

Assessing the Criteria of  
Virtual Community:  
A Case Study of Feederism

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*Virtual communities focus on any conceivable interest, avocation, or identity. As such, the Internet would seem to provide an unprecedented source of social support for individuals with extremely stigmatized sexual identities. (Durkin, 2004:141)*

## **Introducing Community**

This paper examines four related issues. First, it addresses the problem of defining community. Defining “community” has been an important challenge for the discipline of Sociology. What constitutes a “community” has been heavily debated within our discipline. It would seem that the discussions about “community” lead to no simple answers but to rather complex classifications of variables to measure the strength (Blanchard, 2007) of its existence or non-existence. Scholars, Toennies and Durkheim, have been given the accolades of beginning the discussions surrounding the term “community” as it is used within Sociology. According to Steven Brint (2001), “community” has been examined in three primary ways. First, the community studies tradition focuses on physical spaces such as neighbourhoods. This group may feel that the only true type of community is the physical neighbourhood. However, Barry Wellman, a prominent network analyst, makes a differentiation: “communities are about social relationships while neighbourhoods are about boundaries” (Wellman, 1999:xii). Second, elective or choice communities, such as the gambling community have been studied. Third, the structural characteristics of communities has been considered in comparative studies. Brint (2001) argues that none of these lines of inquiry has been particularly successful in fleshing out the term, its use, or the characteristics of “community” on the whole. So he (Brint, 2001:6) defines communities as “aggregates of people who share common activities and/or beliefs and who are bound together

principally by relations of affect, loyalty, common value and/or personal concern (i.e., interest in personalities and life events of one another).”

While the “community question” remains key to the works of many well-known sociologists, for others, the “community question” remains unimportant. For example, generally, symbolic interactionists are less concerned with first defining “community” before applying it to their units of analysis. Were you to ask our University of Waterloo resident symbolic interactionist, Bob Prus, what constitutes a “community” he would likely tell you that it is any group of people acting together and that it depends on the actors’ definitions of the situation. Interactionists see “the process of community building as an active human endeavor” (Ferback, 2007:50) that is achieved when actors “create meanings about community through social interaction” (Ferback, 2007:55). The question of “what constitutes a community” would be answered in terms of what meanings the social activity has for the group members. An entire paper written on the question of “what is a community” would perhaps seem somewhat futile to symbolic interactionists who may consider the question itself absurd. For example, Gauthier and N. K. Chaudoir (2004) use the term “community” to refer to groups of female-to-male transsexuals who come together online to support one another without examining the use of the term “community.” Meanwhile, Adler and Adler (2008:51), well known interactionists, note that the online communities for self injurers are more than just “communities of interest” formed by “self-interested, self-seeking individual who join together to augment each individual’s good.” They suggest that these communities “display norms with sanctions, and they offer a forum that joins people together to form a

social order, enabling cooperation and association.” As such they justify their using the term “community” in their article. It would seem that researchers often label groups of people a “community” without questioning what actually might constitute a “community.”

The term “community” is charged with meaning but lacking in specificity. It easily means different things each time it is used, and we lack a common and succinct definition. It seems we spend little time operationalizing it before applying to it various groups of interest. The remainder of this paper will focus on three remaining tasks. It asks if online groups can form communities? It examines how we can operationalize the concept of ‘virtual community’ to make such an assessment and then this paper assesses if those interested in feederism, who participate online, have formed an online community.

“Feederism” is a sexual inclination, a fetish perhaps, for weight gain. It is also called *erotic weight gain*. Those interested in this phenomenon (most often called “feeders/encouragers” and “feedee/gainers”) are sexually aroused by either gaining weight themselves or encouraging and helping others, namely, a partner, to gain weight. People who are interested in erotic weight gain have formed groups online to discuss their fascination. Throughout my research I always assumed they were members of an online community because participants speak about their involvements as such. However, it was not until recently that I decided to fully examine if such groups can form communities online and what criteria may be used to make such a judgement.

In this paper I will operationalize the concept of “community” by applying it to this online group that I think can be considered a “community.” The purpose of this paper is not to repeat the *entire* debate about whether community is a useful concept or whether the term community can be applied, generally, to groups online (see Kayahara, 2006). Rather, the purpose of this paper is to operationalize the concept of “community” by examining which criteria are most salient to its application and then by using the criteria to examine a case study of individuals who may have formed an online community.

### **Online Group Interactions**

Before establishing if my group of interest has formed an online community, we must begin with the premise that true community *can* be found online. Based on my understanding of the literature, I would not say that this debate has not yet been won but I am confident in proposing that community *does* exist online depending which criteria is used to make the assessment. Numerous scholars believe that community can exist online (Adler and Adler, 2008; Brint, 2001; Nieckarz, 2005; Lui, 1999; Jones, 1998; Wellman et al., 1996; Wellman and Gulia, 1999; Baym, 1998) and so this paper begins with the premise it is possible to find communities on the internet.

“Social networks emerge when people interact with each other continually, and they have to be useful or they would not exist” (Rheingold, 2006:47). People have been interacting on the internet since at least 1995. Since then, Sociologists, it seems, have been scrambling to study and classify these interactions. Online groups, or virtual communities are now starting to be classified. Within Brint’s (2001:10) scheme of the

types of communities that exist, virtual communities are seen as a choice community (versus a geographic community), that are often activity-based (as opposed to belief-based), where other members are dispersed in space (as opposed to being concentrated in space). He further defines virtual communities as “communities in which members interact exclusively through the medium of computer technology” (Brint, 2001:11). Virtual communities have become another type of community for sociologists to consider.

The inquiry into virtual groups has just begun and it struggles with the same contention: what characteristics are necessary call a group a community? “The first step in acting effectively is to know what you are acting on. Collectively, we know only a small amount about human behaviour in social cyberspaces. We need to know a lot more” (Rheingold, 2006:74). Dawson (2004:78) suggests that while “we need to know more about the qualitative character of online relationships and the actual performance of so-called virtual communities,” he also implies that the question of what makes a virtual community must also be addressed since “not all virtual groups are communities” (Dawson, 2004:77). Criteria are needed to assess what makes a virtual group a virtual community. By using the characterises proposed by Dawson (2004) this paper will present a case study of a virtual group that appears to display the characteristics of a virtual community. It will apply the criteria to assess not only if this virtual group is a virtual community but also to assess if the set of criteria itself are complete or if it may be amended.

