Fall 12-12-2017

R00ting the Ingroup: Anonymous and Social Identities in the Digital Sector

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ROOTING THE INGROUP:

ANONYMOUS AND SOCIAL IDENTITIES IN THE DIGITAL SECTOR

_____________________
A Doctoral Dissertation

Presented to

The College of Humanities & Social Sciences
School of Conflict Management, Peacebuilding, & Development
Kennesaw State University
Kennesaw, Georgia

_____________________
In Partial Fulfillment

of the Requirements for the Degree

Doctor of Philosophy in International Conflict Management

_____________________
by
Crystal Armstrong
November, 2017

Keywords: Social Identity, Self-Categorization, Mobilization, Digital Technology, Anonymous
Abstract

In this dissertation, the author examines the online hacking collective, Anonymous to determine if Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory are transferable to the digital sector. The case study utilizes semi-structured interviews to determine how members of the collective experience their shared identity and how the collective communicates that identity to members and prospective members. It also explores how Anons use their social identity to mobilize others for membership and action. Findings suggest that these theories do indeed have applicability online, and that while exceptions exist, Anons share a salient social identity and experience generally muted individual identities. Anons express their social identity through emphasis on their shared norms and values. They mobilize via both passive and active mobilization methods and these methods vary based on the mobilizer’s level of self-categorization. Study findings have implications for scholars who wish to explore the formation and expression of online identities. Findings will also be of interest to policymakers who seek to collaborate with digital groups or to understand less benevolent groups that pose a threat to public safety. Finally this research may be of interest to social movement organizers who wish to mobilize others for their causes.
Dedication

To my son Rhett. Thank you for making me a mother.

I hope with all my heart to leave this world a better place for you.
Acknowledgements

I am both incredibly proud of this project and acutely aware that it would have been impossible without the help of so many.

To my Anons, the crazy hackers who humored me as I attempted to understand your world, I am eternally grateful. You willingness to engage with me and share in my enthusiasm for this project means more to me than I can ever express. You taught me how to walk with you in a geography I had not ventured before. You made sure I was safe. You shared your thoughts and feelings, and trusted me to protect both. Thank you for your willingness to be vulnerable to a stranger, and for watching out for my own vulnerabilities (especially the ones I couldn’t see).

I must take extra time to thank a few Anons who were especially helpful in teaching me to navigate the Anonymous landscape. Thank you UK_15 for teaching me and showing me all the cool tools. The extra time you took with me was above and beyond what I expected. Thank you KatO for your kindness and excitement over this project and for womens’ achievements everywhere. I admire your enthusiasm for the success of others and your selfless efforts toward helping us all be our best selves. Thanks Matrix for your candor, the referrals, and for cracking me up. You brightened a time during data collection where I was struggling. Thanks Shade for showing me places and people I never would have found on my own, and for doing things with style. Your videos are amazing and your taste in music isn’t half bad either. Thank you Wauchula for giving me such a detailed look into your world and your efforts. The work you do is often thankless, and I wish that weren’t the case. Keep fighting the good fight. Thanks 99 for helping me get started and for the kindness that you extend to everyone, even those who don’t reciprocate. Thank you H4x. You. Are. The. Man. You kept me on my toes more than anyone else, and I know that you’d love to know that. Thank you ALL for giving of yourselves so that I
could complete this project. Though they asked not to be named in this document, there were many other Anons who contributed with time, kindness, and information. All y’all who prefer to remain in the shadows- please know that my deepest gratitude extends to you as well. A very special thanks to Dimples, whose name I wish I could use the most. You opened the door for me and pushed me down the Anon rabbit hole. Thank you friend, for inviting me into the world of Anonymous, for vouching for me, for helping me tighten my opsec, and for laughing at ‘hacking’ and sour cream containers. I’ve missed you on the tail end of this project but am hoping the message of gratitude reaches you.

I am also deeply indebted to my committee. Your timely and thoughtful feedback were critical in my ability to produce this piece of writing. To Dr. Dan Gressang IV—thank you for taking a chance on an unknown student. You had no reason to show such kindness to a stranger, and yet you did. Your uniquely knowledgeable perspective and pointed feedback assisted me in assuring that I both understood and expressed the policy-relevance of this project effectively. I was so appreciative to have you attend in person as I defended. Thank you also Dr. Charity Butcher. In the classroom, you taught me how to interpret theory more critically, and with an eye for real-world applicability. During our collaboration on our NGO article, you guided me through the research and publication process, and my first real taste of a ‘reviewer 2’. As for this dissertation, you have been an invaluable source of information, advice, and encouragement. Your sharp eye caught many things that slipped past me. Thank you for mentoring me and special thanks for the speedy turnaround on chapters. You’re a miracle-worker.

To my dissertation chair, Dr. Volker Franke: How do I thank the person who knew exactly when to push, when to let me trudge through, and when I needed a lifeline? Your uncanny ability to sense precisely what your students need helps us all through this crazy
process. Thank you for supervising me through this dissertation and my entire KSU adventure. Your investment in student success is above and beyond what most of us deserve, yet again and again, you give of yourself anyway. Thank you for reigning me in when I tried to drive faster than my car could take me. I don’t know if I can accurately express how much I’ve learned under your guidance, or how fundamental you’ve been to my academic development. If there’s a ‘so what’ to your mentorship, it’s this: I articulate myself more clearly because of you. I think more effectively because of you. I am a better scholar because of you. Please also thank Niklas and Emma for sharing their dad during meals, during car rides when I’d call to ask questions, and with my incessant texting (especially right at the end). Thanks for that kiddos! Niklas- thanks also for the feedback on my presentation and interest in my topic. Emma, thanks for picking out the lovely card holder. You’ve got style!

There are others at KSU I would like to thank. I’d like to extend my gratitude to Dr. Becky Lefebvre for the feedback on my proposal for this project. Your expertise in this area of inquiry and thoughtful comments helped me shape a better project. Thank you for including me in your Ferguson project and modeling good research practices. Thank you also to Dr. Maia Hallward for collaborating on our book chapter and guiding me through one of my first publication processes. Your subject area expertise made that project possible, and working alongside you taught me about the type of scholar I’d like to be. Thanks for letting me run with the methodology, and for keeping me in mind as you’ve seen opportunities that might be of interest to me since. I’m so grateful to have worked with you, and appreciate how much you give for us as students beyond the classroom.

I’d like to thank my 11th grade English teacher as well-- Mr. Jack Bonawitz. Writing in your class every week was a huge pain. I became a better writer because of each assignment
though, and will always appreciate the way you made me WANT to improve. Reading and thinking became fun for so many of us because of you. I feel bad for all students that don’t have a Mr. Bonawitz in their life, but grateful that you’ve been a part of mine.

Many of my family members were lifesavers as I worked to complete this research. Thank you to my mother-in-law Deb and to Aunt Mary for caring for my son so I could read, type, and revise. Special thanks to my own mother, Carol, who made the 3 and a half hour trip to our home too many times to count in order to babysit while I worked. I never could have finished without your visits. To all three of you: it was so much easier to focus my attention elsewhere because I knew my son was in such caring hands, thank you for loving him. Thank you Dad for the financial assistance in making the move down to Atlanta and then back home- you saved me from years of ramen. Thanks to you and Sue for always being interested in what I was working on. It meant the world to feel your enthusiasm from afar. Thanks to my baby brother Mikey, for answering my tech questions and texts at all hours. Thanks also to Mom, Dad, Sue, and Dennis (we miss you!) for encouraging me on my educational path through the years. I took the indirect road and you supported me through every detour and distraction along the way. Thank you for believing in me and for helping me learn to believe in myself.

Last but not least, I must thank my husband Tyler, who was not only my biggest supporter during this project, but also served as a walking thesaurus for four and a half years. Your vocabulary is [insert adjective]. Thank you for letting me bounce ideas off of you, and for taking an interest in my passions. Thank you for your calm encouragement all the times I was wound too tightly, and for the shoulder rubs that helped with the same. Thank you for creating an office for me at your business so that I could work most effectively. Thank you for the million things you do every day to help me make my dreams a reality. I may not acknowledge them out
loud enough but they never go unnoticed. Thank you for loving Rhett and I with such a fierce love, and thank you for always being on my team. I love you Swede.
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Abbreviation</th>
<th>Description</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>99</td>
<td>@anon99percent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>ALH</td>
<td>AnonLulzHacks</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>BDS</td>
<td>Boycott, Divestment, Sanctions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DDoS</td>
<td>Distributed Denial of Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DM</td>
<td>Direct Message</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DOD</td>
<td>Department of Defense</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>DoS</td>
<td>Denial of Service</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>INCM</td>
<td>International Conflict Management</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IOF</td>
<td>Israeli Occupying Forces</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IP</td>
<td>Internet Protocol</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>IRC</td>
<td>Internet Relay Chat</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOIC</td>
<td>Low Orbit Ion Cannon</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>LOL</td>
<td>laugh out loud</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Lulz</td>
<td>alternative to LOL</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>MMM</td>
<td>Million Mask March</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ops</td>
<td>Operations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SCT</td>
<td>Self-Categorization Theory</td>
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<tr>
<td>SIT</td>
<td>Social Identity Theory</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>SQL</td>
<td>Structured Query Language</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>TOR</td>
<td>The Onion Router</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>UK_15</td>
<td>@AnonymousUK_15</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>VPN</td>
<td>Virtual Private Network</td>
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Chapter 1

Introduction

“The challenges in cyberspace are so broad... it is going to take a true partnership between the private sector, the government and academia to address them”

-Navy Admiral Michael S. Rogers, US Cyber Command and NSA Director

On the evening of August 13, 2014, police dispatcher Bryan Willman was outed by Anonymous member @theanonmessage as the shooter in the killing of Michael Brown, an unarmed teen who was shot and killed in Ferguson, Missouri on August 9th, just a few days prior. The only problem was, Willman was not the officer who shot Brown (at the time Darren Wilson had not yet been identified as the shooter). Within the AnonOps IRC, the OpFerguson channel was a mess with Anons discussing who the shooter might be, how reliable information was about the shooter, and when they should announce it (Weinstein, 2014). Other Anons wanted to wait, but @theanonmessage released the (wrong) name and officer Willman and his family were harassed, threatened, and feared for their safety. Anonymous faced enormous criticism by the media for @theanonmessage’s decision to act before the shooter’s identity could be verified.¹

Around the same time, Anons were beginning to mobilize against the Islamic State’s digital propaganda efforts. In the 3 years following, Anons would be responsible for the removal of over 100,000 ISIS mobilizer and supporter Twitter accounts. They also report between 3,000 and 5,000 accounts daily to Twitter for suspension (Russon, 2016). Though it may be impossible to measure the exact impact these efforts have had against the spread of ISIS’s message, the sheer volume of activity suggests their efforts have not been in vain.

¹ See Kevin Collier’s (2014) article in the Daily Dot for an example of this reporting.
To most, Anonymous is a mystery. Even amongst its own members, it is difficult to reach consensus about exactly who they are and what they believe. What is known, however, is that their actions are impacting our world. Their work reaches both individual citizens (like Willman) and larger populations who are unlikely aware of the work being done on their behalf to prevent terrorism. Understanding Anonymous and other non-governmental digital groups is imperative, particularly because they do not often have structures of accountability, or ways to ensure their actions do not put others at risk. As these digital groups grow and affect our daily lives, it will become increasingly critical to understand their nature and their goals.

In this dissertation, I apply traditional Social Identity Theory to the online collective Anonymous. I conduct this research in order to determine if members of the collective behave as the theory predicts, as well as how any social identity they possess might be used by members to mobilize others for membership or action. While this is a worthy avenue of inquiry because of its novelty, it becomes demonstrably more important when considering that identities are also triggers of conflict.

In the context of conflict, identity (from interpersonal to international) is often a powerful factor in both escalation and mitigation. In offline settings, identity has been studied by researchers as a main driver of conflict, often superseding or exacerbating issues of resources (Bannon and Collier, 2003), balance of power issues (Powell, 1991), opportunities and threats (Gagnon 1994), grievances (Klandermans 1997), and heterogeneity (Kelman, 1997). Online conflict, while relatively new, has exhibited similar tendencies (Ma and Agarwal, 2007; Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler, 2007). In order to effectively apply what is known about identities to online conflicts, it is important to first understand if they function similarly in on- and offline settings. From there, it will then be possible to apply theory to practice and use what is known about
digital identities to move towards more productive digital conflict engagement, de-escalation, and resolution.

**Conceptual Framework**

The theoretical frame for this study combines traditional components of Social Identity Theory (SIT) and a related sub-theory, Self-Categorization Theory with research regarding social movement mobilization. By combining what is known about social identities and social movement mobilization, I examine an online group to determine the applicability of SIT in the digital sector, and its potential role in online mobilization for activism.

As humans, we seek continuity (Breakwell, 1986) and to reduce uncertainty (Hogg, 2000; Stein, 1996). This allows us to view ourselves more positively, minimizing feelings of threat against our own security (Bloom, 1991). Social identity (Tajfel, 1974; Tajfel and Turner, 1979; Turner 1975) refers to a person’s sense of self that derives from their belonging within social groups. Individuals seek to elevate their ingroups relative to other outgroups in order to maintain a positive self-image (Abrams and Hogg, 1988). In order to maintain a degree of individuality, Brewer (1991) proposes that individuals need both ingroups and outgroups to maintain a level of optimal distinctiveness, or being unique AND belonging. Individuals belong to their ingroups and are distinct in their comparisons to outgroups. Self-Categorization Theory (SCT) further suggests that individuals may also experience a shift in salience between their individual level and social level identities (Turner et al., 1987).

Before any conclusions can be drawn about the applicability of SIT online, however, it is important to understand not just *if*, but *how* social identities function online. The use of identity as a tool for mobilization in social movements (Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013) provides a pertinent example. Social movement research typically defines activism is terms of
specific roles in social movements and protest events (Diani, 2003; Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003; Saunders, et al., 2012). Alternatively, Franke and Armstrong (2017) propose a spectrum defining 5 levels of social movement activism: mobilizers, activists, supporters, silent supporters, and the disengaged. Mobilization to these levels of activism using components of social identities (such as ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration) would support not only the presence but the use of a social identity in the activities of a group.

Based on this information, my research questions ask:

**Do digital social groups behave as traditional Social Identity Theory and Self-Categorization Theory would predict? Are these theories transferrable to the online sector?**

Initial research (Flanagan, et al., 2014; Kim and Park, 2011; Wang, et al., 2009) indicates that minimal group experiments attempting to test the online applicability of SIT and SCT find some support for the applicability of SIT online, though support is derived from experimental settings and assigned identities, rather than true, pre-existing identities. Therefore, I offer 2 sets of hypotheses, to be applied to an actual, rather than assigned group. I predict:

- **H1:** Common identity signals including a perception of shared norms and values will influence Anon behavior.

- **H2:** When attempting to mobilize new members and increase participation, the desired level of engagement will influence the type of social identity (ingroup vs. outgroup) Anons utilize in mobilization messages.

One of Social Identity Theory’s main contributors, John Turner has emphasized that examining psychological processes only in abstract is insufficient. “Process theories such as social identity and self-categorization require the incorporation of specific content into their analyses before they can make predictions either in the laboratory or the field and are
designed to require such incorporation” (1999, p.34). The research presented in this dissertation embraces Turner’s recommendation and applies SIT to Anonymous, a digital collective that exists not only outside the experimental setting, but outside the physical world as well.

**Procedures**

A case study of Anonymous was selected and semi-structured interviews conducted with Anons were used to collect data regarding the formation and expression of a shared social identity. Sampling occurred primarily online via snowball efforts within Twitter and the AnonOps IRC. Other respondents were sampled from participants at the November 5, 2015 Million Mask March in Missoula, Montana. Interviews were conducted either in person or online via the platform of the respondent’s choice. Analysis was completed using the qualitative data analysis tool NVivo through a process of iterative coding to main nodes of interest, based on previous research and expected findings.

**Limitations**

The predominant limitation of this research is generalizability. The uniqueness of Anonymous and sampling limitations inhibits the ability to draw broad conclusions. An undefined sampling frame also limits internal validity to a degree, because I cannot claim representativeness of an unknown population. I did seek to minimize this through purposive sampling efforts and though findings cannot be extrapolated confidently, there are broad implications beyond Anonymous.

**Study Significance**

This study offers insights that should be of interest to scholars working to define how groups communicate their identities online and interact with other groups. It will also be of
interest to government officials and policymakers who might benefit from cooperation or collaboration with digital groups. Findings could also be beneficial to those that seek to counter identity-based mobilization of extremists online. Finally, social movement organizers might benefit from these findings as they seek to reinforce their own social identities and mobilize others to their cause.

**Dissertation Organization**

This dissertation is composed of seven chapters. This introduction offers background on my initial interest in this topic and its justification. I outline the conceptual framework, the procedures for data collection and analysis, and the study significance. I also provide a brief description of each chapter.

In chapter 2, I review theory and research on traditional Social Identity Theory, Self-Categorization Theory, and social movement mobilization. I also review recent research on digital applications of SIT, and general digital mobilization and activism literature. I highlight a proposed spectrum of social movement activism. Based on these, I ask my research question and posit two sets of hypotheses.

Chapter 3 is a brief history of the case: the digital collective Anonymous. Its foundations, early operations, and evolution are described, and its suitability as the case selection for this dissertation are provided.

In chapter 4, I describe the research design and methodology of the study. I provide justification for the method, detail the process of making initial contact with the collective, and outline my sampling process. I describe the demographics of my sample (to the degree I am able), and describe my approach to analysis. I conclude with a discussion of validity, generalizability, and ethics.
Chapter 5 is my first results chapter. In it, I provide findings relating to my first set of hypotheses regarding shard norms and values. I discuss identity-driven decision-making regarding both Anon selection into the collective and their decisions to act on behalf of the collective. I outline 3 of the most prominent shared norms and values of Anonymous: the shedding of individual identities, an emphasis on the underdog, and a focus on ‘fam’ or family. I also describe three of the exceptions to Anon’s shared values including conflicts between new and seasoned members of the collective, ethical disputes about internal doxing, and a divide between Anons regarding cooperation with the US government on the removal of Islamic State propaganda from social media platforms.

In chapter 6, I discuss my second set of hypotheses. I begin by describing the lack of support I found for this set of hypotheses and my process for using emergent findings to propose a new hypothesis. I describe the two types of mobilization methods Anons use, as well as the locations where each occur. Then I revisit my third set of hypotheses which emphasize the level of self-categorization of the mobilizer as the independent variable influencing the type of mobilization method utilized. Based on findings, I propose the Anon Mobilization Orientation Matrix, a categorization tool for understanding mobilizers based on their level of self-categorization and their personal beliefs about mobilization into the collective.

Chapter 7 provides a summary of key findings from each results chapter, and a connection back to the conceptual framework that drove the research. I then discuss limitations and implication of the study and make recommendation for future research. I also make recommendations for policymakers and social movement organizers. I conclude with personal reflections on working with Anonymous, and a set of recommendations for others who may seek to study similar groups.
Chapter 2

Social Identities, Self-Categorization, and Mobilization

In order to effectively apply traditional social-psychological theories to a group in a new setting, several areas of previous research must be summarized and synthesized. I begin this chapter by providing background on many of the perspectives contained within the Social Identity Approach. I then summarize the literature on social movement mobilization and highlight a spectrum that categorizes levels of activism. Next, I discuss digital activism, and mobilization within digital settings. I conclude with a summary of recent research on digital social identities, and the gap they leave, which I seek to fill through this study.

Identity

Identity definitions vary across disciplines and academics have rarely agreed on the different amounts of explanatory power they ascribe to intrinsic and social factors that shape identity. This research project aligns with those that have focused on the socially constructed factors that influence identity. When examining identity in digital settings, many of the other frames through which to consider identities cannot hold across cultures, languages, and other demographic variation that distance intensifies. Because social identities are examined through an interactive lens that shifts in response to identity salience, this perspective is particularly well-suited for application in the fluid digital landscape. Huddy (2001) suggests, “Social identity is highly dynamic: It is responsive, in both type and content, to intergroup dimensions of immediate social comparative contexts” (p. 134). Because the nature of Internet relationships and the speed at which they evolve exceeds what we see in traditional identity formation, fluid theoretical frames are valuable in their suitability for explaining the swift changes observed in
online interactions. Likewise, because individual traits are harder to express online, the role of group status and identification is of particular interest.

**Background**

Kriesberg and Dayton (2012) state, “We know who we are by emphasizing how we are not like others” (p. 57). This simple phrase highlights the external component of identity formation, and captures an important function of identity: allowing individuals to understand themselves in terms of their social location. Scholars including Tajfel, Turner, Hogg, Oakes, and Brewer in the 1970’s, 80’s and 90’s criticized the field of social psychology because of its heavy focus on the individual and the failure of the field to address the social factors that influence the formation of identity. Social Identity Theory emerged and now loosely encompasses a group of theories relating to the relationship between individuals and groups in identity formation. Broadly, social identity can be explained as “those aspects of a person’s self-concept based upon their group memberships together with their emotional, evaluative, and other psychological correlates” (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240). Brewer and Gardner (1996) add that individuals define themselves in terms of their relationships and draw much of their self-conception from these relationships (p. 83). In other words, our self-concepts extend beyond the individual traits we possess, and are informed by the interpersonal similarities and differences that help us locate ourselves within our social world.

**Review of the Literature**

**Social Identity Theory.** Social Identity Theory rests on the assertion that individuals gain pride and improve self-image from the groups that they belong to (Tajfel, 1981). Because people prefer to view themselves favorably (Eiser and Smith, 1972; Goffman 1963), belonging to groups the individual views favorably is also important. In an effort to illustrate in-group bias
and the tendencies of salient in-group identities to supersede individual identity, Henri Tajfel and fellow social psychologists engaged in work known as minimal group experiments. These experiments involved testing the strength of in-group bias based on the bare minimum connection between individuals in a group. “Subjects favored their own group in the distribution of real rewards and penalties in a situation in which nothing but the variable of fairly irrelevant classification distinguished between the in-group and the out-group” (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971, p. 150). In these cases, there was a maximization of intergroup differences and an elevation of the in-group traits that most distinguish members from an out-group. These experiments suggested that even when the participants had nothing to gain from reinforcing differences with an out-group; they would still do so. Shared norms, values and expectations with the in-group reinforced the likelihood that individuals favored their in-group over an out-group even when the behavior did not serve any particular purpose, and even when the categorization was based on inconsequential traits (Tajfel et al., 1971). From these experiments and others that would follow came consistent findings that “People are motivated to seek positive social identity by comparing in-groups favorably with out-groups” (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 240). Tajfel himself referred to social identity as "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership (1981, p. 258). To him, these social identities included skin color, socioeconomic positions, and other status indicators (p. 258). He argued that individuals “achieve most of their significance in relation to perceived differences from other groups and the value connotation of these differences” (p. 258). When individuals failed to maintain a secure identity through these intergroup comparisons, they would experience severe psychological discomfort that could be experienced as a threat to their survival. Even in the absence of competition for resources,
however, individuals tended to evaluate ingroups more favorably than outgroups (Ferguson and Kelley, 1964).

**Self-Categorization Theory.** As an expansion of Social Identity Theory, and to address questions about how individual make decisions about the way they define themselves, Self-Categorization Theory explored the unseen processes that informed the choices individuals would make about the ways they conceived of themselves (Turner, 1985). Turner and Oakes (1986) described several levels of self-conception: superordinate (being human), self and social (ingroup/out-group categorizations), and subordinate (self as an individual versus other in-group members). These three levels always act in a state of tension with each other in terms of salience (p. 241). That is, when one level of self-categorization was strong, the others saw a reduction of salience. “There tends to be an inverse relationship between the salience of ingroup-outgroup and personal self-categorizations” (Turner and Oakes, 1986, p. 241). They suggested that this could be envisioned in terms of a continuum, where at any given time, both portions of an identity maintained some level of salience.

