so far as to encourage veterans to “stop by and offer [their] encouragement” (“NaNoWriMo Forums”). The organization, by providing these spaces for newbies, encourages members to make meaning together through noting their experiences, reinterpreting, and theorizing with one another, as suggested by Ziegler et. al. NaNoWriMo does not only prioritize the newbies, but they also give the “Overachievers” their section on the forums to swap tips and share their own experiences. Overachievers are different from the normal NaNoWriMo veterans in that they take the challenge to the next level. This refers to those participants who write their 50,000 words all in one night, one weekend or one week. This refers to those participants who attempt to write more than 50,000 words, such as 100,000 or even 1,000,000 words (yes, this has happened). NaNoWriMo provides forums for those who take the challenge to the next level and newbies or veterans might venture into this subsection of the

forum to adopt Overachiever methods into completing the normal challenge. All this to say that, not only are participants of all skill levels welcomed to participate, but their participation is required for the survival of the community, according to Swales.

The importance of inclusivity spanning over backgrounds, identities, and skill levels is just that: it includes everyone. An online community, especially following the theories of the affinity space and the discourse community, is not meant to have an exclusive membership that is only available to the most seasoned published writer. Additionally, since it is truly not about the writing challenge, it is about the community, it is only right that everyone, no matter their background, identities, or skill levels, is invited, included, and encouraged to participate in the challenge. NaNoWriMo's creed is that everyone has a story to tell and there should be no barriers to that, which is why they provide so much structure and promote so much inclusivity in their organization.

COVID-19

When I started my project, COVID-19 had yet to hit the United States. In addition, my project revolved mainly around the writing challenge aspect of NaNoWriMo and I planned to study how it led to publication. As I continued to study and COVID-19 hit, my project shifted from a focus on the writing challenge to that of the community. COVID-19 has changed the world that we live in and continues to change the world, as of October 2020. We have not yet reached NaNoWriMo 2020, which will be a lot different than NaNoWriMo 2019, especially when it comes to regions. In-person meet-ups are not currently viable and NaNoWriMo's organization has outright banned them. MLs must change their strategy, which means adapting online, for connecting with their participants this year. The shift to online, especially in the

regions, definitely challenges the MLs as they have to adapt their typically in real-life events to something that they can host online. As of my interview with the MLs in Summer 2020, their November plans were not set in stone. They have begun to use their Discord server for virtual write-ins and participants will have to see how the MLs adapt their special in-person events for the Discord server or online services in general. Participants might find that online events will happen more frequently. Additionally, the switch to online allows those who do not live in London, such as myself, to interact with the same people I interacted with in real life in 2017.

I predict that more people will participate in NaNoWriMo 2020 and it will be marketed similarly to “Make your own Sourdough Starter 101” or other do-it-yourself trends that we saw grow in popularity during the beginning of quarantine this year. I can already predict the headlines now: “Stuck in Quarantine? Write the next Bestselling Book in 30 Days with NaNoWriMo!” which further attempts to push the narrative that this is about a writing challenge, rather than the community of over 500,000 people that spans across the entire world. It is not necessarily a bad thing, as it will encourage people to participate in the challenge (and potentially stay for the community), however, there is a missed opportunity on the part of journalists and scholars to cover this massive group.

The important and more general message of the switch to online is that it is a good opportunity for those who might be isolated or quarantined away from friends, family, and strangers. Online communities exist to escape and communicate with one another online while it might not be safe for them to meet up in person. The move to an online community also makes participants much more accessible than they were previously. So those who are isolated or quarantined are not alone in their isolation, chances are there are many more who are isolated

alongside them and they can find comfort in bonding with others over the common endeavor while also staying safe in their homes.

Implications

By placing these theories in conversation with one another, we discover that each captures distinct aspects of the NaNoWriMo community. Each theory covers a diverse area of the internet in their original contexts. The combination of the theories tells a unique story about the who, what, how, and why of the NaNoWriMo community that cannot fully be told only utilizing one or two of the theories. This combination suggests its own Franken-theory that puts emphasis on the community's common, public endeavor; diverse participatory methods (and content generation that stems from these methods); human feeling and personal connections; and inclusivity, which bridges background, skill, knowledge, and identity gaps between participants. It is necessary to combine these theories in new ways to capture the complexity of online communities today. This unique combination may assist in the further study or understanding of similar online communities and how they function across different platforms. In the case of NaNoWriMo, it ultimately shifts the focus from the ambitious challenge to the participants behind that challenge and the ways that they interact with one another from one platform to the next.