### **Assessing “Community” Online**

In their early article comparing face-to-face communities with computer mediated communities, Etzioni and Etzioni (1999) defined “community” as having two attributes. First, they noted the importance of bonding within communities. They described bonding as an inter-related web of relationships that criss-cross and reinforce one another. Second, they noted the importance of developing a culture, which consists of shared values, meanings, and a historical identity. Overall, they believe that both bonding and culture can be accomplished online, so online communities are a real possibility. Since then, various scholars have addressed what criteria should be used to assess if community can be found online.

Sociability, support, sense of belonging, ‘quality’ online relationships, and (perhaps) political action were found to be important criteria during Kayahara’s (2006) review of the literature. Political action does seem to be important to some researchers in this field. However, I agree with Kayahara (2006:148) in that most traditionally thought-of communities, even geographical communities, do not engage in political action so to expect a virtual community to be politically charged is erroneous. Steven Brint (2001) is not concerned with political engagement but instead notes that fraternalism, mutual support, low levels of status inequality, informal settlement of disputes, illiberalism, and intolerance are observed attributes of online communities.

Peter Nieckarz (2005:406) wrote an article that examined if the practice of collecting and trading live music online is an example of a virtual community. For his analysis he used the following characteristics of a community: “regular interaction, a negotiated order, a

sense of belonging, shared goals and values, distinct norms, identity, and social status, personal commitment to the group and its preservation, sources of interpersonal support, and a process of socialization.” In my mind, his list seems to cover a lot of ground in a very specific way.

Further still, Dawson (2004:83) adapts criteria from Jones (1997) and Liu (1999) and proposes six elements for an online group to be considered a virtual community: (1) interactivity; (2) stability of membership; (3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship and social control; (5) personal concern; (6) occurrence in a public space. Based on my review of the original and secondary literature on the topic I tend to agree that Dawson’s virtual community elements are most salient in regards to setting up criteria that are not only thoughtful but empirically measurable. Therefore, use his proposed criteria when examining the case study. I have, however, separated netizenship from social control and added further considerations to some of his other suggested elements in an attempt to develop the criteria for assessing the existence of a virtual community.

### **Case Study Description**

I came across an interesting phenomenon during my first year of graduate studies called “feederism.” In the article I was reading this phenomenon was described in a horrific way that left me questioning whether it really existed or not. Were people really sexual aroused by weight gain? After doing a search of academic articles and finding nothing about the topic, I turned to *Google*. As soon as I typed “feederism” into the search engine I was immediately given many online directions to more information. I quickly

came across a website called “Fantasy Feeder”<sup>1</sup> where there looked to be many people discussing this topic and interacting with each other online.

I soon discovered this was not the only website that catered to this topic. A second website, “Dimensions Online,”<sup>2</sup> seemed to be another place where people were discussing feederism online. By spending time on both of these sites I found many people were discussing erotic weight gain, posting pictures, sharing stories and advice, and chatting about this topic. It seemed to me that this was likely a phenomenon that could be happening offline, in people’s real<sup>3</sup> in-the-flesh lives as well. I decided, due to the lack of empirical academic research into this phenomenon, to make this topic the focus of my master’s thesis research.<sup>4</sup>

I conducted thirty interviews with members of these online websites. Twenty-three of the interviews were conducted online using instant messaging programs, while seven were conducted over the telephone. While answering questions about their definitions, desires, fantasies, and relationships, my respondents used the term “community” again and again. It seemed respondents defined their involvements in online feederism websites as being part of a community.

Everyone in *the community* is concerned with health issues. . . It’s really a nurturing, caring relationship; *a community* of respect, love, and nurturing. (Damon, emphasis added)

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<sup>1</sup> The website URL is: <http://www.fantasyfeeder.com>.

<sup>2</sup> The website URL is: <http://www.dimensionsmagazine.com>.

<sup>3</sup> A note on this concept of “real life” – Speaking about real life here does not mean that what is happening inside one’s fantasy or online is not part of one’s *real* life. Rather “real life” in this paper refers to actions that are taken outside of fantasy and not online. See Waskul (2003:23-24) who discusses this idea successfully. In addition, Adler and Adler (2008) refer to life that happens offline as the “solid world.”

<sup>4</sup> Some of the respondents’ quotations used in this paper are from my thesis (Bestard, 2008).

We started dating and he would slowly introduce me to famous BBWs online and *the “Dimensions” community*. (Jackie, emphasis added)

For myself, it’s all about the weight gain. But I don’t see myself as being representative for *the feeder/feedee community*. (Grant, emphasis added)

I’m so used to running in communities with INTELLIGENT people who talk about sex, that it’s really kinda frustrating to be in *the feeder community*, where most people (unfortunately) seem to be morons. (Donna, emphasis added)

I’d say “dime” is more of a size acceptance/all encompassing *community* and feederism is just a small part of it, but from *the community* I gain a lot of support. (Cathy, emphasis added)

I do admit yearning for a more intelligent tenor of conversation, wherever I go, and, sadly, *the feederism community* seems rarely able to provide it. (Rosie, emphasis added)

Most users use “Fantasy Feeder” or “Dime” as porn sites as well as a connection with *the community*. (Damon, emphasis added)

[I am] only [out] to *the online community* who has similar interests. (Perry, emphasis added)

While doing my analysis for my thesis it was suggested to me that I examine more in-depth my respondent’s use of the term “community.” While this reached beyond the scope of my thesis topic, I decided to come back to this idea to examine if there is a “feederism community” online? Just because numerous people are discussing the topic online, is that enough to constitute it being called a “community?” Just because they call it a “community,” is that enough to warrant it being called such? It seemed obvious that my respondents were feeling a “sense of community” (Blanchard, 2008) but was this enough? In order to examine this, in addition to the data I had already collected, I re-interviewed three of my previous respondents and three new respondents over instant messenger. The findings presented here serve as a case study to examine if

sociologically the group of people involved in feederism websites have formed a virtual community, using and adapting Dawson's (2004) criteria.