**Depersonalization.** Of similar and related importance with self-categorization is the concept of depersonalization of individual self-perception. In terms of changing identity salience and the shift away from the subordinate focus on the self, Turner and Oakes defined the depersonalization process as: “The basic process underlying group phenomena such as social stereotyping, in-group cohesiveness and ethnocentrism, intragroup cooperation and altruism, emotional empathy and contagion, social influence processes and the emergence of social norms” (1986, p. 242). This is a critical contribution to our understanding of conflict, and in particular, those types of conflict that are connected to stereotyping, othering, and the groups people choose to identify within. For instance, many people are aware of their racial heritage,
and this can foster feelings of similarity or even a certain level of shared norms with others of the same heritage. When those social similarities become more salient than their individual traits and they choose to identify within the white power movement, for example, they may experience deindividuation, or the decreased feeling of uniqueness an individual feels and a loss of self-identity resulting from immersion and connection within a group. Deindividuation affects behavior of the individual because it fosters a sense of anonymity, thereby reducing perceptions of individual responsibility. It encourages a context-specific shift (Onorato and Turner, 2004) away from self-awareness and thus reinforces or affirms group cohesiveness by minimizing the focus on individual differences (Reicher, Spears, & Postmes, 1995).

**Optimal Distinctiveness.** A similar concept- optimal distinctiveness also assumes that our identities exist within a constant state of tension, and that we need both to belong and to be unique at the same time (Brewer, 1991). In order to meet these opposite needs, individuals utilize both ingroups and outgroups. “The need for deindividuation is satisfied within ingroups, while the need for distinctiveness is met through intergroup comparisons” (Brewer, 1991, p. 477). Brewer believes this balanced state offers ‘optimal distinctiveness’. She suggests that moving too far along the continuum in either the direction of being too individualized or too collective is unfavorable and that a balance between the two, as satisfied by the ingroup/outgroup dynamic above is ideal. The group must also work to maintain this balance in order to maintain group membership. “To secure loyalty, groups must not only satisfy members’ needs for affiliation and belonging within the group, they must also maintain clear boundaries that differentiate them from other groups” (Brewer, 1991, p. 478). Thus, being too far towards either end of the personal or social will be a threat to the self-worth and security of an individual.
Prototypical group members and polarization. Finally, there are dynamics within in-groups that are important for this study. In a return to the discussion on self-categorization, Turner and Oakes (1986) claimed that the concept of polarization is important, particularly when looking at in-groups that are grounded in potentially extreme or out-of-the-ordinary ideologies. Polarization is observed within an ingroup when there is some preferred ideal type that exists within characteristic identification in that group (Rosch, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986). This is in reference to prototypical traits of an actual, or perceived ideal individual within a salient ingroup identity. In their research on polarization, Turner and Oakes have found that the individual levels of polarization of individual group members after discussion surpassed the mean level of polarization of each individual member prior to the discussion (1986). “Polarization is the tendency of the average response of group members on some dimension to become more extreme towards the initially preferred pole after group discussion” (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 246). Thus, the salience of the characteristics that define an ingroup are heightened or polarized when group members’ interactions increase. For example, NRA members tend to resist government restriction of weapons. This is a critical and highly salient component of ingroup membership among NRA members. When asked to share their views on gun control legislation, an average member might indicate that he or she is opposed to most such legislation. Polarization, as Turner and Oakes describe it, would suggest that after a discussion about fighting gun control legislation efforts with other NRA members, that average individual would shift towards a more extreme position than they previously held. In their own research, the authors have observed, “the most normative position is sometimes polarized beyond the mean” (Turner & Oakes, 1986, p. 248). This makes sense when we consider that ingroup identity salience is fueled by drawing distinctions with out-groups. A trait or behavior expressed by an
individual that is particularly distinct from that of an out-group would solidify inclusion in the in-group- satisfying both of Brewer’s (1991) demands for achieving optimal distinctiveness.

**Critical Examination of Social Identity Theory.** The description above of Social Identity Theory and its related theories of self-categorization, optimal distinctiveness, deindividuation, and prototypical group member development are not without flaws. Indeed, one of the main arguments about the weakness of Social Identity Theory is that it has been successfully tested with imposed, inconsequential identities which researchers have attempted to make salient, but not with pre-existing, salient identities ((Bornstein, et al., 1983; Schiffman and Wicklund, 1992; Wang, et al., 2009). Huddy (2001) argues that original minimal group experiments have used arbitrary traits such as those who overestimate and underestimate dots, or those who favor Klee and Kandinsky paintings (p.138). This is problematic because though research has shown that even minimal similarities lead to in-group favoritism, the degree to which salience affects this behavior is unknown. Simple experiments focusing on minimal identities do not inform the way real, pre-existing social identities, which are complicated because they have a historical context, compete with other identities.

Other critics highlight that the meaning of group identities have been largely ignored, with the focus of experiments being on the boundaries of groups (Huddy, 2001, p. 142). By ignoring the meaning of identities, and their variation in meaning within groups, we are unable to draw conclusions about how deeply an identity is embraced by an individual, how meaning can vary within ingroups, and how this outwardly affects behavior. This is not to suggest that the results of minimal group experiments are of no value; it simply means researchers must approach the topic from research orientations beyond experimental methods, and take care to analyze variation in identity salience and meaning for individual group members. Finally, the
generalizability of the theory has been criticized. It has been argued (Brewer, 1979; Brown, 2011) that it is inappropriate to attempt to explain large scale intergroup conflicts based only on findings of minimal group experiments. Not only is the scale vastly different, replication to any scale approaching international conflict would be impossible.

Social Movement Activism and Mobilization

**Identity as a Mobilization tool.** Mobilization into groups using identity may occur in response to threats to individual traits, a threat to group inclusion (Ellemers, Spears, & Doosje, 2002), or a common, causal, external enemy (Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans, 2013). The last of these is a focal point of this research. As noted above, social psychologists have successfully shown that even with minimal shared identities, individuals favor ingroup members and their information over outgroups. When this is applied to the recruitment process, individuals may be more likely to mobilize into a group, or to take some action for that group if they perceive a sense of shared identity.

**Recruitment for Varying Levels of Engagement.** Literature on recruitment to groups engaging in collective action often appears as a polar comparison (Fisher, et al., 2005; Hornsey, et al., 2006). Either citizens choose to mobilize for a cause, or they do not. Likewise, reasons for mobilization are often reported singularly, and minimize that mobilization is more than a choice to participate or not. Orum (1974) argues that these mono-causal arguments “simply fail to appreciate the complexity of political movements or the dynamics that may drive people to participate in them” (p. 192). Scholars also often describe the specific roles of participants in activism rather than levels of engagement (Diani, 2003; Rowley and Moldoveanu, 2003; Saunders, et al., 2012). Based on this gap in defining the degree to which individuals might engage in social movements, Franke and Armstrong (2017) have proposed a spectrum of social
movement activism, with 5 distinct levels of social movement activist engagement. These include the Mobilizer, Activist, Supporter, Silent Supporter, and the Disengaged. Table 1 defines each of these.

Table 1

*Spectrum of Social Movement Activists*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Level of Activism (high to low)</th>
<th>Description</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mobilizers</strong></td>
<td>Individuals actively engage in mobilizing others for participation as activists or supporters, e.g., by directly encouraging individuals to participate, spreading information about protest time and location, or sharing information about the causes, reasons and demands of a protesting group with the intent of mobilizing others to become activists.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Activists</strong></td>
<td>Individuals participate in protest events but are not directly involved in the organization, coordination, or mobilization of others.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Supporters</strong></td>
<td>Individuals support a protest movement or agree with its cause short of direct participation through actions e.g., by solicited or unsolicited financial support or support through the transmission of information, signing a petition, actively seeking out information, or some other tangible gesture- with the intention of expressing solidarity with a cause or movement.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Silent Supporters</strong></td>
<td>Individuals agree with a cause, but do not take any unsolicited action to support it, incl. expressions of passive agreement when prompted and consumption of information regarding a movement short of direct support action.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Disengaged</strong></td>
<td>Individuals with no opinion regarding the cause or movement or with little to no information about the movement either because of a conscious choice to avoid the issue or some other unintentional reason.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

This spectrum allows for an expanded understanding of how activisms function- beyond black and white participation versus not, and beyond simply defining roles without indicating the degree of commitment necessary for each.
Identity and Mobilization in the Digital Sector

**Digital Interaction and Identities.** Much like in offline engagement, individuals are in regular contact with those whom they share common interests. Further, they care less and interact less with those whom they do not share such affiliations (Sunstein, 2001). Because of this, social capital can be built online much in the way it is built offline—with trust, community, and identity merging as individuals with shared interests interact (Williams, 2007). Gone are the early arguments (Kraut et al., 1996) that time spent online increased loneliness. Even as far back as 2002, these arguments lost footing (Kraut, 2002). Instead, Zhao, et al. (2012) have found that familiarity with other members, perceived similarities of others, and trust in others are all present and enhanced feelings of belonging. These identities need recognition, however. Ribiero (2009) argues that even with the flexibility that comes with online interaction, “the identity built virtually also needs recognition from others so that it does exist” (p. 295). Ingroup identities online need comparative outgroups. With both of these present, “Relationships made in virtual space can be just as powerful and meaningful as those formed in the real world” (Brown, 2011, p. 30).

**Digital Recruitment and Mobilization.** Why do social movement efforts need to be explored in the digital sector? Newer forms of digital collective action do not have the typical traits of offline movements, nor do the online groups that participate in them. There is often an absence of defined leaders, membership in officially recognized organizations, or clear-cut collective identity frames. Instead, they are more likely to appear as loosely organized activities (Bennett, 2012; Micheletti, 2003). Though not always regarded as legitimate by governments, media, or the average citizen, some digital movements and groups have successfully built their memberships and support and expanded globally. Biekart and Fowler (2013) argue,
“Contemporary activisms constitute a distinct shift in the character of civic engagement as they surf on waves created by the increased availability and use of social media” (p. 527). They also note that these changes are signaling to old power structures and actors that the rules are changing (p.534). While the Arab Spring led academics to focus on how citizens utilized new media to facilitate protests stemming from their physical grievances and identities, groups engaging in digital direct action have yet to receive the same attention. The Islamic State has received coverage relating to their Twitter presence and recruitment efforts, as has their loosely affiliated hacking group working under the name CyberCaliphate.

**How Does Identity Function Differently in the Digital Sector?** The geographic location of social interaction also contributes to the overall context of exchanges that communicate some identity. In exchanges that happen within a digital location, circumstances differ from what many refer to as ‘real life’. These nuances are important, and the way they are addressed or accommodated for by in-groups is important as well. Initially, the individual must be examined. De Kerckhove and De Almeida (2013) define the digital individual as “A part of the individual identity that has been extended into the online sphere” (p.277). Ribiero discusses this shift and suggests that the transition to the digital sector involves “rituals of initiation” (p. 292) such as login, username selection, anonymity, platform specific competencies, and related activities that signal “ceremonial entrance markers” (p. 292). These processes help to define the specific identity of a user as they adopt their online identity. The name selected is often one of the first things others will see, and the process of selecting the degree to which a person wants to reveal or modify which information is available about themselves to others is an important first step to digital social interaction. Once online, the nature of the digital sector sometimes “Allows the user to experience different identities, distant from commonly adopted references of the
 offline world” (Ribiero, 2009, p. 291-2). The relative flexibility of identity formation online allows a user either represent themselves much as they are in the physical sphere, or instead to explore any number of other variable and even contradictory identities. Within online areas of interaction, such as traditional chatrooms, social media platforms, or interactive simulation games, users employ ‘cues’ to fill the space where physical identifiers would be necessary (Robinson, 2007, p. 105; Wang, et al., 2009, p. 63). These cues can include “the use of shared jargon, conventionalize expressions including emoticons, and abbreviations” and help to express “emotions, moods, humor, sarcasm, and irony” (Wang, et al., 2009, p. 64), which can be harder to detect online.

There are two main concepts to note here. The first is that the identity a person expresses in the digital sphere is much more flexible than a physical identity. Online a young, timid woman may embrace an identity that is cheeky and aggressive. She may select avatars that look nothing like she does. This articulation of a different self is an important difference from traditional identity formation. For example, when a young black man goes to catch a taxi in the physical sector, he cannot shed racial indicators that drive stereotypes in hopes of catching a ride faster. Online, however, he can choose to interact without race being a factor in how others understand him. In his discussion on the ways digital technology is reshaping our relationships, Brown (2011) describes this difference:

Social scientists make the distinction between a found identity and a made identity. The found identity is one created by your circumstances- who your parents were, your ethnic background, your religion, your sex, where you went to school, your profession, and all the other external factors that people use to categorize and describe you. The made identity, on the other hand, is the one you
create for yourself. It is how you wish to see yourself and how you want others to see you (p. 34).

Because “technology will let you make and remake your identity at will” (Brown, 2011, p. 34), these ‘made’ identities can be more appealing than the identities individuals experience offline.

The second thing to note, and perhaps of most importance for this project, is that all of the choices made with a digital identity are made with the intention of engaging in some form of interaction. Digital identities interact much the same way physical identities do. Thus, names, appearances, and behaviors are all subject to social interpretations from others, and the user will shape an image and online personality based on what interactions they expect to have. When a person visits their grandmother, they dress, speak, and act a certain way that is likely much different than they do when they are out at a party with friends. This does not change in the online (Ribiero, 2009).

**Testing Social Identity Theory in Digital Settings**

Some social psychologists have begun to explore Social Identity Theory and its ability to translate into an explanatory mechanism in the digital sector. They have sought to replicate digitally the minimal group experiments that contributed to the formulation of traditional Social Identity Theory. In a digital minimal group experiment, Wang, Walther and Hancock (2009) assigned individuals to two groups - Sphynx and Pyramids. The Sphynx were told that they shared common intellectual tendencies with each other, while the Pyramids were told that they were more in tune with their emotions. They then conducted tests on how group members from each group perceived others within and outside the group that acted likeably (similar to the group prototype) and dislikably in a digital chat platform. From this, they found that several components of Social Identity Theory transferred to the online interactions. They were able to
conclude that, “Relational communication significantly impacts attraction and liking online” (Wang, et al., 2009, p. 60). Of particular interest for this proposal was their finding that “Ingroup and outgroup categorization exaggerates perceptions of similarity between the self and the other ingroup members and magnifies perceived differences between the self and outgroups” (Wang, et al., 2009, p. 61).

Kim and Park (2011) reached similar conclusions based on their minimal group experiment using similar and different avatars and noted, “Reduced social cue in CMC [computer mediated communication] can accentuate group identification and adoption of group norms more than in face-to-face interaction” (p. 1). While these experiments suffer from the same criticism of many traditional minimal group simulations in that they do not utilize real identities, they do suggest that in-group favoritism may function within the digital sector similarly to the way they do offline.

**Real Identities.** In an attempt to take these experiments further and utilize existing, rather than assigned identities to test Social Identity Theory, Flanagin, Hocevar, and Samahito (2013) conducted an experiment using actual traits of undergraduate students. They tested whether students were more likely to value and use information from their ingroups to a greater degree than those receiving information from others not part of an ingroup. The experiment had a platform similar to *Rate My Professor* and students were asked about the information they saw, how valuable they thought it was, and if they intended to use it. They found that, “The availability of cues indicating similarity between a user and prior contributors may prompt a sense of collective identity, belonging, or community” (Flanagin, et al., 2013, p. 3). Individuals were also more likely to be persuaded by information provided by ingroup members than by outgroup members (p. 4). Finally, they found that the students were significantly more likely to
contribute their own information when they felt strong identification with the ingroup. Much like the other two experiments highlighted here, their research found that the main arguments put forth in Social Identity Theory, “endure even in the context of online venues, where shared social identity is signaled through cues that may be somewhat limited, as compared to cues available in offline contexts” (Flanagin, et al., 2013, p. 8). While this moves closer to examining real identities in their natural settings, it still utilized an experimental design with an imposed stimulus (the mock website where information was exchanged).

Some research even suggests that group identification online may be stronger than it is offline. As previously mentioned, the concept of certain cues replacing the physical components that are lost in the digital sphere may tend to accelerate self-categorization to the social level within ingroups. Bennett (2012) suggests that access and utilization of social media platforms have lowered barriers to identification with a group or cause (p.22). This may be due to the utilization of exaggerated cues, or it may because geographic barriers to group formation are removed when one seeks social interaction with specific types of people in the digital sector. Brown supports the later of these. He refers to this behavior as digital tribalism, or the observation that “people are using technology to find others with whom they share important affinities, ranging from genomes to beliefs to lifestyle choices” (2011, p. 34). Of course, many social media platforms encourage this type of behavior. Facebook suggests ‘people you may know’ within your newsfeed. Twitter suggests new people to follow based on those already followed. Both of these support the process of finding people that are likely to share some common trait or interest. There are even digital services that email you a personalized newspaper based on those you follow on Twitter. Paper.li sends a daily ‘paper’ that includes tweets of

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news stories, photographs, or anything important (as indicated by retweets) from individuals’ followers and friends (Brown, 2011, p. 30). These types of services are often shared by their subscribers as well, in order to summarize the important happenings in their sphere of influence. In combination, it is likely that all these have the potential to facilitate feelings of connectedness, shared interests, and community.

**Synthesis of the Literature**

Previous research has shown that individuals seek to minimize uncertainty through belonging in ingroups (Tajfel, 1981). Additionally, individuals favor their own groups in comparison to respective outgroups, even when the traits that distinguish between the two are relatively inconsequential (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, & Flament, 1971, p. 150). Recent research seeking to replicate these findings within a digital setting yielded similar results (Kim and Park, 2011; Wang, et al., 2009). Some of these digital minimal group experiments have even sought to move toward the use of real identities within a quasi-experimental setting to test transferability of Social Identity Theory into digital settings (Flanagin, Hocevar, and Samahito, 2013). None of these, however, have examined real, pre-existing identities online to observe the way they are articulated and experienced in their natural settings. Therefore, my research asks,

*Do digital social groups behave as traditional Social Identity Theory would predict?*

*Are these theories transferrable to the online sector?*
To answer these questions, I predict the following hypotheses:

- **H1**: Common identity signals including a perception of shared norms and values will influence Anon behavior.
  - **H1**: Individual Anons are more likely to self-select into a digital social group if they perceive a sense of shared norms and values (Brown, 2011).
  - **H1**: Individual Anons are more likely to take some action for that group if they perceive a sense of shared norms and values (Flanagin, et al., 2013).

- **H2**: When attempting to mobilize new members and increase participation, the desired level of engagement will influence the type of social identity (ingroup vs. outgroup) Anons utilize in mobilization messages.
  - **H2**: Anons will utilize ingroup favoritism when mobilizing for silent support (Tajfel et al., 1971).
  - **H2**: Anons will utilize ingroup favoritism when mobilizing for support (Tajfel et al., 1971; Wang, et al. 2009).
  - **H2**: Anons will utilize outgroup derogation when mobilizing for activism (Kim and Park, 2011; Turner and Oakes, 1986).

**Conclusion**

In this chapter, I have provided background on traditional Social Identity Theory and related sub-theories that are a part of the Social Identity Approach. I have discussed previous research on social movement activism and mobilization, including identity-driven mobilization. I also highlighted a proposed spectrum of social movement activism that distinguishes between 5 levels of activism. I summarized current discussions of digital social movements and the formations of digital identities. Finally, I underscored findings from recent experiments that have
sought to test the applicability of SIT in digital settings. In order to fill the gap left by these experiments, I ask about the applicability of SIT to a real, rather than assigned group online and predict two sets of hypotheses to guide the research.

These predictions combine previous findings (both online and offline) on Social Identity Theory with research on processes such as the communication of shared norms and values and mobilization efforts. By making predictions about how social identities are articulated online and how that affects the behavior of members of a digital social group, I attempt to determine whether Social Identity Theory is applicable in the digital sector. Findings from this research are both timely and novel, as digital interactivity and digital conflict are increasing from individual interactions all the way to international conflicts between states. The implications and opportunities for comparative case research based on this study will be relevant to individuals, organizations, and official institutions who interact with or represent social groups that function in the digital sector.
Chapter 3

Selecting a Digital Social ‘Group’

“It purports to have no leaders, no hierarchical structure, nor any geographical epicenter. While there are forms of organization and cultural logics that undeniably shape its multiple expressions, it is a name that any individual or group can take on as their own”

–Gabriella Coleman

Anonymous

Ask anyone who Anonymous is and you are likely to receive answers ranging from hackers, to cyber terrorists, to wannabe punks in mom’s basement. Officially, the group has no defined makeup, membership roster, or official articulated platform. Rather it is a fluid amalgamation of individuals who self-select into the collective. Where did they begin, how have they evolved, and who are they now? The first of these questions is simple, the second begins to show how complex the group has become, and the third is impossible to detail completely. The group’s shifting nature and lack of an official mouthpiece further complicate the task. Beginning with what IS known, however, this summary attempts to provide an overview of who Anons (as they refer to themselves) are and how they came to their current iteration. This information serves as the basis for my selection of the group as the case for this dissertation. By examining the formation and evolution of the Anon digital social identity, I have attempted to provide new information and insight into how conflict, identity formation, and mobilization for activism have all firmly taken root in the digital sector and how Anons in particular are engaging in these processes.
History

Tracing its origins to the image sharing board 4chan, Anonymous has evolved into a loose global collective of hackers, activists, and those seeking the lulz. Anon’s search for the lulz, (an alternative to the acronym LOL, or ‘laugh out loud’) are described by anthropologist Gabriella Coleman as “A deviant style of humor and a quasi-mystical state of being” (2014, p.2). For Anons, the lulz are online activities and group actions conducted against others were not politically driven nor was their purpose necessarily meant to extend beyond the entertainment value they provided to those participating.

As early as 2006, 4chan users were beginning to use the name Anonymous in some of their interactions. 4chan’s b-board, or /b/, was a location where there were few rules, and crude, offensive language and images were rampant. Set up to be a location for random interactions and miscellaneous topics, rather than the other boards which have themes such as anime, alternative sports, travel, fitness, and more, /b/ was a location where many of the memes we are now familiar with also came into existence. Because 4-chan does not require typical registration and does not archive conversations, maintaining anonymity requires minimal effort. 4chan site creator Chris Poole echoes this sentiment and recently told Rolling Stone, “’Anonymity enables people to share things they wouldn't otherwise do [. . .] That's always been my party line” (Kushner, 2015, March 13). On the site, users may post under their own name or may post anonymously. The speed of content arriving on /b/ can at times, make it nearly impossible to be noticed, even if an identifying moniker is utilized. In the span of only a couple minutes, posts

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that no one responds to are likely to disappear from the site (Coleman, 2014; Norton, 2012).

Within 4chan around this same time in the early 2000’s, there existed a large population that chose not to post from an identifiable handle. Users joked that perhaps all the anonymous postings could be coming from one single person, ‘Anonymous’ and the descriptor was born. Those frequenting /b/ embraced the term, began referring to each other as Anons, and ventured out into the 4chan landscape in search of the lulz.

