

**Meeting Up:
Friendship and Voluntary Organizations
in the Internet Age**

by

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Where do people go to meet friends in the digital age? How do people understand with whom they want to be friends? Drawing from qualitative interviews, participant observation, and content analysis, I examine the website Meetup.com, which allows people to search for common interests on the Internet and meet up with groups of people face-to-face. My study offers new insights into why people turn to the Internet to meet new people; how voluntary organizations determine who they want as their members; and how gender and sexuality shape people's friendships and participation in these groups. This thesis has larger implications for the study of friendship, voluntary organizations, social capital, and Internet studies.

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Chapter 1: Let's Get Together

An Introduction

Where do people meet new friends? They may meet them at school, at work, or some other setting like a church. All of these spaces are traditional sites for making friends, even though their more apparent purpose is something else, such as getting an education or attending religious services. Sociologists have long been interested in where people make social connections, like friendships. Classical social theorist Émile Durkheim, for instance, looked at how institutions foster social solidarity, or a sense of unity and cohesion among people (2008 [1912]).

Sociologists' interest in community and friendship-making continues today, a post-modern era marked by new technologies such as the Internet. As e-mail, social networking sites, instant messaging, and online forums become more prevalent in people's lives, social scientists seek to understand how these forms of computer-mediated communication impact people's relationships and society at large. Several scholars express concern that the Internet and other technologies may be negatively impacting American's ties to one another (Nie 2001; Putnam 2000, 2003; Turkle 2011). These concerns are not necessarily misplaced, given the benefits of social interaction on people's physical and mental health (Bagwell et al. 1998; House et al. 1988; Kadushin 1983). Other scholars argue that the Internet allows people to better personalize their social networks, or systems of interconnected people (Wellman 2001). But how does the Internet shape

people's friendships and their participation in community life? How do people approach friendship-making and belonging in the Internet age?

This study addresses these questions. I am interested in how the Internet is fueling new ways of making friendships outside of traditional social institutions, like school, work, or church and other voluntary associations. Drawing from in-depth interviews, participant observation, and content analysis I detail the ways Americans think about how they make friends. My focus is a website called Meetup.com, which allows people to join user-created groups online and then "meet up" offline at in-person events. The website and its members offer insight into the ways people use the Internet to find new friends or voluntary organizations.

While using Meetup is a relatively new phenomenon, making friends or joining voluntary organizations is not. Moreover, social scientists have examined the Internet's impacts on social life since its beginnings. In the following sections, I review some of the previous research done in these areas, discussing interdisciplinary work from communication studies, social psychology, and sociology. I also highlight some of the applicable gender and sexuality scholarship. Along the way, I raise questions relevant to my study on Meetup. The studies I cite here will frame my discussions in the chapters that follow, and I will ultimately tie my findings to the literature in my Conclusion.

Friendship

What is a “friend”? While it may be easy to identify one’s own friends, a good definition of friendship has proven elusive for social scientists. One reason for this is that American society does not have an institution specially designated for friendships. Lillian Rubin writes that:

Without institutional form, without a clearly defined set of norms for behavior or an agreed-upon set of reciprocal rights and obligations, without even a language that makes distinctions between the different kinds of relationships to which we apply the word, there can be no widely shared agreement about what is a friend. (1985, p. 8)

Internet scholar danah boyd echoes this sentiment, and writes that, “it is unlikely that there will ever be consensus on a formula for what demarcates a friend” (2006, n.p.).

Sociologists seem to agree that in the most general sense friendship involves intimacy and the divulgence of the self to a specified other (Barry et al 2009; Fischer 1982b; Silver 1990; Wellman and Wortley 1990). Sociologists also comment on what they see as the voluntary nature of friendships (Bell 1981; Feld and Carter 1998). In his inductive quantitative study of friendship, Claude Fischer writes that being a friend involves “voluntary relations, the content and future of the bond being always at the discretion of each party” (1982a, p. 114). Understanding friendships as voluntary is problematic for two reasons, however. First, romantic partners and marriages are also voluntary in American society.

Even maintaining kinship ties today involves a degree of noncompulsory effort, so focusing on the voluntary nature of friendship does not distinguish it from other kinds of relationships. Second, describing friendships as voluntary undermines the significance friendships play in our lives. Friendship bonds have the potential to become strong enough as to feel obligatory. Sometimes people describe their close friendships as being just as close or even closer than family (Muraco 2012; Rubin 1985).

While they may not offer a satisfactory definition of friendship, social scientists still champion the benefits of these relationships in people's lives (Bagwell et al 1998; House et al 1988; Kadushin 1983). Researchers find that grade school children who maintain a best friendship over the course of their young life have higher levels of self-worth in adulthood (Bagwell et al 1998). Sociologists argue that friendships and other forms of social support contribute to better physical health (House et al 1988) and mental health (Kadushin 1983). Friendships not only help our well-being, they also contribute to what social scientists call our social capital. Social capital refers to the real or potential resources that are accessible to people through the other people they know and interact with (Bourdieu 1985; Lin 2001; Portes 1998). Knowing a friend who can help fix a car or who can help you find a job are two examples of social capital.

Social scientists also examine the ways that gender shapes people's friendships. While traditionally friendships between women were viewed as inferior to friendships between men, this attitude seems to have been reversed in

recent years (Bell 1981; Kaufman 1993; Miller 1983; Wright 1982). Feminists champion women's friendships with other women, arguing that they may serve as an alternative to compulsory heterosexuality, the patriarchal idea that men and women are inherently heterosexual and must be paired up (Rich 1980). Men's studies scholars tend to lament what they perceive as men's inability to develop meaningful emotional ties with other men (Brod and Kaufman 1994; Miller 1983; Nardi 1992; Reid and Fine 1992). Although the homophobia surrounding men's homosocial friendships is a relatively new phenomenon, it inhibits men's emotional intimacy with one another (Nardi 1992b; Rubin 1985). Robert Bell (1981) suggests that the competitive workplace plays a role in men's wariness of expressing themselves to other men.

Other studies examine how friendships and marriages alike have been shaped by companionate marriage, or the idea that one's spouse is also their best friend (Oliker 1989). Some authors point to the relative devaluation of friendship compared to the institution of marriage. In her book *Just Friends*, Lilian Rubin (1985) explores the differences between men and women in how they make and maintain friendships. Drawing from the psychoanalytical account of Nancy Chodorow (1978), Rubin (1985) argues that these differences stem from familial experiences in early childhood. She believes that men tend to have friends who pass through their lives, while women also have more long-term emotional friendships.

Americans are more willing today to have a cross-sex friend (Werking 1997; Wright 1982); however, there remain few social scripts for this relatively new form of friendship (O'Meara 1989). Studies examine some of the challenges faced by cross-sex friends in a heterosexist society (Muraco 2012; O'Meara 1989; Rubin 1985; Werking 1997; Wright 1982). Anna Muraco (2012), for instance, conducted in-depth interviews with cross-sex, cross-sexuality friendship pairs. Her respondents included pairs of heterosexual women and gay men, and lesbian women and heterosexual men, which she calls "intersectional friendships" (2012). Muraco suggests that ascribing to a sexual identity does not inherently prohibit friends from engaging in sexual behaviors. She found that the line between friendship and romantic relationships was blurred for her respondents. She argues that

intersectional friendships, most profoundly, challenge two widespread assumptions about friendships between men and women. First, these relationships challenge the idea that men and women are fundamentally different from one another; and second, they challenge the widespread understanding that men and women who are not related by biology or law can forge significant bonds only within romantic relationships. (2012, p. 2)

However, other studies of cross-sex friendship are problematic in several key ways. First, many of these studies uphold heteronormativity. Most include little, if any, discussion of LGBT or queer understandings of friendship and sexuality, aside from briefly citing Nardi's (1992(a); 1994 with Sherrod) work on

gay men's friendships. Afifi and Faulkner (2000), for instance, did not ask their participants to indicate the sex of the friend with whom they had sexual intercourse. Instead, they assume that because their respondents marked that they were heterosexual, that all of their sexual relationships with friends were cross-sex. Conversely, some studies assume that same-sex friendships uphold a binary between platonic and sexual relationships (Rawlins 1982). Additionally, some studies draw their conclusions from college student populations (e.g. Afifi and Faulkner 2000; Reeder 2000; Schneider and Kenny 2000), so it is questionable how generalizable their conclusions are to other populations. Finally, many cross-sex friendship studies rely on quantitative, experiment methodology, with the notable exception of Reeder (2000), who used in-depth interviews for part of her analysis. Rather than allowing participants to explain in their own words how they conceptualize their cross-sex friendships, these studies instead impose their own pre-conceived categories of friendship and sexual relationships.

Voluntary Organizations

Voluntary groups are an integral part of the American experience. Since the 19th century, social scientists have been drawn to learning more about these groups and why people join them (Tocqueville 1961; Weber 2011). During his tour of the United States in 1905, Max Weber found Americans' participation in voluntary groups a requisite part of social life (2011). Examining different

religious affiliations, he noted that, “it has been a characteristic precisely of the specifically American democracy that it did not constitute a formless sandpile of individuals, but rather a buzzing complex of voluntary associations.” (2011, p. 216). Additionally, when Alexis de Tocqueville toured the U.S. in 1831, he was struck by the prominence and plethora of different clubs and organizations (1961).

Voluntary organizations provide an avenue for their members to acquire social capital. An individual’s cultural capital (i.e. their education and their conception of cultural norms and goods) also shapes their social networks and social capital (Bourdieu 1985; Lizardo 2006). Structural inequalities impede some individuals from fully benefitting from group membership (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). This raises concerns, as participation in social life is understood to have a variety of health benefits (House et al 1988; Kadushin 1983), increases one’s social support (Wellman and Wortley 1990), and promotes civic engagement (Putnam 2000).

Studying voluntary organizations is important to social network theorists. For instance, Feld (1981, 1982) proposes that ties in a social network tend to cluster around non-network entities, called foci. Feld defines a focus as “any social, psychological, or physical entity around which joint activities of individuals are organized” (1981, p. 1025). A focus may be sharing a position in a company, studying at the same coffee shop, or belonging to the same sorority. Whatever the focus may be, one cannot reach a full understanding of why people

in a network cluster together without taking into account shared foci, such as voluntary organizations (Feld 1981, 1982). Furthermore, life course events may shift the foci a given person associates with (Feld and Carter 1998).

Furthermore, voluntary organization members tend to share similar attributes (McPherson 1983; Popielarz and McPherson 1995; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). The tendency for individuals with similar characteristics to interact with one another over others is known as homophily, and is a well-documented phenomenon in sociology (Huckfeldt 1983; Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson et al 2001; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987; Moody 2001; Verbrugge 1977). Most studies focus on status homophily, which is based on demographic characteristics such as gender, race, and age (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954). Homophily may be “induced” by some element of the social structure (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). Alternatively, people may actively choose others that are like them, which is known as “choice homophily” (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987). Scholars have examined homophily in traditional settings, such as workplaces (Feld 1982), neighborhoods (Huckfeldt 1983), schools (Moody 2001), and voluntary organizations (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987), as well as Internet sites such as MySpace (Thelwall 2009), Facebook (Viswanath et al 2009), and Twitter (De Choudhury 2011). Furthermore, the homophily in voluntary organizations and the homophily in their members’ social networks reinforce one another. People who are brought together by a focus tend to be more homogenous (Feld 1982).

Members who are “atypical” of a group in some sociodemographic sense are more likely to leave than those members who share characteristics with group members (Popielarz and McPherson 1995).

A number of studies examine how gender and gender homophily shape participation in voluntary associations (Caizza 2005; Handler 1995; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1982, 1986; Popielarz 1999). J. Miller McPherson and Lynn Smith-Lovin (1982; 1986) have conducted substantial research on gender and voluntary organizations. In one study, they show that although the men and women they surveyed participated in the same number of voluntary groups on average, the size of men’s voluntary organizations were larger than women’s groups (1982). Therefore, men could better enlarge their social networks than women from their group memberships (1982; but see Popielarz 1999). Furthermore, drawing from survey data, McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1986) found that voluntary affiliations were heavily segregated by sex. This was due, in part, to the nature of the voluntary organizations to which their respondents belonged, as many of the groups were either “traditional female domain[s] (housewife social clubs)” or “male-dominated groups (often professional/business related associations)” (1986, p. 72). McPherson and Smith-Lovin determined that cross-sex contact was low in voluntary organizations as a result of this sex segregation. Pamela Popielarz (1999) builds on this research, and demonstrates that women belong to women-only groups at higher rates than men belong to men-only groups. In other words, men’s groups are more gender-

integrated. Research also suggests that a lack of perceived safety prevents some women from participating in community life at the same rates as men, “since many of these activities are scheduled after work, in the evenings, when it is dark out” (Caizza 2005, p. 1608).

While these studies showcase the ways that gender shapes voluntary group membership, scholars have not examined the processes behind this gender segregation in depth. Furthermore, since McPherson and Smith-Lovin published their studies, cross-sex friendships have become markedly more widespread and studied in the social sciences (O’Meara 1989; Werking 1997). Scholars have not investigated what happens when voluntary organizations include both men and women in relatively equal numbers, or how people navigate their experiences in such organizations.

Few studies analyze how sexuality and voluntary organizations impact one another (Handler 1995; Kalmijn and Flap 2001; Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). Handler (1995) examined how sorority sisters saw their organization as a “haven from the chaos of the unregulated romantic marketplace” (p.242). The sorority also upheld compulsory heterosexuality and complicated relationships between friends who were both interested in the same guy. Although Handler offers interesting insights about gendered processes within a voluntary organization, she does not generalize these insights beyond college Greek life.

Some survey research has looked at how voluntary organizations more broadly connect partners. Kalmijn and Flap (2001) examined how institutional

settings, including voluntary associations, influence the kinds of homophilies spouses share. Drawing from McPherson and Smith-Lovin (1986), they argue that because voluntary organizations are segregated by sex, they do not operate as marriage markets to the same extent as other institutions like schools.

Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) include churches in their larger investigation of how the Internet is displacing traditional means of meeting partners. However, voluntary organizations are not the central focus of either article, and serve as just one of several other institutions these scholars examine in their analyses. To my knowledge, social scientists have not investigated sexuality within voluntary organizations, which strikes me as a pretty large oversight.

Groups come to center around certain member characteristics by classifying themselves within a “niche” in social space, a bounded multidimensional area where given sociodemographic characteristics like age, race, gender, education, etc. determine social interaction (McPherson 1983; Popielarz and McPherson 1995). In the social space of a religious organization, a youth group might have members from the ages of 15-20, while an adult study group might have members from the ages of 40-65. The two, then, hold different niches. Niches are multidimensional and may operate on several demographic parameters (McPherson 1983; Popielarz and McPherson 1995). Because members recruit new members from their social networks (which, again, usually consist of homogenous ties), the similarities between group members reinforce themselves (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). Group niches may also overlap, however, and

organizations compete with one another for members and their limited free time, whether knowingly or not (McPherson 1983; Popielarz and McPherson 1995). As a result, group niches develop in relation to one another in an effort to reduce competition (McPherson 1983; Popielarz and McPherson 1995).

McPherson's model is not free of shortcomings. First, little is known about how organizations approach competition or position their group niches. It is proposed that organizations develop niches through "blind evolution, rather than human agency" (Popielarz and McPherson 1995, p. 718). However, this view minimizes the fact that organizations consist of individuals who make decisions about how the organization is run. Second, research has not investigated the extent to which organizations view themselves as being in competition with one another. This may have implications for how groups vie for niches in the social space. Finally, a group could conceivably establish homophily among its members even when new members are not recruited from pre-existing offline homogenous ties by new members searching for the group on the Internet.

The Internet and Community

Social scientists are anxious to better understand how computer-mediated communication (CMC) impacts our ties with one another, in light of recent warnings that close ties are dwindling in U.S. society (McPherson et al 2006). In *Bowling Alone*, Robert Putnam (2000) argues that Americans' civic participation has declined since the 1950s as a result of their increased television watching. He

believes face-to-face interactions are better at supporting community than online interactions, and expresses concern that Americans no longer frequently interact with others in public and are becoming more socially isolated. Similarly, Norman Nie (2001) suggests that Internet use results in decreased social capital and loneliness; although his results have since been widely rebuked (see Bargh and McKenna 2004; Wang and Wellman 2010). Americans only have so many hours in the day, Nie argues, and when they spend more time on the computer, they lose time they could be spending with others in person. Finally, Sherry Turkle (2011) asserts that using social media like Facebook and texting diminishes the quality of time that people spend with one another face-to-face.

Other scholars argue that new media technologies may help people make and maintain friendships and other relationships (Bargh and McKenna 2004). Social network analyst Barry Wellman and his colleagues (2000, 2003, 2010) study how technology enhances community within suburban and urban neighborhoods. Wellman argues that the Internet and other technologies like cellphones and wireless communications allow people to establish ties on a person-to-person basis, rather than relying on traditional social spaces to meet and see people. Wellman calls this new type of community, “networked individualism,” because it allows people to personalize their social networks to a greater extent than through traditional institutions.

Studies that explore the benefits of online communication tend to focus on ties that were first established in person, and then supplemented online. For

instance, a majority of users' Facebook friends are offline to online ties (Ellison et al 2007). That is, the ties on Facebook are simply representations of ties that were previously established in a traditional offline setting (e.g. a university).

Although social scientists have not looked extensively at online to offline social ties (see Wang and Wellman 2010), the online dating literature is one exception. This body of literature has shed light on computer-mediated homophily with no prior social ties, since it is only upon viewing one another's profiles that two individuals might decide to meet in person. Studies explore how individuals using online dating are more likely to send messages to similarly socially desirable partners (Kreager et al forthcoming), partners with similar education levels (Skopek et al 2011), and partners with similar social characteristics (Hitsch et al 2010). Online daters are also more likely to seek out partners with "attributes related to the life course, like marital history and whether one wants children" (Fiore and Donath 2005, 1). However, because such studies draw from survey data, they are unable to determine if face-to-face interactions actually occurred after an initial computer-mediated contact. Furthermore, these results apply to dyads, which limits how relevant they are in group settings. As of this writing, I have been unable to find research on these processes as they pertain to voluntary organizations.