### **Analysis – Is the case study a virtual community?**

According to the literature, if the group of people involved in feederism websites have formed a virtual community their groups must meet, to varying extents, several criteria: (1) interactivity; (2) stability of membership; (3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship (5) social control; (6) personal concern; and (7) occurrence in a public space (Dawson, 2004:83). Each of these criteria will be examined in turn to assess not only if this group has indeed formed a virtual community but also the usefulness of the criteria being used to assess it.

### ***Interactivity***

The ability for group members to communicate and interact (Driskell and Lyon, 2002: 377) may be the most important and most obvious feature of online groups. Dawson (2004:83) calls for a “significant level of inactivity” in order for a group to potentially qualify as a virtual community. Even in its subjective state, it can be said that there is significant interactivity online for individuals involved in feederism. The two main websites for this group are *Dimensions Online* and *Fantasy Feeder*. The main part of the *Dimensions* website is the very popular discussion forums. At any given time during the day, over 500 individuals are logged-onto the discussion boards.<sup>5</sup> Overall, the boards are

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<sup>5</sup> It should be noted that this number does not count the number of users who are viewing the discussion boards without logging-in. Because the discussion boards are viewable without logging-in it is likely that the discussion boards have many more “active users” than the number of logged-in members. In addition, one is able to remain logged-into the discussion boards even when they are not actively interacting with

geared towards fat positive topics. Those interested in feederism congregate in the “Weight Board” which is subdivided into the topics of “Fat Sexuality” and “Erotic Weight Gain.” The “Weight Board” itself usually has between 30 and 60 people viewing/posting on it at any given time.

*Fantasy Feeder* has fewer visitors at a given time but it caters only to those interested in erotic weight gain (as opposed to a more general fat and fat admiring audience). Usually there are around 50 members logged-into the site at one time.<sup>6</sup> *Fantasy Feeder* also has discussion boards, which are less popular than at *Dimensions*, where members discuss topics associated to their fascinations. In addition to discussions, *Fantasy Feeder* has hundreds of user-submitted pictures, videos, and stories, online personal dating ads, and an online chat room. Interactivity on these two websites comes from the discussions boards and real-time chat.

Structurally, it is suggested (Dawson, 2004:83) that interactions resemble a continuous feedback loop where conversations are related and turn taking is occurring. The set-up of these discussion boards, like many others on the internet, is that a user may start a new thread on a topic of interest and other group members may reply, in turn, to the original poster. Replies are displayed in sequence. Posters are able to reply to the original poster or anyone who has replied to the thread. They are able to quote in their reply, any previous message which they wish to reference, with ease. This makes tracking the line

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them (e.g. their internet browser may remain open while they do other things on the internet). Thus, these numbers are not necessarily accurate portrayals of actual usage.

<sup>6</sup> There are also usually 50 around “visitors” on the site at any given time as well. A “visitor” may be a lurker or it may be a member who hasn’t bothered to log-into the site before interacting with the site.

of conversation quite simple and allows for optimal interaction. It is possible that threads may get “de-railed” off-topic. It is also possible that multiple topics may be discussed within the same thread. Posters are usually clear to whom they are replying and about which specific topic they are discussing. These discussions are structurally set-up and function in a way that allows for maximum interactivity.

In addition to the interactions being structurally organized in a way that facilitates interchanges between group members, another consideration in terms of interactivity, that may be lacking from Dawson’s (2004) description, is that of the *quality* and *content* of interactions occurring in these spaces. It is fine that the interactions are occurring as synchronous dialogues between group members, but the content and purposefulness of those conversations, I believe, needs to be meaningful to the individuals. It is this feature that may be most closely tied with Brint’s (2001) criteria of fraternalism and mutual support. While Dawson’s (2004) element of “personal concern” may touch upon similar sentiments, I think overall, the emotive component of online group interactions may be lacking in his schema. The addition of the criterion of mutual support, described below, may make this emotive characteristic measurable.

Support is an important benefit that is offered to group members, and as Durkin, *et al.* observe (2006:598): “The internet is an unprecedented source of support for those with the most devalued sexual identities - a place where they can readily receive affirmation and reinforcement.” Those who are interested in erotic weight gain have a desire that is uncommon and that often elicits negative responses from outsiders. Therefore, this idea

of finding support from like-minded individuals is key for this group of individuals. Support, “refers to any form of social interaction that involves providing some form of assistance. The assistance can be either tangible or intangible. Tangible support typically takes the form of physical goods, while intangible support can include information, psychological, and emotional support.” (Kayahara, 2006:141). Support for this group is intangible. Brint (2001:14-15) seems to recognize the importance of “fellow feeling and mutual support.” Mutual support is a specific type of interaction that is considerable for members of these websites and speaks to the quality and content of these interactions.

*Dimensions* has given me quite a bit more confidence in myself and my desires and love of fat women and feederism. (Adam)

The best part about the online community is that it gives me a sense of normalcy and I have made some great friends there. (Sonya)

From the community I gain a lot of support. It’s nice to know you’re not alone in your views, especially views that are misunderstood and looked down upon by much of society. (Cathy)

Just being somewhere where these feelings and desires are normal, where other[s] share some of them or at least understand and accept them...that is the biggest reason I keep coming back. (Henry)

These websites provide these group members with mutual support and reinforce that they are not alone in their desire for or fascinations with weight gain.