Users on /b/ also engaged in digital shenanigans outside the confines of 4chan. This is important not only because Anonymous would start to identify as a more cohesive collective as it expanded into new digital terrain, but also because it would begin to capture the attention of the outside world as a defined unit. As they began to explore the world outside of 4chan together, one of the first raids conducted by the /b/ users was in the online game Habbo Hotel. Habbo Hotel was a virtual hangout game, similar to SimCity and other avatar-based games. Journalist Parmy Olson describes the July 12, 2006 event: “One day, someone on 4chan suggested disrupting the virtual environment by joining en masse and flooding it with the same character, a black man in a grey suit and Afro hairstyle (See figures [insert figure #s] from the game). The men with the hairstyle then had to block the entrance to the pool and tell other avatars it was ‘closed due to fail and AIDS’” (2012, p. 49). The group also created swastika formations using their avatars and reveled in the subsequent uproar. The phrase ‘pool’s closed’ is a common joke still surfacing among Anons. This is an example of one of the earliest forms of Internet trolling, engaging in an action with the specific intention of upsetting others.

Notable Operations and the Evolution of Anonymous

In 2008, Anonymous members began engaging much more politically. To date, this shift has not been completely explained, but many agree that Anons’ interactions with the Church of
Scientology helped to ignite this evolution. The activities waged against the Church of Scientology were referred to by Anons as Project Chanology. Most operations since have had official names and often begin with ‘Operation’ rather than ‘Project’. This naming is important as many Anons include list of operations they participate in or support within their digital social networks, thus making it easier to find others with similar interests and beliefs.

Anons efforts during Project Chanology, including both Distributed Denial of Service⁴ (DDoS attacks) and physical protests against the church, paved the way for Anonymous to evolve. At the time, a video featuring Tom Cruise espousing his commitment to the teachings of Scientology leaked on the web and was openly mocked and shared by Anons around the world (Norton, 2012). When the church began threatening lawsuits against those sharing the video, Project Chanology was Anonymous’ response. Anonymous members purchased Guy Fawkes⁵ masks and showed up by the tens of thousands in over 90 cities globally to protest in front of Scientology centers. The group also engaged in digital measures, “Guerrilla action has so far included the temporary disabling of its [Church of Scientology] international website and ‘Google bombing’, a manipulation of the search engine which has resulted in the website being the first result returned by Google when users type ‘dangerous cult’ (Barkham, 2008, February 4, p. 1). This was the first time collective action efforts by the group manifested themselves in a physical protest, in addition to digital activism. Through 2008, the church and Anons went head to head and the dissent against the church continued in both the physical and digital sectors.

⁴ For a detailed explanation of what a DDoS attack is, how they are carried out, and their variations see http://www.digitalattackmap.com/understanding-ddos/.
⁵ Guy Fawkes was a Catholic dissident. For information about him and the Gunpowder Plot, see http://www.bbc.co.uk/history/british/civil_war_revolution/gunpowder_robinson_01.shtml. A Guy Fawkes mask is worn by ‘V’, a main character in the 2005 film V for Vendetta. This anarchist character leads revolutionary behavior in a future United Kingdom and his theatrical stunts and provocative use of violence, explosives, and technology make him a character that Anons embraced early in their own development. For more information on the film, see http://www.imdb.com/title/tt0434409/?ref_=ttfc_fc_tt.
During this time, and into 2009, Anonymous members struggled with defining who they were as a group, or if they even wanted to be defined as a group. Were they becoming political activists? Were activities like Project Chanology carried out just for the lulz? What types of future actions should they take? Olson (2012) summarizes the main source of discord: “The biggest rift was over what Anonymous was about. Activism? Or lulz?” (p. 93). Two working definitions came from this divide. Anons who hoped to continue with more activist activities became known as moralfags. Anons who were simply engaging in pranks and disruptions without a desire to politicize were described as lulzlags. Use of terminology such as ‘fag’ and related variations are common vernacular amongst Anons. While many insist that they do not harbor prejudices towards individuals outside of cisgender and heterosexual identities, the terms are used often, and without apology. Quinn Norton describes the language choice: “Terms like nigger and faggot are common, but not because of racism and bigotry—though racism and bigotry are easily found on the /b/ board. The language is there to keep out the straights. Those words are heads on pikes, warning you that deeper in it gets much worse” (2012).

Those Anons who chose the more politicized, activist route of engagement spent the next two years engaged in a number of operations that would propel them into the media spotlight, and for some, into the big house. Operation Payback, an Anonymous Op occurring in two stages, is noteworthy for three reasons. First, Anons began using the LOIC DDoS tool, also because of the media attention, and finally because of the fallout.

The first phase of Operation Payback, originally called ‘Operation Payback is a Bitch’ (Sauter, 2014) was completed in retaliation against the motion picture and music industry. The two main organizations MPAA (Motion Picture Association of America) and RIAA (Recording Industry Association of America) were alleged to have hired AiPlex to DDoS the file sharing site
Pirate Bay (Sauter, 2014, p. 113-114). Aiplex is an Indian firm that allegedly engaged in for-hire DDoS attacks against Pirate Bay, amongst others. There is no definitive evidence that the MPAA and RIAA actually paid Aiplex for DDoSing, but a manager at the firm admitted that they engaged in such attacks for profit by members of the industry who were attempting to limit pirated copies of their materials from circulating the internet (Sauter, 2014).

Aiplex had engaged in DDoS attacks against the site and Anons responded with a new weapon: the Low Orbit Ion Canon (LOIC). Low Orbit Ion Canon is a reference to the game *Command and Conquer*. Names and nicknames within the Anonymous network and weapon arsenal often adopt pop-culture or counter-culture related names. Familiarity with these names, much like with the popular memes, is often used to assess the authenticity or legitimacy of Anons on message boards and social media platforms. The complex web of ‘inside jokes’ is also used to reinforce a sense of belonging amongst Anons. LOIC is an open-source application that allows users to contribute to a DDoS campaign from the comfort of their home by simply entering the target address and clicking the temptingly giant button marked ‘IMMA CHARGIN' MAH LAZER” (Coleman, 2014, p. 101-2). Previous versions of LOIC had been used in other attacks, but its open source availability allowed users to tailor it to their specific needs. For Operation Payback, the ‘hive mind’ option was added to one version of LOIC and allowed users to grant permission for remote access to their computer. This way, attacks are carried out by a remote Anon using the original Anon’s computer (Sauter, 2014, p. 129). The ‘hive mind’ option in LOIC allowed Anons to remain engaged even when they were not able to be at their computers during scheduled attacks, and also allowed for less technically-inclined Anons to contribute to the attacks. For almost an entire month, Anonymous launched attacks against MPAA, RIAA, and Aiplex.
The media response to Operation Payback was massive. Gabriella Coleman (2014), an anthropologist who spent several years studying Anonymous and engaging with many of its high profile members, notes that Operation Payback caught the attention of the small tech-related media outlets but that it was also covered by most of the major nightly news broadcasts, including special reports on CNN and in the New York Times (p. 121). Even Anons suggested that the media attention from LOIC DDoS attacks helped propel the cause (Coleman, 2014, p. 137). Likewise, because the media was hungry for information about the hard-to-access group, they sought out any information they could on Anons and their causes. This circumstance, combined with the fact that Anonymous had the ability to produce high quality, intriguing releases meant that the media often promoted such messages in their own reporting on the group. Molly Sauter summarizes the situation well in *The Coming Storm*: “One of Anonymous’ primary methods for spreading information about operations and raids was through the public distribution of slickly produced videos, graphics, and public social media streams, and the result was, in many cases, news organizations embedding Anonymous videos and call-to-action posters directly in news stories” (2014, p. 68). Whether intentionally or not, the media essentially served as a vehicle for the promotion of Anonymous during this time. Between the attention from the government, media, and their heightened level of activity, Anonymous seemed to capture the attention of the world.

Shortly after Operation Payback, WikiLeaks became headline news and Anonymous mobilized again. When WikiLeaks released classified and sensitive government documents leaked by Chelsea (Bradley) Manning on November 28th of 2010, Amazon, MasterCard, PayPal, Bank of America, and others responded by refusing to process donations and payments to the online site (Coleman, 2014, p. 118); (Norton, 2012). Perceiving this as a choice by these
companies to support the suppression of information, Anonymous reacted by engaging in a barrage of DDoS attacks against the companies. While not all downloads can be contributed to Anonymous, it is telling that the open-source LOIC tool used for most of the DDoS attacks was downloaded over 100,000 times in the month of December 2010. Likewise, active participation on the AnonOps IRC channels spiked from an average of 700 users to over 7800 users the same month (Coleman, 2014). For nearly all of December, the attacks raged and most of the targeted companies reported downtime of their websites. During this time, Anonymous also attacked the US Library of Congress and the US Copyright Office (Toor, 2013). Some accounts of this time refer to the DDoS attacks as part two of Operation Payback, while others refer to it as the beginnings of Operation Avenge Assange. Without one specific spokesperson or a hierarchy of leadership, this was the first of several scenarios where overlap and confusion occurred for Anons. This trend would carry into the future with operations waged against pedophiles, the Islamic State, The KKK, and Donald Trump. One thing is clear, however. By the end of 2010 and moving into 2011, Anonymous was officially on the radar of mass media, the federal government, and the general public.

By the end of December 2010, the first of a swath of FBI raids on Payback and Wiki participants would begin. In July 2011, the FBI had arrested 14 participants of early LOIC attacks and those engaged in the following attacks against PayPal, MasterCard, the Koch Brothers and others. Court cases for these and related operations have since resulted in prison terms up to 6 years\(^6\) and fines reaching as high as $183,000 for one participant. Through the next 3 years, a number of Anons were tried and prosecuted under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act.

\(^6\) Nearly all cases against Anons’ direct action activities are prosecuted under the Computer Fraud and Abuse Act. For details and language about the law, see [https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/1030](https://www.law.cornell.edu/uscode/text/18/1030). This version includes recent changes and additions to the law.
(CFAA) for digital direct action activities during *Operation Payback* and *[Operation Avenge Assange]*. They would also face prison sentences and fines for attacks waged against Stratfor Global Intelligence Service⁷, the Arizona Department of Public Safety, Boston Police Patrolmen's Association, the FBI's Virtual Academy (Smith, 2013).

While Anonymous did, and still does focus on the importance of US government transparency and the free flow of information, their members, interests, and causes extend much further than the geographical confines of America. As WikiLeaks, Stratfor, and FBI raids demanded attention domestically in 2011, some Anons focused their attention across the Atlantic as the Arab Spring began to explode.

A Tunisian Anon (going by the name Adnon in IRC channels) worked in late 2010 to encourage Anons to take up the cause of the Tunisian citizens within the AnonOps IRC channels. Few Anons seemed interested initially, but by the time Mohamed Bouazizi, the infamous fruit cart owner who self-immolated in protest of government corruption, passed away in January 2011, Anons were fully behind Adnon and the Tunisian people (Coleman, 2014, p. 152-3).

Noting that the plight of the Tunisian citizens had largely been ignored by Western media, and that the Tunisian government was censoring its citizens, Anons engaged in attacks against official Tunisian government websites and distributed information about effective and safe physical protests to Tunisian citizens via social media platforms. They created safe digital pathways for Tunisians citizens to seek and spread information about dissent while avoiding

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⁷ The attacks against Stratfor remain strong in the collective memory of Anonymous. The main perpetrator, Jeremy Hammond is currently serving time for crimes committed against Stratfor. A former Anon known by the name *Sabu* (Hector Xavier Monsegur) fed Jeremy information and encouraged his (and others’) attacks against Stratfor and others after being flipped by the FBI. Jeremy’s prosecution and similar legal plights of Anons are frequently attributed to the information and encouragement from Sabu during his time as an FBI informant. For detailed accounts of Sabu’s time as an informant, see [http://motherboard.vice.com/read/exclusive-how-an-fbi-informant-helped-anonymous-hack-brazil](http://motherboard.vice.com/read/exclusive-how-an-fbi-informant-helped-anonymous-hack-brazil).
detection by government officials who were attempting to trace such behavior online (Olson, 2012, p. 141-142). They even went so far as to demand in an open letter to the media\(^8\) that the oppression in Tunisia be addressed in news reports (Coleman, 2011).

While the government overthrow in Tunisia rarely includes information about contributions by Anonymous, their participation and encouragement of the media was an enormous undertaking. Additionally, this timeframe would mark the shift towards new social issues and new forms of collaboration becoming a mainstay for Anonymous. “OpTunisia represented another turning point in the political formation of Anonymous as a protest movement. Whereas most previous operations resided in the realm of Internet politics or censorship, this operation moved squarely into human rights activism as it converged with an existing social movement” (Coleman, 2011, April 6, Political Birth section, para 11,).

Subsequent efforts by Anonymous to support the Algerian and (both)\(^9\) Egyptian overthrows have been documented and further support the assertion that Anons focus on social causes.

Since this time, Anonymous has continued to shift in its makeup and interests. Membership estimates within the fluctuating group cannot be pinpointed accurately, nor do Anons necessarily believe this type of count is necessary. Some even insist that they are not a ‘group’. This runs counter to their shared norms and values but is a comment that will occasionally appear in social media discussions or in response to news stories that seek to lump members together to a degree that exceeds their own perceived cohesiveness. Their referral of themselves as *Anons* also suggests some level of ‘groupness’ or shared identity. It is this and other unique traits of Anons however, and their broad range of interests, abilities, and

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\(^9\) See [http://leaksource.info/2013/02/05/anonymous-opegypt-press-release-02042013/](http://leaksource.info/2013/02/05/anonymous-opegypt-press-release-02042013/). For the Anonymous press release relating to the second Egyptian revolution, during which Anons took an even more active role.
backgrounds that make them such a fascinating case. In fact, their expansion to most regions of
the planet, and increasing number of subgroups and operations make it challenging to tell a
comprehensive narrative beyond this point without neglecting and/or misrepresenting segments
of the collective.

In the past two years, and despite much internal strife, the movement continues to expand
and evolve. Their evolving list of operations is impossible to trace, partially because anyone
may start an operation, but the size and sustainability of ops varies wildly. While dozens of
operations spring up quickly and fade away just as fast, others seem to capture the collective
attention of the group. Operations tend to rise and persist through a process of legitimation by
participation. Since anyone may start an operation under the banner of Anonymous, those that
strike a chord with Anons are elevated and circulated within their private and public digital
networks. This is done through retweets, favoriting, and quoting content in the public sphere.
Privately, prioritization of operations are discussed, willingness to engage at various levels is
signaled, and coordination of actions occurs. This process serves in-group members by affirming
or questioning levels of consensus, and indicating where priorities and salience are strongest.
Some operations may also form small clusters of main actors who temporarily wield increased
influence, but never for extended periods. Coleman (2014) notes, “Anonymous is emblematic of
a particular geography of resistance. Composed of multiple, competing groups, short-term power
is achievable for brief durations, while long-term dominance by any single group or person is
virtually impossible” (p. 193). Popular operations receive support in the form of participation,
marketing material development, information dissemination, and even dedicated discussion
channels within IRC servers. Those that do not generate consensus or willingness to participate
are dismissed due to lack of salience amongst a large enough portion of the group and often simply fade away due to a lack of acknowledgement.

**Justification of Case Selection and Research Question**

Looking broadly at how Anons conceive of their own identity is a first step toward understanding digital social identities and how they form. While extrapolation is always a challenge in the case of emergent concepts, initial mapping of groups allows for comparison across time and contrasting with other groups, thus leading to more generalized understanding and capacity for building theory. Anonymous provides a particularly good initial case for examining the formation of digital identity and digital social identities. Because Anons’ origins are digital, they are unique among collectives, even those who act and engage primarily within the digital sector. Anons have no previous offline relationships. They do not know each other’s demographic makeups. They also offer a unique case because of their lack of hierarchy and insistence that ‘no one speaks for everyone’. These characteristics make them a least likely case for affirming the presence of digital social identities, which makes findings in support of a shared identity more convincing. We know there is some form of shared identity though because they express it in public forums, particularly within social media and content sharing platforms. They display a strange cohesiveness and shared ethical and moral framework but their consistently growing numbers blur both of these.

Findings from Anonymous may be even more challenging to extrapolate than other groups because of their high profile and digital origins, but there may also be very unique things that can be learned from such a group that has been able to achieve notoriety and membership to the scale Anonymous has. Anons have an uncanny knack for capturing media attention and have mobilized impressive numbers for activism, yet in ways strikingly different from the way typical
interest groups or aggrieved populations have done so previously. One reporter describes the importance of this distinction:

It [Anonymous] is also profoundly at odds in its ethos and methods with traditional NGOs and activist groups. This is not your traditional protest movement and elements of it would be deeply hostile to more traditional political activism. Anonymous is something that, because it grew organically in cyberspace rather than reflecting the cyber version of existing real world phenomena, looks and works differently than real-world organisations or movements. Something important and new is happening here (Keane, 2011, p. 1).

Anons have a strong online presence, both publicly and privately. The majority of their networking occurs in public social media platforms and through private, anonymized chat servers and occasionally gaming chat functions. This creates a unique atmosphere where we can examine both how Anons choose to publicly communicate the norms and values of their group (and mobilize others into their group), and how they experience their in-group identity during interactions with each other that occur away from the public eye. By examining both the public and private aspects of their identity as a group, and how they articulate their in-group characteristics to outsiders and each other, this dissertation begins to define how they conceive of themselves, how they distinguish themselves from out-groups, and how those distinctions can be used for mobilization. From here we can then begin to examine variation among different digital in-groups in order to begin building theory around their formation and evolution.

As our lives become more entwined in these digital components of our identities, so does the likelihood of our conflicts occurring digitally and being influenced by digital action. The preceding narrative history of Anonymous provides several clear examples of this and suggests
that we must work harder to understand how digital identities and digital social identities function. Further, we must develop a clearer understanding of how mobilization occurs into digital groups. Anonymous works in the white and black hat sectors of digital direct action\textsuperscript{10}, but other groups such as the Syrian Electronic Army, CyberVor, Lizard Squad, GhostSec, and dozens of others, political and unaffiliated, have found a front from which to wage electronic wars. Understanding how digital identities form and how the in-group/out-group dynamics of digital groups are used to recruit others for digital conflict will be critical as we move toward broader definitions of conflict and digital conflict analysis. Anonymous provides a valuable case because they engage in so many different types of digital activism. They are vocal political dissidents, engage in questionable digital direct actions against other digital ‘civilians’, and even work like online NGOs for a plethora social causes. All of these can contribute to our broader understandings of digital engagement and the role new technology will play in shaping the way citizens will engage with non-state ‘others’ and their governments in the future.

\textsuperscript{10} For information on digital direct action, see Molly Sauter’s \textit{The Coming Swarm}. 
Chapter 4

Navigating the Dark and Engaging with Shadows

Is there anything you would like outsiders to know about Anonymous?

“I say to most, find out for yourself. You can’t really know until you follow this for a good while, witnessing everything. It’s not at times agreeable, but consistent on two primary things:

We care. We’ll fight.” (@ANONShadeSeptum, participant).

This Was a Mistake

On April 11, 2015, the Twitter account I had been using (@aka_ms_rico) to follow and network with Anons was bombarded with messages and accusations: “You filthy FED scum!!! Get out of r network!!!!” immediately followed by, “Our wrath rains down on FEDS the hardest! Leave before I lose my patience. SCUM!!!” (@H4x0rsB1tsL4p, personal communication). A month away from defending my dissertation proposal, I suddenly feared as though I had made a horrible mistake in my case selection. Because private messages may only be sent to users who follow you, I had no way of responding privately. Instead I engaged in a brief, public defense of myself, only to be shut down repeatedly with more threats and accusations.

Solidly in panic mode, I began scanning the user’s page. They had recently interacted with another Anon I knew, AnonLulzHackz (ALH), who is also known on Twitter as @GetHaCkedSkidz. Because ALH and I followed each other within Twitter, I was able to send him a direct message (DM) asking him if he might assist. After several hours and multiple messages providing information so that both could ‘verify’ my non-FED status, we made our peace. In June of that year, I was able to speak to ALH again and discovered that both my personal and university email had been hacked back on that day in April, and that he had conducted a lengthy search to assure that I was trustworthy and not, in fact, a federal agent attempting to spy. While this was not my only rough encounter with Anons, this early incident
provides a window into the challenges I faced while engaging with members of the Anonymous collective in order to understand their digital social identities.

This chapter outlines my aims and objectives for data collection and provides justification for the research design and chosen methodology. The chapter then details my sampling approach and recruitment process, followed by a description of the sample and available demographics. Next, I describe my approach to data analysis, followed by a discussion of internal and external validity, and ethics.

**Aims and Objectives for Data Collection**

Exploring the applicability of Social Identity Theory (Tajfel, Billig, Bundy, and Flament, 1971; Tajfel, 1979) in the digital sector necessitated identification and access to a group that was both engaged digitally, and had digital origins. These two variables have been tested singularly in online settings, but never together. Likewise, previous research utilized identities that were relatively inconsequential (Flanagin, Hocevar, & Samahito 2014; Kim & Park, 2011; Wang, Walther, & Hancock, 2009). My main objectives were to ensure that I accessed a salient identity, one that was selected rather than assigned, and that I was able to collect data that was rich enough and detailed enough to draw robust conclusions about the dynamics of a digital social identity.

**Research Design**

Because of the exploratory nature of the subject and the group, I employed a case study approach to examine the online identity of Anons. This approach allowed for both contextual description of the factors influencing Anons’ social identity, and formulation of hypotheses. Because little scholarship exists on the dynamics of digital social identities, I needed two things: a focused case where I could develop deeper understanding of complex group dynamics, and
access to a group of individuals who would be willing to reflect about their individual perspectives of their shared identity. Ravitch and Riggan (2012) suggest that both ‘who’ and ‘what’ is being studied must guide the research design. Anonymous as a group necessitated a more comprehensive approach, thus a case study was appropriate.

Methods

I also selected methods in response to my research question and the unique characteristics of my test case.

Semi-structured interviews. I chose semi-structured interviews because they offered reflexivity that I could not achieve through surveys, questionnaires, or structured interviews (Diefenbach, 2009). This was particularly important because some Anons were quite open, while others were exceedingly cautious about interacting with me. The ability to modify questions in order to accommodate suspicious members and probe with particularly open members was critical for me to maintain trust and conduct constructive, informative conversations. I also opted for interviews because my research question sought information about the ideas, intentions, and beliefs of Anons, all of which did not fit neatly into multiple-choice responses or other scaled tools of inquiry. Diefenbach (2009) supports this approach and emphasizes the need for adaptability, suggesting that reformulating and adding questions is a sign of progress and allows for increased and deeper knowledge of emerging patterns (p. 877). Semi-structured interviews provided a solid initial format to assure I was able to ask questions that directly informed my hypotheses, while being flexible enough to adjust format, tone, and location in response to each interviewee’s preferences.

Instrument. I designed my interview instrument with operationalization of variables in mind. As outlined in chapter 2, my main research question was:
Do digital social groups behave as traditional Social Identity Theory would predict?

Are these theories transferrable to the online sector?

To answer this question, I predicted the following hypotheses:

- **H1**: Common identity signals including a perception of shared norms and values will influence Anon behavior.
  - **H1**: Individual Anons are more likely to self-select into a digital social group if they perceive a sense of shared norms and values (Brown, 2011).
  - **H1**: Individual Anons are more likely to take some action for that group if they perceive a sense of shared norms and values (Flanagin, et al., 2013).

- **H2**: When attempting to mobilize new members and increase participation, the desired level of engagement will influence the type of social identity (ingroup vs. outgroup) Anons utilize in mobilization messages.
  - **H2**: Anons will utilize ingroup favoritism when mobilizing for silent support.
  - **H2**: Anons will utilize ingroup favoritism when mobilizing for support.
  - **H2**: Anons will utilize outgroup derogation when mobilizing for activism.