The Organization of the Thesis

In the pages that follow, I examine the ways that the Internet is changing how people join groups and make friends. First, I outline my methodology and how I went about studying Meetup.com. I discuss the demographic characteristics of the people who generously allowed me to study them. I also reflect on how my own perceptions and embodiment impacted what I learned in the field. Finally, I show how Meetup is an appropriate site for studying friendship and voluntary organizations in the Internet age.

Why are people turning to Meetup to make friends? This is the subject of Chapter 3, where I explore what is going on in Meetup user's lives that prompts them to use the Internet instead of traditional friendship-making settings. I show how people feel a degree of ambivalence about using Meetup. They perceive relying on the Internet for making friends as "lame" or dangerous, while at the same time getting the social capital benefits Meetup provides.

In Chapter 4, I examine how Meetup users define their own voluntary group niches in social space. Because of the ability to search outside of pre-established categories, the Internet affords people more agency over the kinds of voluntary organizations they join and the kinds of people they meet. This may also have negative, exclusionary effects as well, though, which I also discuss.

I unpack some of the gendered interactions that I encountered during my time studying Meetup in Chapter 5. Although the aim of my study was to understand more about friendship in the Internet age, I became increasingly

aware of the role sexual relationships played in Meetup. I argue that sexuality fundamentally influences people's participation in voluntary organizations, and show the variety of ways this can happen.

Finally, I connect my findings to the wider literature and discuss some of the larger ramifications of my study in the Conclusion. I conclude with my thoughts on future research on the Internet, friendship, and community life.

Chapter 2: Methodology

In this chapter, I detail my methodological decisions while studying Meetup. I discuss my theoretical justifications for why Meetup is an ideal place to study friendship and group membership in the Internet age; how I went about collecting and analyzing my qualitative data; and, finally, I reflect on how my status as a white female researcher in my early twenties may have influenced my interactions and access with my participants and interviewees.

Site of Study

Why is Meetup an appropriate place to study friendship and group membership in the Internet Age? Meetup's purpose is to enable face-to-face interaction from groups created through computer mediated communication ("About Meetup"). Meetup cofounder Scott Heiferman established the site shortly after the events of September 11th with the purpose of "using the internet to get off the internet -- and grow local communities" (2011). Robert Putnam, who has advocated for increased face-to-face interaction, currently sits on the site's advisory board (2000; see comment in Wellman et al. 2001).

After signing up for the site, users can search for groups using topics or interests and select groups to join. A head organizer manages each group's events and webpage, including the group's categories and searchable tags. To join a group, a user must upload a profile picture and fill out a form that the group's organizer specifies. While most groups are open to join immediately after

answering several brief introductory questions, some groups are private and cannot be accessed until a group organizer has approved the request. In both public and private groups, events have a title, a location, brief description, date, time, and a list of other attendees who have RSVPed. Once a member of a group, users can click and RSVP that they will be attending an event. Some events are repeating, and this is noted on the event itself (e.g. “This Meetup repeats every 2 weeks on Monday”). Finally, not all group members come to every event. As a result, the group of people who participate will be different from event to event, although there tends to be a set of “core members” who attend regularly.

While Meetup is unique in that its users rely on the Internet, making friends with similar others is not. Social scientists have established that people find new friends based on their similarities, or homophily, in a variety of settings (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1987; Moody 2001; Verbrugge 1977). As discussed above, friendships are a meaningful part of the life course. It is understood in social science that people have traditionally made friends at work, at church, or in neighborhoods. Members of a church, co-workers, neighbors, and the like share an understanding that if they are in the same setting, they probably share other characteristics, interests, and values. Friendship is not the manifest purpose of these sites, however. Instead, people usually enter these settings for other reasons, but may make friendships over time.

Meetup is an unusual space for friendship making, in that friendship is the directly intended outcome of participating in certain groups. As such, it serves as an appropriate site to investigate people's motivations for making new friends and what being a friend means today. On Meetup, users have more control over who they meet that have their same interests and values. That is, Meetup allows people greater control over the homophilies they share within groups to a greater extent than a church, workplace, or neighborhood might, which I discuss further in the chapters that follow.

Finally, Meetup is also a favorable site to study how people understand their interactions via the Internet. To participate in Meetup, users must have access to the Internet. Many of the Meetup users I met also use other social media tools to keep in touch with their friends. For this reason, it is externally valid on theoretical grounds, even though my data is not statistically generalizable (Luker 2008). That is, my case is logically generalizable from a theoretical standpoint, because Meetup represents the larger phenomena of friendship making and voluntary group membership.

Sample

One challenge for my data collection was the sheer number of Meetup groups. Austin alone features hundreds of different groups with a wide variety of different foci. I established several sample boundaries as a guide when determining whether a Meetup group would be included in my sample. Employing such

boundaries also better the internal validity of my study, or how well my study measures what it is supposed to measure (e.g. friendship and voluntary group processes). I employed these boundaries across all of my data collection.

First, the Meetup group needed to meet at least once a month, since I am interested in offline interactions that happen regularly enough to foster friendships and a group identity. I also excluded groups that had well-established means of connecting with like-minded individuals prior to the establishment of the Internet. For example, participants in Christian-based Meetup groups could meet similarly-minded individuals by attending a church, Democrats could become involved in their local party, and softball players could have joined a sports league. While the Internet and Meetup have supplemented other avenues for such participation, my interest is in groups that rely more heavily on the Internet for developing face-to-face connections. For inclusion in the sample, a group could not have a manifest value set required for participation (e.g. groups that require their members to be “liberals”, “upholders of the Constitution”, or “atheists”). Making friends based on shared political, religious, and other beliefs constitutes what scholars call value-based homophily (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954). It is harder to understand how values structure friendships when such values are already constrained at the outset explicitly. Participating in Meetup groups with no explicit ideologies or value sets gave me greater insight into the latent value sets in groups with no manifest value sets. Finally, I excluded groups from my sample that serve purposes other than

belonging to a voluntary group. Examples include groups dedicated to learning a new skill, groups for professional development, support groups, fitness coaches, and seminars, to name a few. In a similar vein to online dating sites, Meetup users may also connect with romantic interests through groups. Groups and events exclusively dedicated to practices such as speed dating, and meeting other singles were excluded from the sample.

Because most Meetup users belong to more than one group, many of the people I interviewed on the basis of their membership in one group that fit my sample sometimes described their experiences in other groups that did not fit my sample. For example, although I interviewed Gabriela who organized a group for Latinas in their 30s and 40s, she also discussed her bible study group and her raw food group. Neither of the latter two would have been included within my sample. Furthermore, as I discuss in Chapter 5, I quickly learned that it was not always all that clear whether a Meetup group encouraged dating among members or not. If anything, my experience suggests that sample boundaries are helpful for narrowing down a sample size with theoretical reasoning; however, they may not play out as ideally once in the field. Nevertheless, I believe my conclusions about friendships and voluntary organizations are still valid.

Data Collection

My qualitative data collection featured three separate approaches to give me a more comprehensive understanding of Meetup: in-depth interviews with Meetup

group members and organizers, participant observation with several Meetup groups, and content analysis of Meetup group webpages. Qualitative methods gave me insight into how Meetup users conceptualized their decisions and understandings about their groups and friendships. My choice of methodology allowed me to better understand the categories relevant to my participants' lived experiences using Meetup (Luker 2008). My research was conducted in and around Austin, Texas over the course of 2012.

First, I engaged in over sixty hours of participant observation with five Meetup groups, including a co-ed board game group; a co-ed group for eating at various outdoor restaurants around Austin; a female-only group for knitting, crocheting, and embroidery; a female-only board game group; and a co-ed social group, where I participated in activities such as touring a brewery, bowling, going to a museum, and rock climbing. I also chose to go to events outside of my comfort zone (e.g. rock climbing, playing obscure board games) so I would not be limiting my results to my personal range of interests and experience levels. By attending Meetup events myself, I could witness firsthand divergences and similarities between what Meetup users said or believed and what they did. Ethnographic data also allows for rich description of lived experiences (Emerson, Fretz, and Shaw 1995).

Because of my status as a white, heterosexual female in my early twenties, I was unable to gain access to groups that specified other status homophilies as an outsider (Merton 1972). To help ameliorate this, I conducted in-depth, semi-

structured interviews with twenty-two Meetup group organizers and participants from a variety of different groups. In-depth interviews helped me learn about places that I could not have gone myself (Weiss 1994). Furthermore, in-depth interviews allowed me to make sense of how people understood their experiences using Meetup. Even if events did not go exactly as my interviewees suggest they did, in-depth interviews offer insight into the socially constructed ways interviewees perceive the world, or what Kristen Luker (2008) calls the “mental maps” people carry with them. As anthropologist Ellen Lewin (2009) notes, the “concern is what they [interviewees] *say* and what that indicates about what they imagine and value, rather than what they *do* as a matter of daily practice,” (p. 37 [author’s italics]).

I include a table describing my interviewees in Appendix B. I interviewed 16 whites, 1 Native American, 2 African Americans, 2 Latinos, and 1 individual who identified as multiracial. Three of my interviewees were members of the LGBTQ community (1 lesbian woman, 1 gay man, and 1 transgendered person); my other 19 interviewees identified as heterosexual. My interviewees were a variety of different ages: my youngest interviewee was 20 years old, and my oldest was almost 70 years old. Four interviewees were in their 20s, 8 were in their 30s, 4 were in their 40s, 4 were in their 50s, and 2 were in their late sixties. The average age of my interviewees was roughly 40 years old, with a median age of about 37 years old. Although I did not ask my interviewees' income, most of them worked in jobs typical of the middle class, as supervisors, researchers, educators,

consultants, and accountants. Apart from my youngest participant who had only recently completed high school, most of my interviewees received some higher education. Six interviewees had some undergraduate education, 4 had Bachelor's degrees, 4 had some graduate education, 6 had one or more Master's degrees, and 1 had a doctorate. Of my interviewees, 18 organize or had organized at least one Meetup group, and the other 4 had participated in several Meetup groups. Interviewing organizers, many of whom are members in other groups, offered greater insight into how organizers and members perceive their experiences using Meetup.

Using my pre-determined sample boundaries as a guide, I reached out to most of my interviewees through Meetup's in-site messaging system. Interviews were subsequently scheduled via e-mail or over the phone. A colleague, Michelle Mott, conducted the interviews with Micah and Chelsea during my pilot fieldwork, and generously allowed me to use the transcripts for analysis. Both of these interviewees and Lawrence were recruited through personal networks. Two interviewees (Jaime and Chloe) were recruited through my participation in groups. Ultimately, only one interviewee (Kyle) was recruited through snowball sampling, through a member of a group I participated in who I did not interview.

My interviews lasted anywhere between 30 and 90 minutes, and on average lasted about 60 minutes. They took place in coffee shops, restaurants, and workplaces. Twenty-one interviews took place in person, and one interview was conducted over the phone. I audio recorded each interview and then deleted the

recording after transcribing the interview. I created an interview guide that I then adjusted as I reflected upon my transcription work. As such, some early interviewees were asked questions that were later dropped, and some later interviewees were asked questions that I had subsequently developed. While I usually followed the guide, if an interviewee brought up a concept related to a different question, I adjusted the order of my questions accordingly. That said, all of my interviewees addressed several broad topics: why they decided to go to Meetup events; their experiences at Meetup events; their relationships and interactions with their friends both in and outside of Meetup; and their understandings of computer-mediated and face-to-face interactions. The most recent version of my interview guide can be found in Appendix A.

Finally, I sampled 50 Meetup groups around Austin for a content analysis of their webpages. Analyzing Meetup group webpages revealed the ways that organizers appealed to and portrayed their groups to potential new members publicly. Used in conjunction with my other methods, my content analysis offered a comparison between how groups depicted themselves and how group interactions actually took place. It also allowed me to access some of the other groups that I did not participate in or whose members I did not interview. I have included a table of the groups whose webpages I analyzed in Appendix C. Of these 50 groups, 25 featured a female head organizer and 25 featured a male head organizer. Sixteen groups were private and 34 groups were public. Twelve groups were limited to female participants, 1 group was limited to male

participants, and 37 groups were open to both sexes. Seventeen groups targeted a specific age range (e.g. “35+” or “20s and 30s”), and 33 groups were open to all ages. Four groups were aimed at the LGBTQ population, and 7 groups were for people of color.

Within my sample there emerged two broad categories of Meetup groups: "social groups" and "activity groups." To be clear, all Meetup groups involve both socializing and some kind of activity, be it sitting at a restaurant or rock climbing. However, in a broad sense, social groups provide a wide variety of activities within each group, but tend to rely on making a status such as gender, sexual orientation, age, or race the explicit basis for gathering. Activity groups, on the other hand, center around specialized foci, such as viewing the long-running British television show *Dr. Who* together or playing board games, but do not specify status homophilies on their group webpages. In my sample, I categorized 19 groups as activity groups and 31 groups as social groups. Whether the member similarities are based on status or a shared interest, these similarities are made explicit on Meetup groups' webpages and serve as the basis for participation.

I examined several elements of each group's webpage that highlight group boundaries and identity. I sampled each of the groups' "About Us", "We're About" and the "Join Us" sections. All three sections are edited by a group's lead organizer, and publicly accessible regardless of a groups' privacy settings. The "About Us" sections typically serve as a lengthier explanation of the group's

membership expectations, purpose, and activities. Group pages also include a shorter “We’re About” section, which uses short tags to label itself for the Meetup search engine. As such, these tags showcase the kinds of terms an organizer expects a potential member to use when looking for his or her group. Finally, group organizers establish a set of questions they have each new member fill out. These questions are accessible by clicking on the “Join Us” button on a group’s page. The form may simply be an optional introduction, or a more in-depth series of questions. All three sections serve as a means for organizers to recruit the kinds of new members they want.

Access

Access and accuracy are key concerns for social scientists. Particular attention has been given to insider/outsider effects, or the notion that a researcher’s set of characteristics will in some way alter their results (Collins 1986; Merton 1972; Schilt and Williams 2008). Feminist theory has challenged the understanding that there is a central “truth.” Rather, the researcher ought to account for how his or her own positionality relative to respondents’ may have shaped the study’s results. In this section, I reflect on how my embodiment influenced what spaces I was able to access and my interactions within those spaces on Meetup.

My race both opened and restricted access to Meetup groups for interviews and participant observation. As I discuss in Chapter 3, joining and enjoying Meetup groups is predicated, to some degree, on class and, by extension, white

privilege. People of color who participated in predominantly white groups felt “out of place,” which I delve into further in Chapter 4. As a white woman, this privileged me to participate in groups where I felt my presence was not challenged or otherwise called into question. Conversely, my embodiment also blocked access to groups for people of color (e.g. Austin Black Professionals, Desi Girls Austin). I felt it would not be appropriate to insert myself into groups purposely formed as a space apart from the white Meetup experience. Instead, I chose to e-mail the organizers of these groups in the hope that they would agree to an interview with me. After numerous attempts, only one interviewee agreed to an interview. I suspect that my status as a white researcher may have contributed to this low response rate, given the distrust of white researchers in communities of color (Gibson and Abrams 2003).

My age had two particularly noticeable effects on how my participants interacted with me. First, middle-aged and older respondents seemed more conscious of their age relative to mine. For instance, when I first met with Tammie she commented, “Either you started grad school real young, or I’m gettin’ older.” When I asked Ivan, another interviewee, if there were any Meetup events he would like to attend but hadn’t, he said he had wanted to go to a few outdoor adventure groups, “but I haven’t because [laughs] I’d say that at my age [rubs his bald head] I’ve had enough adventures.” This also motivated several of my older interviewees to reminisce about the days when the Internet was a new technology.

Second, my age coupled with my gender-presentation led to two male participants asking me out, one via e-mail and one in person. After each of my interviews, I sent the interviewee an e-mail thanking them for taking the time to talk with me about Meetup. One male interviewee in his early 30s, sent me a response telling me that, “If it's not against the rules, you're welcome to hit me up. :)”. Having already sent a thank you e-mail, I chose not to reply. I did not receive any such e-mails from my female interviewees. I had a similar encounter with a participant at another co-ed Meetup group. I had only met Chuck less than an hour or so previously when we had the following exchange as I was leaving for the night:

Oh, I'm heading out too, Chuck says. He gets up to leave and follows me, putting on black riding gloves. He stops at his parked motorcycle and asks if I'd like to go to see Wayne's World at the Zilker Park Movie on the Green night [where you can watch a movie in an outdoor grassy amphitheater]. It's the last one! he tells me. Confused about his intentions, I ask him, Is it a Meetup? No, he admits. I ask him, What day is it? This Wednesday, he says. I tell him that I can't, I have another Meetup to go to. This is both true and a good excuse because I am pretty sure he is asking me out on a date. I tell him I'll see him at the next Meetup, and I walk to my car as he gets settled on his motorcycle.

I did not see Chuck again for the remainder of my fieldwork, nor did he reach out to me through Meetup's e-mail service. So, even given my status as a researcher,

these men felt comfortable approaching me after interacting for only an hour or so each. Had I been older and/or male or masculine presenting, I doubt that I would have had these encounters.

Finally, I believe my sex and gender impacted my access to women's only groups and insights with male interviewees. I was able to participate in a women's social group on the basis of my female embodiment and feminine gender presentation. This gave me insight into the workings of women-only social groups on Meetup, which I discuss in Chapter 5. Had I been male, I could not have gathered as rich of data from these groups; however, several of my interviewees who organized women only groups still had insights I could have used.

That said, as a woman I could not gain access to the sole men's group in the Austin area. Kristen Schilt and Christine Williams (2008) have previously contemplated how social science researchers can adjust their methodologies in the face of denied ethnographic access on the basis of gender. They suggest interviewing people who did have access to spaces where access was denied to the researcher. In-depth interviews also allow the researcher to access people's private understandings of events which is, "perhaps more central to understanding their sexual and gender identities than the actual content of these men-only meetings" (p. 221). Taking Schilt and Williams' advice, I was able to interview the organizer of the men only group and learn about his thoughts on the group.

Furthermore, I believe that the men I interviewed felt more comfortable opening up to me about intimate, emotional experiences, like depression and loneliness, because I was a woman. Research suggests that men are more likely to disclose their emotions with women than their male friends (Reid and Fine 1992). Early in our interview, Ivan admitted that he began using Meetup during a “period of depression.” On another two occasions, men made comments about feeling like they were opening up emotionally in our interview. One interviewee, Ethan, joked that he should pay me a hundred dollars for our “therapy session,” following our discussion of his struggle to date and meet friends. Donald laughed heartily after he went into depth describing his desire for close, “confidante” friends, and said, “This is getting deep, isn’t it?” Still, these interviewees could only be so comfortable talking with a researcher they had just met, and both resorted to joking or laughing to diffuse the situation. I have to wonder: would my male interviewees have told me the same information about their struggles with depression and loneliness had I been a man myself?