While the majority of respondents felt welcomed and supported by the virtual groups, this was not the case for everyone. Some participants did not fully participate in the online virtual groups for various reasons. One such reason was that they practice a version of

feederism that they felt was deemed too extreme by the group. For example, Sandra did not find *Dimensions* to be a safe place for her to discuss her desires. She felt that because she practiced a more extreme version of feederism, desiring to be 1,000 pounds, that the virtual group actually shunned her. In her words,

I have talked about my desires in DIMS in the Weight Board forums. They've have had to shut down my threads it got so hateful towards me. They don't like me as far I as I can figure. Because I really really make a stand for feederism. When I believe in something I tend to go over board and I really like and identify with the whole feederism thing. [So] it is ok to just speak a little, it is ok to just *lightly* be into it, flirt with it, talk about maybe the idea, but if you come out and say, and I'm the only one who said, "I want to be over 1,000 pounds", that is way too "in their face." They can't handle that. They are into soft feederism, [gaining] 10 pounds 20 pounds, just to flirt with it. (Sandra)

So while these online spaces generally provide a safe space for people to discuss their weight gain desires, it seems there may be a limit on what the group will accept. While overall, the majority of respondents felt welcomed and supported, anyone who is too extreme in their desires, may be less likely to find a safe place within this group. The interactions that occur here are not only structurally organized into coherent dialogues, the content of the interactions are important and meaningful to the group members. This suggests that perhaps this is a virtual community.

### ***Stability of Membership***

Dawson (2004: 84) suggests that participants in virtual communities should "post messages relatively frequently and over a reasonably long period of time. These two indicators tell us we are in the presence of something more than a mere exchange of views of some passing topic of common concern." Granted, erotic weight gain is not a common interest within the mass populous. However, even being a rare predilection,

there is a consistent and significant following online. Some of the respondents I spoke with noted that they spend a lot of time interacting with feederism online by visiting various websites and/or discussing the topic on discussion boards, or through one-on-one online conversations. The amount of time spent engaging with feederism online varies.

- a few hours a day (Harold, Patricia, Jackie, Derek)
- more than an hour a day (Hailey, Byron)
- an hour a day / 7 hours per week (Brandon, Grant, Shawn, Stewart, Damon, Adam)
- 5 hours or so a week (Jane, Henry, Odette, Brittney, Katrina)
- a couple hours a week (Dewayne, Calvin)
- various amounts of time when the interest strikes (Randy, Mary)

As Jane notes, “well it is pretty important since finding people online who talked about it proved I wasn’t totally insane for liking it! I spend a fair bit of time online, sometimes an hour a day, sometimes an hour a week... it depends on my moods.”

Not only do group members consistently spend time on these sites, discussing the topic publicly and privately with online friends, they have been doing so for years. These are not fleeting groups of people. *Dimensions* online was started in 1995 to complement a fat-positive print magazine. In 2002, the print magazine was stopped, due to the high costs of printing, but the magazine owner continues the website with its popular discussion board to this day. Some of my respondents remember joining *Dimensions Online* at its inception. For example, Henry says he has been part of *Dimensions* (DIMS) since it’s inception, with its various changes. Sonya, a young adult says, “I have been

lurking<sup>7</sup> on DIMS since age 12 off and on but I have been active at DIMS for 3 years.”

At *Dimensions*, someone recently posted a thread on the “Weight Board” called “The Fatty Questionnaire” which in addition to questions about fat, the body, shopping, and food, contained five relevant questions: What brought you into the community?; Why do you stay in the community?; Do you see yourself in this community in the next 5 years?; What is the biggest disappointment of this community for you?; How has this community made you feel? At the time of writing this paper, there were over 50 replies to this questionnaire. It seems that people found the group through inadvertent searching for fat related content online or through a friend or personal acquaintance. Friendship, support, and acceptance were the most common responses for the reason why members stay (or return) to the group. The majority of people see themselves remaining active members for the next five years. Overall, the biggest disappointment within this group seems to be the drama, pettiness, and rudeness that sometimes occurs when numbers of people from different positions and viewpoints attempt to discuss important facets of their lives with one another. Overall, this group feels that their experience with *Dimensions* online makes them feel happy, accepted, loved, and beautiful. Even from this short summary of the impromptu questionnaire, a thread where people are still posting replies, we can see that members feel a sense of belonging to the group, evidence that this may be a virtual community.

I, myself, posed a question on the “Erotic Weight Gain” board at *Dimension*: “have you been here long?” My post received 29 replies at the time I wrote this paper. What I

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<sup>7</sup> “Lurking” means visiting and reading posts, for example, but not participating by way of replying.

noticed most about the replies I received was that many (more than 10) members mentioned that they lurked on the site for many years before joining. Also, it was interesting to note that 19 people divulged that they have “been around DIMS” (either lurking or participating) for more than 10 years. This completely non-representative random poll illustrates that membership on this site seems quite stable. As Henry told me “there is a core group that is very stable, a good number of whom go right back to the beginning. Some members do come and go, but there are lots of members who remember when my son was born, and he is going to be 12 soon.” Having a stable membership cohort is a criterion necessary to call an online group a virtual community. It would seem that this group meets this criterion suggesting that it may be a virtual community.

### ***Stability of Identity***

In addition to stable memberships, identities are also to remain stable. In so far as participants keep the same nicknames and character displays during their group interactions (Dawson, 2004: 84). I think it could also be added that, in addition to the functional task of keeping the same nickname over a period of time, a further consideration would be that participants present themselves in a consistent manner. While it is commonly known that people online can portray any version of themselves they so desire, the portrayal should remain consistent over time. In online environments this can be a tumultuous issue since visual cues are absent and people rely only on textual representations (and sometimes presented images) of self. One way that these sites attempt to rectify this issue is by allowing group members to view all discussion posts made by a user. This allows one to read all comments made by a user to check for

consistency in one's presentation of self. In addition, on *Fantasy Feeder*, there is a system by where other group members can vote on the real-ness or fake-ness of each user. The group is aware that this system is not without its flaws, (e.g. someone can have their friends repeatedly vote for themselves as "real" and likewise, people can ban against you and vote you as "fake") as they have discussed better ways to govern this. However, at this time, it does give the group a way of dealing with potential fakes.

One of the negative issues that was revealed during my interviews, within these virtual groups, was the problem of fakers. Fakers are people who are thought to be, or found to be portraying a version of themselves that is not consistent. Specifically, this most often occurs when people (often gay males) pretend to be female feedees in chat rooms. That is to say that sometimes gay males are said to pose as females who are seeking encouragement for their weight gain from straight males.