For H1, I utilized Tajfel’s (1972) definition, "the individual's knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership” (p. 292). I explored this idea through questions about group norms, self-identification within Anonymous, and questions about the Anonymous community. For example, I asked all Anons the following:

*Would you describe for me a little about how you came to be familiar with Anonymous? For instance, where did you first hear about Anonymous and what were your initial feelings about it?*
People define Anonymous in different ways. Would you consider Anonymous a group? A collective? Some other thing?

For H2, the intention was to solicit answers about both mobilization efforts of participants, and details about their experiences being mobilized (Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears, 1995; Van Stekelenburg and Klandermans, 2013). For example, I asked:

*What do you think triggers Anons to become more active with various operations?*

*Have you ever tried to get others to be more active with Anonymous or a specific Op? How so?*

*Did anyone encourage you to become involved in Anonymous? How?*

Additionally, I used casual opening questions to build rapport and ease tensions Anons had about revealing personal information. Finally, I included demographic questions in order to explore the relationships between interview data and other potential intervening variables related to the varying characteristics of interviewees in my sample. These questions helped to define the makeup of my sample and to as much as possible, helped me avoid large demographic gaps in sampling. See Appendix A for the complete interview instrument.

**Sampling: Where are the Masks?**

From the time I identified Anonymous as a potential case study for my project, I began collecting as much information about them as I could. I observed their online presence via several social media platforms including YouTube, Twitter, Facebook, Instagram, and Tumblr. I researched their website content, including the site [www.AnonOps.com](http://www.AnonOps.com), which provides information to new and potential members, and provides details about how to access their largest Internet Relay Chat (IRC) network. I also tailored an existing Twitter account (@aka_ms_rico) for research and began following Anonymous members within the platform, occasionally retweeting information, pictures, and comments they shared. This background information provided me with some basic understandings of where and how Anons operated online, and also
allowed me to begin to build my own following of Anons who occasionally engaged in reciprocal following, or ‘friending’. From there, I was able to snowball out and make contact with the other Twitter users who were also friends with these Anons. While snowball sampling is not assumed to be representative, I had no defined population to select a random sample and thus had to reach out to Anons via other methods. I also made early contact with several key informants who provided me with referrals to other networks of Anons that I had not come into contact with through my snowball friending process. Through these key informants’ networks, I was able to reach other Anons from different location across the globe, and Anons who worked on operations I had not previously seen. Conventional wisdom regarding sampling in qualitative research suggests that a representative sample, or a sample that reflects the diversity of the population is ideal and can minimize bias in findings (Barbour, 2001). Because the complete population of Anonymous and a membership roster indicating the demographic makeup of the group does not exist, I was forced to approach sampling via the later, a sample attempting to reflect the diversity of the population (Maxwell, 2013).

**Initial Observations and Access.** In order to assure I would be able to access members of Anonymous, I worked to develop initial relationships with a few Anons who expressed curiosity about my reasons for joining their networks. One of these initial contacts (J0k3rAn0n) worked with me on preparing to approach other Anons, and to improve my own internet security for several reasons. First, I hoped to show them that I was legitimately interested in their world, and was willing to do the work to prove my genuine interest. Second, I hoped to assure them that I could protect their information when they provided interviews, and would take their need for privacy and security seriously. Finally, I wanted to add this additional security to protect myself. In light of J0k3rAn0n’s recommendations, I downloaded TOR (The Onion Router) as my
browser, which I used for all online interactions (less those that occurred from my iPhone, which was adequately encrypted already). I also created a nick\(^\text{11}\) in order to verify myself each time I entered the AnonOps IRC network to access their various channels. I further created a vHost\(^\text{12}\) so that my IP address could not be detected and used to hack or corrupt the data I would be collecting. Figure 1 shows a screenshot of the login process to enter the AnonOps main network.

![Hexchat access to the AnonOps IRC network](image)

**Figure 1:** Hexchat access to the AnonOps IRC network

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\(^\text{11}\) A nick is a unique nickname used when accessing channels in the AnonOps IRC. For more information, see [https://newblood.anonops.com/basics.html](https://newblood.anonops.com/basics.html).

\(^\text{12}\) A vHost is an IP masking tool. Though the AnonOps IRC network automatically blocks IP addresses, this added an additional layer of security that Anons cited as a reason they felt safe interacting within the network.
Figure 2 provides a screenshot of the Twitter profile and the details I provided to Anons.

![Twitter profile](image)

**Xtal**  
@aka_ms_rico

PhD candidate writing on digital social identities and Anonymous. Always looking for interviewees. DM me to discuss. Don't tell my mom I say bad words.

📍 1 foot in ATL, the other in MT

789 FOLLOWING 240 FOLLOWERS

![Tweets Media Likes](image)

*Figure 2: Twitter profile used for networking, chat, and group conversations*

The account offered a basic description of my research, provided an opening for conversations, and directed potential interviewees to a mode of contact. I also included a joke at the end, as humor had provided a valuable opening and aligned with Anons appreciation of the *lulz*\(^\text{13}\). Tailoring my profile and behavior to the norms of the group provided me with the ability to put potential interviewees at ease, as they were able to interact with me in a way that mirrored their own group norms and fostered a relationship that was familiar and comfortable for them (Maxwell, 2013).

---

\(^{13}\) Since their early days, *Lulz* have evolved to refer to jokes and a general nature of trickery. Early Anons were much more focused on Internet behavior such as trolling, teasing, and a highly stylized, humorous approach to their activities. This cultural trait remains within the group today, and was an effective opening for me throughout the data collection process. For more information on the *lulz*, see [http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lulz](http://www.urbandictionary.com/define.php?term=lulz).
Recruiting respondents. Recruiting respondents occurred primarily through the AnonOps IRC network and within Twitter. The IRC network has a channel officially dedicated to media contact. The channel also has trusted moderators who engage with journalists who come to the channel in hopes of speaking to Anons. From here, I contacted several network moderators, who were able to connect me with active members of 12 different operations. I was further able to enter the channels for some of these operations, as well as new private channels created by Anons in order to engage in private conversations with me.

From Twitter, I built basic rapport with several Anons who connected me to others within their respective operations. I created a list of operations and of location data (when available) to purposively approach Anons working in many different areas of activism. This approach to sampling proved effective, and many Anons agreed to interviews within the platform where initial contact was made. Other Anons I approached were more cautious, and requested contact via email, or through encrypted chat platforms like Kik and Telegram. I also provided potential interviewees with a highly detailed process for information protection that I followed in order to assure their anonymity. These approaches yielded 36 interviews across 6 digital platforms and one in-person location.

One other area where I was forced to revise my approach to recruitment was the delivery of IRB consent forms (See Appendix B). I learned almost immediately that many Anons were unwilling to open emails from a stranger, so delivery of consent materials had to be revised in order to keep participants from opting out based on an unwillingness to view the form. The

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14 Kik and Telegram are chat applications that encrypt conversations through secure socket layer (SSL) technology. For more about Kik and their security, see https://www.kik.com/privacy. For more about Telegram and their security, see http://telegram.org/faq#how-is-telegram-different-from-WhatsApp.
code-sharing tool Pastebin provided an ideal option\textsuperscript{15}. Pastebin allowed me to upload my consent form to an encrypted server and provide a link to participants. From this link, they could view and print the consent form, and send their verification of consent to me via their platform of preference. This revision, combined with my other security efforts enabled me to assure Anons that I was serious about protecting their data and identities, and did not have malevolent intentions.

\textit{Million Mask March Recruitment.} Along with online participant recruitment, I was able to attend the Million Mask March on November 5, 2015 in Missoula, Montana to solicit interviews from participants. These marches are held worldwide annually, but the march in Missoula was the closest to me at that time. The participants who I was able to speak to only represented a relatively small geographic region (the state of Montana), but had driven from several cities and some up to 200 miles to attend. In order to gain the trust of these strangers who I would be approaching cold, I brought 2 Guy Fawkes masks and several signs. The signs included basic messages that I found on social media sites and news articles about marches from previous years. They included: ‘I don’t want you to think like me, I just want you to think’, and ‘We are Anonymous. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect us’. I tried to keep these signs generic, as I did not know if certain social or political issues that are often used for such signs might offend any potential respondents. Figure 3 is a photo of myself (center) and two Anons who participated in the march standing on the street in front of the courthouse just before the event began.

\textsuperscript{15} Pastebin is an online tool used to share computer coding, but is also utilized by Anons for sharing data dumps and information regarding operation activity. It is accessible at \url{https://pastebin.com/}.
The march began at 4 pm in front of the Missoula County Courthouse and had approximately 25 participants. I cannot be sure of the exact number because I was counting as people were arriving and leaving but 25 was the most at one time onsite. I arrived early to the march and introduced myself to the organizers, who both agreed to online interviews the following week. They introduced me to one other Anon who spoke to me while taking a cigarette break. As the march drew to a close, there were several Anons I had spoken with throughout the march who had offered to talk in depth at its conclusion, but requested a group conversation at a local bar, which I agreed to in order to not miss out on the opportunity to add more participants. Though the format was more representative of a focus group, the ability to
interact with active members who could be verified made flexibility a necessity. I was able to adapt my interview instrument slightly during our conversations in order to direct questions to more than one person and do not believe that the group component limited honesty or transparency, but there is no way to be certain.

The data derived from this group was valuable, as it provided an opportunity for participants to consider the contributions of each participant, and expand, question, and clarify comments from each other. It also provided me with default demographic information of their race, gender, and approximate age, traits that I had a much harder time collecting from online participants. Overall, the march yielded valuable and detailed information, and though participants represented only a small geographic area, their interests and identification within subgroups varied very much the same as online participants who had a much larger geographic spread.

**Who wears the mask? Defining the participants.** Recruiting participants and conducting interviews were processes that overlapped across ten months. Once a participant had been recruited, interviews took place almost immediately. Overall, 36 interviews were conducted with participants, 9 in person, and 27 online\(^{16}\). Table 2 highlights where interviews were conducted, and the location of each participant, when they were willing to share.

\(^{16}\) These numbers do not include 7 interviews that I discarded either because I questioned the validity of the participant, or only a small portion of the interview was completed, or language barriers made translation of my questions and subsequent participant responses too unreliable for inclusion.
Table 2

*Interview sites and participant locations*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Interview location</th>
<th>Number of Participants</th>
<th>Number of participants offering to disclose geographic location (country)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>IRC</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Kik</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Twitter DM</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Telegram</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Skype</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Email</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>In person</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>TOTAL</strong></td>
<td><strong>36</strong></td>
<td><strong>25 (69.4%)</strong></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Of all interview locations, the Million Mask March, and the Twitter direct message (DM) function were the most common. Other chat platforms were used, but much less frequently. Skype was generally unpopular popular, a fact Anons attributed to its weak encryption and rumored affiliation with the FBI. All 3 Skype participants were happy to disclose their locations, but were also all quick to tout Skype’s recent increased encryption and their confidence in the platform. Those who gave physical interviews provided geographic location by default. Twitter users were fairly willing to disclose their country location. Kik, Telegram, and IRC users seemed the most paranoid during their interviews and in the case of IRC interviews, this also included refusal of location disclosure. For Kik and Telegram no strong trend emerged. Email participants used more secure email accounts, including Tutanota and Protonmail, which are non-US-based, and according to my participants, this makes them less likely to be pressured or coerced to provide identifying information by US authorities.
Table 3

Respondent demographic makeup

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Demographic Information</th>
<th>18-30</th>
<th>30-50</th>
<th>50+</th>
<th>declined to share</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td>19</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Number of years with Anonymous</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&lt; 1 year</td>
<td>4</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1-2 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>14</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6-8 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>&gt;8 years</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declined to share</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender Identification</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>6</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>23</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>declined to share</td>
<td>7</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table 3 summarizes some of the available demographic information for participants. The age range for this research reinforces Gabriella Coleman’s (2014) assertion that outside perceptions of Anons as nothing but teen boys in their parents’ basements is inaccurate. Though I did not intentionally recruit participants based on age because this information is rarely revealed upfront, I still received a range of participants, though certainly skewed toward the 18-30 age bracket. Twenty percent of participants declined to provide an age, however, so no definitive conclusions can be drawn about the age distribution of participants.

The length of time members identified as Anons also provided a solid range, with less than ten percent of participants refusing to disclose. While I conducted many interviews with
newer Anons, 55 percent of participants identified as Anonymous for at least three years. Additionally, though not reflected in the table, 4 participants who cited being engaged for 1-2 years also noted that they had participated for longer periods of time, but considered their more ‘active’ participation to fall within the smaller timeframe.

Finally, gender distribution showed less than twenty percent of participants as female, sixty-four percent as male, and nineteen percent declining to provide gender identification information. This demographic indicator is particularly interesting because I intentionally approached many female Anons for interviews, and was met with resistance in nearly all instances. The females who did respond were either women who I met in person at the Million Mask March, or women who were referred by another Anon. I only conducted one interview with a female Anon that was a ‘cold call’ where I approached her without an introduction. In speaking with both male and female Anons about this resistance to talk, they all offered the same comments about the internet being a rough place for women to engage and that they typically were much more guarded than men about offering personal information, for fear that it would be used against them in some way. This is not likely to be an Anon-specific issue though. It is well-documented (Buni and Chemaly, 2014; De Letter, van Rooij, & Van Looy, 2017; Megarry, 2014) that women face more aggression, criticism, and verbal abuse online than men, and my experience trying to solicit participants appears to reflect that.

**Participant verification.** Because Anons do not reveal identifying information online, because anyone can become Anonymous (AnonOps.com), and because there are no certain methods for determining actual engagement with the group, I approached verification of Anon activism from several angles. First, I relied on gatekeepers and respected Anons to recommend potential interviewees in order to try to reach active members of Anonymous. I also sought to
cross-reference social media accounts in order to reach participants who had one consistent Anon identity across multiple platforms, making crosschecking with other Anons easier. In my interview instrument I included several questions that solicited answers that would indicate members’ relative knowledge of the norms, practices, and activities of the group. Additionally, when an Anon approached me, I considered the value of the data with more skepticism, and asked more clarifying questions than when I approached an Anon.

One emergent observation I utilized in the decision to discard interviews that did not meet verification standards was the type of language participants used. While most participants referred to Anonymous with inclusive language, i.e. ‘we’ and ‘us’, I had 3 interviews where participants used language that suggested they did not identify within Anonymous. These participants used language like ‘they’ and ‘them’ when referring to Anons. Doosje, Ellemers, and Spears (1995) suggest that language can help distinguish between levels of identification within a group. Language inclusive of interviewees can be considered to indicate a ‘high identifier’ and strong group affiliation. Absence of this language might not exclude group identification, but might indicate a weaker relationship. As a result, and because I was not able to find any other way to verify their participation within Anonymous, I chose to discard their interview data, and no data from those interviews, either content or demographic, has been included in my data for analysis.

**Analysis approach**

Project results are presented in two chapters, one for each main hypothesis. Analysis via the Qualitative software NVivo and the creation of nodes for each interview question and general theme from the literature provided an initial baseline of data quality and gaps. From here, further interviews were conducted purposively to fill gaps in operations, and some participants were re-
contacted for clarification. As general areas of inquiry approached saturation, sub-nodes relating to hypotheses were also created. For example, I initially created a node that would contain comments from respondents that might contradict SIT expectations. In total, I had 29 references that fit within this node. After conducting about 10 interviews though, I realized that almost all comments that fit within this code referred to two topics. The first was regarding doxing and the second was regarding conflicts between new and more seasoned Anons. I created 2 subnodes, one for each of these categories, and then re-categorized to these subnodes (See Appendix C for all nodes and subnodes. While these topics connected generally, dividing responses as I noticed the pattern allowed me to understand the two types of exceptions and how they differed from each other (see chapter 5 for discussion of these and other exceptions).

Units of analysis for interviews were individual responses to each question. Comment coding is based on both the nodes initially created for hypotheses, and emergent nodes. See Appendix C for my full list of nodes and sub-nodes, along with the number of responses for each.

For digital content, NVivo’s Ncapture tool was used to import digital content. These pieces of information were not used to draw conclusions, but rather to triangulate findings from interviews and to illustrate in this document with images what interviews described in words. While subjective, my coding approach emphasizes consistency, awareness of bias, and continuous refinement of variables (Guest, et al., 2012). Aggregation of data has also been completed in order to combat criticism of anecdotalism (Bryman, 2012).

Validity and Generalizability

There were several notable threats to validity in this project. Identification of validity threats and efforts to limit these challenges have been incorporated whenever possible. Overall,
great strides have been taken to assure that research design was “both formed and porous” (Ravitch & Riggan, 2012, p. 68). The design provided a solid plan with firm definitions and an interview instrument based on detailed operationalization of variables. The methods were prepared and conducted in a way that allowed for iterative revision and a responsive approach. This flexibility provided opportunities for clarification when necessary, and facilitated the addition of follow-up questions in response to emergent themes that warranted exploration and probing. For example, many Anons referred to other Anons as ‘fam’ or family. Asking what this type of language meant to them and how they felt about their ‘fam’ in comparison to other online connections was vital in understanding how Anons perceive of their Anonymous ingroup versus more casual online contacts.

**Representativeness.** As discussed in sampling procedures above, Anonymous has an unknown population size and makeup. Because of this, I cannot be certain that I did not miss important sections of the group. While many Anons outside the US operate in English, there are also large populations of Anons in Southeast Asia and Central and South America are only represented by 4 interviews. Because no one knows which percentage of Anonymous these groups represent however, minimizing this challenge was only possible through purposive attempts to connect with Anons from as many geographic locations as possible. Figure 4 is a map of all known locations of Anons who participated.
Figure 4: Locations of Anons participating in interviews.

While 6 continents are represented, I have only one respondent from Africa, European participants were mainly located in Western Europe, and much of Asia is unrepresented. It is impossible to know if these trends are representative of the actual makeup of Anonymous or if I failed to access entire portions of the population. Additionally, while only eight countries were represented in my sample via Anons disclosing a location, I was able to determine that respondents represented 15 countries, either through accessing metadata available from participants’ social media profiles, or based on actual content I observed from them outside of our interviews.

Verification of Participant Identities. First, my ability to verify participant information and actual participation in Anonymous is limited. The sampling strategy outlined above, as well as verification processes, was utilized in order to minimize this threat. Likewise, the amount of time I spent observing my participants within various social media platforms allowed me to observe their actions, participation, and identity assertion. Key informant bias (Maxwell, 2013)
could also be problematic, as many of my initial interviews were facilitated by key informants, and may be biased toward their networks, preferences, and self-interest in my results. With time, however, I was able to form my own networks with other Anons and a much smaller portion of my total sample originated from those initial gatekeepers.

**Interview process and location variation.** Another potential threat to validity relates to my interview instrument and interview locations. While I sought to include questions that informed my hypotheses, my suspicious population required flexibility in both my line of questioning, and in interview location. This introduced a degree of variation in interviews that resulted in inconsistencies in the length of answers and level of candor amongst participants. While those who preferred to email me all answers were often quite detailed in their responses, those who talked via messaging platforms like Kik and Telegram provided shorter, more concise answers. Respondents I spoke with on Skype were more likely to wander off topic and that data required much more filtering to find relevant responses to my questions. The ability to ask follow-up questions and re-contact participants when necessary assisted in minimizing the impact of interviewing in multiple locations. In the case of interviews that took place within chat platforms, I also sought to ask questions in more than one way, in order to solicit more detail and occasionally asked participants to elaborate if answers lacked depth. The only limit to this was occasional account suspension and subsequent inability to re-connect with participants. For example, in the early spring of 2016, a large group of Anons affiliated with OpISIS were suspended by Twitter, and many of their accounts remain inactive. This limited my ability to re-contact them within the platform, though I was able to connect with two via other digital locations. Other accounts have been deleted, or renamed by the user, which also presented challenges when follow-up questions would have been valuable.
**Intentional deception.** Diefenbach (2009) warns that in the case of certain populations, “There might be conscious and deliberate attempts by the interviewee to mislead” (p. 881). Initially I suspected this could be a serious challenge in my data collection. This threat to validity became less of a concern as I built more relationships with participants, however. As my network of Anons grew, many expressed appreciation for my efforts and case selection, and offered to help in any way they could. Additionally, throughout the interview and analysis process, early findings have been shared with participants. While this approach is more in line with action research (Berg and Lune, 2004), feedback based on this approach has allowed for clarification, and served to reinforce the reciprocal benefits of participation. Anons also expressed appreciation that they were able to conduct interviews with a person who was not connected to media and would not ‘sensationalize’ their responses. This provided assurance that they viewed me with less suspicion than reporters who may also be approaching them for interviews.

**Tempering Validity Threats. Digital Content Triangulation.** Triangulation through the collection and analysis of digital content from the group has also assisted in triangulating findings from interviews. This digital content has been collected across multiple social media and online locations including Twitter, Facebook, YouTube, Instagram, Tumblr, Vidme, and from numerous Anonymous-affiliated websites, chat channels, and anywhere they allowed me to follow their interactions. For example, when speaking about doxing, many Anons expressed to me that they did not believe in doxing and that they needed to articulate this position to the new Anons who were doxing other Anons. When I was able to observe this same sentiment being expressed by other Anons within Twitter and the AnonOps IRC channels, the opinion was reinforced. Figure 5 is an example of one such comment.
Though the limitations above are considerable, the fact that digital content aligns with interview data increases my confidence in the quality of the interview data.

**Generalization.** Generalizability for this case is limited, though there are significant implications for digital groups, policymakers, and social movement organizers. Anonymous is unique in many ways and extrapolation from this group to others would be inappropriate. Anonymous’ rejection of individuality limits connections that can be made to other groups who express their individual identities. Their interest in many social and political issues could lead to overlap with other online groups, which would minimize this limitation, but their uniqueness likely outweighs similarities they may share with other online collectives. Because analysis for this project does not attempt broad generalization beyond the group, however, external validity is only a mild concern of others were to seek to extrapolate. Additionally, the focused nature of this research project provides a detailed account of Anonymous and the methods described can be applied to future comparative cases, which would be the most logical path to determine if generalizability beyond this study is possible.
Ethics. As a researcher engaged with groups participating at times in illegal activities, I took considerable care to address ethical obligations and assure my own safety and the safety of my participants. In order to assure that I caused no harm to my participants and protected their identity, I offered to provide pseudonyms to all participants. Some Anons accepted this offer, while others requested the use of their identifying online user names. I also discouraged them from including details about any of their illicit activities during interviews, a reminder I had to offer repeatedly to multiple participants. I was sent pictures of FBI emails and passwords an Anon claimed to have hacked. Another sent photos of weapons and drug paraphernalia. Yet another walked me through the steps of how he hacks poorly protected shopping websites to steal people’s credit card information. I reminded each of these and many others that they should avoid sharing these types of details but in most cases, they seemed willing to accept some risk in order to boast or provide examples of their abilities. As a final step to assure the safety of Anons who spoke with me, I stored all identifying data on a laptop that was not connected to the internet, so that the data could not be accessed by anyone attempting to hack my home network. This information, and my transcription and storage processes were all outlined for participants, and occasionally, they requested additional accommodation for added security such as communication only through encrypted chat platforms, or the exclusion of operation details in my write-ups, which I complied with whenever my technical skills allowed. In cases where I was unable to add enough security to assure participants of their anonymity and safety of their information, we decided together to exclude certain interview questions that might be connected to their online or offline identities.