Data Analysis

Finally, I analyzed my data using inductive coding according to grounded theory procedures (Charmaz 2006). In my initial coding, I read through my data and noted series of patterns. Although guided by theoretical ideas, my categories were grounded in the data. These patterns ultimately became the codes I would

use for more focused coding using Atlas TI, a qualitative analysis software package.

Chapter 3: Meeting Up

Community and Social Capital in the Internet Age

I think that [Meetup] is turning the Internet back into a tool that can help facilitate community. We are no longer a society with Elks Clubs and Rotary clubs and the Lodges and the bowling groups and so on. Oh. I take it back, there are probably a few bowling Meetups out there [chuckles]. But you know that old social structure has all disappeared and gone away and we need to create new ones. And I see this as a good way that's creating new ones. —Donald, interviewee

How does the Internet facilitate friendship-making? Can Meetup help people's personal social capital, as Donald seems to suggest?

Social scientists often use the concept of social capital when talking about friendships and community, although the term has been used in nuanced ways. To some scholars, an individual's social capital is the assortment of material and non-material resources embedded in their social network (Bourdieu 1985; Lin 2001). These resources, in turn, help foster other social goods, such as trust (Paxton 1999). Providing emotional, financial, or other kinds of aid in a friend's time of need would be an example of drawing on social capital. Pierre Bourdieu (1984, 1985) points out that social capital may also be exchanged with other forms of capital, such as economic capital (namely, money) or cultural capital

(one's education and understanding of cultural goods and norms). Previous quantitative studies describe social capital on a larger scale, like neighborhoods or American society at large (Paxton 1999; Putnam 2000). Robert Putnam (2000) suggests that when citizens participate in community life, this bolsters collective social capital which in turn promotes a democratic civil society. James Coleman (1988), on the other hand, understands social capital as facilitating people's rational choices in social structure. Some scholars, such as Alejandro Portes (1998) have also pointed out the consequences of social capital. Being too socially embedded, Portes suggests, may place restrictions on individual freedoms or result in exclusion of others. Whatever their differences, broadly speaking, social network theorists are interested in the ways in which people are interconnected, the nature of the connections that tie them together, and how this, in turn, fosters social capital. More to the point, social scientists continue to debate over how the Internet affects people's social capital.

Some scholars are skeptical about the Internet's role in promoting social capital and interpersonal relationships offline. Robert Putnam, for instance, argues in *Bowling Alone* that time spent on the computer at home detracts from the amount of time people have to participate in public life and traditional voluntary associations like bowling leagues, and Rotary Clubs (2000). As a result, he argues, Americans have become more socially isolated and the nation's collective social capital has decreased. Putnam has also made clear his preference for face-to-face interactions (2003; see comment in Wellman et al 2001). He

argues that it is an “open question” whether the Internet can build “real” community or social capital (2003, see chapter 11).

Putnam’s argument has since drawn considerable criticism from social capital, community, and Internet scholars alike (e.g. Paxton 1999; Wang and Wellman 2010). Barry Wellman and his colleagues argue that the Internet supplements social capital, not deteriorates it, and that the “panic about the decline of social connectivity” is unfounded and cyclical (Wang and Wellman 2010, p. 1149; Wellman et al 2001; see also Bargh and McKenna 2004). Wellman proposes instead that community has become personalized, with networks working from person-to-person, rather than from place-to-place (2001). Technologies such as cell phones and the Internet allow for people to stay connected on an individualized basis, rather than rely on places like church and other voluntary organizations for sociability (2001).

Most Internet tools and social media like e-mail and social networking sites are used to keep in touch with friends people have already made in person, rather than approach complete strangers (Haythornthwaite 2002; Ellison et al 2007). Ellison et al (2007) found that the popular social networking site Facebook helped bolster college students’ social capital; however, they also show that nearly all ties on Facebook are representative of ties previously established in person. Much less is known about when friends meet online and then get together in person. Although Wang and Wellman (2010) establish that this type of friendship has become slightly more prominent among heavy Internet users,

this was only one small subset of their survey data. The question remains: how can the Internet help people make friends and build social capital in and of itself?

In this chapter, I explore how people understand their use of the Internet to meet new people. I found that people turn to Meetup to make friends following a major life course event that made them highly aware of how few friends they had. I show how Meetup contributes to people's social capital in a variety of ways; however, people face considerable doubts about relying on the Internet to make friends. Meetup users find ways of overcoming stigma about the Internet, though, because they see the Internet as the most efficient or only option available to them to make the friends they feel that they need.

“Get off the couch!”

Why do people start using Meetup to meet new people? What was going on in their lives when they started using the site? I asked each of my interviewees this question at the outset of our interview, and asked people I met at Meetup events these questions informally. The Meetup users I encountered started using the site after a significant event in their life brought into focus how few friends they felt they had. These life events include moving to a new city; graduating from high school, college, or completing other degrees; a divorce or break up with a partner; a death in the family; becoming an empty nester; and retirement.

When I asked Lisa about what was going on in her life when she joined Meetup, she said:

My mom was very sick and she'd been sick for... about three years with cancer. And I just spent so much time taking care of her and going to take her to the doctor and just working and I kinda just lost touch with all my friends. And then realized that the ones that were left... were like married and had kids and I was like, "I don't have anything in common with you" or they were all in another state or four or five hours away, so I was like "Wow. Everyone's life moved on and I just kinda stopped."

Following the death of her mother, Lisa realized that she had "lost touch with all of [her] friends," or that they had "moved on" with their lives. She felt that her life "stopped" during the time she was taking care of her mother. Lisa describes feeling halfhearted toward her remaining friends, who had since married, had kids, and had otherwise reached different points in their lives. As a result, she felt socially isolated and, no longer needing to take care of her ailing mother, had more time on her hands to spend with friends.

Several of my interviewees also told me that they had felt lonely or depressed before using Meetup. Ethan moved to Austin in the hopes of "pushing the restart button," following a break up. He told me that he came to Austin "in a funk, in a depression." Because the nature of his work is isolating, he felt that there was "no opportunity to build friendships" or "socialize." He wondered, "So how do you make friends?" Ethan decided to "give Meetup a whirl" in an attempt to "expand [his] social circle."

Jaime, too, experienced a need for friends after she and her husband moved to Austin. Jaime did have friends already; however, many of them are now scattered across the country. Here she describes her decision to use Meetup:

I was kind of, like, “I should try and make friends. I should try and make friends.” [How come?] Well... just like, even now, when I think of who my close friends are, they’re not in Austin. It’s more like my college friends. And so I just, y’know, wanted to re-establish that friend circle I had before. [...] When I first started to use Meetup, I was like, “y’know, I should maybe try meeting some friends so I can have people to hang out with here in Austin.”

Jaime expresses a need for “establishing” a local “friend circle” after moving to Austin. She remarks that her “close friends” are her “college friends,” none of whom live in Austin. Jaime discussed at length in our interview the importance of maintaining these close friendships. She used a variety of social media to keep in touch, and was thankful that the Internet allowed her to do so. However, she also suggests that living nearby is important for “hanging out,” and stresses that she should “try and make friends” locally.

Like Jaime, all of my interviewees praised the Internet in some capacity for allowing them to stay in contact with friends over long distances; however, they also felt the need for local, face-to-face friendships, which in turn led them to using Meetup. The Meetup users with whom I spoke felt a need to “get out of the house” and participate in community life. Gina, who I met at a rock climbing

event and who had just moved to Austin, told me that she didn't "want to just sit alone in [her] apartment alone at night." Patty, who I met while playing boardgames, said that if she didn't get out, she would "start looking at the four walls of [her] apartment, going insane."

Gina and Patty's sense that they needed to leave their apartments and interact with other people was also represented on group webpages. One women's social group proposes, "Lets get out of the house, and enjoy Austin together!" [sic]. This captures the sentiment of many of the phrases groups use in their About Us sections. One group advertises that their group "is for ANYONE AND EVERYONE who wants to get off the couch and enjoy life." Ironically, this group is limited to people in their 20s and 30s. Still, this message plays on the assumption that staying at home on the couch does not lead someone to "enjoy life." Rather, one must "get off the couch," and out of the house, and socialize. These webpages and my participants' comments suggest that people feel an internalized pressure to have friends and participate in community life.

Many of my interviewees felt that friendships were best established and maintained face-to-face. One reason for this is a matter of selection bias: using Meetup is probably predicated on a person seeing some intrinsic value in making face-to-face connections. Here, Tammie shows how users perceive Meetup's value in this regard:

Meetup is a place where you can literally make friends, 'cause you're seeing them. There is a component of actual physicality that's required in a

friendship [laughs]. So Meetup is the one supplyin' that and Meetup is on the Internet. So to me, the Internet is evolving back to a place where humanity is recaptured. And that's what Meetup does.

To Tammie, making friendships is dependent on "seeing them." She laughs after stating that "actual physicality" is "required" for establishing a friendship, as if this is a given. Donald, another interviewee, echoed this and commented that, "I don't think you build a real friendship with people until you get to spend time with them person-to-person." That said, Tammie challenges the online/offline binary. She sees Meetup, which is on the Internet, as having a part in "supplying" new face-to-face connections. To her, Meetup represents a shift in what the Internet provides, and that Meetup is bolstering community rather than destroying it.

My participants felt a strong need for in-person friendships; however, many felt they did not know where they could go to establish such friendships before using Meetup. This was brought to light in my interview with Mary, who, throughout our interview, described feeling socially isolated:

Try for say, a month, and don't contact anyone... or don't do any activities. Only what you can find in the newspaper. And, see what there is, and that's the only way you can make a friend, unless you go to a bar, which I'm not going to do. [...] And so, I've gone to church and it's okay, but again it's really family oriented, it's all about the kids, and so I'm going, "Where do you go? Where do you go?" And, if you see events, you have to have people

to go with you. And so, if you don't have somebody to call to go with you, you get more and more into not going anywhere [...] So where do you go or how do you meet friends? What, put a sign around you, "I'm looking for friends"? [laughs]

Mary raises an important question: if you want to meet new friends, "where do you go?" Looking in the newspaper for community activities doesn't seem to help, either. Mary showcases why Meetup is a useful tool for people like herself who would otherwise be socially isolated.

Mary also recognizes more traditional, offline settings like church and bars as sites where she can make friends. That said, she has the sense that she does not belong in either space. Like Mary, several of my interviewees felt that Meetup was their best avenue for meeting similar others. Suzanne, after a long pause, realized that Meetup was the only space she had successfully made friends since moving to Austin three years ago. She commented, "I think a lot of people do go to a church or do something else, but for me, y'know the Internet and shared activities, that kind of is my church, y'know?" To Suzanne, Meetup served the same function that she felt a church would. Her comments bring to mind Durkheim's (2008 [1912]) insights that religious communities function as sites for social solidarity while also providing religious or spiritual rewards.

Scholars have previously examined how spaces such as religious associations, school, work, neighborhoods, and traditional voluntary organizations foster friendships. Other people I spoke with echoed Mary and

Suzanne's sentiments, however, and did not see these settings as ideal avenues for making new friends. During each interview, I made sure to ask, "How have you met friends outside of using Meetup?" Many of my interviewees felt they had made most of their friends in the past in grade school and college, but that many of these connections had since faded away or been maintained across long distances using the Internet. Only three mentioned church and only one mentioned their neighborhood as places they had made or had considered making friends throughout the interviews. Four interviewees told me about voluntary organizations outside of Meetup they participated in, such as Mensa, Harley Davidson groups, and LGBTQ activist groups.

Furthermore, my respondents seemed indifferent about the workplace as a space where they could make friendships. While I regrettably did not press my participants or interviewees for more details about their workplaces, I noticed that many of them worked either in isolating jobs (e.g. a helicopter pilot, telecommuters, and self-employed consultants), were retired, or did not feel that making friends at work was appropriate. While attending a bowling event, I spoke with Akshay, who had recently moved to Austin. I asked him if he had made friends in other places, other than Meetup. He shrugged, frowned, and doubtfully told me, "Co-workers?" His response suggests that he did not consider his workplace an adequate site for making new friends.

Akshay was not the only person who felt this way. Here is an excerpt from one of my fieldnotes during a conversation with Ana, who had recently moved to Austin with her boyfriend Joe:

Ana reflects and says that Meetup's just "people coming to places where other people are willing to talk to people." She also makes a sarcastic side-comment, "What, where else would I make friends? At work?" and laughs, as if that wasn't an option she'd be taking advantage of.

Ana likes that Meetup allows her to mingle with other like-minded people, but she also considers the workplace an unsuitable place to make friends. Nancy offered additional insight into why she didn't see the workplace as a place for making friends:

[Have you had any success meeting friends outside of using Meetup here in Austin?] Um... Actually I have not. No. I don't really socialize with people at work. Um, just for the reason that I like to keep my private life separate from my work life. Um... so, I really haven't. That's... and maybe that's another reason why I wanted the Meetup group, was because I realized that, that I wasn't meeting people outside of work.

Nancy perceives her workplace as a place where she could make friends, but that it is not an option given that she likes to maintain boundaries between work and her private life. Moreover, she has not made friends in Austin outside of using Meetup.

Other interviewees and participants also saw Meetup as playing a significant and unique role in their social lives. When I asked if she would have met the friends she had made through her Meetup group through some other means, Gabriela said, “Definitely not. A hundred percent no I wouldn’t have. A hundred percent.” Some of my other participants felt the same way. Catherine, an interviewee, told me that “If it weren’t for the Internet, I would know-- I wouldn’t know any gay people [in Austin].” She compared this to using the phone book, which did not list any places for meeting other members of the LGBTQ community. Using the Internet, Catherine could search outside of the phone book’s predetermined categories for similar people (see Rosenfeld and Thomas 2012). One woman I met during fieldwork told me that she “wouldn’t have friends here if [she] didn’t do Meetup” and that it was “how [she] met everyone” she hangs out with in Austin. This woman perceived that her entire local social network was comprised of Internet-facilitated friendships.

To summarize, people feel pressure to “get off the couch,” make friends, and be social with others. Oftentimes, this social pressure becomes all the more apparent when people experience a life event that highlights a perceived lack of social ties or increases the amount of leisure time someone has. Life events like these may prompt people to try to expand their social networks; however, they do not know where to actually do this, since traditional places to meet others (like churches, neighborhoods, and offline voluntary organizations) do not seem like viable options. Furthermore, many Meetup users either work alone or are

uncomfortable socializing with coworkers outside of work, which reduces the feasibility of making new connections at their jobs. Consequently, Meetup users perceive the site as the only feasible means to their ends of meeting new people like them.

“Everyone you meet online’s gonna kill you”

Throughout my fieldwork and interviews, people shared their thoughts with me about Internet-facilitated relationships, both through Meetup and otherwise. This did not surprise me, since these were people whose very interactions with me were made possible by the existence of the Internet. It came as a surprise, then, when the Meetup users I encountered sometimes told me that they didn’t feel positively about the Internet. One user, Chuck, even suggested that the Internet was “destroying community.” How could this be, when Chuck had used Internet-based sites like Meetup to join groups participating in community life? In this section, I share some of my respondents’ more negative perceptions of the Internet. I also discuss some of the strategies they employed to reassure themselves about using an Internet site like Meetup to make friends.

I spoke on multiple occasions with people at Meetup events who perceived or had experienced some discomfort around the idea of making friends through the Internet. While attending an event at a food truck, I met Joe and Ana, who had recently moved to Austin together:

Joe adds that he feels that there's still stigma about meeting people online. He used other sites similar to Meetup when he lived on the East Coast. Later, when he would go and introduce his new friends to his parents, he didn't want to admit to them that he had used a website to meet them, and that they would just think that his new friend was just "some creepy guy" that he'd met on the internet. And it wasn't like I could say that a mutual friend had introduced us, he tells me, since I come from a small town "where everyone knows everyone."

Joe feels self-conscious about admitting that he and a new friend had met through the Internet to his parents. He believes his parents will just see his friend as "some creepy guy." Joe considers lying to his parents, but realizes that making up a story about the two meeting through a friend will fall apart in his small town "where everyone knows everyone." Joe's assumes that this lie could work in a place where everyone does not know everyone else. Still, the fact that Joe feels the need to lie about how he and his friend met indicates that Internet-facilitated friendships are stigmatized in some way.

Joe was not the only Meetup user I encountered who felt the need to cover up the basis for his friendships. Gabriela, for instance, did not even admit to her close friends that she was using Meetup until two years after she had started using the site. In our interview, she discussed what led her to do this:

You know, people have been dating online now for years, ten years plus, so it's very socially acceptable that people meet online and this and that, you

know, as— as partners. But my God if you go online to search for a friend! You know? Something's wrong with you then, 'cause, what, you can't keep a friend, or what? So it's— it's really weird how... we've become very accepting of online dating, but online friending is like... you know, "What do you need to go online for, for friends?"

Gabriela believes others, including her close friends, have judged her for using the Internet to find friends. To them, "online friending" is an indicator that "something's wrong with you" and that "you can't keep a friend." Gabriela expresses frustration that finding partners online has become "very socially acceptable," but that finding friends has not.

Lisa, too, compared "online friending," with online dating. In the interview excerpt below, she describes the strong apprehension she felt before attending her first Meetup event:

When I first signed up, I didn't go to anything for a month or two, I just kind of looked at it, and talked myself in to it. "You're not lame for doing this! This is how the world is with technology and the Internet and how you meet people now!" [You had to talk yourself into going to Meetup originally?] Yeah, because it's-- I mean, everyone you meet online's gonna kill you. [laughs] Well, at least, y'know that's what I thought. [...] To me, it's weird. Like, they're gonna stab you. [laughs] I'm like, "Oh, it's so lame." It's like when Internet dating first came about, "Ugh, they're doing what? They're so pathetic. They can't meet people in real life." And now it's, no,

everybody meets everybody online. Everybody does online dating. I know several people who are married, and they met through online dating, and it's just like, "Wow" y'know that's-- it's just a different mentality from what I had. So yeah, I had to talk myself into it.