There are too many frauds masquerading as the opposite sex. (Perry)

The worst thing is all of the fakes. Fakes being gay men posing as women or kids posing as a woman. (Adam)

While this perceived deception can cause some mistrust within the group as people's portrayed identities and authenticity is questioned it is not severe enough to impede all trust within the group.

The main notable feature about identities for this group is that the online interactions allows many members the ability to be themselves (or a version of themselves) that they may feel they are unable to be in other parts of their lives. Respondents talk about being

able to discuss a facet of their lives that they feel they can not talk about in their offline lives. In addition, Derek, a relatively young weight gain encourager and feeder explained that the online group gave him a venue to test out his sexuality.

In 1996, there were only so many websites, so finding fat led to *Dimensions* no matter what. And *Dimensions* already had an outline of all these terms and plenty of cartoons, morphs, pics, stories, and actual people, to test myself on. So imagine me at [age] 12 sneaking downstairs to use the family computer at like 4 am and looking at all this stuff . . . I was only interested in girls for a brief time, if at all, before [weight] expansion entered the picture. (Derek)

Reading about and talking about sexual fantasies is another way that group members interact and learn about their identities, and what aspects of this phenomenon they enjoy most and least. Many respondents spoke about the importance of using their online involvements to explore their weight gain fantasies. This may cause further confusion in maintaining a consistent identity within this group as it may be questioned if one is portraying an “authentic self” or a “fantasy self.” The importance of fantasy for group members may blur the boundary between reality and fantasy making it questionable if group member’s identities are stable enough to be considered a virtual community.

Not only is maintaining one’s identity, in terms of nicknames in a consistent manner important for community building, but so too is the type of identity that individuals choose to portray of themselves. It could be suggested that communities *need to* influence one’s identity in terms of identity conception and identity formation, in some way, to be a community. This case study may suggest that this is an important consideration but further investigation would be necessary to add it to the schema.

Whether an “authentic self” or not, maintaining a stable identity within virtual groups is

an integral part of defining a virtual group as a virtual community. While respondents did not speak about themselves pretending to be anybody but who they are, the importance of fantasy within this phenomenon makes it possible that these group members do not always have stable identities. However, it is also possible that because relationships do develop between group members over time, as will be explored below, that they maintain stable *enough* identities to be considered a virtual community.

### *Netizenship*

Dawson's (2004) suggested criteria for a virtual community blends together netizenship and social control. For my purposes I would like to suggest that these two components are strong enough in their own right to stand independent of each other. For this reason I have separated netizenship from social control. "Netizenship" comes from the word "citizenship" meaning not only the legal right to hold membership within a group (such as a town, city, or country) but to also act in ways that are responsible towards that group. Before one can become a netizen of the group he or she must identify with that group. Group identity is an aspect that I think is missing from Dawson's (2004) schema. However, Barry Wellman (2001:228) includes identity within this definition of community: "networks of interpersonal ties that provide sociability, support, information, a sense of belonging and social identity." It would seem that group identity could be an important facet neglected in the original (Dawson, 2004) schema.

Respondents spoke about finding a group of like-minded individuals, a group they could identify with.

There was a sort of sense of “coming home.” I’d finally found that I was not a unique freak in what I liked, that there were others with similar interests. So that was also a big part of it, that feeling of comfort and fitting in. (Henry)

[I get] a sense of belonging, camaraderie; not feeling like a freak. (Jane)

It’s a way for me to find related resources and people who are wired in similar ways to myself. (Shawn)

[From this website] I realized that I am NOT ALONE in the feelings I have . . . its cool to know there is a community where you aren’t kudded [sic] as a weirdo for having the preferences you have. (Adam)

Once the individual has found the group, and decided that they can identify with this group, these quotations illustrate that they develop a sense of belonging to the group. “Sense of belonging refers to the intangible sense that one is a part of something larger than oneself. In a community context, it often suggests acceptance, and the perception that one has a home, whether literal or metaphorical” (Kayahara, 2006:142-3). Not only does Henry mention this sense of “having a home,” in the impromptu questionnaire currently posted on the *Dimension*’s “weight board” (mentioned previously), a couple of group members indicated that DIMS is their “online home.” Such statements illustrate that group members feel that they can identify with other members and feel a sense of belonging to the group. This seems indicative of a virtual community.

Once one has been able to identify with the group and considers him or herself a group member, they may begin to care about “the good of the group” and therefore, become a netizen. The mark of a good citizen may be that one is a good neighbour, that one shares their skills and/or time to make the community better, or that one has the best interests of the group in mind. A netizen is a citizen of the internet and in theory, while the medium is different the same assumptions can be made about a netizen as a citizen. In terms of

netizenship, Dawson (2004:84) calls for a sense of commitment to the community and says that this commitment can be achieved through helping “newbies” navigate the website and group, creating FAQ pages to help people along, and through gift-giving such as freeware software. To elaborate further, Michael Hauben (1995 [1997:x]) described a “netizen” as follows:

Netizens are not just anyone who comes online. Netizens are especially not people who come online for individual gain or profit. They are not people who come to the Net thinking it is a service. Rather, they are the people who understand it takes effort and action on each and everyone’s part to make the Net a regenerative and vibrant community and resource. Netizens are people who decide to devote time and effort into making the Net, this new part of our world, a better place. Lurkers are not Netizens, and vanity home pages are not the work of Netizens.

Those interested in feederism, who participate in groups online, show some aspects of netizenship when they welcome new comers to discussions, answer “newbies” questions, post respectful replies to other members, provide advice to member’s personal problems, stand-up for others against personal attacks, provide resources (such as web-links) when requested, and generally respect each other. Patricia, a moderator on one of the sites says explains how she promotes the ideas of netizenship.

When the site decided to bring on mods there was a “Hey, Joe” kind of culture of help, where people would ask long-time members. But it took a lot of work to systematise some of the things that made the site change from a fetish site to more of a lifestyle community kind of place.

I think one of the most important things, which in some way was much more likely to come from women than from men, was a robust complaints system. Women are often subjected to sleaziness on the site--on any fetish site, of course--and without a way to report them and expect they would be dealt with, women were less psyched to stay around. I think having moderators in chat was

also important, and having pervy pics taken down very quickly also matters a lot.