Another ethical issue I faced was the verification process. Because some Anons expressed that they prefer I not contact other Anons to verify their activism within the group, I
was, for the most part, unable to verify by any method other than observation. This considerably extended the amount of time I spent online observing their interactions. The increased time spent with Anons did assist in building trust, however, and many Anons are highly active on social media platforms, so some verification was possible. Looking back at the Twitter feed of an Anon over several months allowed me to see who they were interacting with, what operations they were publicly supporting or working on, and whether or not they displayed behavior similar to their interview responses or to other participants.

Whenever possible, I also attempted to obtain the consent of the creators of digital content I included in analysis. When users post information to Twitter, it is considered public knowledge (Zimmer, 2010), and many academics consider it reasonable to collect such data without consent. However, in order to maintain a positive and respectful relationship with Anons, I attempted contact with users when I included anything that may identify them as creators. In cases of digital content that did not identify users, such as websites or videos, I did not make contact unless an email address or other contact information was readily available. Overall, I did not encounter anyone who opposed my inclusion of their content, and in one case, my approach also provided an interview opportunity.

Conclusion

This chapter has outlined the design and implementation of my research project. I have provided details about the selection of methods, and the process of creating an interview instrument that would provide data regarding my hypotheses. My sampling process has been outlined, including initial observations and approaching Anons, my recruitment process (both physical and digital), and the resulting demographic details of my sample, when available. I have described my analysis process including coding and triangulation. Finally, I have provided
a description of internal validity threats and limitations of external validity, along with specific actions I have taken to limit these.
Chapter 5

The Role of Shared Norms and Values in the Digital Social Group

“Zetta, we act like family because we are family. Blood doesn’t define family.

*Family is those that do their best to be there for you when it counts*”

*(Lil’Rico, Twitter group chat, February 2016)*

This chapter presents data relating to my first set of hypotheses, which stipulates that Anons join Anonymous and act on its behalf based on a perception of shared norms and values. It includes additional analysis and discussion that assist in understanding Anonymous’ culture and highlighting many of the shared norms and values of the collective that may not be familiar to outsiders. These include the varying levels of becoming ‘Anonymous’, the perception of themselves as underdogs, and their language that reflects a feeling of family amongst their ranks. The chapter closes with exceptions and emergent findings that show some areas where Anons’ shared identities are splintering, including an age and experience battle, conflicts over doxing (the release of identifying and personal/financial information), and a debate about how much to cooperate with the US government in fighting a common enemy.
While early experiments on the salience of social identities relied on assigned identities, my research emphasizes an identity that individuals select themselves, without the external influence of a researcher manipulating the internalization of that identity. Tajfel, Billig, Bundy and Flament (1971) originally assigned minimal group participants with identities of over- and under-estimators of dots, and later as fans of Klee or Kandinsky paintings. These early studies set the stage for a shift in the way social psychologists considered how individuals interact with others. More recent experiments that attempt to examine social identities within an online setting have utilized both assigned identities (Wang, et al., 2009) and basic biographical traits of participants (Flanagin, et al., 2013). By contrast, my interviews were conducted with members of Anonymous, who had self-selected into the collective prior to my interaction with them. This distinction is important, as the decision to self-select into Anonymous or act on its behalf is a conscious choice and necessitates an active effort by the Anon rather than passive acceptance of an assigned trait or chance inclusion within a demographic group. While researchers have repeatedly found that even inconsequential traits can contribute to ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration, I seek to understand whether real digital identities that have become part of an individual’s cognitive makeup might function similarly. With this distinction in mind, my first hypothesis explores the perceptions that Anons hold about the ways their own beliefs align with other Anons, and how those shared norms and beliefs have influenced individuals’ decisions to join and act on behalf of the collective. My hypotheses stated:

- **H1**: Common identity signals included a perception of shared norms and values will influence Anon behavior.
  - **H1₁**: Individual Anons are more likely to self-select into a digital social group if they perceive a sense of shared norms and values (Brown, 2011).
H12: Individual Anons are more likely to take some action for that group if they perceive a sense of shared norms and values (Flanagin, et al., 2013).

The interview instrument (See Appendix A) contained several questions that aimed to pinpoint both the reasons Anons selected into the collective, and what most often drove their decisions to take some action on behalf of the collective. For example, I asked all Anons:

*Would you describe for me a little about how you came to be familiar with Anonymous? For instance, where did you first hear about Anonymous and what were your initial feelings about it?*

*People define Anonymous in different ways. Would you consider Anonymous a group? A collective? Some other thing?*

Other questions included inquiry into what types of people exist within the collective’s makeup, and whether they feel a sense of community. To explore drivers to action, I asked:

*What do you think triggers Anons to become more active with various operations? Have you ever tried to get others to be more active with Anonymous or a specific Op? How so? Did anyone encourage you to become involved in Anonymous? How?*

Additional questions solicited information about how Anons chose which operations to work on, if anything triggered Anons to become more active with operations, whether they had a history (outside of Anonymous) of engaging in activism, and who enemies of the collective were and how they interacted with those enemies. The following section explores in more detail the relationship between the formation of the Anon identity and its effect on political activism and decision-making more generally.

**Identity-driven Decision-making**

**Self-selection into Anonymous.** Table 4 summarizes findings from these questions and highlights that shared norms and beliefs were drivers of both the decision to self-select into the
collective, and to take some action for the collective. A sense of shared values was more likely to bring a new member into the collective than to drive action, and was the strongest relationship (46%) within this area of questioning.

Table 4

*Rationale for Anon decisions to join or act on behalf of Anonymous*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Perception expressed by Anon</th>
<th>Self-Selection into collective</th>
<th>Driver to action</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Shared norms and values</td>
<td>17 (46%)</td>
<td>8 (22%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Recruitment by another Anon</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>12 (32%)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Shared outgroup</td>
<td>2 (5%)</td>
<td>9 (24%)</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*This table represents 80 percent (29 respondents) of Anons in my sample. Other singular answers were provided, but were not mentioned by more than one Anon and thus were not included here.

Some of the consistent values that appeared across interviews included the general understanding that within Anonymous, people cared about things and were willing to act on behalf of their beliefs. Anons felt as though the collective cared about social and political issues that were important and were willing to act on those issues, whereas others in their lives weren’t. @Ch8mig_M4x said “I found things I cared about” (personal communication, Sept. 2015).

Another Anon who participated in the Million Mask March and my focus group that followed expressed similar sentiments: “I heard a lot online on Twitter and Facebook and that sort of social media stuff. From there I was like, I am on board with what this group, what these individuals are about” (personal communication, Nov. 2015). One Anon who referred to himself as ‘Vandamann’ spent a lot of time talking to me about institutionalized oppression and how seeing others enraged about police brutality made him feel as though he had found a place where he belonged. When he saw Anons planning responses to the killing of Michael Brown in Ferguson Missouri, he said “I watched and offered to help. I started talking to guys and saw how similar we were in our thinking” (personal communication, Feb. 2016). Vandamann and many
other Anons expressed frustration with their personal relationships and a general feeling that they
did not have enough in common with people in their offline lives, family, work, and
dating/marriage. This gap seemed to be filled by Anonymous because they found comfort in a
sense of similarity in values and a willingness to prioritize those values.

Recruitment as a Driver to Action. In contrast to this, individuals were driven to
perform some action for an Anon operation by several motivators. Shared norms and values
were important (22%), but recruitment by another Anon (32%) and the perception of a shared
outgroup (24%) were more important. Recruitment, whether active or passive, was the most
important indicator of a willingness to act on behalf of Anonymous. Anons reported being
actively recruited to hunt for Islamic State propaganda accounts, to dox pedophiles, to fight
against animal captivity at Sea World and similar parks, to spread information about Chemical
Trails (Chem trails), and to help create tutorials for new Anons. Passive recruitment through
general tweeting, the creation and dissemination of YouTube videos, and other non-direct
recruitment was also very common and the range of topics had considerable breadth. The
willingness of Anons to respond to these calls to action appeared to rely more heavily on the
topic than the type of recruitment though. If a specific operation was important to an Anon, they
reported acting, regardless of how they were approached (direct active or indirect passive
recruitment). Some Anons also worked to leverage their online followings to assist in these types
of recruitment efforts. One fairly popular Anon (who has since fallen out with the collective) told
me in an interview: “I often post tweets about encouraging folks to be part of a certain Op. Often,
this is a result of the leader of the Op sending me a message asking if I could support it” (99,
personal communication, Oct. 2015). This type of passive recruitment is very common and can

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17 For more information about Chem trails, and the science debunking them, see
be tailored to specific Ops, like 99 suggests here, or more generic encouragement to join (for examples of passive recruitment within the Anon community, see Appendix D).

Generally, the process looks like this: One Anon starts an Op and seeks support for it within the collective. Another Anon who wields some influence supports the Op and encourages others to engage with it. In turn, other Anons share the recruitment message or become active with the Op. One-to-one active recruitment was less common, but both were cited as reasons Anons were willing to engage in some action for Anonymous.

A willingness to act on behalf of Anonymous or other Anons seemed to hold true both for more official Ops, and simply for helping each other out. One Anon who works to train new members told me a story about a new recruit who needed help: “This kid started messaging me a few months back because she was getting bullied. We destroyed them. We put a house on the market, we messed with car licensing, we set up their computer to say ‘your son is a fucking asshole’ every time they started it. People shouldn’t be afraid to ask for our help”.


Outgroups as Drivers to Action. Having a perceived outgroup (Tajfel, 1974; Turner 1975) was also important for Anons to act on behalf of Anonymous. Twenty four percent of Anons interviewed cited some outgroup as the reason they acted on behalf of Anonymous. While I expected this to be higher, as much of their online content for Op recruitment emphasizes the ‘other’, actual self-reporting of those acting in response to perceived wrongs by an outgroup was only directly articulated by nine Anons (25 percent). Those who did report acting in response to a shared outgroup were very vocal about this though, and tended to self-report as being highly active Anons in their respective Ops. One fairly active Anon who worked against the spread of Islamic State propaganda said, “This organization was killing innocent
people, raping women and kids. We were not going to sit and watch” (WauchulaGhost, personal communication, March, 2016). When asked directly why he thought Anons engaged in actions against governments or other official organizations, respondent 99 said, “I think Anons become more involved as a result of the kinds of injustices they see” (personal communication, Oct. 2015). Another Anon who I spoke with during the early portions of my project talked to me at length about pedophiles and how Anons will do essentially anything to stop a pedophile. He explained that pedo-hunting (searching and exposing pedophiles online) was a bit of an Anon pastime and that any time an Anon is bored, they will pedo-hunt because they are firmly against the sexual assault and exploitation of children (Dimples, personal communication, May 2015). OpPedohunt is one of the longest sustaining Ops within the collective and is one issue nearly all Anons support.

Dimples’ conversations with me about pedophiles illustrates how the shared norms and values of Anonymous, and its perceived outgroups overlap. Anons as a whole, and particularly those who have a strong social justice tendency, seem to value children and animal’s issues. Any time either is faced with abuse, Anons are both vocal and active about it and respond en masse.

**Shared Norms and Values: What does the Mask Represent?**

**Peeling Back the Layers of the Anonymous Onion.** The above analysis showed that nearly half of respondents in my sample expressed joining Anonymous specifically because they perceived that Anonymous members shared similar norms and values. What are those values? Some values that emerged based on interview questions were expected, things Anonymous is known for, such as an affinity for the lulz and general disregard for ‘political correctness’. Others became apparent through the interview process as I probed deeper for more information on things such as subgroups, doxing, and their tendency to mistrust official governing bodies.
Because Anonymous is not a hierarchical organization, however, pinpointing and prioritizing these values was incredibly challenging. The discussion below highlights three main areas of Anon culture, and prioritizes some of the values and beliefs of the collective into varying levels of importance.

Each Anon decides which areas and aspects of the collective are most important to him/her/them. They engage in Ops at the time and to the degree that they choose. After spending 18 months engaging with and observing Anons, certain sets of norms and values emerged, as did a general pattern of behaviors. Overall, most Anons articulate the same basic conception of prototypical (Hogg, 1992) Anon behavior. There are 3 main areas where a prototypical group member (Rosch, 1975; Turner & Oakes, 1986) could easily be defined: their willingness to eschew individuality, a drive to fight for the underdog, and a prioritization of ‘fam’ or their ‘Anonfam’.

**Eschewing the individual.** The first area of Anonymous culture, and probably the one that they are most famous for, is the shedding of individuality in favor of a common identity. The Guy Fawkes mask is the most notorious image linked to Anonymous and is used as many Anons’ social media profile pictures. It is worn annually during the Million Mask March, and it sends a message to outsiders that no one person leads or speaks for Anonymous. This shedding of individuality is important for Anons because they often act as a collective and take pride in the fact that no one person dictates an agenda or vision for the collective.
By letting go of their individuality, Anons are able to harness what they refer to as the ‘hivemind’. Anons articulated to me three main levels to this process. Figure 6 illustrates these.

**Basic digital anonymity.** When an individual joins Anonymous they agree to adopt some basic habits. First, they do not use identifying information online and instead anonymize any profiles they use to interact with other Anons. This does not mean they must completely let go of their entire sense of individuality, however. Anons create new names for themselves, sometimes inclusive of the word Anonymous, and other times not at all. Some Anons I spoke to who were willing to allow me to use information from their online profiles who included a portion of the word in their identity included AnonymousUK_15, AnonShadeSeptum, and SirAnonRobot. Others who did not use the word included M0nsterH4x, YodaSec, and Curmudgeoness. These names are clearly unique, but do not reveal identifying information about the individual. Their personal information, location, profession, and most aspects of their offline life do not transfer over to their Anonymous identity.
**Optimal Distinctiveness.** This degree of Anonymity aligns with Brewer’s (1991) Optimal Distinctiveness definition, as Anons at this level are both alike and different. They all share the Anonymous identity, but also have a degree of uniqueness that is expressed through their online personas. They have become “interchangeable parts of a common collective identity” (p.476). At this stage Brewer suggests that self-worth is defined in terms of the collective’s reputation and outcomes of their actions. One Anon described how this process of shedding a personal identity empowered him: “Being connected with other like-minded people, being active in operations, it gave my little voice two things. Cover, to cover my own identity, and strength, because, who would not feel safer to hide their true identity but be a loud voice for justice” (Monsterbuddy, personal communication, Feb. 2016). As Brewer suggested, his identity is tied to the collective’s actions and reputation. He also suggests that through the collective, his voice is amplified. This stage is not where anonymity within the collective stops though. Once offline identifiers are shed, the next phase is to let go of the need for acknowledgement on the individual level.

**No self-promotion or taking credit.** When Anons act, they do not seek recognition that might indicate that Anonymous members by the names of A, B, and C engaged in an activity. Anons are firmly opposed to self-promotion, particularly in regard to their official Op participation. Anyone who would, for example, seek out recognition through the media would be breaking rank. They are vocal about this as well. Curmudgeoness, a member who took anonymity quite seriously, described to me her understanding of why anonymity is important for Anons: “Those of us who do it for the right reasons don’t want to be known. We do it because it is the right thing and as long as we know that, no one else needs to know shit. It’s like making an anonymous donation for the sake of the cause, not for the accolades” (personal communication, March 2016). Monsterbuddy echoed this, “I do not want to become famous, this is not about me,
and that's what I love” (personal communication, Feb. 2016). Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, and Wetherell (1987) describe this as “A shift toward the perception of the self as an interchangeable exemplar of some social category and away from the perception of self as a unique person” (p. 50). In other words, for Anons at this stage, the ‘I’ has officially transitioned to a ‘we’ in terms of self-esteem. Occasionally Anons will take credit for work they have completed, but this most often occurs with training materials^{18}. One Anon who writes tutorials for new Anons explained this variation to me by clarifying that they want new Anons to know who to reach out to for help (AnonymousUK_15, personal communication, Feb. 2016).

**Embracing the Hivemind.** The final stage of embracing the anonymity component of Anon culture is when an Anon completely lets go of their individuality and their identity is shaped almost entirely by the success or failure of the collective. They think with the collective, act with the collective, and become part of the hivemind^{19}. The hivemind happens when Anons will act for each other virtually without hesitation. From sharing botnets without questioning how they will be used, to participating in a hack using the LOIC (Low orbit ion cannon) program, being part of the hivemind is the deepest level of sacrifice of the individual that an Anon will undergo. One Anon described to me how the process works, “It is a bit complicated. When we are working on an operation, we give up our individualism. It could be dangerous otherwise […] If someone has a problem, another steps in with a possible solution or we bring in another person or whatever. Eventually we resolve challenges together and accomplish goals together” (Th3Anon, personal communication, Feb. 2016). One of my key informants explained the power of the hive to me and emphasized how it differentiates Anons from other collectives:

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^{18} For an example of this, see the bottom of the OpNewBlood website’s front page: [https://newblood.anonops.com/](https://newblood.anonops.com/), which credits contributors and trainers.

Without trying to sound too cliché or take it too lightly… we can, and we will, fuck people’s shit up. Without a face it’s difficult for others to come after us, […] other groups can’t do that. And you can’t really be anonymous with all they want from you. With us all we ask when you join is ‘what do you want your screen name to be?’. (xTheMatrix101x, personal communication, March 2016).

In this sense the mask or the hivemind provide Anons with an added layer of security, especially when they are engaging in unsavory or illegal activities online. Brewer (1991) would suggest that this pronounced level of inclusiveness would also mean that the conception of the self would become even more depersonalized; and amongst Anons interviewed, this was certainly the case. The hivemind state amongst Anons fulfills both components of her theory of optimal distinctiveness. Anons are both able to perceive themselves as alike to their fellow collective members and deriving their self-esteem thusly, but also remain very different from outgroups that are so often the targets of their operations.

Anons shed their individuality to varying degrees at varying times. Much like traditional Social Identity Theory suggests, different identities vary in salience in response to different circumstances and interactions. One thing that remains the same for Anons though is the expectation that they shed certain components of their individuality and offline life when they engage with the collective. Hornsey (2008) maintains that embodying the prototype can maximize influence, resources, and power. For Anons this means that the more they seek to maximize their position within the group, the more they must shed their individuality. Though counterintuitive perhaps, being un-unique is ideal and respect is earned through becoming increasingly generic.
**Fighting for the Underdog.** Anons have a long history of attacking power structures and fighting for those who are unable to fight for themselves. In my interviews, one emergent theme was that of the underdog. Anons seem to view themselves as underdogs, and also as people who were willing to fight for the underdog. Just a brief overview of recent Ops shows that the idea of working for or with the underdogs of the world is quite common. Anonymous has an operation to counter bullying. They have an operation that seeks to punish Israel for its occupation of Palestinian Gaza and the West Bank. They have operations to free journalists who have been jailed by governments (Barrett Brown) or who have been killed and their cases abandoned by governments (Serena Shim, Turkey). They take up causes of nearly any group who is unable to fight for themselves. They have a huge environmental wing that works to hold industry accountable for the damage they do to air and water supplies, and dozens of operations that work against different types of animal cruelty all over the globe. This concept is one of the norms around which Anons build their identity.

During interviews, the underdog theme emerged during several different questions. Whether discussing what initially attracted them to Anonymous, which operations they prioritized, or how they recruited others, Anons perceived themselves as especially capable of filling this role. One of the first questions I asked all Anons was how they originally found out about Anonymous and what attracted them to the collective. One Anon I interviewed at the Million Mask March expressed to me that being a part of the collective helped him feel like less of an underdog, “As a unit, we have so much power. That is important. If I am going to give my time to something I want to know I will make an impact. As an Anon, I never have to worry about that” (personal communication, Nov. 2015). Another Anon agreed and said, “Like you can look at things, you can look at banks and corporations and you are so infantile. You look at the
planet and the solar system and the galaxy. And you’re like oh man I am small, I am nothing, I will leave nothing here. But the idea of Anonymous lives on. An idea is forever” (personal communication, Nov. 2015). He is clearly gaining self-esteem by internalizing the Anonymous identity.

Anons seem to be aware that many come to the collective feeling like underdogs. When I asked one Anon what the easiest type of person was to recruit, he responded without hesitation, “People who feel beat down by a system they cannot change from within” (Vandamann, personal communication, Feb. 2016). In a way, Anonymous is the comeback for these individuals. It is their opportunity to stand up against the structures that have held them back as individuals, and as a unit they are no longer the loser or the victim. Simon and Klandermans suggest that this is one of the most important traits of a collective identity. “Collective identity signals that one is not alone, but can count on the social support and solidarity of other ingroup members so that, as a group, one is a much more efficacious social agent” (Simon and Klandermans, 2001, p. 321).

Another question I asked Anons was which operations they worked on or supported. M1ssUnd4st00d, who worked on several animal rights operations explained to me that she selected operations to help with based on where she saw animals enduring pain at the hands of people, “People who abuse power tend to attract our attention, especially if they are causing suffering” (personal communication, Sept. 2015). Other Anons explained that they are also approached by underdogs seeking their assistance, “Often, I am told that law enforcement will not help them, and that Anonymous is their last resort” (99, personal communication, Oct. 2015). Anons have a soft spot for those who have been dealt a rough hand, who cannot catch their break.
An Anon going by the name of M4dh4tt3r (Madhatter) spoke to me about this at length. When I asked him what he thought made Anonymous different from other groups, he told me, “We DO something. We don’t complain about the world and leave it at that. We do our damnedest to affect real change and make our involvement mean something” (Feb. 2016). In our conversations that continued after the official interview, he elaborated on this and recounted stories to me about a group of Anons helping a woman get out of an abusive relationship and get back on her feet after her ex had been trying to sabotage her ability to get work in their small community. He mentioned the phrase ‘unexpected heroes’. When I pushed him to tell me more about what this meant, he simply said, “We aren’t the guys who are supposed to get the girl, who are supposed to win the fight, but over and over again, we do. We come out on top. And we want to help others do that too” (personal communication, July, 2016).

This seems to suggest that Anons have two connections to the idea of the underdog. First, they want to see underdogs succeed and will fight for the little guy in nearly every scenario. Those in power can be seen as a generic outgroup that Anons compare themselves against regularly. Governments, businesses, banks, bosses, and any organization wielding a little power seem to be included in this general outgroup category. By comparing themselves, they are able to embrace an identity that situates them in the underdog role, making any victory or come from behind even more important, unlikely, and attributable to their contrasting position of relatively low power. Second, Anons want the same for others they see in this position. The ingroup expands to include others who are not Anons but who also identify as the victims of systems and structures that hold them back. By helping fellow ingroup members, Anons further build on their self-esteem because again they are victorious against an opponent that by all perceived accounts should beat them.
Anonfam. Anons refer to each other as fam, Anonfam, family, brother, sister, and other familial terms of endearment. This was something I was aware of before I even began conducting interviews. Within different social media platforms and other digital locations, Anons can be seen using the terms of endearment in exchanges with each other, and in public statements made about each other. When it came time to write my interview instrument, I considered asking a direct question about this idea of ‘fam’ but decided against it in order to prevent leading Anons into overemphasizing the concept. Instead, I asked a few questions about the relationships Anons have with each other. Here are a few of the first questions from my interview instrument that seek to capture the nature of relationships amongst Anons:

People define Anonymous in different ways. Would you consider Anonymous a group? A collective? Some other thing?

How would you explain Anonymous to someone who knows nothing about the group?

What appeals to you most about Anonymous?

Do you feel a sense of community with other Anons?