Although she jokes that "everyone you meet online's gonna kill you," or "stab you," Lisa also took these ideas seriously before working up the courage to go to her first Meetup event. Aside from her fear of Internet strangers, she discusses feeling "lame" about meeting people online. Like Gabriela, she believes that today, "everybody does online dating," and that it has become more acceptable. Lisa, too, thinks that others consider people who use the Internet to make friends to be "pathetic," and that there is something wrong with them that, "they can't meet people in real life." To both Gabriela and Lisa, the specter of Internet stigma looms over their Meetup experience.

Several of my interviewees commented that the Internet was an "unreal" way of making friends. Kenneth, one of my interviewees and the organizer of a professional networking group, felt very strongly about this:

The Internet is shallow, the Internet is unreal. The Internet is an excuse to be-- or a license to be anybody you want to be, because you're just... a screen name. You're just a photograph which may or may not be really you, and you're just whatever the conversation y'know, will bear. [chuckles] So basically, yeah, it's a circus. It's a joke, for the most part, but the Internet... among friends the Internet has been terrific.

Kenneth expresses ambivalence about the Internet and friendship. On the one hand, he calls the Internet “unreal.” Later in our interview, Kenneth decries the Internet as “superficial.” He suggests that making friends on the Internet is a “circus” and a “joke” because there is no way of telling whether people are who they say they are. “You’re just a screen name,” on the Internet, says Kenneth, and the only details people know about you are “just whatever the conversation will bear.” On the other hand, Kenneth believes that “among friends” the Internet is “terrific” for keeping in touch. Earlier in our interview, Kenneth told me about a close friend who lives in Moscow, with whom he still keeps in contact through Internet services like Skype and e-mail. Although he argues strongly that the Internet is “shallow,” Kenneth’s comments show how relationships on the Internet cannot be dichotomized as either “real” or “unreal.”

Given these concerns, how does anyone convince themselves to use Meetup to meet friends? First, some respondents felt it was safer to meet people in groups versus one-on-one. Mark, an organizer in his forties, made one such comparison:

I would feel comfortable for the most part just because most of these groups are... group-oriented versus, "hey why don't you meet me out here let's go have a cup of coffee." You really put your trust in this one person, and not in, "hey I'm going out into a controlled environment," and so it's... the concept [of Meetup] is great, it's good because it's about groups of people getting together versus me goin' on Facebook, seein' your profile, "Hey

you're cute, what's up girl? Know what I'm sayin', let's meet" and then we meet somewhere and you're crazy, I'm crazy, or we meet somewhere and it's like, "Ehh" and it's kinda awkward and it's forcing us— versus putting us in a natural environment [like in Meetup].

Here, Mark stresses that meeting only one person from the Internet involves a large degree of “trust” that the other person will not be “crazy” or that the interaction will not feel “awkward” or forced. Mark also suggests that there is something predatory about a man looking at an online profile of a woman and asking her out. He contrasts this with Meetup, which he views as more “natural,” because it’s a group setting, even though it is still an Internet site. Mark is able to rationalize using Meetup as a “controlled environment,” rather than a site where “crazy” people go.

Furthermore, several interviewees (including Mark) stressed using common sense “as you would about meeting any stranger,” which Tammie stressed in one of her stories:

I don’t think Meetup has a downside as long as you use your brain. Now, a couple of weeks ago we had a happy hour and one of the gals-- I didn’t know her, she was-- one of the guys brought her. She’s from a [different] group. But... Um... She had gone to a sailing Meetup that morning. And the guy that owned the boat was there and she and a girlfriend went, and they were the only ones. Nobody else has showed up, and they set sail with this guy they never met, and she said, “We were looking out over the

water, we turned around and he had taken his swim suit off. He was just naked on the boat.” And you know, I wouldn’t be in that position. So, I think that... Y’know in Meetup, you’ve gotta use your brain. [...] Y’know, if-- if I was going to go on a boat with you, I would have to know people who knew you. I would not go on a boat with you, just in Meetup. That would be silly. It’s like getting in a strangers car. It’s even worse! ‘Cause it’s a lot more remote out on the lake. [...] Yeah, that’s a creepy guy.

Tammie understands the man as a “stranger,” and sees the woman’s actions as reckless and “silly”. Tammie believes that she does “use [her] brain” when using Meetup, and that, as a result, she would not have been in the same situation as the woman whose story she relates. “If I was going to go on a boat with you,” she asserts, “I would have to know people who know you.” To Tammie, then, it’s important that she be able to utilize her network ties to be able to vet someone she’d “go on a boat with.” She does not see Meetup as a place where she can do that; however, later she commented that she had been successful using Meetup because she has used “common sense.”

Like Tammie, many people I encountered perceived the people they were meeting on Meetup as “strangers” or “random people.” I met more than one person who likened using Meetup to “the first day of kindergarten,” since no one knows anyone else when they first show up. Kyle, who regularly attends a variety of different Meetups for technology professionals, had this to say about the nature of Meetup events:

You definitely see kind of that first day of kindergarden, um, attraction to these Meetups, because a lot of people are showing up for the first time at any given Meetup, a lot of people, y'know, a lot of people are there by themselves and don't know a single person in the room.

Kyle reassures himself with the fact that he is not the only person experiencing the anxiety around not knowing anyone. Rather, he reminds himself that “a lot of people are there by themselves” and don't know anyone else there.

Many interviewees derived comfort from the ability to look at members' profile pictures prior to the event on the group webpage. Chloe emphasized that this was particularly important when approaching one's first Meetup event:

I was really nervous, but one thing I like about the Meetup format is that everyone usually has a profile picture so you that can kind of see in mind's eye who these people are and associate a picture and a name. So you're not going there completely, y'know, looking around for people who you're supposed to be doing something with. It's more like, you can see a picture, you can see a face, you can say “Oh, okay, I'm looking for y'know person A” [...] I mean, I've felt a little nervous but I also felt a lot more confident because of the fact I had already seen their pictures, read their statements, and y'know could see a little bit about the type of person they were.

For Chloe, the ability to “see a face” reduces the amount of “looking around for people” and makes her feel “a lot more confident” about the people she'll be meeting at each event. She can also “read their statements” and get a better sense

of “the type of person” each member is. The profile photos and statements reduce the amount of uncertainty Choe feels before entering a space surrounded by people she’s never met before.

Organizers, too, use profile photos as a means of reducing this uncertainty. Several of the group webpages I analyzed required a profile photo, and would not accept members without one. Gabriela, the organizer for a women’s group, manually approves who can join her private group. This gives Gabriela considerable control over who can (and can’t) access the group:

I do look at the profiles. If you don’t have a picture, you know, you need to kinda send me your full name and your Texas driver’s license so I can look you up, or you’re not joining. [A Texas driver’s license?] I’ve done that before. [Really?] Yeah, ‘cause I just don’t feel good about it. [...] I’ve established such relationships with some of these women, they’re my friends. So I’m very protective of my friends. And because sometimes we host events at our homes— No, we’re not opening up to just anybody! I’m not putting your address out there, just to anybody! ‘cause I dunno, what’s gonna happen, y’know? Anybody— no, not anybody can join! So, yeah, I have some saying so on who joins or not ‘cause these are my friends, y’know? So, I’m selective.

In this passage from our interview, Gabriela stresses the need for incoming members to have a profile picture. She believes this so firmly that in cases she doesn’t “feel good about,” she requests that they send her a scanned copy of their

driver's license. As an organizer with friends in the group, she feels "protective" over who she allows into her group. Gabriela feels strongly that the Internet represents an unknown, invisible audience, and that as a result she doesn't know "what's gonna happen" or who will show up. She uses this to rationalize her being "selective" in the face of these perceived threats.

Gabriela and other Meetup users like her perceive the Internet as a dangerous space, where one doesn't know "what's gonna happen." The people I spoke with perceived making friends through the Internet as stigmatized, "pathetic," or artificial. As a result, they approach Meetup events with apprehension, and develop different strategies for rationalizing their use of Meetup. These strategies include drawing from "common sense," looking at and managing others' online profiles, and assuring oneself that there is safety in numbers.

"Heck, you can meet your new dentist there": Meetup and social capital

Meetup is a potential source of social capital to those who use it. My interviewees expressed a variety of benefits they had gained from using the website. I also had the opportunity to observe beneficial interactions firsthand in my fieldwork.

Many of the Meetup users I spoke with joined groups for activities and hobbies they wanted to learn more about. This was the case for Jaime, who joined a women's group to learn how to knit. I observed this firsthand during my participation in a women's knitting, crocheting, and embroidery group, where

members frequently shared knowledge with me and with each other about their respective crafts. Here is an excerpt from my fieldnote:

There was a lot of talk about knitting and crocheting technique going on tonight. The ladies compared different types of needles (both size, and material, i.e. bamboo or metal); the difficulty of keeping your hands loose while you're knitting so your stitches don't get too tight; types of yarn (I learned that merino wool is particularly nice and that cotton usually isn't); and different places to go and buy craft materials (one store had helpful employees, another had snobby ones).

This women's group provided its members, several of whom had only recently picked up their hobby, with a space for sharing relevant information. The organizer, Amber, and members who had more experience frequently helped newer members who were just learning how to knit, crochet, and embroider. In my data, it seemed that members looked to organizers as people who could teach them something they'd been aspiring to learn.

Organizers, too, learn new skills and pick up new interests from their members. Below, Catherine details how a hiking event she organized served as a site where she could both teach and learn:

One of the girls had never been hiking before, but I'd met her-- she'd come to our Meetup before, and, um, and we're like-- she's like, "I've never really been hiking, I don't think I could do those events," and we were like, "Oh no, just wear tennis shoes, it's not gonna be that bad, if you can walk, you

can hike” and-- and so, we’re kind of introducing the outdoors to one of the girls [...] She was there to just enjoy our company and learn a new hobby. And then we went and we looked at birds, and this one guy in our group is obsessed with birds, so he told us all about the birds.

In the course of one event, Catherine both “introduced the outdoors” to one of her members, while learning something new about birds from another member. Catherine describes one female member as apprehensive, having “never really been hiking” but later comments that she had a good time at the event.

Groups can help their members in unforeseen ways, as well. Nancy, an organizer I interviewed, discussed the ways she perceived her group for single women over 50 as helping its members:

I was thinking that I couldn’t be the only female that was over fifty and single, and didn’t have any female friends. So that’s, that’s why I started it. And also, single and over fifty, because I felt like... that... that group of women, that age, have different needs than our married sisters do. [How do you think those needs differ?] The needs and the challenges, Robyn, if I can put that, lump that together. The needs are, y’know, we get lonely. We need somebody to go out and do something with, whereas with our married sisters, she’s got somebody built in so to speak. Um, our challenges, we need something done around the house-- I’m really really handy. I have, um, remodeled five different homes. I’m in house number seven, and I-- these are homes that I bought and sold myself, so I’m really really handy. I can do

more than the average person. But there are women out there that have not a clue how to do this stuff. So, the challenge is... “I need to change the-- the ball in the toilet, how do I do that?” Y’know, it’s simple. There’s instructions on the back of the package, but that’s beside the point. Um, so y’know it’s getting together, and it’s sharing those kind of challenges and it’s... um... helping each other out.

Nancy sees her group as both fulfilling her group member’s “needs” and helping them with their “challenges.” She makes a point to stress that she is “really really handy” and perceives most other women as being unable to “change the ball in the toilet” even though “it’s simple.” Nancy sees married women as not sharing these needs or challenges, because they have “somebody built in.” But she also relies on stereotypical notions of heteronormativity and masculinity in her expectations that a woman will be married to a man who is both “handy” and prevents his wife from being lonely. That being said, Nancy sees her group as empowering her single female members. Later in our interview she spoke about how she had helped and taught her group members about home renovations, and how she brought in independent contractors to present tips for remodeling. Nancy felt positively about her group providing women with the opportunity to socialize with similar others and to learn something new.

Several people who had been using Meetup for several years felt positively about its impact on their social capital. Laney, who I met through a co-ed social

group for people in their 20s and 30s, was one such example. Here is an excerpt from one of my fieldnotes:

Laney tells me, “I’m like a walking Meetup ad.” She met her husband, Tom, through a Meetup group. She originally started going to Meetup in another city and thought, “I don’t just need a boyfriend, I need a whole new set of friends.” She’s made some “really true friendships” using Meetup, including a gal who was in her wedding with Tom last year. Laney adds that she even testified at a divorce case for a guy she met through Meetup so that he could have custody of his kids. She loves to travel, so she joined a travel Meetup, which actually worked as a “dog co-op.” Whenever one of us would go out of town, she explains, we’d call up the others to see if they wouldn’t mind taking care of our dogs.

Laney has derived a number of benefits from using Meetup, to the point where she thinks of herself as “a walking Meetup ad.” The social capital she has developed through her participation in Meetup groups ranges from meeting her husband to being able to leave her dogs with other people while out of town.

Laney, too, provides others with benefits like testifying in a divorce case or taking care of others’ dogs in the “dog co-op.” Throughout my interviews and fieldwork, I heard of other instances like helping people move, supporting one another’s charity events, learning about food allergies, connecting people with jobs, sharing social media expertise, and finding roommates. All of these instances occurred outside of scheduled Meetup events. Combined with my respondents’ perception

that they would not have made these connections otherwise, my data suggests that Meetup offers a unique and valuable source of social capital for its users.

Like other sources of social capital, though, not everyone has equal access to Meetup. While I do not have quantitative data on Meetup users' socioeconomic status, I can comment on the assumptions Meetup groups make about their members' socioeconomic status when hosting events. First and foremost, Meetup users must have access to an Internet connection. This is made considerably easier if the user has Internet access at home, and many of my participants had smart phones with Internet access as well. Furthermore, Austin continues to struggle with a digital divide, and many low income residents have been left behind during the city's efforts to become a "technopolis" (Straubhaar et al 2012). Second, participating in voluntary organizations takes up time and energy (McPherson 1983). I suspect that one of the reasons I met few blue-collar workers during my research was because these workers lack these resources that white-collar workers take for granted. Furthermore, retail workers' experience frequent scheduling changes that may prevent their regular participation in voluntary groups. Third, people require transportation to and from Meetup events. This is made substantially easier with a car. Finally, events themselves cost money indirectly, even if their group does not have a membership fee. Groups often hold events at businesses such as coffee shops, bars, and restaurants where it is assumed that you will buy food or drink. Additionally, in my fieldwork, I had to pay money for renting bowling shoes, time on a rock

climbing wall, and a pass to an art museum. Research has shown that people who participate in the community life have more opportunity to express their political needs and interests (Verba et al 1995). Those who may have been prevented from using Meetup for any of the reasons above may not have the same advantages for civic engagement.

Conclusion

Most of my participants experienced a life course event that made them hyper-aware of their lack of local friendships, which in turn led them to start using Meetup. These events include moving, a death in the family, a divorce or break up, and graduating, to name a few. This corroborates Feld and Carter's (1998) finding that life events such as these impel people to shift the foci they associate with. Although many of my interviewees and participants felt that maintaining their long distance friendships over the Internet was an important aspect of their lives, they also believed that face-to-face interactions with others was important to their mental health.

But, "where do you go" to meet new friends, when traditional settings do not feel like a realizable avenue to meet them? The Meetup users I spoke with had made few, if any, social connections through their neighborhoods, church, or other offline voluntary organizations. Many continued keep in touch with friends they had made in grade school, college, and grad school; however, most of these ties were maintained long distance through the Internet. Respondents and

participants alike did not view the workplace as an ideal site for friendship making, assuming their job was not already socially isolating.

Many interviewees and participants felt the need to rationalize their decision to use the Internet to make friends. Using Meetup to meet people compelled them to confront and reflect on stereotypes about meeting Internet “strangers”. These stereotypes included the notion that “everyone on the Internet is going to kill you” and the understanding that Internet-initiated relationships are in some way artificial or “creepy.”

Assuming they can overcome these pre-conceived notions, though, Meetup can be a valuable source of social capital for people. My participants and interviewees expressed that the friends they had made using the website would not have been made otherwise. Meetup groups themselves offer a wide variety of opportunities for members to learn new skills and take up new hobbies. Furthermore, the people I spoke with felt that participating in Meetup groups had additional benefits beyond the group itself. That said, not everyone has equal access to joining Meetup groups, and I suspect that socioeconomic status plays a large role in an individual’s ability to take advantage of the social capital the website has to offer. Still, the Meetup users in my sample are a sign that Americans continue to value voluntary group membership, and that they are even willing to create their own groups in response to the decline of traditional voluntary organizations. I discuss how people go about creating their own

Meetup groups, and the implications this has for group membership, in the next chapter.

Chapter 4: Which Niche?

Agency and Homophily in Meetup

When I first approached Meetup, I was overwhelmed by how many different groups there were in Austin alone. During my pilot fieldwork, I would sometimes input different activities into the search engine just to see what came up. I saw anything from rock climbing to groups for Black gun owners; a Navajo flute playing group to a polyamorous relationship support group; groups for new moms to Dungeons and Dragons groups. Who was starting these groups and what did that decision look like? In the previous chapter, I examine the decision processes of people who decide to use Meetup and some of its benefits. In this chapter, I look more closely at how people decide which Meetup groups to create and join.

First, how have previous theories understood what kinds of people join what kinds of groups? J. Miller McPherson, who has done extensive research on voluntary organizations, proposed what he called an ecological model of voluntary groups (1983). He draws from Peter Blau's work on social space, or a multidimensional system organized by sociodemographic factors like race, sex, age, etc (1970). According to Blau, people who are similar in some way tend to cluster together in social space and have more social interactions (1970; 1984 with Schwartz). This tendency for people with similar demographic characteristics to have social ties is called homophily by social scientists (Lazarsfeld and Merton 1954; McPherson et al 2001). McPherson (1983) took

Blau's principles and examined how and why the members of different voluntary groups seemed so similar demographically. He argues that groups form around niches in the social space, and that these niches may be more general or more specific (1983). Like animals in an ecosystem, groups vie for resources, namely members who have limited time to participate (1983). Sometimes, then, groups come into competition when they're recruiting the same types of members (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). The new members people recruit into their voluntary organizations will be homophilous, too, because people's social networks tend to be homophilous, or comprised mainly of other people who are like them in some way (Popielarz and McPherson 1995; McPherson 1983). McPherson and Popielarz later add that voluntary organizations evolve organically, without members' choices or actions (Popielarz and McPherson 1995).