Then there's the more informal, sisterly kind of stuff. That includes answering questions like "I'm new to this and I'm kinda scared, what should I do?; How does it feel to binge? What if I don't like gaining?" I can't speak for anyone else, of course, but 'm always hugely careful about answering those. I say things like "You shouldn't do anything until you feel quite sure. Just keep chatting and reading stories and try to learn what feels right to you." Or "You should go slowly, and gain a little bit, and see how it feels to you. You can always lose five or ten pounds, but more is harder. And rapid weight gain is most likely unhealthy anyway." So you can then imagine what I say to people who want advice about gaining faster. I generally ask questions, like "Why does it matter to gain so fast?" and things like that. I provide sound guidance, as best I can, to our members.

In general, I've tried hard to be a voice of reason and temperament, while also being supportive to people who are struggling to 'come out' about their desires. I waited so very very long to embrace my own, I don't want to discourage anyone else.

Not only do moderators exhibit facets of netizenship, regular members also do so.

[[I need to insert quote]]

Netizenship involves caring about the "good of the group" as well as feeling a sense of belonging and identity with the group. Netizenship is suggested to be a factor in determining the existence of a virtual community.

### ***Social Control***

The amount of social control present is another consideration. This is described as occurring when, "the participants in the computer-mediated communication display a sense of responsibility for sustaining the communication by negotiating and enforcing norms to guide future communications and protect participants from various forms of deviance (e.g. deceptions, harrassment, flaming [etc.])" (Dawson, 2004:84). The main type of protection needed within this group is ensuring that members are free from

harassment. This group may be especially vulnerable to harassment because its members are practising or discussing a topic that goes against our social norms. While a discussion about dieting and how to best *lose* weight would be considered quite “normal” and acceptable, the opposite conversation, how to best *gain* weight, is considered quite contrary to many peoples’ ways of thinking. Why would someone want to purposefully gain massive amounts of weight? People who have this desire, to gain weight or to encourage weight gain in others, are vulnerable to harassment from “outsiders” who have not been exposed to this phenomenon before and who do not understand it. Because joining these websites is free and open to anyone, “outsiders” can find their way into the group discussions and join the discussion to share their opinions. Such posts, which can be quite strong, may contain the words: sick, demented, crazy, insane, and unhealthy. In order to provide a safe space for group members to discuss their thoughts and desires, without feeling that they will be harassed for their preferences, these websites have policies in place to help ensure that discussions remain respectful and constructive. The policy for the “Erotic Weight Gain” forum on *Dimensions* is:

This forum is for use by those interested in all areas of weight gain, feeding and topics directly related to those things. The forum is for positive contributions and participation. In other words, if you have nothing good to say about a topic, or constructive/related pro-topic conversation to add, then you should not be posting and any such posts will be removed or edited as appropriate. Repeat offenders may lose access to this board. (*Dimensions*)

In addition to a stated policy, each forum has vigilant moderators who read the messages. The “Erotic Weight Gain” board currently has four moderators. Often a moderator will step into a discussion, by posting a reply, to warn a member that their comments are bordering on inappropriate. Moderators also delete posts, edit posts, and have been

known from time to time to shut down entire discussion threads (which means they can still be read, but no further posts/replies can be made). While the power wielded by moderators is of course subjective (e.g. What is a constructive/related pro-topic?), it would seem that group members are generally accepting of this system.

I've started to visit [the forums] again regularly due to the mods and admins<sup>8</sup> cleaning out the deadwood and worse offenders. (Luke)

I think they do fine, really. They are pretty good at keeping down the criticism. (Henry)

When the mods intervene it's usually for a good reason and well done. We've already got rules against feeder-bashing in the weight room forums. I guess the only thing to be desired is some proper enforcement of them, people are so used to just lumping it I think we debate the flammers instead of reporting them. (Joel)

Patricia, a moderator at Fantasy Feeder explains that being able to exert control as a moderator is important to making members, especially female members, comfortable on the site.

Ours is an unusual fetish, and that means the behaviour on the site can be wide-ranging and sometimes wild. The nature of the site --that it is about a very very very very closeted practice-- means that people can go crazy with the combination of anonymity and the fetish theme. So some percentage of people, mostly men, mostly youngish, act like big jerks and freak out the women on the site. So in this sense, some form of control is disproportionately important for a site like *Fantasy Feeder*. We really needed to make sure that there was some form of recourse for women who felt like they were being harassed, or had their pics stolen, and so on.

It is suggested "that people are willing to submit to some control in order to gain the benefits of community membership. It could be argued that online willingness to submit

to social control could indicate that users are receiving benefits, one of which might be a sense of belonging” (Kayahara, 2006:143). So while group members on these sites know that they are not permitted to say anything they want, especially if it is negative, derogatory, or “un-constructive” (whatever that means), they are willing to follow the rules, for the most part, in order to ensure a safe space for their continued conversations. They are willing to submit to some social control, power, and authority in order that they receive the benefit of being a member of the virtual group.

Mandy described an interesting instance of when she asked moderators to step in and remind another member about the rules.

Recently someone on DIM’s weight gain board said that women involved in weight gain did it due to mental illness--that is was just a way to justify eating disorders and to get attention from men. That upset me a great deal. Because it's rubbish and I'm tired of needing my preferences explained as if they're illnesses. I told her that I've like what I've liked since before I even wanted the attention of men or anyone. And that I enjoy it quite well even when I'm exploring it on my own And that sometimes my weight gain was mere fantasy --I don't need to binge or to overeat or to even really gain weight to enjoy the idea of it. It isn't an eating disorder. She said, "it's just my opinion and I'm entitled to it" and I reminded her that non-constructive and/or negative postings weren't allowed in that forum. I alerted the moderators to it. They asked her to cool it and she admitted she didn't really belong there because it wasn't her thing... I'm cool with people not agreeing with feedism. I'm cool with people having differing opinions on it. I am not cool with people who know what a forum is about coming in JUST to be rude. (Mandy)

Kayahara (2006:146) suggests that, “the anonymity facilitated by the Internet makes social control difficult because people can easily escape the consequences of their actions . . . and makes it difficult to enforce sanctions.” For example, it may be suggested that because membership is, anonymous, free and easy to obtain, members who have been

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<sup>8</sup> Moderators and administrators

sanctioned (e.g. banned from chat rooms or discussion boards) can easily create a new membership account (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1999:243) and carry on with their interactions and therefore escape the penalty placed upon them. However, it should be noted that within this group moving beyond a “newbie” status appears to be quite important and as such this works as a deterrent to people having their accounts deleted.