These questions sought to determine the degree to which Anons felt a bond with each other, and to understand how they perceived or defined themselves as a unit. The answers to these four questions were often very similar, even though they asked for different things. The most common response for each of these questions was family. Overall, my NVivo coding shows that 18 different Anons brought up the idea of family a total of 28 times. Figure 7 compares the tendency of Anons to define their fellow Anons as family to the number of years they have identified as Anons. The result appears to be a curve that peaks from 3-5 years. Those Anons who were newer to the group were less likely to define the relationship as familial, and the most experienced Anons were unlikely to make this connection as well. Over 50 percent of Anons who had affiliated with the collective for 3-5 years saw their colleagues as family.
Figure 7: References to family versus the number of years within Anonymous

One of these Anons told me that the reason she thought of them as family was because, “We can come and go as we please. There is always a place for us here. Everyone has accepted me back every time I’ve had to duck out. Even when I couldn’t explain why (MMM3, personal communication, Nov. 2015). She explained to me that after her son passed away, she felt closer to her fellow Anons than she did her own blood relatives. Another Anon within the 3-5 year range said, “Personally they are my family. They are the people I feel at home with and who I trust and embrace” (M1ssUnd4st00d, personal communication, Sept. 2015). xTheMatrix101x spoke in a similar tone, “We all want the common good, we all fight together. We sacrifice together. We are brothers and sisters” (personal communication, March 2016). More recent
recruits had similar comments, but were not as detailed in describing the relationship to me. ‘We are family’ (Th3Anon, personal communication, Feb. 2016) was a common three word phrase from them.

The more seasoned Anons spoke of family as well, though fewer of them brought it up. One Anon who had been with the collective for 7 years told me, “Anyone and everyone belongs with us [. . .] You don’t have to have faith in anything but yourself, and we will become your family” (AnonBeast, personal communication, Nov. 2015). Twenty four percent of Anons within his experience bracket mentioned family. Of the most experienced Anons (8+ years), only one mentioned family, and it was in a passing comment to me about how distance isn’t necessarily a challenge for family.

The shape of this distribution makes sense given some other data collected from my interviews. First, it is not surprising that the newest Anons did not mention family as frequently. Their relationships have not had an adequate amount of time to develop and their networks are likely smaller and less saturated with other Anons. The Anons in the 3-5 year range are most likely to see their fellow Anons as family because they have a solid history with the group, and have had plenty of time to experience events that might bring them closer to their fellow Anons. As for the most seasoned Anons, they are currently struggling with the influx of new Anons who are not playing by the rules they have established and lived by for the duration of their participation. This has created a rift (discussed in detail below) between new and old Anons, and might help explain why the older Anons are not feeling the same affection for each other that the mid-range Anons feel.

Overall, however, Anons saw each other through the lens of family, and in certain cases, with even more affection than their own offline blood relatives. One Anon summarized this
sentiment well by telling me, “I think it’s important to understand that anyone can “call” themselves an Anon, but those I have in my #Anonfamily are good people who are sincerely interested in making this a better world” (personal communication, Oct. 2015).

Exceptions to the ‘fam’. Not all is well within Anonymous all the time. While the above discussion serves to highlight how important the concepts of family and community are to Anons, they are imperfect and have exceptions like any other family. They bicker, they fight, and there’s always that one crazy uncle that makes everyone roll their eyes at the Thanksgiving table. During my time interacting with Anons, there was noticeable growth and conflict within the collective. Three main areas stand out as the biggest exception to the strong family-type ties that so many Anons expressed. There is a rift between old Anons and new Anons, a general values debate about when/where it might be appropriate to dox another Anon, and a sharp split between Anons who are willing to cooperate with the government in the fight against Islamic State propaganda dissemination online, and those unwilling to associate with the federal government at all, regardless of a shared common enemy.

Old versus new Anons. During my interview process, one third of Anons expressed some sort of frustration that Anonymous had either grown too large and diverse to remain cohesive, or that they were generally frustrated with the increase in infighting amongst Anons. Many of these same Anons had expressed strong familial feelings for their fellow Anons, but still recognized a rift that is occurring between the old and new Anons.

One of the first hints I had that all was not well within the Anonymous ranks was a conversation I had with an Anon named Vandamann. He told me, “We are experiencing growing
pains I would say. Seriously. Oldfags, newfags, it’s a tough battle and we are having it for all the wrong reasons” (personal communication, Feb. 2016). This comment stemmed from a question I asked about the future of Anonymous. Going back through my data, and in interviews that followed, I noticed a handful of Anons expressing similar sentiments. Some, like the members of my focus group, expressed frustration with new Anons, “They have no idea what they are doing yet” (respondent 2, personal communication, Nov. 2015). “They felt really young and scattered and unfocused” (respondent 4, personal communication, Nov. 2015). “A lot of the young guys seem just generally angry at the world. They need the outlet and sometimes some help with direction” (respondent 5, personal communication, Nov. 2015). During analysis I found that nearly all of those expressing discontent were older Anons. Yodasec told me, “I got tired of being disrespected. These new guys talking shit to me don’t even know what I’ve done” (personal communication, April, 2016). CyberPhantom agreed, “I’m an oldfag. A decade if we need to be specific. We started this shit while the incoming generation were in diapers. Too many skids and newfags trying to make a name and doxing each other and not understanding that we aren’t about that” (personal communication, Nov. 2015). To me, this appeared to be one set of Anons asserting that other Anons were, in fact, an outgroup rather than part of their ingroup within that particular given context. This is not entirely unexpected, however. Franke (2003) states that “Categories are particularly salient if recently or frequently activated, or if people are motivated to use them” (p. 37). In the case of old Anons, being repeatedly bombarded with tense conflicts that new Anons were initiating was enough to activate the salience of that identity as an old Anon. During the portions of interviews where I asked

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20 Within the Anon vernacular, they refer to each other as oldfags and newfags, and this language appears in many of their interview transcripts. For the purpose of this research, I have not altered their language, but in my discussion I have used the terminology old Anons and new Anons instead.
about internal conflicts, this identity as an old Anon was expressed as more salient than their identity as a general member of Anonymous. Their self-esteem appeared to derive from the comparison with new Anons and an elevation of old Anons as more experienced, having paid their dues, and less volatile and irrational. They perceived new Anons to be lesser Anons because they were not seasoned in hacking, and were causing conflicts that older Anons would not cause. Hewstone, et al. (2014) focus on this idea and note that these types of negative interactions in particular increase feelings of animosity toward the outgroup much more than positive feelings might temper them. For the old Anons, no amount of positive interaction working together on operations was enough to counter the negative feelings they felt as a result of new Anons who would pick fights and attack others within the collective.

The old Anons were aware of the challenges created by this internal conflict, and spoke with me about this at length. SQL4H4x0Rs, an Anon who focused on training new Anons about their own online security, told me that many of the older Anons were hesitant to train newcomers for fear that the training they provide might tempt the new Anons to abuse such skills, or the new Anon would engage in some illegal activities trying to show off that might land them in jail (personal communication, Oct, 2015). Monsterbuddy agreed, “They haven't figured out what they're doing. They fight with everyone because of that, and some feel like they have something to prove” (personal communication, Feb, 2016). This reflexivity indicated to me a degree of maturity, but also seemed to reflect a concern for the general wellbeing of the whole collective.

Brewer and Gardner (1996) suggest that collective welfare can become a main concern when social identities are salient and for some of the older Anons, the welfare of the collective and its future appeared to be a big concern. “I think people need to learn that anyone can make a video,

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21 For an example of this, see this blog post by anon99percenter: https://anon99percenter.wordpress.com/2016/01/.
anyone can make an ‘op’. Everyone gets mad at these new Anons and operations going around and they don’t stop to think that, in order for shit to work, people have to actually join and help out” (TheMatrix101, personal communication, March 2016).

Clearly older Anons are aware of this rift and for some it has become enough to drive a wedge and make the subgroup more salient than the main collective at times. Whether this will affect the future of the collective is not certain, though many Anons articulated that the size of the collective and the increasing range of interests and positions has created tension within the ranks. Age and length of time within the collective were only two types of conflict Anons mentioned during interviews, but at the time, they did appear to be the most prevalent sources of internal strife.

Doxing. Another issue causing tension amongst Anons was the concept of doxing. A dox is when one person collects identifying information about another and releases it on the web for anyone to access. Common information contained in a dox can include the person’s full name, home address and telephone number, place of employment, legal and criminal history-if one exists, and financial information such as credit card numbers, debts owed, or any other information that could be used to embarrass, endanger, or disrupt the life of the doxee. Anons have engaged in frequent doxing of individuals from outgroups. From members of the Church of Scientology to KKK members, Anonymous has received plenty of media attention, both positive and negative for their doxes. As far back as 2014, the doxing issue was a wedge between Anons.

22 For more information and a basic overview of doxing, see the Reddit thread here: https://www.reddit.com/r/OutOfTheLoop/comments/2e04kr/what_is_doxing_and_why_is_it_used/.
23 For an example of a basic dox done by an Anon, see https://pastebin.com/0fcFnHkF.
While some Anons tend to look at doxing as child’s play, others take pride in the quality of their doxes. The main area where Anons split on doxing, however is whether it is ever okay to dox another Anon. During the course of my research, I observed several internal doxes as they were released, and watched the subsequent conflicts that followed.

One of the first that I encountered was the dox of AnonFingers. Figure 8 is a screenshot of a portion of the dox. This dox, provided to me by Yodasec includes many of the traits commonly found in a dox.

Figure 8: The dox of AnonFingers.
His contact information, home address, criminal record, links to ‘proof’ of his online activities including threats he made and affiliations he holds, and all of his aliases from Twitter. There was a swarm of activity and commentary around this dox, but ultimately it appeared that Anons were generally supportive of it and perceived it as deserved.

One of the biggest doxes that I observed, and the one that sparked the most debate during my data collection was the doxing of @anon99percent (99). I conducted an interview with 99 in October of 2015 and his dox came out shortly after, in early 2016. At the time of my interview with him, he had over 60,000 Twitter followers and a solid amount of respect amongst Anons. He was a generally friendly Anon and often helped new Anons get their Ops off the ground, while also maintaining strong friendships with more seasoned Anons. The reasoning behind his doxing is cloudy but stems from both his creation of a questionable GoFundMe page for his wife,24 who he claimed had cancer, and also from another Anon TKrypt, who claimed that 99 and a subgroup called Fuqursec were doxing other Anons and that 99 was using them to act out against anyone who crossed him. 99’s doxing shook Anons and soon they were bombarding their networks with tweets, Pastebin and Ghostbin links, and videos all commenting on the dox of 99 and the associated ethics.25

There seemed to be two camps of Anons in regard to 99. Some had worked with him over the years and respected his efforts on animal rights issues and his friendship. Others believed he had tricked Anons and betrayed their trust, thus justifying the dox and pariah status.

When I questioned Anons about infighting and doxing in particular, I received similar responses to what I was reading online. xTheMatrix101x told me firmly, “No doxing other

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24 The GoFundme is still active and can be seen here. It has been edited to include 99’s (aka John Baker) defense of the call for donations that was added after his doxing.
25 See the Pastebin by @I_AM_SPOOK for an example of the types off statements being circulated following 99’s dox: https://pastebin.com/jh5nrFLw.
ANONS. Some Anons deserve to be doxed, like the pedos with us. But just going after the newbs and trying to unmask them? No. That I will never stand for. Anons have to actually think shit through” (personal communication, March 2016). xTheMatrix101x provided me with a link to a public threat he made just before doxing a woman who he believed was a pedophile. The comments from him in Figure 9 highlights some of the internal conflict regarding doxing of other Anons.

Figure 9. The Matrix TMT statement.

This type of statement is very common when a dox is about to occur or an Anon would like to provide rationale to the general population about why the dox is deserved.

One of the larger concerns with doxing seemed to center on a fear that the federal government would use information from doxes against Anons. Yodasec and several other Anons
mentioned this concern, “Anonymous is starting to turn on each other. They are too busy doxing each other like a bunch of fucking idiots doing feds work for them. Feds are just sitting back and watching. Or instigating the fights. We’ve known that though. You are not supposed to dox your fucking family. That is the FED’s work and you are doing their job” (personal communication, April 2016). These Anons saw the threat from the federal government as a more important issue. Other Anons were fine with the dox of 99 and saw it more like business as usual. Vandamann told me that doxes like this were typically just people trying to show off or build a name for themselves (personal communication, Feb. 2016). These two camps seemed to have differing outgroups being more salient. Those who supported 99 and feared the federal government saw the government as the dangerous outgroup, and therefore their identity as Anons who opposed the government was more salient. The others believed that veering away from the expected behavior of a prototypical group member (as 99 had done) was more important and thus their identity as more ‘ideal’ ingroup members was more salient. The dynamic nature of social identities (Huddy, 2001) seemed very relevant in the case of doxing. While I observed these two distinct camps when discussing 99’s dox, upon mention of another outgroup (pedophiles) they all appeared to quickly shift back to a broader identity as Anons, with pedophiles as the outgroup. This fluidity in identity could potentially be attributed to the online location where most Anon interactions occur, and future research should explore whether online identities are more fluid than offline identities. Because offline identities have more pronounced (visual) signals and are less grounded in self-selection and more based on demographics or other non-optional traits like race or socioeconomic status, they may not be as easy to discard or embrace within varying contexts.
The ISIS conundrum. Beginning in 2014, and continuing through 2017, Anonymous has engaged in OpISIS. The main purpose of this Op has been to remove ISIS propaganda and social media accounts that recruit and/or promote the Islamic State’s message. Because the Islamic State has proven so adept at harnessing the power of social media, and Twitter in particular where a huge population of Anons interact, the collective took notice (Gladstone and Goelmarsh, March 2015). The Anon response was OpISIS. Anons expressed frustration about Twitter’s (and other social media platforms’) failure to address the violent materials being circulated. Their grievance included Twitter’s refusal or delay in removing videos of beheadings and other violence, promotion of a fundamentalist and violent interpretation of the Quran, and calls for individuals to make hijrah (migrate to the self-proclaimed Caliphate) or carry out terror attacks in the countries where they resided. Not all of these violate the Twitter code of conduct, though Anons have since become more specific in their reporting and hacking of such accounts. Anons also complained that the government was failing to address the online component of the Islamic State’s recruitment efforts. In an interview with Tech.Mic, an Anon going by the name TorReaper said, “‘Kids are pretty smart these days and know how to stay pretty anonymous. I would much prefer the content was off the net and not available to impressionable kids’” (Smith, 2015). He argued that the information needed to be removed and could not wait for verification or more legal channels of removal. Anons claimed that their efforts were the only thing quelling the dissemination of ISIS propaganda. One Anon told me, “ISIS would be everywhere, in my opinion, if it weren’t for Anons. The government doesn’t do anything, or what they are doing isn’t making any difference” (personal communication, September 4, 2015). Others noted that “the government has left a gap in counterterrorism” (personal communication, November 23,

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26 See https://support.twitter.com/articles/18311 for Twitter’s usage guidelines.
As Islamic State propaganda exploded within the platform, Anons’ feelings against the Islamic State were strong and they attacked original content creators and sympathizers alike. One Anon said, “We don’t act against anyone who doesn’t deserve it. When we see evil, it’s not hard to build consensus (personal communication, Nov. 2015). A subgroup formed within Anonymous and referred to themselves as GhostSecurity. GhostSecurity worked around the clock to both report and remove Islamic State Twitter accounts. They even created a site where other Anons and non-Anons alike could report the location of Islamic State propaganda and they would address it. Figure 10 shows a screenshot of this site.

![Ghost Security Reporting](image)

**Figure 10: Ghost Security Reporting**

The OpISIS channel in the AnonOps IRC was a busy place through 2015 but began to show signs of problems in the fall as Anons began to disagree on the process that should be followed for dealing with ISIS content. One camp, which is now known as Ghost Security
Group, chose to coordinate with the federal government by sharing intelligence with the government about Islamic State activities online both within social media platforms and other digital locations. This exchange of information was coordinated through a terrorism analyst, Michael Smith of Kronos. To the members of Ghost Security Group, cooperation with the government was a small price to pay because another outgroup had become more important: the Islamic State. Their identity seemed to become one that no longer prioritized the denigration of the government. The tweets in Figure 11 from an Anon affiliated with Ghost Security Group highlights this type of sentiment, and the need to cooperate with government officials.

![Tweets from Anon](image)

**Figure 11: Government Cooperation**

Other Anons did not find the Islamic State more problematic than the federal government and were unhappy with the relationship being forged between Anons, Smith, and the Feds. To them, the government remained an outgroup and their perception of themselves as more virtuous and less corrupt than the government remained firmly intact. One of the most outspoken,
WauchulaGhost expressed disappointment about the split to me, “At one time we were a close, tight family. We all trusted each other with our lives. That was until the government approached our group. Government funding and money eventually destroyed us. Since then, the group has split into two” (personal communication, March 2016). The split over cooperation with the government proved to be too much and those, including Wauchula, who did not believe they should collaborate cut ties and retained an abbreviation of the subgroup’s original name, GhostSec. The split became so pronounced and such a topic of conversation amongst the collective that one Anon created a how-to graphic (Figure 12) explaining how to tell the difference between GhostSec and Ghost Security Group.

![Figure 12: Ghostsec and Ghost Security Group Comparison](image)

Overall, this split suggests that the Anonymous identity was not salient enough to allow for cohesiveness against outgroups. Ghost Security Group did not maintain the prototypical perspective that the government is not to be trusted. This could prove problematic for Anonymous in the future. When a norm (such as distrust of government) is contradicted by
members of the collective, it sends an inconsistent message to the larger population. Hornsey (2008) reminds us that “the norms of relevant ingroups are a crucial source of information about appropriate ways to think, feel, and act” (p. 210). When those norms are not being voiced and acted by a section of the population, confusion arises and cohesion suffers.

With all the examples shared here: age conflicts, doxing protocol, and government collaboration, the main challenge is a struggle for asserting and accepting norms. Several Anons expressed to me that they felt the size of Anonymous was becoming too large and that was the source of many of their internal conflicts. Others suggested that the lack of leadership gave them no one to look to for a guideline when trying to determine how to settle a dispute. These challenges and the way Anons choose to address them will likely decide the future of the collective. Without a clear plan or directive moving forward, however, the shape of Anonymous remains unclear.

**Conclusion**

This chapter presented information on the norms and values that shape Anonymous and its membership. My hypothesis that Anons join Anonymous based on shared norms and values was supported and data indicated that nearly half (46%) of Anons who joined the collective came to its ranks because of the perception that Anonymous reflected their values. My second hypothesis that Anons also acted on behalf of the collective was less clear, though 22 percent of respondents cited this as a reason they chose to participate in some action for Anonymous. Other Anons cited both recruitment efforts (32%) and the perception of a shared outgroup (24%) as reasons they chose to participate in some action for the collective.

Respondents also provided insight into what the most common shared norms and values were for the collective. The most prevalent was the expectation that members shed their offline
identity and engage anonymously when interacting with other Anons and acting on behalf of the collective. The degree to which Anons do this occurs in three general levels. The first is the basic transition to anonymous profiles online and the shedding of their offline defining characteristics. The second level is the willingness to reject self-promotion or taking credit for work done for the collective. The third and final level is embracing the hivemind mentality and rejecting individuality for the more social identity. This level is closest to the prototypical group member (Rosch 1999) and the status where Anons thrive, as they are able to most effectively harness their shared skills and power, with the least amount of conflict stemming from potential power struggles or personality conflicts.

Anons also emphasize the role of the underdog within their collective. They do this both in terms of their perceptions of themselves and in how they perceive those that they help. Many Ops focus on helping those in relatively low positions of power and punishing those who are perceived to abuse power and inflict suffering on others. Finally, Anons define their relationships with other Anons in terms of family, or ‘fam’ as they say. This is observed both in their interactions with each other, and the way they project their image to the outside world.

There are also areas where Anons diverge and are unable to maintain a cohesive shared identity. More experienced Anons are at odds with younger Anons about how members should behave. This general rift can be seen within both locations for socialization, and within actual ops where Anons cannot agree on processes or positions. Similarly, Anons disagree on the concept of doxing and internal doxes in particular. Several high profile doxes of Anons has made this an area of debate across the board for Anons and in general, the newer Anons seem much more likely to attack a fellow Anon than those who have more time within the collective.
The other area where Anons struggle to take a consistent position is if and when it is ever okay to collaborate with the US government. The case of OpISIS and attempts to rid social media platforms of Islamic State propaganda has brought this disagreement to the forefront for Anons and has led to splintering of previously close-knit working groups.

Overall, Anons do appear to have several shared identities, though the salience of these shift quickly, perhaps in relation to their digital nature and less rigid nature than offline identities. While Social Identity Theory can explain many of the perceptions and actions of Anons, their size and the influx of new and contradictory and conflicting factions suggest that they may be becoming too diverse for a cohesive larger identity to remain salient, and instead, subgroup identities are becoming increasingly important.
Chapter 6

Levels of Engagement and the Anon Mobilization Orientations

*The Romans thought of themselves as the chosen people, yet they built the greatest army on Earth by recruiting warriors from any background. -- Amy Chua*

This chapter builds on information about Anon’s shared norms and values by examining when and how Anons engage in the mobilization process. Data relating to my first hypothesis about joining and acting on behalf of Anonymous from the previous chapter showed nearly half of Anons interviewed joined the collective based on a sense of shared norms and values. They also acted on behalf of the collective based on those values, but to a lesser degree. Anons offered other reasons why they chose to act on behalf of Anonymous (recruitment, perception of a shared outgroup), and reported these at higher rates. My mobilization hypotheses predicted that the desired level of engagement that mobilizers desired from recruits would influence the mobilization method employed. During analysis, findings emerged suggesting these hypotheses were not confirmed by the data and, in fact, mobilization methods were more likely influenced by traits of the mobilizer. This chapter will present these emerging findings and examine specifically the mobilizer-related impact on mobilization methods.
I present findings for this chapter in three sections. First, the initial hypotheses and data are discussed, and emergent data are used to illustrate the need for additional hypotheses. Then the basic methods of mobilization emerging from my data are presented and illustrated. Finally, mobilization methods are explained in terms of the new hypotheses and a matrix of Anon Mobilization Orientations is developed.

**Social Identity Salience and Levels of Engagement**

Based on the spectrum of activism in protest movements proposed by Franke and Armstrong (2017), I predicted that mobilizers would attempt to utilize or make salient different components of the Anon social identity to mobilize individuals for different levels of activism.

**Predicting Mobilization Methods.** My second set of hypotheses was broken down into 3 sub-hypotheses.

- **H2:** When attempting to mobilize new members and increase participation, the desired level of activism will influence the component of social identity (ingroup vs. outgroup, see Chapter 2) Anons utilize in mobilization messages.
  - **H2.1:** Anons will utilize ingroup favoritism when mobilizing for silent support.
  - **H2.2:** Anons will utilize ingroup favoritism when mobilizing for support.
  - **H2.3:** Anons will utilize outgroup derogation when mobilizing for activism.

My intention was to explore the difference between the uses of ingroup and outgroup messages for mobilization. I hoped to see if more aggressive or risky forms of participation (activism) mobilization would utilize stronger outgroup messaging than mobilization for less active forms of participation (support and silent support). For example, every year Anons engage in an operation called OpIsrael where they seek to highlight injustices imposed on Palestinians by the Israeli government and Israeli Occupying Forces (IOF). Activities for this operation include
actions ranging from retweeting information about the conflict, to composing basic mobilization tweets promoting the Anonymous operation, to promoting the Boycott, Divestment, Sanction (BDS) movement on Twitter, to targeting Israeli government and pro-government business websites via hacking. Clearly, the last of these is the most risky and the type of activism that would necessitate action outside of a social media platform. My sub-hypothesis H2_3 proposed that mobilization for those types of actions would use imagery like Figure 13 below of the baby with the bullet hole in its head which sought to highlight the distinction of the outgroup as a violent government that killed children.