In this chapter, I expand upon the ecological model of voluntary groups and discuss some of its shortcomings in the Internet age. I address the following questions. First, do groups establish homophily when new members are strangers and have no pre-existing social ties to the group? If so, how? Second, in what ways do members of voluntary organizations express agency over group membership? That is, how do people shape who can (and can't) join their groups? Finally, how do different groups position themselves relative to other groups?

From Garbage-Peddling to Red-Headed Red Wine Lovers: Searchability and Niches

Across the board, my respondents felt positively about their ability to find similar others. Suzanne, who had had difficulty meeting people in her small town before moving to Austin, used Meetup to meet other cyclists. She checked out the Meetup site before even moving, and became excited about finding her “people.”

Then as I got started exploring the platform-- if you wanna find red-headed, red-wine loving people that live in a certain neighborhood of, y’know, a certain town, you can find ‘em on a Meetup. I mean there’s so many. So, I just-- I thought it was genius. Y’know, so, because what I was missing was, y’know, connection with other like-minded people, so I saw it as the perfect vehicle.

Prior to moving to Austin, Suzanne lived in a small town and described feeling socially isolated. She expressed not being able to find similar others, and that Meetup allowed her to make a “connection with other like-minded people,” once she moved to Austin. Suzanne felt that Meetup allowed her and others to narrowly tailor their groups, so that a group could even be for people with the same hair color, with the same interest, and in the same neighborhood.

Donald’s interview also highlighted the importance of searchability for Meetup. Using the site, he was able to find other people who shared his interests in board games and television show *Dr. Who*:

Meetup is really good for people who have some particular passion for something that is reasonably uncommon. It's not hard for UT football fans to find each other, y'know. It's not hard for people who share a love of a particular sport to find each other. But, *Dr. Who* fans? They need a little more, um... we need to work a little harder to find where the other ones are in the rush and such. In particular, finding people who like the obscure board games that we play at [our events], y'know, you wanna find four to five people who already know how to play this game, uh, so. I think Meetup is really good for-- the more obscure the common interest that people can get passionate about, the more Meetup is useful as a tool for that.

To Donald, Meetup is particularly helpful for people with "obscure" interests. He compares this to football, which he perceives as been universally enjoyed. Sports enthusiasts can find one another in certain place, like arenas and sports bars, unlike *Dr. Who* fans. Donald can now meet other people who share his same hobbies because he can search for them using the Internet. His comments parallel Rosenfeld and Thomas' (2012) findings that the Internet allows people to find similar others who they might not be able to find otherwise.

Like Donald, my other participants believed that it was "cool" that they could find others with hyper-specialized interests. Kenneth, who used Meetup to recruit people for his networking group for the LGBTQ community told me that

You could be a garbage peddler and have a Meetup group. Any people that have any passing interest can be in a Meetup group, and I think that that's

what's so cool about it. It doesn't have to be cut and dry, it doesn't have to be about business, it doesn't have to be about travel, it doesn't have to be about any stuff whatsoever. It could be about y'know a hobby, it could be about a, a— a uh, I dunno, a— a psychological problem that you all have in common that you wanna talk about. It's— y'know, it could be a lot of things.

So, that's why it's so cool.

Kenneth sees the ability to make a Meetup group for anything to be one of its best features. To him, you could literally sell garbage and have a Meetup group. And while no such Meetup group exists in Austin (I checked), Kenneth perceives the scope for user-created content to be boundless. However, as I show in the following sections, Meetup groups do specify their niches more than Kenneth suggests.

Which Niche?

In my participant observation and interviews, I found that Meetup organizers frequently give substantial thought to how they will indicate who can (and can't) join their groups on their webpage. Ethan talks about his struggle deciding whether or not to narrow the focus of his social group for making male, homosocial friends:

I hemmed and hawed about how to organize this group. Um, the two contrasts being, do I want a very narrow scope of participation or do I want to just open it up and say, "come as you are"? Do I wanna make it a

purely for heterosexual men only? Do I want it to be for an age range? Do I want it to be for single people only? And, in the end, as a social experiment, I said, “Nope. I’m opening up the gates, any and all, I don’t care if you’re straight, liberal, democrat, purple, brown, single, old, young. Come as you are and make guy friends.”

Confronted with starting a new group for men only, Ethan still has to determine how “narrow” or “open” his “scope of participation,” or niche, will be. Aside from potential members’ gender, Ethan also has to confront if he will explicitly bound his group by sexual orientation, age, and relationship status. Although he “opens up the gates,” (albeit with some apprehension) to all men, Ethan has still specified that his group is limited only to men.

Catherine, a white educator in her late 30s, took a different approach toward her LGBTQ social group’s website. Catherine requires new members to fill out a relatively extensive questionnaire on the “Join Us” page that directly asks what degrees a potential member has, what their profession is, and their “intellectual interests”. But although Catherine has specified her niche considerably on several different demographic characteristics, she is not at a loss for participation and doesn’t feel the need to pander to all members of the LGBTQ community, because, in her view, they can find other LGBTQ groups on Meetup that will provide the experiences that they want.

While these two organizers are establishing disparate groups, both Ethan and Catherine are alike in one way: they both want to create groups to meet

others who are like them. Catherine, a highly educated lesbian who enjoys the high arts, wants to find other highly educated members of the LGBTQ community who enjoy the same activities that she does. As a single heterosexual man in his 30s, Ethan actively wonders, “Do I wanna make it purely for heterosexual men only? Do I want it to be for an age range? Do I want it to be for single people only?” Both are actively choosing the explicit basis for homophily in their groups. Why, then, does Catherine specify her demographic preferences so stringently while Ethan feels compelled to just “opens up the gates” to all men?

Whether they realize it or not, organizers rely on their knowledge of the social space to establish suitable group boundaries. For a group to survive, Meetup organizers need to know that enough potential members exist within the boundaries they specify on their webpage. Even organizers who have a large pool of members have to continue providing an enjoyable experience to ensure members’ continued involvement. Without enough participation, organizers tend to become disheartened, stop planning events, and the group becomes inactive. So, it is crucial that organizers have an understanding of whether or not they can attract enough members. In my research, I found that organizers relied on three strategies to determine the size of their specified niche.

One of the ways that organizers develop an understanding of the social space is by participating as a member in other groups. Some organizers participate in other Meetup groups even while they organize their own. What's more, many of the organizers I interviewed or spoke with informally at events

told me that they had created their group after participating in others. In my interview with Catherine, she discussed how she had made her group alcohol-free and limited to people over 30 who had college degrees and professional careers, as the direct result of her own negative experiences in other Meetup groups.

Y'know, because of my experiences with all the other groups in town, I-- I had reflected on what did and didn't work in those groups, and I was trying to create a demographic that was going to be the one that worked for me and for other people like me. And so I decided to make it alcohol free because that has, as far as any of the groups so far, that had been the best demographic for what I was looking for. The alcohol free group attracted lots of tame, nerdy types, and that's what I relate to. And so I made it alcohol free, I wanted to make it over age thirty because I had been to this other group [...] and they went to museums, and they went to interesting places, but they were all twenty years old and lived with their dad. And I was thirty something and have a career, and again I didn't relate to them, and yeah, I just wasn't gonna make friends with twenty-year-olds who were still living with their parents, who were uneducated. I just didn't click with that.

To "create a demographic that was going to be the one that worked" for Catherine, she had "reflected on what did and didn't work in those groups". Organizers like Catherine are able to better appreciate their own preferences for running a Meetup group by seeing how other organizers run theirs and what

kinds of people show up. Although she enjoyed the activities with a previous groups and found them “interesting”, Catherine felt that she, “wasn’t gonna make friends with twenty-year-olds who were still living with their parents, who were uneducated.” Consequently, she decided that she wanted to further stipulate age, education, and career requirements for her own group. Additionally, earlier in our interview, Catherine stressed her personal experiences with other groups that catered to a larger niche within the LGBTQ community. So, she knew that a number of people from the LGBTQ community participated in Meetups around Austin and that there would be people interested in joining her group. As such, Catherine could reasonably narrow her group’s niche based on occupation, education, activities, and other class markers, and still expect to attract a number of members.

Organizers also frequently peruse the Meetup website to see what other groups around Austin are up to. The searchability of the social space allows organizers to quickly figure out what is going on in the social space and whether a niche is currently filled or not. George, a white organizer in his 30s, went to “a couple [Meetups] here ‘n’ there” before starting his food trailer group. During my participant observation, he told me that he wanted to try all of the food trailers around Austin, and thought “for sure” there would be a Meetup for that. “There wasn’t, so I made one,” he told me with a shrug. It seems relatively straightforward to George to start a Meetup to fill a niche (e.g. going to food

trailers) that had not already been taken by another group. All he had to do was search the Meetup website.

Finally, organizers also rely on their understandings of others' cultural capital in the social space when presenting their group on Meetup. Donald, the organizer of a co-ed social group for “geeks,” describes one way that organizers bolster their group’s appeal:

[the previous organizer] who started it up actually had a totally different name for the group. He called it Babylon After 5, which was a really cute, clever, but thoroughly confusing name for most people. But out of curiosity I joined and saw that what he was really wanting to do was build a community beyond just one specific Joss Whedon or Dr. Who¹, all of the geeks that have all of this in common. So I lobbied to rename it [...because Babylon After 5] made some people think it was just a Babylon 5 group, which was way too obscure to get more than three members to, um, to really something that was really broad, big tent, kind of thing, for all the local geeks, so that would incorporate anybody who really loves any form of science fiction, fantasy, comic books, games, and so on. And over the last month or two, we’ve just about tripled in size.

In this case, Donald sees the the previous organizer as having made the mistake of naming his group with an “obscure” reference to science fiction soap opera,

¹ Joss Whedon is the producer of a number of popular television shows, like *Buffy the Vampire Slayer* and *Firefly*, and films, like the recent *Avengers* movie. *Dr. Who* is a long-running British television show featuring time and space travel.

Babylon 5. Thus, the only potential members of the group niche would be those that understood the cultural reference. Donald, however, recognizes this. As such, he purposely widens his group name to encompass “geeks” more generally, which he attributes to the group quickly having “tripled in size.” From Donald's perspective, the group would not have attracted nearly as many members and might not have continued without renaming the group.

By gathering knowledge of the social space, organizers can determine how many and what kinds of characteristics they can successfully specify on their group webpages. On the one hand, Catherine had the benefit of there being other LGBTQ Meetup groups around Austin. She knew that there was a number of people like her that were already participating in similar groups, and therefore had the liberty to specialize her group's niche accordingly. Ethan, however, was uncertain about the willingness for men to participate in a men-only group, since he had not seen groups catering to male homosocial friendships around Austin on the Meetup site. As such, he felt compelled to “open the gates” to all men who wanted to make male friends. These two organizers end up with groups with different niche sizes because of the other groups they discern in the social space. Finally, organizers may also determine niche size based on the cultural capital they perceive others having in the social space, like in Donald's case.

Positioning a Group Niche

Meetup organizers also utilize knowledge of the social space in another way: they have to understand where their niche rests in the social space relative to other organizers'. Group niches commonly overlap one another, so organizers have a number of strategies to position themselves relative to other groups, in efforts to reduce competition.

First, organizers may use the description on their own webpage in an attempt to diminish the standing of other groups that hold a similar niche in the social space. One social club in Austin asserts that, "The club is NOT a bunch of strangers getting together, we are a true friendship group." Here the group organizer explicitly differentiates her group from others. She claims to lead a "true friendship group," and implies that other groups are just "a bunch of strangers getting together." By doing this, the organizer argues that other group webpages are misusing the friendship label on their webpages to mislead potential members. She attempts to claim greater legitimacy relative to other groups by putting down the other social groups that serve a similar population (co-ed, middle-aged, middle-class people living in Austin). Another organizer asks potential members on her webpage, "Tired of those big meet-up groups where you have no idea where they are meeting or what type of people you're meeting? Or groups who only have one type of meet-up?" Like the previous organizer, this organizer stresses that other Meetup groups around town are "big" and that a new member can get overwhelmed, and "have no idea" who they might

be meeting. Both examples parallel findings from McNamee, Peterson, and Peña (2010), that online groups try to reduce external threats and reinforce group identity by, “constructing messages which valorize the group and demonize others outside of the group” (p. 273).

The organizer also points out that "groups who only have one type of meet-up" do not offer as much to their members as her group does. Social group organizers also see the variety of events that they provide as another means of gaining an advantage over other groups. Tammie, the organizer of a middle-aged, co-ed social Meetup group, brought this up in our interview. A blonde woman in her early fifties, Tammie has participated in several of the other co-ed social groups for her age range. She argued that

if you're going to keep your attendance up, in the interest of one of these groups, the trick is about always going somewhere new so the people are getting a value, you're taking them someplace they've never been. And that's a huge deal with this. And I think that's why we're successful, y'know, people don't know these places that we're taking them.

As a member of other groups that occupy the same niche, one way Tammie makes her group more competitive is by organizing a wide variety of events. In her view, “taking [members] someplace they've never been” provides a “value” to them. Earlier in the interview, she juxtaposes her variety of events to the repetitive events of another group.

But y'know, [another middle-aged social group] will have, they have two happy hours a month at the same places. Every month. And... y'know, attendance dwindles.

For Tammie, only offering repetitive events doesn't allow the other social group to remain competitive for members. As a result, their "attendance dwindles" and its organizers lose members. The activities that a group provides offers another opportunity for groups to distinguish themselves from one another.

For activity groups, this is generally straightforward enough: people who want to play Dungeons and Dragons attend a Dungeons and Dragons Meetup, and people who want to go jogging attend a jogging Meetup. That said, Meetup groups that form around a similar focus may differentiate further if they believe enough people belong to the corresponding niches. For instance, a popular cycling group in Austin used to host events for both road bikes and mountain bikes. Eventually, interest in mountain biking grew to the point that a member began his own mountain biking group. In an effort to reduce competition between their groups, the organizer of the original cycling group now only hosts road biking events and directs mountain bikers to the other Meetup group on his webpage. Social groups also specialize their group niches, but instead use geography as a means to do so. There are currently social groups serving South Austin, North Austin, and the surrounding suburbs of Cedar Park, Round Rock, and Pflugerville². Groups come to further specialize their group niches on the

² Notably, there is no social group serving East Austin as of this writing. I suspect this may be due to the historic racial and socioeconomic segregation of Austin.

basis of activity or geography should they feel that there are enough interested members to do so. This helps groups focus their efforts on what members want more effectively.

Finally, organizers may capitalize on niche overlap by "cross-posting" events. When an organizer cross-posts an event, they are posting an event to their webpage that another Meetup group is hosting. Tammie, noted that "because Richard cross-posted [an event] with us and we bring new blood, then the attendance [of his group] goes back up." By asking Tammie to cross-post his event, Richard can now have some "new blood" from Tammie's members. Organizers benefit from allowing other groups to post their events because it introduces them to people from the other group with whom they might not have had contact otherwise.

Tammie and other organizers are well aware of other groups that occupy a similar niche in the social space of Meetup. Consequently, they develop competitive strategies to manage niche overlap, like pointing out other groups' supposed negative qualities online or providing a wider variety of events to keep things fresh for members. That said, organizers also realize that they can reduce competition by further specializing their group niche relative to one another, such as specifying geographical location or a type of activity. Finally, organizers who cross-post events may actually benefit from group overlap, because they can draw from an additional pool of members that may have otherwise been unavailable to them.

Out of Place in Social Space

As I mention above, previous research suggests that homophily in voluntary organizations is the result of homophily in pre-existing social ties (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). While most users do not know people in the Meetup groups that they join, Meetup groups still tend to develop around shared demographic characteristics. Although I encountered homophily of different varieties in my research, status homophily based on race and age were front and center for many Meetup groups, so I will explore them further in this section.

Depending on the type of group, homophily may or may not be made manifest on the group webpage. Nearly two-thirds of the social Meetup group webpages I sampled made it clear that they wanted people from a similar age range at their events. Typically, it is considered impolite to ask someone's age during a face-to-face encounter; however, several organizers included questions about a potential member's age in their "Join Us" questionnaires. Some questions were indirect, like asking, "What's so great about being a [baby] boomer?" Others were as direct as asking, "How old are you?" or "Are you between the ages of 24-38?" To put this in perspective, imagine approaching a stranger in person and, after introducing yourself, asking them directly, "So, how old are you?" This would be rather inappropriate in a face-to-face interaction, but is commonplace in computer-mediated communication. Findings in the communication studies literature suggest that people are more direct in their questions about others' physical attributes when using computer-mediated

communication due to reduced visible cues (see Tidwell and Walther 2002, p. 334).

Racial homophily was established somewhat differently on webpages. Unlike age, organizers did not ask their members explicitly about their race, including the 7 groups for people of color I sampled for content analysis. One interviewee, Micah, who identifies as multiracial, said,

I think the thing is, [people of color] go online and then they see that it's all white folks [in the profile photos], you know, and they're like, "Eh. Forget this. Never mind. I knew this wasn't for me." And it just confirms what they thought.

This suggests that profile photos may signify in-group homophily inadvertently. The other two African Americans I interviewed expressed that they were usually "the only one" at a given Meetup. While there are several groups for blacks and other people of color around Austin, whites are privileged when using Meetup, because they do not have to join groups specifically tailored to their race or ethnic identity to meet others from their same background.

Although activity groups do not list demographic characteristics that they expect of their new members on their websites, I still saw the homophily principle at work in my participant observation with activity-based groups. Once while attending an event, I pointed out some homophilies to George, the white 30-something organizer of the food trailer group. Here is his response from an excerpt from my fieldnote:

George walks up just as I'm about to make an observation on race [to another group member]. I comment that it's mostly white people here with a few Asians. George clarifies and says, No, we have a "token black guy." Where? I ask. That guy, right there, he says, pointing to someone who is clearly white. (This puzzles me, but from what [the other member] tells me later, I learn that it is a running joke for George). George adds that it's rare to see kids show up with their parents, but when they have they're around eight years old, and that most members don't have kids at all. He also tells me that it's also rare to see folks over 60 at his group. He notes, I'm the one planning the events, so I figure that people like me will be the one's showing up, "Birds of a feather, y'know?"