Both websites have mechanisms in place that count members’ total number of posts and the ability to see all posts made by each member. Someone who has very few posts, therefore, a “newbie,” would not be given much accord or respect during discussions. As a “newbie” it is best to tread lightly during interactions until one has established themselves within the group. So if someone were to create a new membership account their total posts would be reduced to zero, making them appear to be a “newbie” and in essence, their whole “community identity” as it were, would be removed.

In addition, at *Dimensions*, there is a “reputation counter” where group members can “give rep” to other members when that person says something helpful, nice, or worthy of praise. Members are unable “to rep” the same person repeatedly and when doing so they are told “you must spread some reputation around before giving it again to this member.” Each member’s reputation is displayed beside every post they make. Although a very subjective measure of reputation, it does seem to count for something within this group. This is another feature that if one were to create a new user account would lead the group into thinking he or she was a “newbie.” This set-up allows group members to become committed to protecting their identity, their user account, so that they may continue to

interact with the group. These sanctions, while not severe, seem to be enough to “keep everybody in line.” The reputation counters support stability of membership and identity.

Overall, members of this virtual group seem content with the level of social control they must submit to in return for the continuation of their group communications. Having rules enforced by moderators allows group members to feel less vulnerable to outside harassment. Brint (2001:16) suggests that “communities are often characterized as distinctive in their patterns of dispute settlement.” The informal settlement of disputes sets communities apart from other types of groups. Disputes within this virtual group are handled informally in terms of moderators having the authority to edit and delete posts, reprimand members, delete or close entire threads of conversations, and even ban members from the discussions for periods of time. This informal settlement of disputes and mechanisms for social control allow the group to continue and are suggestive that this may be a virtual community.

### ***Personal Concern***

A certain level of personal concern is needed for a virtual group to be determined a virtual community. Group communication must not be entirely instrumental (Dawson, 2004:85). Interactions also need to include an interest in the lives and personalities of other people. While not every group member will have an interest in every other member’s lives, “some participants must display this broader level of involvement with some consistency” (Dawson, 2004:85). Brint (2001) calls this fraternalism. The most salient of his “fraternal virtues” is “friendly feelings towards those members of the community with whom each individual is in most frequent interaction” (Brint, 2001:14-

5). As has been suggested above, members of this virtual group have friendly feelings towards other group members. Some note that the reason they most enjoy interacting in this environment is because of the friendships they have made with other members. Sometimes, these friends remain entirely online. Other times, group members meet each other in real life (RL). Friendships that are formed through these websites seem to be important to members and ties seem to be more than instrumental. The relationships described by respondents seem to mirror everyday RL relationships where people discuss many facets of their lives.

I have lots of friendships that matter to me but are online only. Some fun friendships and bonds with women. Some flirty friendships with men, casual. Not always in reference to feeding/gaining but it's how we met, so it comes up, but we talk about other things. I know about people's ill mothers, or difficult children, or dodgy boyfriends, sucky jobs, etc. . . . Most importantly I have a handful of what I would call erotic friendships from people I've met at *FantasyFeeder*. Men with whom I chat about all and sundry in our lives. And we know each other as friends do. We have no expectation of meeting in RL, or of developing a romantic relationship in RL, but would take the chance to meet [in RL] if we could. We talk about my day at work, my kid, their everyday lives, things they're thinking about, things about our primary relationships, things about other relationships, everything and anything. (Patricia)

I am involved with several online feedism communities and have contact with a number of online friends who are feeders and/or feedees . . . I don't have many offline friends at the moment to be honest . . . I have a grand total of one actual offline friend who is within offline contact distance. I have many online friends though. (Joel)

I like to talk to likeminded people about things not at all related to feedism [such as] movies, music, and life in general. It isn't too much different than any kind of friendship. I feel I know my feedism friends very well --my closest feedism friends are some of my closest friends in general. (Mandy)

Some members create strong bonds with other group members and conversations move beyond the instrumental into personal lives.

The question of whether online relationships can create ties that are strong enough is addressed by Rheingold (2006). Some “argue that because much of online interaction is focused around narrow interests, relationships will also necessarily be narrow (Kayahara, 2006:144-5). However, as Rheingold (2006:49) says relationships “are too complex to be judged as either ‘deep’ or ‘shallow’ with nothing in between.” It would seem that some very tight or strong bonds can develop between group members. For example, Henry who has been an active member at *Dimensions* since its inception describes some of his long-term friendships.

There are a few [members] whom I may have 'met' through *Dimensions*, but ended up communicating mostly through email or IM. The people in this group are really diverse. One is a Mom around my age, who happens to be also a feeder/feeder by inclination, and we've compared and contrasted our feelings, responses, and thoughts on both weight and family issues for years. I first met her in chat over ten years ago. We don't talk all that often, but when we do it is mostly about family and the personal side of work. We often tease each other about weight related things since we have similar feelings there. She is one of two *Dimmers* that I've ever met face to face (for lunch, when I was off in California on business, many years ago). We just always seem to enjoy talking with each other. She is the most clear cut case of a 'friend' as opposed to 'correspondent' or 'acquaintance.' Another is an older, retired, FA, who I wrote back and forth with for several years, comparing somewhat similar points of view. There have been others over the years. Each one was kind of different, some I'd call friends, others not so much. (Henry)

Another interesting feature of this online group is the ability to meet a romantic partner. Casual virtual conversations with other group members may lead not only to friendships based on personal concern or a level of fraternalism, they may also lead, like friendships in the real-offline-world, into romantic relationships.