*Figure 13: Outgroup mobilization imagery*

Likewise, Hypotheses H2_1 and H2_2 proposed that less active forms of mobilization would use messaging like Figure 14, which merely provides basic information about the operation, but does so with typically stylized graphics (which are a norm for Anon materials and thus indirectly promote Anons as the ingroup).
In my interviews, I included several questions that sought to solicit answers relating to these hypotheses:

1) Would you describe a little about how you came to be familiar with Anonymous?
2) Are there any smaller groups or Operations within Anonymous that you support? Which ones? If yes, what are their goals?
3) How did you find out about the Operations you support/participate in?
4) Have you ever encouraged another person to become Anonymous or participate in an Operation?
5) What do you think triggers Anons to become more active with Anon Operations?
6) Have you ever tried to get others to be more active? How?

During my time collecting data, I observed Anons mobilizing for all levels of activism outlined in Franke and Armstrong’s spectrum (see Chapter 2 Table 1) with the exception of mobilization to the disengaged level, which would not necessitate mobilization in the first place. I was also able to hear directly from Anons about how they mobilized for their Ops and how they had been mobilized by others. What I found, however, was that there were no patterns I could see that indicated any support for my hypotheses. I found some Anons always used outgroup derogation to mobilize, regardless if they were asking others to simply retweet, or if they were DDoSing a
group of websites. Figure 15 below shows one such message, which provides information about perceived connections Monsanto has to the US government.

Figure 15: Outgroup messaging for mobilization.

This image is a clear criticism of both Monsanto and the US government, and yet the mobilization effort was merely asking Twitter users to retweet the message and “Spread the word about the web of corruption” (personal communication, Oct. 2015). Alternatively, some ingroup messages were used by several Anons for mobilization to multiple levels of activism. I
encountered the following image (Figure 16) within mobilization messages asking for retweeting (silent supporter) and for inviting new Anons into the collective (supporter). Later I encountered the same graphic being used for mobilizing Anons to attack businesses owned by Donald Trump by using some of the Trump organization’s purchasing accounts (hacked by Anonymous) to purchase and ship sex toys to themselves (activist). This type of action is what Anons might refer to as ‘doing it for the ‘lulz’.

![Image: Being Anonymous is like being in love, nobody can tell you if you are or aren't... You just know](image)

*Figure 16: Ingroup messaging for mobilization.*

Overall, I found no discernable patterns regarding the type of activism. I did, however, collect a large amount images illustrating mobilization efforts, and interview accounts of mobilization from the perspective of mobilizers and from recipients of mobilization messages that I did not want to abandon.

**New variables.** In order to try and make some sense of mobilization efforts, I created a new variable. As I had coded data into nodes for mobilization (See Appendix C for my full list of nodes and subnodes) and reviewed them during analysis, I noticed much of the mobilization efforts Anons spoke of were indirect or generalized messages sent out to broad audiences. I had also collected a large quantity of these messages from Twitter, Tumblr, and Instagram and this observation held true across these platforms. I did have respondents who spoke in great detail, however, about their efforts to mobilize specific people or their search for specific skillsets that were valuable in operations. These two distinct types seemed worthy of further exploration. My
new variable was categorical and separated mobilization types into passive or active (described and illustrated in detail in the next section). I scanned each interview again, looking specifically at the questions about mobilization and categorized each Anon into active or passive mobilization categories (see below) based on both their experiences being mobilized, and their own efforts mobilizing others.

**New hypotheses.** Because active mobilizers emphasized that they were seeking specific individuals or skillsets, while passive mobilizers were much more general and community-focused in their efforts, I hypothesized the following:

- H3: Anon’s mobilization approaches will be influenced by the level of self-categorization of the mobilizer (Turner and Oakes, 1986; Turner et al. 1987). Specifically:
  - H3₁: Anons whose individual level identities are salient will be more likely to utilize active mobilization methods.
  - H3₂: Anons whose social level identities are salient will be more likely to utilize passive mobilization methods.

Passive mobilizers often reached out to large crowds and did not demand specific skills, while active mobilizers mobilized in much smaller settings and often sought out individuals. This set of hypotheses assumed that these observations might be connected to the level of self-categorization, because passive mobilizers would reach broader groups with more general messages, indicating that the mobilizer might have a salient social level of self-categorization. If correct, the opposite would be true for active mobilizers.

To test these hypotheses, I re-categorized Anons based on their engagement in active or passive mobilization, and examined how these categorizations compared to their self-categorization at both the individual and social level. Below is a description of each mobilization
method including subcategories, along with examples from both interviews and content I collected online via social media platforms, messaging applications, and YouTube videos.

Mobilization Methods

**Passive mobilization.** This method of mobilization was the most common for Anons. Because it typically occurred publically, it served a dual purpose. Anons sent mobilization messages to each other and were able to catch the attention of non-Anons who might be mobilized indirectly. Passive mobilization most often appeared within the pages of social media platforms, but I also observed it on websites, and even through hacking tutorials. Figure 17 shows a basic passive mobilization message from Twitter, simply asking users to welcome a new Anon. This both welcomed the new Anon, and provided a small opportunity for Anons to interact with each other and build community.

![Figure 17: Mobilization for a Welcome Message](image)

The method of mobilization can be categorized as passive if it meets these criteria:

1) The message asks for or suggests participation either through membership or action.

2) The message is not directed to one specific individual.

3) The message does not ask for a specific skillset, or alternatively, an offer to teach the necessary skills is provided.
Not all of these messages provided information about how to participate or who to contact for more information. Some simply promoted an operation but provided no specific information about how to join it.

**Social media.** The place I observed the most mobilization was undoubtedly within social media, and Twitter in particular. As mentioned previously, Anons generally avoided Facebook because they disliked its platform design and policies. Instagram had some pro-Anonymous graphics but had no private chat functions, which forced Anons into one-way communication and limited opportunity for interactivity (Armstrong and Butcher, 2017). Some mobilization was observed within Tumblr and Ask.Fm, but Anons also reported using these with much less frequency than Twitter. The strong Anon presence and observable networks within Twitter made it an ideal location for observing passive mobilization efforts. The platform’s format also allowed me to see who was following and friending each other and gave me access to Anons I might not have met otherwise.

Anons affirmed my observations about heavy reliance on Twitter and provided stories about how they were mobilized, or worked themselves to mobilize others. One Anon told me, “I've stressed through blog posts and tweets that we need #NewBloods (people just getting into Anonymous) to get more involved. Some of us older Anons find "real life" issues often take so much time that we just don't have the time to devote to Ops” (99, personal communication, Oct. 2015). Another Anon, Hotbootyy explained to me how ‘liking’ and retweeting within Twitter brought her into Anonymous, “I sort of discovered Anonymous by accident. I used to retweet animal rights stuff and things against pedos but didn’t realize that it was from Anon accounts at first. I ended up with a bunch of Anon followers and friends and was brought into Twitter group chats” (personal communication, Feb. 2016). Both mobilizers and those being mobilized spoke
about these passive efforts within social media. They expressed that this passive form of mobilization felt less intrusive and made it easier for Anons to find their own way to Ops that they wanted to work on without feeling direct pressure. One Anon shared this screenshot with me to help explain how passive mobilization can work. Figure 18 is a screenshot of a DDoS tool used to block traffic from a Saudi investment company that Anons believed had ties to terrorist funding.

![Figure 18: Passive Mobilization Tweet](image)

The link shown was tweeted out by Anons to their audiences and anyone could join in the DDoS of the site as they pleased, they needed only click the ‘start’ button. Then the same Anons could turn around and retweet the tool, allowing for a snowball sampling-type effect of passive mobilization for participation in this DDoS attack against the Saudi company. These types of
mobilization provided Anons with opportunities to engage, and also reinforced the ingroup/outgroup distinctions that dictated targets of operations.

The overwhelming majority of passive mobilization I observed within social media platforms was fairly public, though I would find out later that this was only one layer of activism occurring within these platforms walls.

**Websites.** Another form of passive mobilization is the use of websites. Websites offer Anons a way to keep information available and visible, without requiring the daily interactivity that many social media accounts demand in order to stay relevant. For instance, the Cyberguerrilla page (Figure 19) was both visibly appealing and highly technical in its offerings and passive mobilization. The page offered a blog, access to an IRC channel,
encrypted emails, and other online security tools. The group describes itself:

The CyberGuerrilla Collective is an autonomous body based in Europe with collective members worldwide. Our purpose is to aid in the creation of a free society, a world with freedom from want and freedom of expression, a world without oppression or hierarchy, where power is shared equally. We do this by
providing communication and computer resources to allies engaged in struggles against capitalism and other forms of oppression” (Cyberguerrilla.org).

The website is managed by a group of Anons and their page, though not overtly announcing its Anon affiliation, mentions Anonymous several times and expresses values typical of Anons, including a distrust of government, distaste for abuse of power, and a high prioritization of internet freedom and tight security. The website is also promoted on Twitter by the same Anons who maintain it, in conjunction with other Anon messaging. Though they were unwilling to speak directly to me about the website or Anonymous, I was welcome to read and observe throughout the website’s layers and IRC conversations. Their mobilization on the site emphasizes freedom from control, and generally appeared to be more focused on privacy and protective of user information than other pages. They also appear to more heavily emphasize perceived outgroup wrongdoings than most other websites engaging in passive mobilization. One Anon I interviewed in person at the Million Mask March (who actually attempted to mobilize me) recommended the website and told me that someone young like me had a lot that I could contribute there. “It’s up to the next generation to take the reins”, they told me. “You have more time and energy than me lol” (MMM3, personal communication, November 2015).

Another website that presents information with a more welcoming tone (though still passive) about mobilization is the AnonOps Newblood webpage (Newblood.anonops.com). This website (Figure 20) offers new Anons information about how to create a Virtual Private Network (VPN), a guide on accessing the AnonOps IRC, use of The Onion Router (TOR), and basics of email encryption.
Figure 20: AnonOps Newblood Homepage

The website is the location where I initially learned how to navigate the Anon universe and effectively protect myself while interacting with Anons online. The entire page is available in six languages: English, Spanish, Dutch, French, Italian, and German. Figure 21 is a screenshot of the greeting provided at the end of the NewBlood introduction. The message plays on their general motto, but rather than sending a warning to outsiders as the message usually does,\(^{27}\) it has been altered and encourages new members to embody the motto. While the original reads ‘We are Anonymous. We are legion. We do not forgive. We do not forget. Expect Us’, this version shifts it to an affirmative greeting and directive for how to behave.

Figure 21: Welcome to Anonymous.

\(^{27}\) For information about the origins and meaning of this and other Anonymous mottos and slogans, see https://en.wikiquote.org/wiki/Anonymous_(group).
Jenkins (2014) believes that this is a critical step in the recruitment process and facilitates the process of an individual embracing and expressing a new social identity. Affirming the new membership signals to the new member, and other existing members that the transition is official and legitimate (p. 173-175). Much like the welcome message shared above (Figure 21) this example affirms to new Anons that they have become part of the ingroup.

**Tutorials and classes.** The third location for passive mobilization that I observed was within tutorials and classes. Though not always occurring in one specific location, these mobilization efforts varied enough from those on social media platforms and websites that they warrant this third, separate categorization. I encountered both synchronous tutorials and asynchronous training materials while researching Anonymous and had Anons tell me in interviews that they had been mobilized via both. While some promoted their tutorials on social media platforms, others simply provided static links to training materials on websites (Figure 22). The actual mobilization, however, occurred during or as a product of the tutorials.

*Figure 22: AnonOps tutorial page*

One Anon talked about how excited he felt to train with more experienced Anons, and how this excitement triggered increased activism. When I asked him to tell me about a time a
tutorial led to increased activism, he recounted a story about training under a more experienced Anon and how it both increased his enthusiasm, and improved his skills. He explained how he learned from “one of our greatest Anons (in my mind) and he let me use his variant of the famous torshammer DoS script. It’s a very powerful script that allowed me alone to take down, and hold down, two to three sites at a single time” (xTheMatrix101x, personal communication, March 2016). In this interview, Matrix spoke with pride about the relationship. It was evident that the access to new tools and the ability to befriend and learn from an Anon who embodied so many of the prototypical traits valued by Anonymous was important. We know that self-esteem is one of the reasons individuals engage in intergroup discrimination (Tajfel and Turner, 1979), but in this case, the close proximity to an Anon and learning new skills seemed to be the drivers, even though Matrix had not been actively recruited for the interaction. This indicated to me that the increased sense of self Matrix was feeling was not only important in terms of intergroup comparison, but in terms of his status within the collective as well. Though he had been mobilized passively, his self-categorization seemed to be salient at the individual level and status within the ingroup might be more important to him than intergroup comparison.

Another Anon I interviewed at the Million Mask March agreed that honing hacking skills and learning new skills was instrumental in accelerating activism. When I asked why she was willing to give so much of her time to training others about technology and security for free she told me, “Learning more triggers activism. Knowledge is the critical step. That is why I focus my time where I do” (MMM2, personal communication, Nov. 2015). I inquired as to why she opted for passive mobilization methods if her efforts were critical and she told me that she didn’t want to waste any time on someone who was only there halfheartedly. In MMM2’s mind, she would

28 For more information about Tor’s Hammer, see https://www.anonsforever.com/tors-hammer/.
create tutorials once, then make herself available for questions. This way, only those who were genuinely interested in learning would be taking her time.

An Anon I spent a great deal of time with focused a large portion of his efforts offering group tutorials on weekends for would-be Anons. AnonymousUK_15 offered these tutorials and also ran the OpNewAnon Twitter page and chat group. During our first Skype interview, UK_15 walked me through several of the things he taught these incoming Anons, including several tools for DoS attacks, SQL injections, and basic ‘snooping’ tactics he used for compiling doxing materials. Another Anon told me, “Yes, I make tutorials about new tech and security and some basic coding things and put them up for anyone to access within the network. I share on various accounts about where people can come to help on different things. I teach about good opsec for those who are new to the blackhat/greyhat world. I don’t seek anyone out, but lots of people ask and are out there looking for help. I try not to blow anyone off unless I don’t think they are serious” (SQL4H4x0rs, personal communication, Feb. 2016). When I asked one Anon why he offered tutorials and tried to bring in new Anons, he said, “I started OpNewAnon when I reached 1k followers. I thought I would teach people how to hunt pedos and DDoS and it went really well so I continued it. The older generation of Anonymous is starting to leave so I’m trying to teach the new ones” (personal communication, Feb. 2016). This seemed to be a common observation amongst Anons who sought to mobilize. The transitioning out of many old Anons was leaving a void that other Anons sought to fill. Another Anon working with UK_15 promoted his tutorials on Twitter. Figure 23 shows a basic tweet he would send out to his network inviting users to training sessions.
How did these training sites and events evolve into mobilization? It appeared that most participants were already prepared to be mobilized, and were approaching the trainers themselves. The process was simple: An interested individual would approach an Anon who offered trainings. During trainings, they would learn new skills and often use current Ops as examples for practicing the skills. This would then pique the interests of the participants and they would join the Op once the necessary skills were acquired. UK_15 told me that made it easy to talk to new Anons about Ops because they were often very motivated to do risky things, but needed the training. He used trainees’ need for skills development as an ‘in’ to promote operations “In Anonymous if you can’t hack no one wants to talk to you…We go looking for trouble most of the time (personal communication, Feb. 2016).

Many Anons seemed to rely on tutorials to learn independently as well. Th3Anon recounted how he made his way into the collective and started working on Ops:

So once I had a feel for what Anonymous does I thought that they were a pretty good group doing good things. They were seeking justice. So I read up on how to be anonymous and how computers and security online works. Then I waited to
see if there was a cause that I could get behind that felt worthy. I made a Twitter
account as well. A couple years ago there was an op called OpPedoHunt
searching for pedophiles online. I asked a guy to show me how to help and I
collected a network (60ish followers) on twitter. I started to teach myself with
tutorials too. I was learning as I did things (personal communication, Feb. 2016).

This self-selection into the group was facilitated by access to tutorials that could be utilized
asynchronously. Though a tutorial may have been placed online months prior, it was still
successful in mobilizing a potential Anon not just into the group, but to act in an Op as well.

Th3Anon was not the only Anon who expressed being mobilized in this way, via passive
mobilization and tutorials. XXVandamannXX told me, “I watched and offered to help” (Feb.
2016). Another, SQL4H4x0Rs_DONE said, “I found people and Ops online and just started
following them and offering help when my skills fit” (personal communication, Oct, 2015).

Mobilizers felt the same. Regardless of whether they used passive methods in social
media platforms, websites, or through tutorials, they believed passive approaches were effective
ways to reach out. When I asked Anons if they had ever tried to mobilize another for action, one
Anon said, “Not directly really, but in making sure our messages and ideas reach people”
(Anomnomnomom, personal communication, Jan. 2016). Another said “Of course. That’s how we
built our ranks. Most people don’t need pushing though. They opt in and get to work. That’s how
you’re accepted” (Cyberphantom, Nov. 2015). Another told me, “You have to understand that
people come to us. They are drawn in because of our reputation or history” (M0nsterH4x,
personal communication, Feb. 2016). Still another said, “We just put our shit out there and
people pick it up. Sometimes the idea is the right one and you connect with what people are
feeling and they are with you. (M4dh4tt3r, personal communication, Feb. 2016). Of my
respondents, 17 Anons (47%) believed that passive mobilization efforts were enough to mobilize new Anons or existing Anons for increased activism. These findings suggested to me that perhaps Anons who engaged in passive mobilization found their social level identity to be particularly salient. This should be tested in the future with a larger n and a more representative sample (as much as representativeness can be for an undefined total population).

Self-Categorization for Passive Mobilizers

Many of the comments I analyzed from passive mobilizers referenced the reputation of Anonymous as something that tempered the need for aggressive recruitment. Anons who employed or experienced these passive forms of mobilization seemed to have a strong sense of self as a social category (Turner and Oakes, 1986). The salience of their categorization at the group level was high and self-esteem was derived from pride in the reputation of Anonymous as a group, rather than the more individualized categories of self. As a result, they felt that more active efforts were unnecessary because people would seek inclusion without more direct or aggressive mobilization efforts. They were also very likely to promote a group mindset with their mobilization materials. Figures 24-26 show some of the messages shared by passive mobilizers.

Figure 24: Passive mobilization graphic 1
These messages and those who shared them seemed to reinforce each other, with a message being sent out to the mobilizer’s network, and the network responding with support or echoing the message back. Turner and Oakes (1986) believe that these independent perceptions and consensual validation are interdependent processes. The social level of identity was salient for these Anons, allowing them to see themselves as a more homogenous group, rather than a combination of unique individuals. Jetten, et al. (2000) who examined group variability and
intergroup differentiation would suggest that this indicates a higher level of uncertainty amongst Anons, and a need for reinforcement of homogeneity in order to reduce uncertainty.

Overall, passive mobilization was observed across nearly every platform where Anons interacted. The messages were accessible, welcoming, and enthusiastic about the collective as a whole.

**Active mobilization.** Active mobilization was much less visible, and according to Anons, took place behind the scenes in private chat groups much more frequently than it did within the public areas of different social media platforms. When Anons engage in active mobilization, they often seek a person with specific skills, relationships, or a reputation that might help advance their operation. Mobilization messages are considered active when they meet the following criteria:

1) The message asks specifically for membership or action.

2) The message is directed to one specific person or small group -or-

3) The message requires a specific skillset.

These types of messages were less visible during my time conducting interviews and observing Anon interaction online. This is not surprising and was likely the case even in mobilization efforts I did not see. When mobilizing actively, the audience is often much smaller and thus the message can be tailored directly to the recipient or small group of recipients, rather than a flashy graphic that must speak to a larger audience. Because of this, I have less visual examples, but was luckily able to observe the process myself in both a mobilization request directed at me and in a Twitter group chat. This allowed me to verify that the Anon descriptions of direct mobilization were authentic.
**One-on-one interactions.** Because Anons interact through so many different channels, it was challenging to observe actions that would align with the questions in my interview instrument. When I asked one gatekeeper where I might be able to observe mobilization efforts, I was told that most Anon-Anon interactions that were of a more serious nature would occur in non-public places online, in part because the conversations could be legally incriminating for both parties (Pseudo 3, personal communication) and in part because the nature of the interaction simply lent itself to less public modes of communication. One respondent recounted how easy it was to mobilize new members through the Twitter Direct Message (DM) function. If someone followed his Twitter profile who looked like he or she might be a good fit as an Anon, he could simply send them a direct message and invite them to talk about it. He told me that, “In the last month I have gotten 3 people to join the IRC” (xTheMatrix101x, personal communication, March 2016). This process Matrix described was something I had actually experienced myself several months prior.

In October of 2015, I was approached by an Anon via the Twitter DM option. The Anon (who declined to be interviewed) asked if I would support their OpSafeWinter messages and share a Pastebin link (Appendix E) with the other Anons in my network of followers. They were attempting to revitalize the operation for the 2015-2016 winter season and hoped I might retweet and assist them in circulating the call to action. When I asked how they had found me and why they thought I would be a good person to circulate the information, they responded that I was American and thus might have a good audience of stateside Anons, which was the population they were hoping to reach. I obliged in hopes of establishing some good will and perhaps opening a door to more interviews, but the exchange was mostly unfruitful from my end. I was, however, able to experience direct mobilization firsthand. While the interaction was not the risky
exchange that Pseudo 3 had described, it did affirm that these one-on-one mobilization efforts occurred using the DM function. I cannot be sure that their method of mobilizing me was similar to how they would approach other Anons, aside from the fact that they affirmed this was their preferred way to interact within Twitter. The exchange was cordial and fairly innocuous, however, so I saw no reason they would choose to lie.

**Group chats.** The other location Anons reported engaging in active mobilization was within group chats on social media platforms and messaging applications (apps). Anons preferred Twitter and Telegram for the majority of their group chatting. When I asked one Anon about her experiences being mobilized for action in Anonymous, she recounted to me her experiences within group chats being mobilized for green rights and the environment and told me that she thought people mobilized there because “When others get more active, then other people get excited too. It builds momentum and when there is enough, it can get wild” (personal, communication, Sept. 2015). Though this signifies a degree of social self-categorization on her part, she was not the mobilizer, but the target of a mobilization effort. In order to learn more about group chats, I asked other Anons about them. One described how they are often selective about who is invited into the groups and that they wanted to include, “People with the skillset to work with us, and people who would like to have those skills” (AnonBeast, personal communication, Nov. 2015). He was not interested in large groups, but told me they were common as well. He told me they were more for social interaction though, and rarely served as recruiting grounds. He believed there were too many people to trust that they were genuine Anons and not government or other individuals seeking to use information gained there against Anonymous in some way.

Figure 27 is a screenshot of a partial conversation in one of the group chats I was invited
into by an Anon. He invited me in to allow me to spend a more extended period of time observing how they mobilized each other, and how they generally interacted and built friendship and trust amongst a smaller subgroup. The group chat had about 30 members at any given time, though this varied from day to day as some left and some joined (were added). The chat was full of Anons who were pedohunters (their term for those who ‘hunt’ pedophiles online) and sought to find, expose, and sabotage those who circulated child pornography on the darkweb. This particular screenshot also supports findings from chapter 5 about family being one of the most important values of Anons.

Figure 27: Screenshot of Twitter group chat for pedohunters

Typically the group was about 80 percent actual efforts to find/report/sabotage the pedophiles, and about 20 percent socializing. This allowed me to observe their work firsthand.