While it is rare to encounter people over 60 at his events, in my experience the age range for George's group was even narrower, ranging between people in their mid-twenties to their mid-forties. Additionally, George is aware that his group does not have a black member, and his attempt to use humor by calling someone who is white the "token black guy" does not support the inclusion of black members. George also makes a valuable observation: Meetup group members' demographic characteristics tend to mimic those of their group organizers. Since George is white, middle class, and in his mid-thirties, this has a clear influence on who feels welcome at his events. I found that this pertained to other Meetup groups that I attended, as well. The knitting and embroidery group that I participated in twice a month, for instance, almost always drew women who were

white, highly educated, heterosexual (usually married or coupled), and within their early 20s to late 30s. Although knitting and embroidery are stereotypically feminized activities, the strength and consistency of these other homophilies was surprising; until I realized, though, that the organizer of the event, Amber, fit all of these characteristics.

Later during my fieldwork, a Black woman in her late 50s named Roberta began attending the fiber art events. At her first event, I wrote:

[With still another 30 minutes left in the event] Roberta, still seated, looked around and asked, “Well, if it’s alright with you guys I’ll come back next time” to which everyone affirmed that she was welcome back. She said that she could only stay for an hour, that she had to walk her dog. I asked her as she got up and started walking out what kind of dog she had. She turned her head back to me. “A shih tzu. An old lady dog.” she said, smiling softly. After she left, the room was silent for what seemed like a full minute before people started talking again.

With all of the other women I witnessed come and go to the knitting group, Roberta was the only one to ask if it was “alright” to come back. That she refers to her shih tzu as “an old lady dog,” also suggests that she was conscious of her age in a setting full of 20 and 30-year-olds. Roberta frequently was the first person to leave the event. As it happens, one time during a one-on-one conversation, she made a comment that she felt very “aware” that she was the

only older or black woman to participate. Mary, a white organizer in her late sixties, discussed this in our interview as well. She told me

I actually went to a couple [other Meetup groups], but I can't remember what they were, but it's like I felt really out of place because I looked around and everybody was a lot younger than I was, and it just... felt kinda strange. They were talking about things I have no clue about.

Mary, who expressed her desire to meet new friends throughout our interview, "felt really out of place" among people who were a different age than her. When she made the realization that everyone "was a lot younger" at the event, she "felt kinda strange" and ultimately stopped going to the Meetup group. This may also happen the other way around, however. During my fieldwork I met Kayleigh, who was in her mid-twenties and had recently moved to Austin. Here's an excerpt from my fieldnote, as we walked back to our cars after going to a Meetup at an art museum:

She tells me about how one time she went to a brunch group ("hey! I like brunch!" she says) and how when she got there she was shocked that everyone was in their fifties and sixties. While looking at the group from afar, she says, I couldn't decide if I should just join them, or just leave. I ask her, So what did you do? She tells me that she decided to go and just sit with them, but that they talked a lot about retirement, so it wasn't really meant for her.

Much like Mary, Kayleigh faced some discomfort when going to a Meetup where members were uniformly of a different age than herself. Both Mary and Kayleigh find that they do not have much to talk about with their peers at the Meetup event. Kayleigh even considered leaving instead of sitting down for brunch, which goes to show how feeling like an outsider may prevent group participation altogether.

Conclusion

To summarize, both social groups and activity groups find ways to establish homophily within their groups, even though their members are not drawn from pre-existing social ties. Race and age in particular serve as a clear boundary within Meetup groups, although my analysis here is applicable to other status homophilies as well. Social groups establish homophilies outright using group webpages, making it clear what potential members' bodies should look like. Activity groups are more subtle on their webpages, however, and members have to attend a group to figure out whether or not they fit in. Group members who share characteristics with the group organizer will be more likely to continue participating; however, for some groups this has the unintended consequence of making others feel "out of place."

My research builds upon the previous scholarship on voluntary group membership. First, my findings challenge the interpretation that voluntary group niches are determined without some degree of member agency (cf

Popielarz and McPherson 1995). By participating in other groups face-to-face and exploring other groups' webpages, organizers come to develop a better sense of what other groups are doing, and what kinds of people groups serve in the social space. Organizers draw upon this knowledge of the social space and their own set of cultural assumptions to determine their groups' niches. They also develop different strategies to reduce competition in the event that their niche overlaps with another group's.

Since it has its basis on the Internet, Meetup users have considerably more choice over the homophilies they select than in many traditional settings, where homophilies may be induced (see McPherson and McLovin 1987). In part, this is due to the voluntary nature of Meetup. Like offline voluntary groups, participating in a given group is at the discretion of the group member. In the past, however, scholars have understood offline voluntary group membership to be predicated on pre-existing ties between a member and a potential member (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). With Meetup, however, this is not the case, as an individual may join a given group, regardless of whether or not she knows anyone there. Additionally, Meetup has the added dimension of being an Internet website, which confers additional control to its users. Searching for other organizations in the social space of Meetup is markedly faster than in more traditional social spaces. Rosenfeld and Thomas (2012) note that, “modern Internet search accesses data that can be sorted and searched by user-defined rather than predefined categories, making search for anything uncommon

dramatically more efficient” (p. 3). In Meetup's case, the ease of starting or finding a group also allows organizers and users to coalesce around esoteric interests or draw from highly specified segments of the population more readily. My findings, then, also suggest that voluntary groups can establish homophily in the absence of pre-existing social ties, and more efficiently than in traditional settings.

Homophily, however, is not always a good thing. True, it may facilitate friendships and group interactions; however, it may result in in-groups and out-groups that make it hard for some to participate in voluntary organizations. Civic participation is understood to increase one's social capital (Putnam 2000). If there are relatively few groups an individual can comfortably participate in based on one of their statuses (e.g. race or age), it may result in a lower quality of life. As Pamela Popielarz argues, “a society integrated in the sense that most citizens belong to voluntary organizations will not be integrated in this other sense if the organizations [themselves] are segregated” (1999, p. 245). While scholars have examined racial homophily and its influence on differential outcomes (de Souza Briggs 2007; Moody 2001), future research should aim to better understand why age homophily holds such a strong influence on who people see as acceptable potential friends. In the next chapter, I delve into how gender and sexuality shape voluntary group membership.

Chapter 5: The Meet Market

Gender and Sexuality in Meetup

Tom asks me if I'm participating in Meetups with "the more sexualized aspects," and I explain that I won't be, since it's not a part of my research question on friendship, although I recognize that there's certainly a sexualized element of that to Meetup. "There's a large element of that" he jokes.

Although I approached my study with the intention of learning more about friendship, I soon realized that I could not ignore how prominent dating and sexuality were on Meetup. I made this intention clear in the excerpt from the fieldnote above to Tom, a member of a co-ed group for people in their 20s and 30s. Soon after this interaction with Tom, however, I began to notice a trend in my interviews: all of my interviewees were bringing up dating or sexuality in some capacity. Furthermore, many of the women and men I interviewed and spoke with informally at events compared Meetup to online dating. One woman commented that "Meetup is giving Match.com a run for its money." Why was this happening? If I was studying friendship, why could I not get through an interview without talking about sexual relationships?

In this chapter, I draw from the larger scholarship on gender and sexuality to help answer these questions. Although people claim gendered identities, theorist Judith Butler (2004) argues that, "the terms that make up one's own gender are, from the start, outside oneself, beyond oneself in a sociality that has

no single author” (p.1). That is, gender is something that is derived through larger social structures, rather than inherent in any given person. Along the same lines, sexuality is not just an individual’s sexual identity or behaviors; it is also an organizing principle in society with socially ascribed meanings (Laumann et al 2004; Pascoe 2012). Finally, sex describes the physiological differences between people. Even these differences, however, are impacted by social meanings. In contemporary Western societies, for instance, biological arguments are used to justify social inequalities between men and women who are more alike than different (Lorber 1993).

Scholars understand gender, sex, and sexuality as socially constructed; nevertheless, these “are social constructions with consequences,” especially for people who do not fit neatly into normative categories (Valocchi 2005, p. 752), who then feel the need to account for their difference (Meadow 2011). Queer theorists argue that a binary gender system does not take into account the myriad ways people express themselves in actual lived experiences (Butler 2004; Halberstam 1998). They seek to deconstruct gendered binaries and reveal the complexities of people’s lived experiences (Valocchi 2005). Drawing from queer theory, I intend to showcase and deconstruct some of the gendered binaries that shaped my participants’ experiences using Meetup.

Previous scholarship has examined gender in both work (Acker 1990; Chodorow 1978) and voluntary organizations (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1982, 1986; Popielarz 1999). Most studies of gender in voluntary organizations draw

from survey data and examine the composition of men and women in these groups. While these studies show the effects of gender segregation in voluntary organizations for people's social networks, they do not satisfactorily explain why this gender segregation happens in the first place.

Theories on gender and work organizations, on the other hand, have been more successful in this regard. Feminist scholars such as Joan Acker (1990) argue that organizations rely on a logic that inherently benefits men. The very structure of work organizations, Acker argues, idealizes a worker that is embodied as a man, which has implications for female workers' success in the workplace. Nancy Chodorow (1978) offers a psychoanalytical account for how a gendered division of labor replicates itself. According to Chodorow, boys and girls develop different relationships to their mother, who is overbearing, and their father, who is mostly absent. This ultimately results in boys replicating the relative independence of their fathers when they join the workplace, and girls seeking love by becoming mothers themselves. Both Acker and Chodorow offer compelling arguments for gendered experiences, but their focus is on work organizations, not voluntary organizations.

In the previous chapter, I explored the processes at work when Meetup users establish and shape different group niches online that serve as the basis for meeting up with people offline. In this chapter, I narrow my focus and explain how gender and sexuality interact with these processes. In what ways do gender and sexuality shape people's experiences using Meetup? And, more broadly, what

can this tell us about how gender and sexuality shape people's friendship-making and participation in voluntary organizations?

During my research, I began to realize that a number of my participants used the term "meat market" when describing their experiences in social Meetup groups. A meat market is a sexualized space where meeting sexual partners is the manifest purpose for participating. One characteristic of a meat market is that the people in the space do not have network ties with one another outside of the space. For example, when two people meet in a bar, were it not for the bar itself, they would not have met one another through their friends or acquaintances. The individuals are strangers to one another. This means that there is limited commitment for either party and helps ensure that negative interactions in the space have minimal repercussions on people's social networks. Another characteristic of a meat market is that they need not be in-person. Dating websites, for instance, represent an online meat market because people are browsing potential romantic partners. In Meetup's case, the meat market takes place mostly in face-to-face settings, but is supplemented by online browsing and interactions. Finally, the existence of sexualized interactions is not a dichotomous one; rather, some groups serve more explicitly as meat markets than others. As I discuss below, many Meetup groups attempt to dissuade conspicuous, sexual behaviors. Instead, meeting partners may be a latent function of the group, and one of several motivations for joining and participating. I call such a space a *meet market* in my analysis. I define a meet

market as a sexualized space in which people may meet and browse for others that fit their desired specifications amidst a number of people; however, sexual encounters do not serve as the basis for participation, like they do in meat markets. Rather, meeting partners is just one of several reasons to participate in the group. As I show in the following sections, determining the extent to which a group serves as a meat market or a meet market is not straightforward, and is further complicated by the fluidity of people's motivations when using Meetup.

"You can see it": manifest meat markets

I did not interview or participate in groups that were labeled "singles events" or "dating events" online. Yet I ended up talking to people who were members of groups that fostered a meat market. Had I overlooked something while assessing group pages? Or was there some other way to delineate whether or not a group incorporated dating?

Here is an excerpt from a typical social group's "About Us" section on their webpage: "We are all about support, friendship, and having FUN again!!! We are a super-friendly, close community and really welcome newbies! [...] Just show up, grab your seat and be greeted by your new warm, wonderful friends." In a matter of sentences, the organizer, Sheila, mentions "friendship" "super-friendly" and "friends." To an observer, it seems logical, then, that the group would focus on platonic relationships. However, as I started interviewing people who had participated in Sheila's group, it became clear that her group was a meat market,

and that friendship-making was not its focus. Later, when I began my content analysis, I realized that Sheila had included the searchable tag, "singles" in her "We're About" section. This has two implications. First, even though the "About Us" section suggests otherwise, a Meetup user that does not pay attention to the tags in the comparatively smaller "We're About" section (as I hadn't), might be surprised by the focus of the group. Second, were a user to search for "singles," using Meetup's search engine, Sheila's group would eventually show up. So, if enough people were motivated to join the group on the basis of finding other singles, this would change the character of the group. Needless to say, it is not always very clear to users looking at a group's webpage when a group hosts a meat market or not.

Several interviewees also had this experience. Feeling like she had had great success making friends and looking to similarly expand her husband's social circle, Gabriela decided they would attend their first Meetup with a co-ed group for people in their mid-forties and above. Soon after they arrived at the restaurant, however, she picked up that the event was a "total datin' somethin'." Rather than approach the group at all, Gabriela and her husband chose to evade the group:

[How did you know that it was a singles group if you didn't interact with them? I'm curious.] Oh! 'cause you can see it. There's, y'know, everybody's just lookin' at each other an'... Yeah. [What were people doing?] [pause] They're sitting... y'know, it's like a few girls, a few ladies sitting on the side,

and then the guys are drinkin' beer over here... and before they sit anywhere, they kinda scopin' out where they're gonna sit, y'know? It was like, [as a guy scoping girls out, as if pointing at people] "No. Too old. Too— y'know no make up on. Nah. Where's a hot one? Where's a hot one?"

Whatever they're attracted to, y'know, just like, yeah... no. [giggles]

Gabriela perceives the group being a meat market by how the men were "scopin' out" the group of women at the event. She describes the women and men as gathering separately from one another, but feels that the men in particular were looking for "a hot one" before committing to a seat. To Gabriela, the meat market was so pervasive ("you can see it") that she and her husband decided that it was futile to try and make friends at the event.

Some people, however, only realize the sexual nature of the group after they've introduced themselves, though. Here, Tammie recounts her experience at an event she attended:

It was clearly a, a singles group. It was very focused on being a singles group. And the women were, um, extremely unfriendly and the men were overly friendly. I felt like a piece of bait that was about to be cut up by the women in the group. [laughs] It was extremely uncomfortable [...] The guys were super super interested, because I was fresh meat. That was my perception. It was like, "Wow, the guys are super interested and the women are really hostile." So there was a definite hands-off aura around the women. It was very uncomfortable.

Because she is “fresh meat” to the group, the men are “overly friendly” and “interested” in Tammie. She sees this as impeding her interactions with the women of the group, who seem “really hostile” about Tammie entering the space. Tammie also suggests that this was because the women felt threatened about the men showing interest in someone new, resulting in “a definite ‘hands-off’ aura.” Reasonably, she dropped the group shortly thereafter because it was “not very inclusive.” But Tammie herself engaged in some “hands off” behaviors as well. At another event, she brought a man she was going on a first date with to an event to go dancing:

Y’know, you would sit at a table, and especially these women [from a group], they would come and ask your date to dance. Because it was a Meetup. And to them, all is fair in a Meetup. [...] But there was one particular gal who has done it to me a couple of other times and had done it to [my friend], and I finally... had a *discussion* with her, about... y’know, what I call “hos over bros.” Y’know, she’s like, “Why don’t y’all ever include me when you do things outside of the Meetup?” I’m like, “Well, here it is.” “Oh! Was that a big deal?” “Well, it is! It is a big deal.” Y’know, you’d think at fifty a woman would know that! It’s almost like, “Did you ever have any girl friends?!” I mean, you don’t *do* that! But you know, the thing is, you can’t call me your “girl friend” *and* hit on my guy. I mean, really. Choose. Y’know, are you *that* girl? Or are you *this* girl?

Tammie believes social etiquette has gone out the window because some women think that “all is fair in a Meetup.” She expresses incredulity at the woman’s behavior and, later in the interview, even goes so far as to call the woman and others like her “socially retarded.”

For Tammie, a woman can’t “hit on my guy” and then claim to be her friend. She sets up a strong binary: “are you *that* girl? Or are you *this* girl?” That is, is the woman there to make friends? Or to meet male partners? In Tammie’s mind, the woman cannot have both. Gabriela also upholds this binary, when she and her husband decide that friendship-making was not an option in a space that was a “total datin’ somethin’.” Furthermore, both respondents comment on the palpability of the meat market interactions. It seems that the binary between friendship-making and dating becomes more rigid the more manifest these meat market interactions become.

“This is not a dating site”

But what about groups that attempt to distance themselves from such palpable meat markets? How does this impact friendship-making and dating practices?

Organizers often list a series of “rules” for participating in their group in their “About Us” sections where they describe themselves, or on additional pages they set up through their group site. Usually, this includes a discussion of RSVPing, attendance policies, and other logistics; however, some groups

proclaim that their group "is not a dating site" in an attempt to further disassociate themselves from groups with a meat market. As one board game group organizer succinctly wrote, "Come to play games, not to hit on our members." Here is another example taken from an outdoor activity group:

We are not a social club or a 'meet market.'³ Our membership consists of both singles and couples, and our events tend to be athletic in nature. [...] Ground Rules: The primary purpose of this club is to meet and become friends with other adventure sports enthusiasts. If this leads to something more, then great, but if your only interest in joining this club is to "hook up," then this is not the club for you. Dating will occur within the club as a matter of course, but there are also a lot of couples in the club who have no desire to be hit upon. Get to know someone and find out their situation before you start asking them out, and 'no' means 'no.' Anyone engaging in predatory behavior will be voted off the island with extreme prejudice. If you believe that you have been harassed by another club member, inform an organizer or assistant organizer immediately.

The organizer, Greg, asserts that his group is "not a social club or a 'meet market'" and addresses potential sexual harassment in the group "with extreme prejudice." Upon further inspection, however, Greg expresses some ambivalence about dating in the Meetup group. On the one hand, he strongly dissuades people

³ Ultimately, this organizer's typo served as the inspiration for my use of the phrase "meet market" in place of "meat market," (which was the phrase employed by the Meetup users in my study).

from joining the club only to “hook up” or “engage in predatory behavior.” After all, the “primary purpose” of the club is to “become friends with other adventure sports enthusiasts.” On the other hand, Greg believes that “dating will occur within the club as a matter of course,” and seems just fine with the idea of members being friends first, then “leading to something more.” Dating a friend, then, is not the same thing as participating in the meat market for this organizer. Greg’s group page troubles the binary that a group either allows sexual relationships or does not.