To grasp how these theories connect to one another, it was necessary to map the overlap of the four major theories: Gee's Affinity Space, Swales' Discourse Communities, Rheingold's Virtual Communities, and Jenkins' Fandoms. While each covers a distinct space on the Internet, these spaces are truly not as different as one might think. Figure 1 calls attention to the places where these theories overlap, while also preserving their unique elements. In the first circle, labeled "Gee – Affinity Space," I listed each characteristic unique to the theory, which includes

Gee's ideas about knowledge, status, leadership, and how content is changed by the participants. Despite not overlapping with the other theories, each characteristic critically pertains to NaNoWriMo in its own way. Gee's ideas of knowledge and status connect to the types of NaNoWriMo participants (Newbie, Veteran, Overachiever), while leadership connects to the MLs. In the second circle, labeled "Swales – Discourse Community," the Discourse community theory only has one characteristic that does not overlap with any of the others – the "set of specific lexis" which are prevalent in the NaNoWriMo community. In the intersection between the Affinity Space and Discourse Communities circles, we find a lot of overlap between the theories that is unique to only Affinity Space-Discourse Communities: Common endeavor, varying skill levels, and content-generating participatory mechanisms. While these two theories might have covered the expanse of NaNoWriMo, I felt something was missing. Looking at these circles and the overlap between them, I noticed that the human component was missing. While online communities depend on humans to function, these theories focus in on the common endeavor that unites them, the skill levels they might have, and the content they might create. This presents a problem that I had only noticed with my inclusion of Jenkins' Fandoms and Rheingold's Virtual Communities: Human feeling was missing.

In circle three, labeled "Jenkins – Fandoms/Participatory Culture," the missing human feeling component is present as it connects to members and their contributions/content. In the fourth and final circle, labeled "Rheingold – Virtual Communities," the final distinct characteristics of online communities click into place: Sufficient human feeling and the time aspect. Through the inclusion of both Rheingold and Jenkins, humans and human feeling are injected back into the online community theories. In terms of the Rheingold-Jenkins intersection, we have a key component that is not present in Gee or Swales: "Members feel a degree of social

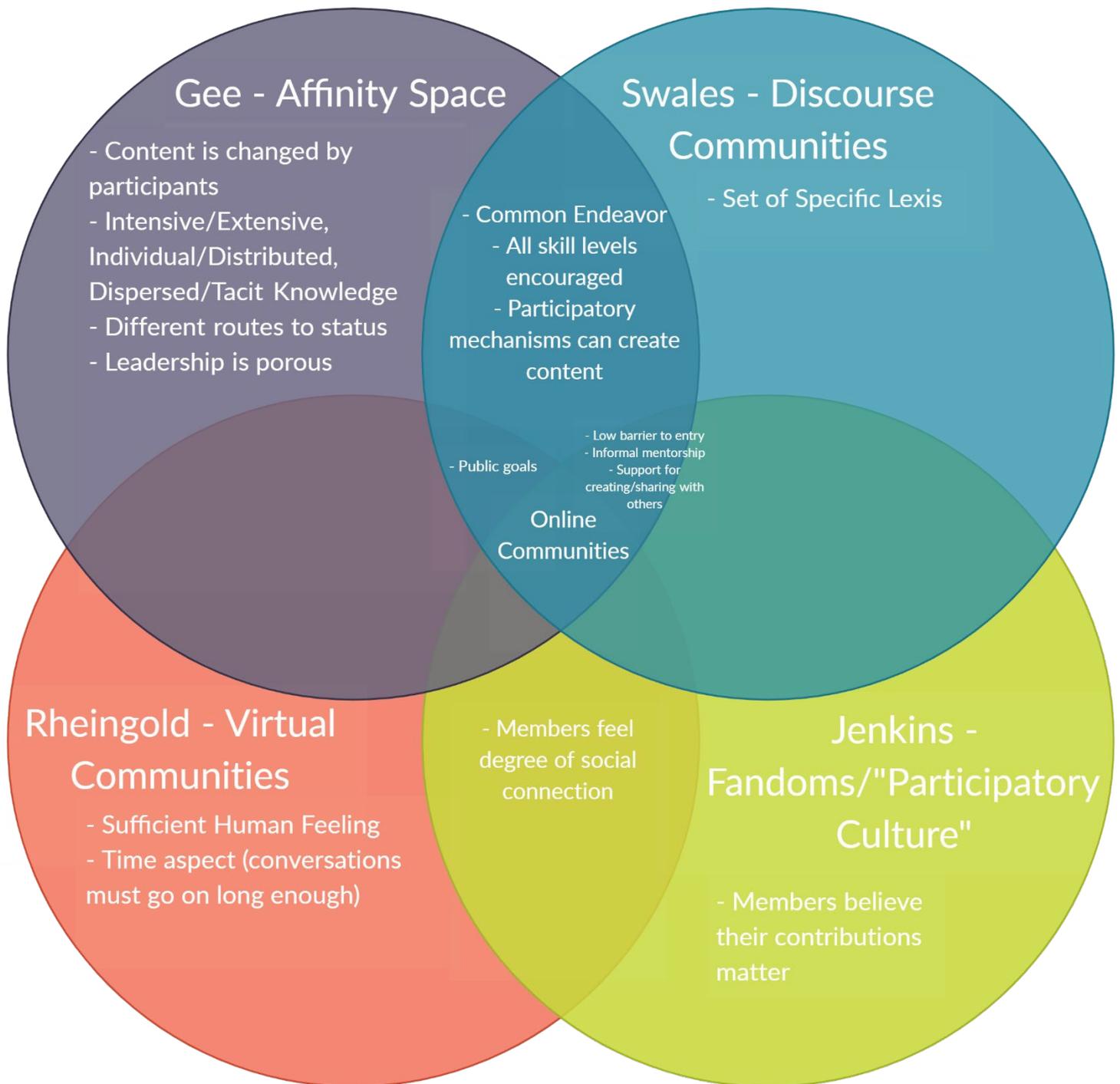
connection.” To not include this intersection in my overarching theory of online communities would be a massive flaw in my research about the humans who make up the online community behind NaNoWriMo. In addition, by including Jenkins piece, I expand the scope and modernize the reach of the theory – Gee covers the video game aspect of the Internet, Swales covers the online forums, and Jenkins covers Fandoms, which are a relatively new area of research. While not modern, Rheingold’s piece brings in the necessary human feeling component that completes the online community theory puzzle.