I met my boyfriend in DIM chat and people know him in there. And they knew I got pregnant. My daughter is a DIM'S baby, as people say, she was "made in DIMS" because we met in DIMS. (Sandra)

I met him [my husband] in *Dimensions* chat. We started chatting and I knew he was an fat admirer and he knew I was fat. But neither of us were looking for or expecting things to turn out the way they did. I had it in my profile that I was a 'feedee,' so when we were chatting he was asking me about it. He said he was a 'feeder.' [Although] that still did not mean we were going to have a relationship it just turned out that way. When we realized that it had changed from just chat buddies to a very strong attraction on all levels and that we were going to be an item, we knew it would be a feeding relationship. He was in the U.S. I was in the U.K. so it was very hard. I flew over three times a year, we chatted online and cammed<sup>9</sup> and phoned every day (our phone bills were huge!) [Eventually,] I left my job, sold my home and moved over here [to the U.S.]. Very big changes but worth it. (Odette)

According to Dawson (2004:85) not everyone in the group has to have an interest in everyone else in the group. Even people who are less "enjoyable" to deal with are still considered valuable because they are members of the group. This shows that there a "knowledge and appreciation of the individual personalities of members of the community" (Brint, 2001:15). As Henry describes:

On *Dimensions* there are people who have also been around the community for a long time, who I may or may not particularly enjoy dealing with, but whom I recognize as others who are trying to build a strong community, and I feel a vague obligation to keep an eye on them and help them.... sort of "we've all come this far together, nobody gets left behind now." Call it camaraderie maybe. (Henry)

Overall, it would appear that those who participate in the online websites dedicated to the phenomenon of feederism move beyond instrumental interactions with other group members and sustain relationships where instances of fraternalism and personal concern can be found. The virtual relationships described by respondents provides evidence that the relationships "people develop and maintain in cyberspace are much like most of their

‘real-life’ community ties: intermittent, specialised, and varying strength” (Wellman and Gulia, 1999:353). In this way as well then, because there can be a high level of personal concern between group members, it is quite possible that feederism has an online community.

### ***Occurrence in a Public Space***

For a virtual group to be considered a community, according to Dawson, “much of the interaction in question takes place in a context where it being viewed by others, especially the other potential participants in the group” (Dawson, 2004: 85). The interactions that occur on the discussion boards at both *Dimensions* and *Fantasy Feeder* occur in public spaces. Not only can all the members read the posts but so too can anyone who visits the site. Even without signing up for a free membership account, anyone who lurks on these sites can read the discussions. Several respondents noted that they lurked on the discussion boards of these sites for weeks, months, or longer before setting up a membership account and joining the discussion. While members are able to communicate privately as well through private chat sessions or private messages, much of the discussion, especially on the popular discussion boards at *Dimensions*, occur in very public spaces.

Group interactions within this virtual group can be considered “a shared experience among a reasonably large number of people” (Dawson, 2004:85). The fact that these discussions are occurring in rather public spaces, where anybody can read the discussions, be enticed to create a membership and join the discussion (free of charge),

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<sup>9</sup> A type of communication over the internet which involves video cameras displaying each other’s live

makes it necessary for these areas to be monitored by moderators for content that may be deemed inappropriate. Its openness also invites and makes it easy for potential new group members to consider joining. This may be a virtual community because large numbers of people interact in spaces that are viewable by other group members and other potential members.

## **Conclusion**

In regards to the criteria suggested by Dawson (2004:85), he writes that, “this list of considerations is probably not definitive and it leaves much still to the subjective judgement of the analyst.” As such, I am not suggesting that my analysis is a value-free neutral assessment of this virtual group. I have been interacting with members of this group for over two years and from the beginning, I admit, I have considered them to be a community. However, the intellectual exercise of going back and really looking at the term “community” sociologically and assessing this group using the criteria provided by various scholars in this area has been worthwhile. It has allowed me to more firmly state that those who interact with feederism websites have formed a virtual community when considering the following elements: (1) interactivity; (2) stability of membership; (3) stability of identity; (4) netizenship (5) social control; (6) personal concern; and (7) occurrence in a public space (Dawson, 2004:83).

This paper adapts an original schema and further develops the criteria that could be considered when looking for instances of community online. This paper adds to the plentiful literature available on the topic of “online communities” but specifically

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streaming video to the other person. “Camming” can include voice and sound or can be only visual.

addresses how one might apply that literature to a group of interest. This paper has operationalized the concept of “virtual community”, a term that is often used implicitly. By first defining the term and assessing the criteria by which we measure its application we not only assess what is or what is not an instance of the inquiry we also create a dialogue about how a complex concept such as this may be operationalized and empirically measured. This intellectual endeavour is the heart of qualitative research.

The largest contribution made by this paper to the original criteria for assessing virtual communities is the separation of netizenship from social control. My findings suggest that these two elements are strong enough to stand on their own. In addition, I have further elaborated on netizenship. My findings suggest that individuals need to identify with the group and develop a sense of belonging to the group before netizenship can be achieved. That is to say that one needs to feel that they are part of the group before they can care about the “good of the group.” Therefore, I would amend netizenship to not only include caring about the “good of the group” but to be prefaced by a sense of group identity and a sense of belonging.

As more people rely on *online* social interactions these interactions must become a focal point of research. People are forming online groups in many new ways. For example, Facebook and Twitter have become “social networking” giants and little research has been done to assess the characteristics, impact, and limits of these potential virtual communities. More research about the presence of virtual communities is needed. The criteria that we use to assess the existence of a virtual community needs to be continually modified as technology and online trends change. A gap in this research that needs

attention is the question about how online communities influence one's identity conception and identity formation. The case study examined in this paper suggests that identity is tumultuous territory when it comes to online interactions. Therefore, further research is needed to understand what role online communities play towards one's identity formation.

Overall, this paper has remained allegiant to Dawson's (2004) criteria for a virtual community with slight revisions or additions to strengthen the list of criteria. By adapting the suggested criteria and systematically applying it to a case study I feel confident in concluding that those who participate in feederism websites are members of an online community.

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