Ivan, the organizer of a running group, also wanted to distance his group from the meat market. In our interview, he talked about how he presented this intention on his group page:

I put on there specifically, "this isn't a dating site. This isn't fitness singles dot com. You wanna do that? Go ahead and"-- 'cause I want this to-- we're trying to foster-- I want runners, beginners, middle of the pack, elite runners to be able to come and run and not worry about if somebody's gonna hit on 'em, somebody's gonna, y'know-- somebody's only there to run to meet women. I've already had to decline several— because the guys were asking, "Hey what kind of women you get running in the group?"

Ivan wants to “foster” a group for runners of all sexes to “come and run and not worry about if somebody’s gonna hit on ‘em.” For Ivan, this “somebody” is a man hitting on a woman. He denies access to men who only express interest in the women in the group, and not in running itself. He rejects his group serving as a

“dating site” and suggests that these men look elsewhere, like fitnesssingles.com, if their sole motivation in joining the group is to date female runners.

But just because someone enters a group without the intention of dating, does not mean that they won't end up dating someone in the group. Ivan knows this all too well, as he admits:

There's, uh, there is a couple [of women] that I have been interested in. But I've kind of stayed away from that, and I mean, we kept it as a platonic type thing, and I said, "Look, if she's interested there, y'know, then they're gonna make a move. If not, then I'm okay with that, but I'm not gonna..." 'cause I have to practice what I preach, y'know? And I'm not. If it happens, then— I tell everybody, "If you guys date, and it happens, that's fine, but if it turns out sour and you guys can't be around each other, then somebody's gotta go." So it's not that I foster dating, then I don't. It's kinda like-- in other words, to sum it up and that is, I don't condone it nor do I condemn it.

Even while asserting that his group is not a “dating site,” Ivan admits that he has “been interested in” and dated some of the other group members. Ivan also has to grapple with the ethics of dating as an organizer. He feels the need to “practice what he preaches” on the group webpage. But Ivan also admits that when members do decide to “make a move” and start dating after participating for some time, it complicates his desire to establish his group as platonic. Ivan also hints at the ambiguity of his relationships with other group members.

Another interviewee, Chloe, highlights how the group structure influences her dating and friendship choices:

Well, for me, personally, I would rather date someone that was a friend anyways. So I wasn't looking to join Meetup as a way of meeting a boyfriend initially. I would rather make a bunch of friends and then from there decide if I wanted to pursue a more intimate relationship with some of those individuals. You know, I'd rather it'd be more of a two step process. So that's why I haven't joined some of those ones that are like the dating scenes, or the speed dating... I did try, uh, some of those online dating sites, but you go there with the *intent* of trying to find a boyfriend and I didn't feel that worked always as well for me as, y'know, just more naturally meeting someone who was just a friend and then deciding to move into something, uh, more deep.

To Chloe, there is something important about the "intent" one brings to joining a Meetup group. Chloe feels discomfort with the idea of joining meat market groups to meet a boyfriend. Instead, she perceives a "two step process" of making friends and then deciding if she "wanted to pursue a more intimate relationship" with someone as more "natural," when compared to "the dating scenes."

Unlike Chloe, Donald had participated in several meat market groups and offered some comparisons of these groups with other Meetup groups. When I asked him if he had ever met someone he was interested in romantically at Meetups, he had the following to say:

I would certainly say that there have been a couple of the women I've met at some of the gaming Meetups, and going, "I wouldn't mind going out with you." Hard to, uh... but I'm letting those just develop as friendships for now. But yeah I think there's certainly interesting chemistry. Interestingly enough, not in the singles groups. [Why do you think that is?] Because the singles groups, the only thing you have in common is being single. And people don't feel happy about that. When you go to a board game group, or a Dr. Who group, or something else where you share a passion, you're passionate about that. And you've got something in common. And you know, when you go out on a blind date with somebody and it was a good one and you tell the friend who fixed you up, "Oh! It was great! I found out we have so much in common." [with a smile] So a group that has something interesting in common, like a shared passion for science fiction or what have you, um, I think it's inevitably going to give you a stronger bond with somebody than just, "Oh, we're both single."

Like Chloe, Donald feels the need to "let [relationships] just develop as friendships for now." He notes that it is "interesting" that he has not developed "chemistry" with other women in singles groups. For Donald, it is not enough to only have being single in common. Rather, he sees it as important that a couple "share a passion," and that that gives "a stronger bond with somebody than just 'Oh, we're both single.'"

Some of my respondents have ambiguous intentions when it comes to dating in Meetup groups. As organizers, both Ivan and Greg express heavy ambivalence about dating in their groups once members have participated for long enough. Ivan doesn't "condone it nor condemn it" and has even been interested in some of the women he's run with in his group. It seems, then, that these organizers are not necessarily inherently uncomfortable with dating in their groups. Instead, these organizers do not want to have dating and hooking up to be the sole reason a person attends their group. Since meeting partners is a latent function of these groups, they serve as examples of meet markets. Chloe and Donald echo this sentiment, and suggest that they would rather have a friendship built on common interests progress "naturally" into a romantic relationship. My findings suggest that some Meetup users do not approach groups with an either/or mentality of friendship or dating (i.e. a group is either a meat market or it is not). Rather, they approach groups where they can meet friends with similar interests, and "if this leads to something more, then great." In the sections that follow, I explore the ways gender shapes how people conceptualize the role of sexuality in friendship.

"The Girl Factor"

During my fieldwork, I attended a bowling Meetup event with about eight men in their late twenties and early thirties. It came as a surprise to be the only woman at the event, since several other women had RSVPed on the group

webpage. I had met David the organizer of the group before and, shortly after I arrived and put on my bowling shoes, he jokingly asked me “So... do you feel intimidated by all these guys?” While I shrugged the comment off jokingly, I soon realized that these men were bursting to talk about their Meetup experiences with me once they knew I was a researcher. What’s more, I was an insider as a member of the Meetup group, but an outsider as the only woman present among a group of men. After two rounds of bowling and beer, the guys started divulging some of their thoughts on Meetup:

David adds that there’s a “single guy mentality” in Meetup, too. He tells me that he recognizes that unless there are a certain number of girls who have RSVPed for an event, a guy won’t come unless he’s sure someone he’s already met will be there. Nate, who is single, says that “when you’re single, everything is about meeting cute girls. [pause] And beer.” David says that he realizes this, so he tries to include more “girl events.” I ask him what those might be, and he tells me that horseback riding, going to museums, and wine tastings are usually girl events. Nate counters this, and says “those are all things I would do.” Tom attempts to clarify what David meant, saying that “statistically” there will be more girls who attend those events than other ones. Akshay chimes in and says that if you’re going to more “college [aged] Meetups”, you’re “going for the girls.” David suggests that single, heterosexual men have a different “mentality” and approach to using Meetup than others. As Nate and Akshay both note,

“everything is about meeting cute girls.” Later in the evening, David commented that originally he didn’t really feel like coming to the bowling event, but he was glad that he came because he had a good time.

In the fieldnote above, David also alludes to a ratio of women to men that increases the likelihood of a male group member to show up. During my fieldwork, this was a frequent concern for David, who took his organizing seriously and wanted to provide a wide variety of events for his members. Two months later, at a museum event, he told me:

I’ve been getting lower turnouts lately, David says quietly with a note of concern in his voice. Why do you think that is? I ask him. “The girl factor,” he tells me.

David attributes his lower turnouts to events to the number of women that do (or don’t) RSVP and show up to events, which he calls “the girl factor.” The “girl factor”, in turn, influences how many men RSVP and show up to events.

While gendered, David's concern about lower turnouts isn’t misplaced. Recall from chapter 4 that organizers need to have enough participating members at their events for their group to survive. Even organizers who have a large pool of members have to continue providing an enjoyable experience to ensure members’ continued involvement. Without enough participation, organizers may become disheartened, stop planning events, and the group becomes inactive.

Furthermore, David felt Meetup was a “positive experience” and wanted to continue making friends. He frequently told new members that he had been the best man in Tom’s wedding and became excited when Nate later referred to him as a friend. As an organizer of a co-ed group, David sees the female to male ratio at events, or the “girl factor”, as one way of appealing to single male participants and increasing his attendance rates (and the number of potential new friends he can make).

What’s more, David was not the only male organizer who noticed the "girl factor." Cliff, an interviewee in his early thirties, also recognized the gendered trend. Here is an excerpt from our interview:

[Have you ever had a Meetup experience that you didn’t really enjoy as much?] Well the second pub crawl, um, we had about-- just as many people RSVP, maybe even a little bit more. But there was a better mix of guys and girls at the first one. At the second one, there was-- it was very male heavy. And uh, and there was... dissent in the ranks, bunch of the guys thought there’d be more girls hanging out. But I said, “Hey look, you can hang out and meet new guy friends, but we’re still going to bars with plenty of girls and stuff.” ‘Cause a lot of guys were single and looking to mingle, that sort of stuff, and um, you can still talk to girls even though they’re not in the Meetup group, so don’t dock my Meetup group just because it’s not, y’know, tons of chicks running around. And uh, but-- so I think I got four out of five stars on the second one. I don’t blame ‘em

though, it was-- I mean, it was cool, I had some good friends there, met a lot of good dudes, but, um, it is nice to have a better mix of guys and girls that are there. [Why is that?] Um... I dunno, it's just uh... You wanna show that the group has clout, y'know, that it has-- that you can actually get some girls there, too. Um... for the *heteros* in the group, um. Yeah, I dunno, it just seemed like when there's a better mix the guys are happier. 'Cause it was probably sixty-forty the first one and it was probably ninety-ten the second one. Yeah, it was disproportionately bad. But I still had a great time, but I think I had a less time knowing that a lot of guys are kinda like, y'know.

While David had been organizing for several years, Cliff had only planned two bar hopping events as a co-organizer for a co-ed group for 20 and 30-year-olds. Cliff suggests that heterosexual male organizers are predisposed to notice the importance of the female to male ratio at co-ed social events. Like David, Cliff comprehends his success as an organizer as revolving around whether or not the men at the event enjoy themselves. He notably does not tell us anything about how the women at the event might have been feeling. Accomplishing "a better mix of guys and girls" shows that "the group has clout" for men, or "the [male] heteros in the group." Cliff even suffers some disappointment and frustration from an average event rating of 4 out of 5 stars, rather than the full 5, on his event webpage. Cliff feels frustrated that it is not enough for the men to "hang out and

meet new guy friends” or “meet some good dudes”: in his mind, he must also provide them with a number of available women to socialize with.

Given their reliance on members attending their events, organizers like David and Cliff have reason to be concerned about the “girl factor”: some people simply will not attend events if they perceive the ratio of people they're attracted to is not in their favor on the event page. Ethan, who is straight, white and in his early thirties, made this known to me in our interview:

I will absolutely go down the list and look at the guy to girl ratio [on the event page]. A hundred percent I'll do that. [How does that work out? I'm curious.] If I see it's a guy heavy thing, I just won't go. If there's a balance and, uh-- I hate to admit all this stuff, or, let's say there is a fifty-fifty balance, and I go through-- I'll go through the female profiles and say, “I could be interested in this person, I could not be for this person.” Um, it's terribly superficial and judgmental because there's nothing on those profiles but pictures. Um, but that is what I do.

Ethan pays very close attention to the “guy to girl ratio,” on the event's webpage, and won't even attend a “guy heavy” event. He takes the time to browse the profiles of female members who will be attending to assess their attractiveness. He realizes that it is “terribly superficial and judgmental,” although he was a bit embarrassed to “admit” these behaviors to a female researcher.

At first glance, it seems that Ethan is prioritizing meeting women over men, since he does not look at the profiles of male users. However, at the time of our

interview, Ethan had just founded the sole men's friendship group in Austin. He described having "a great time" after organizing two "successful" men's only nights. Still, throughout our interview he grappled with the difficulty of meeting and making male friends:

I was just very curious as to, y'know, where do you draw that line? Sexuality and guy platonic friendship things, it's all a very touchy and muddled subject. [Why do you think that is?] I think too many guys are purely just flat-out homophobic to be honest with you. Uh, I feel weird about going up and talking to a guy and saying, "hey what's up" y'know whatever, for fear of him thinking that I'm hitting on him. And I don't know why that frightens me, uh, I certainly wouldn't do it to a very large gentleman for fear of getting punched out. Um... I guess, and that's something I struggled with, with organizing the group is, how do we just establish that intention? "Hey I'm just here to not do anything sexual, I just want to hang out." I don't know why it seems to be an overly touchy thing for guys, but it does.

Ethan believes that the fact that "too many guys are purely just flat-out homophobic" prevents men's participation in men's only groups. His perception that other men are "touchy" about "sexuality and guy platonic friendship things," leads him to believe that he will get "punched out" by a "large gentleman" were he to approach him for conversation. Ethan struggles with how to "establish the intention" just to "hang out" and "not do anything sexual." One strategy he used to do this was to organize events revolving around compulsory heterosexuality.

These events included bar hopping and “Titty Bingo,” at a popular Austin venue, which Ethan described as being held in “a giant room where they basically use pornographic references and even video scenes in a form of bingo.” For both events, Ethan used sexualized spaces to establish non-sexual events.

Ethan suggests that sexuality and friendship become “muddled” for men trying to make friendships with other men. This, in turn, presents some frustration for organizers like David and Cliff, who wonder why it's not enough for men to just come out and "meet new guy friends." Instead, these male organizers feel the need to placate men by amplifying compulsory heterosexuality in the space. Such strategies include preventing “male heavy” spaces altogether by drawing more women to events (i.e. the “girl factor”).

"I just want friends": Women's Only Groups on Meetup

Roughly a quarter of the fifty groups I sampled for content analysis were female-only groups in some capacity, compared to the one men's social group for the entire Austin area. These groups make it clear that they are for females only upfront, with names like "Girls Just Wanna Have Fun" and "Ladies Social of Austin." Some may even go one step further and declare on their webpages that there are "absolutely NO boys allowed!!" Additionally, some of these groups are further specified by age and/or race and ethnicity (e.g. "Desi Girl Austin," "Amigas Latinas," and "Austin Women in Black"). The aim of women's groups is to offer a space where women can, in the words of one group, "Leave the men

behind and just have some mature fun. A place where there is no dating, no kids, no husbands, and no boyfriends. It's just us." That this group promotes "a place where there is no dating," assumes that members are heterosexual, or have no sexual interest in the other women attending. So, when the organizer proclaims that the group is "just us," one of "us" is assumed to be heterosexual and female. This is the underlying assumption in women's social groups, whether they post it explicitly on their webpage or not.

Of course, this assumption is troubled by lesbian social groups. Two interviewees both discussed the prevalence of the meat market in lesbian social clubs. Catherine expressed frustration that the other groups she had participated in "were all pick up joints." She discussed at length her negative experiences in lesbian groups, including one incident where she believed a woman purposely stood behind her to "take a little peek" under her shirt at a book club. Encounters like these frustrated Catherine, who was using Meetup to find friends, not partners. This led her to establish her alcohol-free, "platonic" LGBTQ group for "educated professionals" of all sexes. Catherine told me, "I wanted to make a platonic group, because.. y'know.. my experience was that if you slap the word 'gay' on something, then it becomes a pick up joint, regardless of what the group's focus is." Micah, another interviewee, corroborated Catherine's intent, and commented that Catherine's group was established because the other lesbian groups in town were "too meat-market." Additionally, Catherine decided the group would be alcohol-free, because, for her, this "attracted lots of tame, nerdy

types" rather than people who would come and hit on her and her members. So, lesbian and other LGBTQ groups can also find ways to distance themselves from a meat market atmosphere. Furthermore, since women, men, and transpeople were all able to join the group, Catherine's group challenges the understanding that co-ed social groups are inherently meat markets.

Still, many co-ed social groups do become meet markets. Jess, who had since stopped organizing, found this to be the case in her own group. Although she expected some dating to occur in her group, she "didn't know that it would be to the extent that it was." Eventually, she left the group in the hands of a new organizer, because she "kinda felt like I got out of it what I wanted" by meeting several new friends through the group. She told me:

Y'know, I think, especially with [my co-ed group] you always have the sense that--like, with like... like if a guy was talking with a girl, you were always like on the defensive-- not like on the defensive but you were always like, "Is he flirting with me? Is he flirting with me? Is he flirting with me?" and I-- I can see being in a relationship not wanting that to be the only thing I'm thinking about constantly, y'know, like I don't wanna go to a Meetup where I'm just gonna get hit or or where y'know-- or like nobody wants to talk to me because I have a boyfriend, y'know?

Although she is single, Jess perceives being coupled as a hindrance to making friends in a co-ed social group because "nobody wants to talk to me because I have a boyfriend." She does not want to have to constantly question if the man

she is talking to is flirting with her or not, which she got a "sense" of in her co-ed group. Lisa, an organizer for a women's social group, puts it even more bluntly: "I'm not lookin' to get hit on, I'm not tryin' to find somebody, I just want friends." For both women, participating in co-ed groups is not the most effective place to make friends, because they feel they are only perceived by the men in terms of their dating potential.

Jess also comments that she can see how a woman in a relationship would not want to "constantly" worry about being hit on by men. This sentiment played out in my participant observation in a women's social group, where most of the women were coupled or married. Some of them were members of other Meetup groups with their husbands. I did not encounter anyone who was coupled in that group who also participated in co-ed groups without their male partners or another female friend. Some of the considerations for these behaviors came through in this fieldnote excerpt:

Amy says that she's been thinking about going to a co-ed hiking group without her husband, but that they're concerned about her going into the wilderness with strangers who might hit on her. Her husband asked her, "Who *are* these people?" Amy says they're just trying to be safe about it.

Peggy says this is much the same reason why she doesn't like going to the bar events, because she doesn't want "weird guys hitting on me."

Amy is preoccupied with "going into the wilderness with strangers" and, as I discuss in Chapter 3, this distrust of strangers and the stigma of Internet danger

serve as an initial obstacle to participating in new Meetup groups. Amy and Peggy's comments, however, show how gender is particularly pertinent in these considerations. Amy's husband brings these concerns to the fore, asking "Who *are* these people?" and, as Amy relates it, seems to suggest that swarms of men will be hitting on her in the wilderness. Amy's considerations for her relationship with her husband preclude her from participating in an activity she would otherwise enjoy and, to my knowledge, she never joined the hiking group.