At the intersection of Gee-Swales-Jenkins, we find similarities in the participatory mechanism concept, informal mentorship, and support for creating and sharing one’s work with others. We start to see the connection between humans and content (or work) and the development of professional relationships (informal mentorship) at this intersection. The intersection’s flaw lies in the lack of personal social connection that we see in the Rheingold-Jenkins intersection. The second to last intersection is Rheingold-Gee-Swales, with only one characteristic in common: public goals. While this could be similar to that of the common endeavor characteristic, I believe that the key word missing is “public.” The word “public” is critical, as these online communities are meant to be open and easily accessible to all. In addition, the goals of these communities must be open and accessible to all. While it is a minor difference in wording, this is a crucial characteristic. The final intersection is Gee-Swales-Jenkins-Rheingold, which consists only of the facts that they are online, and they are communities made up of people. The combination of these four distinct, but somewhat similar, theories is crucial for the complete study of the complexities of online communities and their function across platforms. It is not enough to use one or two, as all four of these theories provide unique characteristics of online communities.

In researching and writing this honors thesis, I came to discover the NaNoWriMo community's ability to be both big and small. The community exists on a large enough level, in that it has grown to about 500,000 participants, yet, it is small in that it allows subsets of the community to branch off while still remaining in the larger group as a whole. It is also small in that the community feels spacious and home-like for those participating in it. These are made possible by the sections of the forums that allow for off-topic conversations (Gaming, Movies, etc.) or identity-based groups (LGBTQ+, Teens, Writers of Color) to occur, as well as the regions that allow for people to meet in real life. Even in the London region, which has over 2,000 members, only about 15-20 people (on average) show up to the real-life meetups. This ability for the community to feel both large and small simultaneously makes the NaNoWriMo community unique as an online community.

As one of the largest, if not the largest, online writing communities, it is my hope that the media or scholars will attempt to explore the nuances of NaNoWriMo as an online community with an ambitious challenge that unites them. My honors thesis attempts to fill the gap in scholarship surrounding the community aspect; however, my it only covers the tip of the iceberg of NaNoWriMo's online community. Further research should delve deeper into each aspect that makes the online community what it is. I hope my work has laid out the groundwork for further study on NaNoWriMo's growing online community by establishing a new theory that spans across many facets of online communities across the Internet. By providing this holistic, combinatorial theory through the study of NaNoWriMo as a case study, I hope others may apply it to other online communities that have both online and offline elements.

Figure 1.



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