This gendered distrust of strangers and the meat market also shape the ways female organizers approach managing their groups. The female organizers I interviewed of all sexual orientations see themselves as gatekeepers and protectors of their group and its members. Meetup's group page setup provides organizers with a powerful tool for managing members. As Catherine unabashedly commented, "We've had one or two problems, and I hit the delete button and they go away." Referring to some members as "problems," Catherine stresses the ease with which she can make them "go away." All she has to do is "hit the delete button."

Other organizers, like Lisa, stressed the ability to make a group private, which means that only members can view the group's events and their details.

[What about being in charge do you enjoy?] Because it-- the safety parts of it. Because our-- the group wasn't made, wasn't private [before I became organizer], so anybody could get on-- if it's not made private, you can go on to any group, whether it's a women's only group or not, and you can just

look at the different members, and you can read where they're gonna be, like, "Oh!"-- Like I think with [another women's social group], I think it's open to members, or to everyone in Meetup can look on it and see where they're having their girls things. I'm like, that's creepy! 'Cause there's creepy dudes who are like, "Ooo, I'm gonna go meet some ladies, they're gonna be here at Chuy's at eight on Saturday. Imma go over there." And just-- I don't know if anyone's that crazy or not, maybe I'm just super paranoid, but I made it private.

Here, Lisa explains her motivations for making the group private. She finds it "creepy" that there are "dudes" who can look at public women's social groups' event information without being a member. Earlier in our interview, she discussed having to kick "two dudes" out of her women's social group when she became organizer and discovered they had joined. While she admits that she might just be "super paranoid," she views her decision to make the group private as something that will increase the "safety" of her group and decrease the ability of "creepy dudes" to prey on her members.

When a group is private on the Meetup webpage, organizers like Lisa have to manually accept (or reject) each new member's "Join Us" questionnaire. This gives the organizer a considerable amount of control over who can (and can't) participate in their group. I asked Gabriela, who organizes a private group for Latinas, whether she had ever denied a new member entry into her group:

I don't accept everybody. I have been, uh... I've been called a few things, for being, uh, non-inclusive of... [with difficulty] same-sexually orien— same sex orientually? Women? [in an exasperated whisper] *Lesbians*. However you say that, I don't know. Um... so I've been called-- you know, "how— who are you to decide who joins the group? Y'know, what if I'm lookin' for a Latina woman?" I'm like, "well, I don't think none of my friends want that. This is not a dating site, we're really just lookin' for friendships, and no I don't think you fit the profile."

Later in the interview, Gabriela remarks, "I'm very protective of my friends." Combined with the comments above, she clearly perceives herself as a line of defense against people who would treat her group as a "dating site." She perceives all lesbians as being solely motivated to join her group to "look for a Latina woman." Gabriela's homophobia (she has difficulty using the word "lesbian") coupled with her control of access to the group has serious implications for who can and cannot join her group. A woman could "fit the profile" in every other aspect, but if she's a lesbian, she must look elsewhere to make friends.

To summarize, many straight women avoid co-ed groups because they perceive men's intentions as sexual. They instead turn to women's social groups, where only women are allowed, to make friends. However, many women's social groups rely heavily on compulsory heterosexuality in their attempts to distance themselves from both meat and meet markets. In opting out of co-ed groups,

women rely on the understanding that all men are in the group to find sexual partners. So, what friendships with men might they be missing out on? Furthermore, by assuming that there will be "no dating" between the women in their groups, organizers are also assuming that there will be no lesbians in their groups as well. They may even reinforce this boundary by denying access to women on the basis of their sexual orientation on some occasions.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I highlighted several ways that gender and sexuality shape people's Meetup experiences. I showed how many people that use Meetup are motivated not just by making friends, but also by meeting romantic partners. I also argue that these intentions do not represent a strict binary. Instead, people's intentions for meeting new friends and romantic partners are inextricably linked with one another. Although scholars have examined gender's impact on voluntary organizations (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1986; Popielarz 1999) and how voluntary organizations shape spouse choices (Kalmijn and Flap 2001), to my knowledge scholars have not examined sexuality in voluntary organizations and how this influences participation.

In contrast to online dating websites, whose explicit purpose is to provide dates one-on-one, Meetup group pages are often ambiguous about whether they harbor a meat market. Some groups have more manifest sexual purposes than others, which heightens the perceived binary between friendship and sexual

relationships. Other groups may be a “meet market,” a term that addresses the latent function of spaces like voluntary organizations for finding sexual relationships. Such groups do not want to have meeting sexual partners be their only purpose; however, meeting partners may be one of several underlying motivations for a member to join the group. Even while meet markets try not to have sexuality be at the forefront of their experience, they are still sexualized spaces.

This, in turn, has ramifications for other groups in the social space as well, some of which try to distance themselves from an intentionally sexual atmosphere in an effort to maintain clear boundaries between friendship and sexuality. Some heterosexual women segregate themselves into women’s only groups, a move they perceive as effectively blocking any potential sexualized interactions. By doing this, however, these women are also effectively blocking any potential friendships with men, thus furthering the stereotype that men are only interested in sex. This conclusion may shed light on Popielarz’s (1999) findings that women participate in more gender-segregated organizations than men. Moreover, organizers go to great lengths to police the boundaries of their platonic groups by making the group private and managing access to the group. Organizers also have certain bodies in mind when they conceptualize who they want joining their group, which brings to mind Acker’s (1990) work on gendered organizations. Assuming that female-only groups provide a sort of shelter from being “hit on” relies on notions of compulsory heterosexuality, since these groups

willfully ignore the existence of and sometimes even purposely exclude lesbian Meetup users. In this sense, Meetup groups maintain heteronormativity.

While there was a preponderance of women-only groups, several of the heterosexual men I interviewed felt disappointed about what they perceived as an inability of men to make friendships with other men. They suggested that homophobia prevented men from creating and joining men-only groups, and that women needed to be present in order to prevent an event from being “male heavy.” Although my male respondents continue to value friendships with other men, homophobia hinders their efforts to establish such relationships.

Some of my respondents, however, have ambiguous intentions about friendship-making and dating, which in turn troubles the ostensible binary between the two. These respondents see Meetup groups as a way of meeting friends with similar interests, but remain open to them evolving into a romantic relationships. The idea that this is a more “natural” way of finding romantic partners relies on cultural values of companionate marriage, or the idea that one’s partner should also be their best friend (Oliker 1989). All in all, my respondents both maintained and muddled the perceived binary between friendship and sexual relationships.

Furthermore, my findings suggest that, in one way or another, people must take sexuality into account when they join and participate in voluntary organizations. This is the case even for “platonic” friendship groups. Male Meetup users rely on heteronormative, sexualized spaces to distance themselves

from the homophobic anxiety surrounding “male heavy” events. LGBTQ Meetup users must consider which groups will accept them on the basis of their sexual orientation. Even members of women-only groups make their decisions to join such groups in the face of sexualized spaces. Regardless of whether or not people are attending for the explicit purpose of meeting sexual partners, participation in voluntary organizations is fundamentally shaped by sexuality. This may also have broader ramifications for both the quality and quantity of social capital people can access through voluntary organizations beyond Meetup.

Chapter 6: Conclusion

Throughout this thesis, it has been my goal to connect my findings on Meetup to sociology at large. My study contributes to several areas of research, including the literature on friendship and sexuality; voluntary organizations; theories on social capital and civic engagement in contemporary America; and the Internet's impact in these areas.

Social scientists and the greater public continue to deliberate on the effects of new media and technologies on social interactions and friendships. My participants and interviewees believed that friendships were an important part of their lives. They became acutely aware of this following a major life course event that prompted them to “get off the couch” and meet new people; however, they were uncertain where they could actually go to find people like them. Contrary to my expectations, the people with whom I interacted expressed ambivalence about turning to the Internet to make friends. They felt that the Internet was an artificial, stigmatized way of meeting people; however, they also appreciated the meaningful friendships they accrued from using Meetup. Given the Internet's searchability, people who would have otherwise been socially isolated can now find similar peers. By the same token, Meetup also provides opportunities for people to meet others they probably would not have met otherwise and expand their social networks and social capital. Meetup group members and organizers alike learn new skills and can ask other members for help in ways that advantages their own social capital. Furthermore, these benefits may also take place outside

of the boundaries of the Meetup group itself, with people drawing on Meetup-established ties to help them move, take care of their pets, or testify in a divorce case. My findings suggest that the Internet has the capacity to bolster people's friendships in much the same ways traditional institutions do.

My study also illuminates processes of voluntary organizations. Scholars have previously understood voluntary associations as drawing from pre-existing ties, and that this accounts for the homophily present in these groups (Popielarz and McPherson 1995). On Meetup, however, the group members would be strangers to one another outside of the context of the group. In other words, new group members were not recruited from pre-existing ties. Instead, people learned about the group through their own efforts on the Internet through Meetup's search engine. Groups still find ways to establish a group "niche" in the social space, however, even when the group itself is the only basis for social ties. Additionally, the ease of starting or finding a group also allows users to coalesce around esoteric interests or draw from highly specified segments of the population more readily than traditional organizations. I also explored several ways that Meetup group organizers shaped their group niches relative to other groups. My findings suggest that group members actively sculpt their group niche in some capacity.

Finally, my study details the ways in which people frame their friendships and participation in groups through heteronormativity and sexuality. In one way or another, my participants and respondents decided to join the Meetup groups

that they did based partly on whether or not they were open to sexualized interactions. Even people who purposely joined groups that were “platonic” did so out of a desire to avoid sexualized interactions. The friendships people make in these groups, then, are also the product of heteronormativity and sexuality. Partly due to my sample boundaries, most of the people I spoke with avoided participating in meet markets, where meeting sexual partners was the manifest purpose of the group. Instead, they opted to join meet markets, a term I use to describe groups where meeting sexual partners is a more latent function of the group. While scholars have examined how spaces such as bars lend themselves to sexuality (Green 2011; Laumann et al 2004), Meetup allows users to meet sexual partners at events that can take place anywhere around town. I believe sexuality in voluntary organizations warrants additional study.

Limitations and Suggestions for Future Research

Although my study offers new insights in these areas, it has also left me with additional questions. One regret I have about my study was the fact that I did not go into enough depth about people’s work lives. I was struck, for instance, by my respondents’ and participants’ belief that the workplace is not an appropriate place for making friends, as I discuss in Chapter 3. Has this always been the case? Or has the neo-liberalization of the American workplace impacted people’s workplace sociability? What implications might this have for the telecommuters and other high-tech industry workers I met during my study?

Furthermore, my data suggests the need for a revitalized discussion of voluntary organizations in the Internet age. I believe Meetup use will only become more widespread in the years to come, and this will have unintended benefits and consequences on community life. At the very least, the Internet and other communication technologies may play an increasing role in how all voluntary organizations recruit new members, keep in contact with one another, and plan their events. As I point out in Chapter 4, the Meetup groups I investigated established homophily in various ways. This, in turn, led to some exclusionary practices which may prevent some people's access to the benefits Meetup has to offer. Furthermore, I suspect that activity groups may have more diversity than social groups, since a common interest, not a status like age, race, or gender, is the basis for participation. Because I did not collect survey data, however, I am unable to say the extent to which people are similar along demographic characteristics. Since Meetup users connect with people they otherwise would not have met, it is possible that Meetup does, in some cases, increase the diversity of people's social networks. Future research should examine survey data to better understand whether or not Meetup groups (or other Internet groups) encompass a wider variety of people than traditional voluntary organizations and institutions do. The extent to which the Internet fosters homophily or diversity in voluntary associations is an open question.

One limitation of my study is that I only talked with people who were still using Meetup and examined groups that are active. I suspect that some people go

to only one Meetup event, but for some reason or another never go back. I believe talking with such people would have been illuminating; however, I do not believe I could have sampled them in a strategic way. Furthermore, many Meetup groups “die out.” That is, Meetup groups will hold events and then for some reason stop hosting them. Given my sample, I can say little about why this might happen. However, it begs the question: why do some voluntary groups live and others die?

Finally, my conclusions in Chapter 5 highlight how little social scientists have looked at sexuality in the context of voluntary organizations. Previous scholarship examines how gender shapes voluntary group membership (McPherson and Smith-Lovin 1982, 1986; Popielarz 1999); however, little to no research has been conducted on how sexual orientation or heteronormativity do. I argue that sexuality inherently shapes how people approach voluntary organizations and the friends they can make in them, but what larger implications might this have for people’s participation in community life and their friendships? This remains to be seen.

Conclusion

Participation in voluntary associations has long been an important aspect of American life. Does the Internet have a role in supporting people’s friendships and group membership? I believe that it can. Several of my participants and interviewees felt that the Internet was a tool. And, just like any tool, I think that

the Internet can be used more or less effectively for different tasks, like finding new friends and promoting civic engagement.

Appendix A: Interview Guide

About Joining Meetup

- Why did you decide to start going to Meetup events? What was going on in your life at that time?
- How did you decide to attend the groups that you did? What search terms did you use?
- How did you feel at your first Meetup event?

Meetup Experiences

- Tell me about a Meetup experience that you really enjoyed.
- Tell me about a Meetup experience that you didn't enjoy as much.
- Was there ever a Meetup event that didn't go as you'd expected?
- Have you ever seen any Meetups on the website that you'd like to try but haven't yet? What kinds?
- [For Organizers]
 - So you organize the _____ group. What led you to organize this group?
 - What are some of the difficulties you've encountered as an organizer?

People at Meetup

- Tell me about the people you've met through Meetup.
- Have you hung out with people you've met at Meetup outside of organized events?
 - [If yes] How did that come about? How was it different?
 - [If no] Any reason why not?
- [re: relationship status]
 - You mentioned that you are single. Have you ever gone to a Meetup event and met someone you were interested in?
 - You mentioned that you are [married/seeing someone]. Has your partner ever gone to Meetup events with you?
 - [If yes] How is the experience different?
 - [If no] How come?

Friendships outside of Meetup

- How do you keep in contact with your friends? What tools do you use?
- Can you describe your best friends for me and how you met them? When did you realize your friend had become a best friend?
- How have you met friends outside of using Meetup? Can you give me an example?
- How do you feel when people say that the Internet is making meaningful friendships harder to make and maintain?
- What would you say are some pros and cons of interacting face-to-face? What would you say are some pros and cons of interacting on the internet?

Wrapping Up

- Is there anything that I haven't asked you that you think I should know about your experiences with Meetup?

Appendix B: Table of Interviewees

Pseudonym	Organizer?	Sex	Sexual Orientation	Relationship Status	Race/Ethnicity	Age	Education	Occupation
Lawrence	No	M	Heterosexual	Single	Black	20	High School	Freelancer
Jaime	No	F	Heterosexual	Married	white	25	Some Graduate	Researcher
Chelsea	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Dating	white	25	Some Bachelor's	Dog Trainer
Chloe	No	F	Heterosexual	Single	white	29	Doctorate	Researcher
Cliff	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Single	white	30	Bachelor's	Recruiter
Jess	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Single	white	30	Some Graduate	Analyst
Micah	No	Trans.	Transgender	Single	Multiracial	31	Master's	Community organizer
Lisa	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Dating	Native American	32	Bachelor's	Accountant
Kyle	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Married	white	32	Bachelor's	Software Developer
Ethan	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Single	white	33	Bachelor's	Pilot
Claire	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Married	white	37	Master's	Supervisor
Catherine	Yes	F	Lesbian	Divorced	white	38	Master's	Educator
Mark	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Divorced	Black	40	Some Bachelor's	Event planner
Gabriela	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Married	Hispanic	42	Some Bachelor's	Small Business Owner
Ivan	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Divorced	Hispanic	47	Some Graduate	Loss Mitigator
Suzanne	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Divorced	white	49	Some Bachelor's	Consultant
Donald	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Divorced	white	51	Master's	New Hire Trainer
Tammie	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Divorced	white	51	Some Graduate	Non-Profit Director
Max	Yes	M	Heterosexual	Single	white	55	Some Bachelor's	Alarm Designer
Nancy	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Divorced	white	57	Some Bachelor's	Accounts Manager
Mary	Yes	F	Heterosexual	Divorced/ Widowed	white	68	Master's	Small Business Owner (Retired)
Kenneth	Yes	M	Gay	Single	white	69	Master's	Travel Agent

Appendix C: Content Analysis Sample

Group ID Number	Privacy Setting	Org. Sex	Group Sex	Group Age Range	LGBT Group	Group for people of color	Group Type
1	Public	M	N/A	30s	No	No	Social
2	Public	F	N/A	35+	No	No	Social
3	Public	M	N/A	45-65	No	No	Social
4	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
5	Public	F	N/A	N/A	No	No	Social
6	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
7	Private	F	N/A	40+	No	No	Social
8	Private	F	N/A	40+	No	No	Social
9	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
10	Public	F	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
11	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
12	Private	F	F Only	N/A	Yes	No	Social
13	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
14	Public	M	M Only	N/A	No	No	Social
15	Public	M	F Only	N/A	No	No	Activity
16	Public	F	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
17	Public	F	N/A	20s, 30s	No	No	Social
18	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
19	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
20	Public	F	F Only	35+	No	No	Social
21	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Social
22	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
23	Public	F	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
24	Private	F	F Only	30+	No	Yes	Social
25	Private	F	F Only	30+	No	No	Social
26	Private	F	N/A	20s, 30s	No	Yes	Social
27	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
28	Public	F	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
29	Private	F	F Only	20s, 30s	No	No	Social
30	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
31	Private	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
32	Private	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
33	Public	M	N/A	25-40	No	No	Social
34	Public	F	F Only	N/A	No	No	Social
35	Private	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
36	Public	F	N/A	40+	No	No	Social

Group ID Number	Privacy Setting	Org. Sex	Group Sex	Group Age Range	LGBT Group	Group for people of color	Group Type
37	Public	F	N/A	60+	No	No	Social
38	Private	F	N/A	N/A	Yes	No	Social
39	Public	M	N/A	N/A	Yes	No	Social
40	Public	M	N/A	N/A	Yes	No	Social
41	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	No	Activity
42	Private	F	N/A	25+	No	Yes	Social
43	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	Yes	Social
44	Private	F	F Only	N/A	No	Yes	Social
45	Public	M	N/A	N/A	No	Yes	Social
46	Private	F	F Only	25-45	No	No	Social
47	Private	F	F Only	N/A	No	Yes	Social
48	Public	M	N/A	20s, 30s	No	No	Social
49	Public	F	F Only	50+	No	No	Social
50	Private	F	F Only	50+	No	No	Social

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