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29 The name of this subgroup has been excluded at their request, and identifying information has been removed from screenshot #.
The mobilization I observed included some passive actions asking others to report accounts, but typically action was more singular, where one member would ask another specifically for assistance in their search for information and incriminating evidence on a potential pedophile target. They seemed to have a fairly solid understanding of each other’s strengths, as requests often were directed at a few specific people that the mobilizer thought could be helpful. Other times, someone would send a message out to the full group asking who had access to a certain hacking tool or the ability to hack in a certain way, so even though the message went to everyone in the chat, the mobilizer was looking for something very specific.

**Self-Categorization for Active mobilizers.**

The social categorization level seemed to be less salient for Anons mobilizing directly. Their language and their actions rather suggested that they felt the subordinate level of identity as more salient. For example, when asked what troubled him about Anonymous, one Anon said, “What I don’t like? Well Anonymous is the horde, so you have to take it at its face. One day I had someone in the main chan trying to convince me alchemy was real and you could turn any metal in to gold, so I guess that's my long winded way of saying [we have] stupid people” Niaz, personal communication, June 2016). He was not concerned about intergroup comparisons, but rather how he compared to others within the ingroup. When asked to define Anonymous, another Anon told me, “A straight definition is hard because Anonymous means something a little bit different to all of us” (AnonBeast, personal communication, Nov. 2015). Again, the emphasis is on difference between group members.

The unique traits possessed by different members of the collective were more important to active mobilizers, and their own skills and interests were mentioned more frequently compared to passive mobilizers. The locations of interactions may have influenced this as well.
Turner (2007) notes that “people are much more likely to see themselves as individuals in settings where only people from their own group are present than where members of other groups are present” (p. 3). Since most active mobilization occurred in private conversations and small groups, this might indicate that specific settings might trigger a shift between the individual and social levels of self-categorization. This remains unclear, however, as Anons choose the settings in which they interact, so the direction of this relationship, if one exists, would need to be clarified.

**Anti-mobilizers.** One more group emerged during my re-analysis of mobilization interview data that is worth discussing briefly. These individuals were not active or passive mobilizers, but rather were vocal in their insistence that Anonymous not only did not need to mobilize new membership or try to accelerate participation within its ranks, but that doing so was actually problematic and they were willing to take action to prevent mobilization. When I asked one Anon if they had ever encouraged another person to join Anonymous or become more active if already part of the collective, they told me, “That’s not how it works. You show your skills. Then you are in. If you can’t write a few lines of code, you’re a skid. And that’s fine, but this isn’t the place for you. (Ch8mig_M4x, personal communication, Sept. 2015). This Anon was very vocal within Twitter and the AnonOps ORC about how Anonymous had become too big and it needed to purge the ‘skids’ and ‘newfags’ because they were the ones that were fueling internal conflict. I watched Ch8mig threaten several new Anons with doxing, and also saw them actively encourage other Anons to do the same. Another Anon I interviewed several months later expressed similar feelings, “There’s a lot of posing, skiddies, people who want the name. Which is pretty much the opposite of what we stand for” (Lyanon, personal communication, Feb. 2016). When I asked Lyanon if anyone had mobilized him, he told me, “Nah. I think most of us just
sort of put in the time until we are accepted” (Feb. 2016). Another Anon who was vocal against mobilization efforts told me that the subgroups within Anonymous were much more trust-worthy. He said, “I kind of stick within the smaller group and the people I know and trust a little more” (Pseudo1, personal communication, Dec. 2015). In reviewing these interviews, the language they used and their heavy emphasis on the individual while criticizing the collective’s dynamics suggested to me that these anti-mobilizers felt their individual levels of self-categorization as more salient than the social level. The fit of this categorization (Oakes, et al., 1991) reflected a reality where these Anons perceived themselves as superior somehow to other Anons, and also to potential incoming Anons. Overall however, they clearly aligned more closely with active mobilizers than passive in both their behavior and perceptions, even though they worked to counter mobilization efforts.

**Self-Categorization in the Data**

In taking a step back and looking at my entire sample, I used NVivo to compare my mobilization variable to my node on self-categorization. This, I thought, would help confirm whether or not the observations described in this chapter did in fact support my third set of hypotheses:

H3: Anon’s mobilization approaches will be influenced by the level of self-categorization of the mobilizer (Turner and Oakes, 1986; Turner et al. 1987). Specifically:

H3₁: Anons whose individual level identities are salient will be more likely to utilize active mobilization methods.

H3₂: Anons whose social level identities are salient will be more likely to utilize passive mobilization methods.
While my small sample size limits my options for hard tests of statistical significance, simple charts generated in NVivo illustrate that there does appear to be a relationship between the level of self-categorization and the type of mobilization.

Figure 28. *Individual level self-categorization versus mobilization method*

Figure 28 shows that 63 percent of Anons in my sample who asserted an individual level of self-categorization engaged in active mobilization. Only 33 percent of those at the individual level engaged in passive mobilization. This would suggest support for H3, which predicts that Anons self-categorizing at the individual level will utilize active mobilization methods.
Figure 29: Social level self-categorization versus mobilization method

Figure 29 also appears to support my hypotheses. In this case, 66 percent of Anons who self-categorized at the social level utilized passive mobilization methods. Only 22 percent utilized active mobilization methods.

These two charts offer evidence that H3 and the corresponding sub-hypotheses which focus on the mindset of the mobilizer are a more accurate way to conceptualize the Anon mobilization process than focusing on the level of engagement for which Anons are being mobilized, as I had initially attempted to do with H2 and sub hypotheses. The mobilizer rather than the operation appears to be a more informative variable in predicting how mobilization will occur. This should be a focus of future research with a larger N.
The Anon Mobilization Orientations

In order to synthesize this information and create a tool for organizing information about Anon mobilization, I propose a matrix of mobilization orientations. Initially I considered a spectrum to explain Anon mobilization, but because I had Anons who worked actively against mobilization and Anons who expressed general indifference, basic scales were not an accurate fit. In returning to my two variables from H3, I decided a matrix might be most appropriate. As I defined the traits that would fit in each category, I became more confident that this was an effective way to understand Anon mobilization. Because I found that the mobilizers’ traits were fairly reliable predictors of mobilization methods, I refer to the below matrix (Table 5) as the Anon Mobilization Orientation. It consists of 4 categories, each defined by a pro- or anti-mobilization perspective, and by which level of self-categorization is salient.

Table 5

Anon Mobilization Orientations

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salient subordinate self-identification</th>
<th>Pro-Mobilization orientation</th>
<th>Anti-mobilization orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Active Mobilizers)</strong></td>
<td>1. The Anon feels salience at the individual level –and-</td>
<td>1. The Anon feels salience at the individual level –and-</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Engages in mobilization of specific individuals or those with specific skillsets.</td>
<td>2. Engages in aggression toward mobilizers and/or new Anons seeking to be accepted into the collective.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Salient social categorical self-identification</th>
<th>Pro-Mobilization orientation</th>
<th>Anti-mobilization orientation</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>(Passive Mobilizers)</strong></td>
<td>1. The Anon feels salience at the social categorical level –and-</td>
<td>(Indifferent Observers)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>2. Engages in mobilization to a broad spectrum of individuals or for a broad spectrum of skill levels.</td>
<td>1. The Anon feels salience at the social categorical level and –BUT–</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>2. Is unwilling to engage in efforts to help or hinder mobilization by others.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Active Mobilizers. This category of mobilizers includes those who worked within group chats to mobilize each other for various operations, as well as Anons who sought out people with specific skillsets and invited them into Anonymous or their respective operations. They function with a salient individual level of self-categorization, especially when engaged in mobilization efforts. This may explain why they so often find themselves working within smaller groups or alone on operation activities. In addition to mobilizing via active methods and interacting on a much smaller scale than other categories of mobilizers, active mobilizers often emphasize specific skillsets in their mobilization messaging. They are more likely to speak in terms of ‘I’, ‘me’, and ‘my’ when describing their contributions to the collective.

Impeders. Similar in level of self-categorization, impeders are opposed to mobilization efforts and are willing to act against both mobilizers and new Anons to prevent mobilization. This category includes those like AnonBeast who believed that individuals without hacking skills had no place in Anonymous and would work to discourage mobilizers. He felt that Anonymous was being watered down into a social organization and had lost sight of its roots (personal communication, Nov. 2015). Other Anons who would fit in this category include those who trolled and threatened new Anons with doxing because they were frustrated with the ever-expanding size of the collective. These individuals do not shed individuality the way the prototypical Anon would be expected to, and thus tend to derive self-esteem at the individual level, making cooperation and consensus less important.

Passive Mobilizers. This category of mobilizers varies from the first two in that their social level of self-categorization is salient. They are pro-mobilization and work within social media platforms, websites, and by offering trainings and tutorials to mobilize new Anons or increase the participation of current Anons. They emphasize the ‘we’, ‘us’, and ‘our’ perspective
when speaking about the group and most closely resemble the ideal-type or prototypical Anon in terms of shedding individual identity. In my previous chapter, these Anons would be contained within the third level of anonymity—embracing the hive mind. Their sense of self is highly depersonalized (Brewer, 1991) and they act as a cohesive unit, rather than a group of unique individuals. This category includes Anons like Mr. Hackintosh who, when I asked if he ever mobilized others to become more active in Anonymous, told me, “Yeah. I think so anyways. Everything I put out on Twitter would qualify under that category. It’s not like intense or a hard sell. I get plenty of questions and activity though so I think it works well” (personal communication, Dec. 2015).

**Indifferent Observers.** This category of Anons was rare (in part because I rarely encountered anyone who did not have a very strong opinion on mobilization) but I did speak to a handful of Anons who were not interested in the debate. These Anons were similar to passive mobilizers in that they typically had a salient social level self-categorization. They did not, however, work to mobilize others for two reasons I was able to see. First, and most often, they simply expressed that they did not have time. Second, they felt that it was unnecessary and that good Anons who wanted in or to be more active would do it without external pressure or encouragement.

These four categories are derived from my exploration of Anon mobilization efforts and experiences. While I cannot guarantee that these categories are inclusive of all Anons, they provide a general orientation which most Anons should fit. It is also worth noting that the level of self-categorization here does not always hold in other areas of Anon interactions. For example, just because an Anon is an active mobilizer with a salient individual level identity when mobilizing does not mean they do not have a social level self-categorization when working
with other Anons during an operation or when casually socializing. The categorization is fluid and responsive to context (Branscombe, Ellemers, Spears, and Doosje, 1999).

**Merging the Hypotheses?**

My original hypotheses predicted that the type of mobilization message utilized varies in relation to the type of action being sought. Based on this prediction, I more specifically examined the extent to which passive and active mobilization efforts varied in response to the level of action for which Anons were being mobilized (Franke and Armstrong, 2017). While my interview questions had not been composed to solicit this type of information, my data contained 28 examples of Anons (23 Anons total, 5 of whom provided 2 examples; 64 percent of all respondents) who mentioned both the type of mobilization, and the level of activism. Table 6 shows the results of a quick scan of data including possible trends operationalized based on the spectrum presented in Chapter 2 (see also Franke and Armstrong, 2017).

**Table 6**

*Levels of activism by Mobilization Method*

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Silent supporters</th>
<th>Supporters</th>
<th>Activists</th>
<th>Mobilizers</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Passive mobilizers</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Active Mobilizers</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

At a glance, passive mobilizers appear to seek participation across all levels of activism. While there are not enough data points to draw any robust conclusions regarding passive mobilizers, these 21 examples are enough to show that there is definite variation in the level of activism passive mobilizers target with their efforts. This makes sense in terms of other findings from this chapter and chapter 5. Passive mobilizers have a hivemind mentality AND believe that expanding membership is critical, thus we would expect them to mobilize for all levels of
activism. Active mobilizers on the other hand did not show the same tendency to mobilize for all levels of engagement. Their mobilization efforts appeared to solicit activists specifically, with only one example provided where an Anon used active mobilization to mobilize to the supporter level. This is also not entirely unexpected, given that active mobilizers often sought out one individual based on their unique skillsets or access to tools. Future research both within Anonymous and for other groups should examine mobilization method variation in relation to these levels of activism.

**Conclusion**

Overall, gaining a better understanding of the Anon mobilization process proved complicated. Initially, I had selected variables that proved unhelpful in exploring my questions. For my first set of hypotheses, I found no statistical or substantive evidence indicating that the desired level of activism influenced the component of social identity (ingroup vs. outgroup) that Anons utilize in their mobilization methods. Though ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration are hallmarks of Social Identity Theory, (Tajfel and Turner, 1986) they were not significant for the levels of activism for which mobilizers sought to recruit. While Hewstone, et al. (2014) found that negative intergroup contact had stronger effects on attitudes toward outgroups (p.49), Anons’ recruiting for higher levels of activism did not seem to necessitate outgroup denigration.

Once I was able to identify intervening variables and reexamine my data through a different lens, new explanatory patterns emerged. By looking more closely at the level of self-categorization of the mobilizer, I was able to see that the mobilizers rather than the level of activism provided me with a more reliable approach for predicting mobilization methods.
I was also able to define mobilization methods as passive and active, and break them down into locations where each occurred. Passive mobilizers primarily focused their efforts within social media platforms, on websites, and within tutorials and trainings they offered to other Anons. Active mobilizers were most likely to use group chats or one-on-one conversations for their mobilization efforts. This new variable, when compared to the self-categorization of the mobilizer (Turner and Oakes, 1986), revealed that those Anons whose social level identities were salient tended to mobilize via passive methods. Meanwhile, Anons whose individual level identities were most salient tended to mobilize via active methods.

These findings provided me with information needed to propose the Anon Mobilization Orientations, defining four different types of mobilizers: First are active mobilizers, who feel their individual level of self-categorization as most salient, and mobilize specific individual or for specific skillsets. Impeders also feel their individual level identities as most salient, but oppose mobilization and work to prevent it through threatening or intimidating new Anons and their mobilizers. Passive mobilizers self-categorize at the social level and seek many types of individuals with varying levels of skills. Indifferent observers also function at the social level of self-identification but do not support mobilization efforts. Unlike impeders though, they are not willing to engage in efforts to prevent mobilization.

Finally, I attempted to return to my original hypotheses about the levels of activism and assess whether any of my new findings could provide insights. By comparing the type of mobilization (passive or active) to the level of activism for which an individual was mobilizing, I found that those using passive mobilization methods sought to bring in new Anons, and increase participation of Anons at all levels. Anons utilizing active methods of mobilization in group chats or one-on-one private conversations almost always focused on mobilizing specifically to
the activist level of engagement. Their focus on one individual or person(s) with unique skillsets likely contributed to this.

Generally, I found the Anon mobilization process to be diverse and complex. The use of ingroup favoritism and outgroup denigration in mobilization messaging is still unclear, but findings about the characteristics of mobilizers led to connections between self-categorization, mobilization methods, and levels of activism. Given the size of the collective and the breadth of their interests, the patterns that have emerged are worthy of expanded exploration, particularly in regard to whether various levels of activism impact mobilization methods.
Chapter 7

Digital Social Groups, Conflict, and Context

I have outlined the conception, design, implementation, and findings of this research project in the previous six chapters. My initial research questions asked:

_Do digital social groups behave as traditional Social Identity Theory would predict?_

_Are these theories transferrable to the online sector?_

From these questions and a review of relevant literature on Social Identity Theory, social movement mobilization, digital activism, and emergent findings, I developed three sets of hypotheses. With these I sought to explore:

1) The articulation of shared norms and values of the collective.
2) The influence that the type of activism might have on mobilization methods, and
3) The influence of mobilizer traits on mobilization methods.

I found digital social identities being articulated and utilized by Anons in many of the ways Social Identity Theory might predict including in their articulation of shared norms values, their mobilization methods, and even in the exceptions to group cohesiveness as the group prototype was articulated. Overall, Anons exhibited a social identity that allowed for mobilization into the group, and for action on behalf of the group. They mobilized using those values, and their mobilization methods varied in response to the salience of mobilizers’ individual and social identities.

In this chapter, I summarize the key findings from each hypothesis. I interpret these both in terms of how closely Anon behavior follows the assumptions of Social Identity and Self-Categorization Theories, and in terms of what these findings may mean for other groups whose social identities are articulated online. I then summarize limitations of the research and discuss
implications for researchers, policymakers, and social movement leaders and organizers. The remainder of the chapter includes my reflections on the case selection, and a brief outline of the main lessons learned during data collection that may be of interest for those seeking to engage in research with groups that are mistrustful, dangerous, or based primarily in online settings.

**Key Findings on Shared Norms and Values**

**Self-Selection into Anonymous.** Data from my interviews show that 17 Anons (46 percent of respondents) have selected into Anonymous based on a perceived sense of shared norms and values. This is the most common notion Anons provide for their initial transition toward internalizing the Anonymous social identity. No other reason for joining the collective is mentioned by more than 2 respondents from my sample, indicating that articulating shared norms and values is vital for the collective’s ability to build its ranks. Social norms are both the basis and product of influence (Turner and Oakes, 1986). Anons’ articulation of their norms and values to prospective members are no exception. They communicate their norms, attract members, and the ability to draw new members in based on those beliefs helps solidify their importance.

**Drivers to Action.** Findings on those who choose to act on behalf on Anonymous are less clear. While 8 Anons (22 percent) report that a sense of shared norms and values contribute to their choices to act on behalf of the collective, two other variables appear to be more likely to drive action. 12 respondents (32 percent) report that recruitment by another Anon drives them to act for the collective. So while Van Stekelenburg & Klandermans claim that “The more people identify with a group, the more likely they are to protest on behalf of that group” (2013, p. 890), other variables also appear to influence Anon behavior beyond identity traits alone.
Simon and Klandermans (2001) emphasize the politicization of identity and suggest that external opponents or enemies are often blamed for groups’ challenges, aligning with my findings that 9 Anons (24 percent) cite perceptions of shared outgroups as their reason for acting on behalf of the collective. These findings are muddied by the fact that mobilizers often utilize ingroup norms and values or outgroup denigration within mobilization messaging, so future research should seek to disaggregate the influence of these variables.

**Detailing Shared Norms and Values.** Three of the most pronounced norms or values Anons cite as important for their conception of themselves as a collective are: eschewing identity, the concept of ‘Anonfam’, and fighting for the underdog.

*Eschewing identity.* Anons emphasize three levels of anonymization. First they adopt basic digital anonymity, next they avoid self-promotion or to taking credit publicly for their actions in operations. At the highest level, they fully embraced the ‘hivemind’ mentality and acted as a unit, rarely questioning each other and most closely resembling the prototypical group member.

In referring back to Brewer’s (1991) optimal distinctiveness, Anons ask members to abandon some individuality for the sake of membership in the collective, and Social Identity Theory would expect this. They also provide members with a plethora of potential outgroup comparisons to fulfill the second component of distinctiveness. Thus it would seem that in regard to this SIT concept, Anons behave as the theory would predict. Anons do appear to amplify this concept, however. They take the abandonment of individuality further than their offline counterparts by not using real names or profiles, sharing their work without taking credit, and at the highest level, and often functioning as a singular unit rather than a group of individuals. This is likely attributable to Anonymous specifically, however, and not their digital location. If this
were Optimal Distinctiveness being amplified because of a group’s digital location, it could be expected that those other than Anons would abandon a higher degree of their individuality.

**Anonfam.** The concept of family is critical to the social identity of Anons. Whether expressing their bond in interviews or sharing terms of endearment with each other via social media platforms and chat applications, Anons express a profound connection with each other that sometimes even surpasses the connection they feel with their offline families. This trend helps to firmly solidify the social identity of Anonymous for many Anons. Functioning at the social level of self-categorization (Turner and Oakes, 1986) consistently reifies the Anon identity and makes it easier for Anons to belong and to more clearly delineate who is, in fact, not family (Brewer, 1991, p. 478).

There also appears to be a relationship between the time an Anon has identified within the collective and the likelihood that they perceive other Anons as family. As discussed in chapter 5, once Anons have been a part of the collective for at least 3 years, they become significantly more likely to perceive each other as family. 71 percent of interview respondents who mention a familial connection also identify within the group for at least 3 years. And while membership numbers tend to wane after 5 years, those still with the collective for longer periods of time retain the family orientation.

**Underdogs.** The final shared value of Anons emerging from my data is an emphasis on underdogs. Anons often describe themselves as underdogs and emphasize that they fight for the underdogs so that those individuals may escape from people that abuse power and institutions that oppress. Anons fight for political underdogs, social underdogs, underdogs who are victims of structural inequality, and even singular individuals who have been dealt an unfair hand. Social movement literature suggests that the perception of relative deprivation (Crosby, 1976) is
one of the drivers of protest behavior. This concept merges well with Anon conceptions of underdogs. When a grievance like relative deprivation is tied to a social identity, those feelings can be exacerbated (Van Zomeren, et al., 2004). While Anons do not often express grievances tied to their own relative deprivation, when others express these sentiments, Anons take up their cause, or invite them in. In this sense, those aggrieved individuals who join or are assisted by Anons reinforce the connection of the underdog to the Anon identity. Not only do they help the aggrieved, they bring them into the collective’s ranks.

Exceptions to the Anonfam mentality. There are three main exceptions to the Anonfam mentality and the general cohesiveness of Anonymous’s social identity.

- Anons show high levels of disagreement between new members and more seasoned Anons. Older Anons see the new members as more volatile, less committed, and less likely to value the norms and beliefs of the collective. This aligns with research on prototypical group members (Rosch, 1975) where it is assumed that certain members are more privileged or valued than others and that member ought to seek to approach the characteristics of these individuals in their own behaviors and actions. To older Anons, new members do not appreciate the importance of the prototypical traits the way Anons with more experience do.

- Doxing is another (connected) area of contention. Many Anons, in particular those who are new to the group are much more likely to be in favor of doxing each other as a form of conflict engagement. These Anons likely function at the individual level of self-categorization (Turner, et al., 1987). Other Anons believe that internal doxing against each other distracts from operations being conducted against outgroups, and
threatens group cohesion. These Anons likely function at the social level of self-categorization.

- The operations against the Islamic State are a final source of conflict. Some Anons share information with the US government and collaborate to prevent the spread of ISIS propaganda. Other Anons see the US government as a permanent outgroup and believe that collaboration is never warranted, regardless of potential shared enemies. The main distinction between these two sections of Anonymous seems to be the salience of the government as an outgroup. The more salient that comparison between Anons and the government is, the less likely an Anon is to support interaction or cooperation with them.

These findings, while exceptions to average Anon behavior, occasionally align with traditional assumptions about social identities. Nevertheless, the conflicts do drive a wedge between Anons and counter an assumed collective understanding of how they define themselves and their actions. In particular, “It is assumed that people have implicit ‘practical’ knowledge of this ‘collectivized’ formula, in the sense that they would perceive as cognitively inconsistent disagreement between themselves and others perceived as identical in respects relevant to the making of the judgement about some identical or shared stimulus situation” (Turner and Oakes, 1986, p. 244, emphasis added). Anons would be expected to both feel and act the same regardless of their time in the collective, and in response to issues such as doxing or the sharing of Islamic State data. They don’t, however, and the divisiveness of these issues suggests some variation from what we would expect when applying expectations derived from Social Identity Theory. Likewise these findings stray from Tajfel’s (1978) expectation that protecting the identity of the group relative to other groups be a priority. For some Anons (those who do not
dox and would not collaborate with the government against ISIS) this is the case, for others (who dox and shared intelligence), it takes a backseat to revenge (doxing) or broader desires for social good (stopping ISIS).

**Key Findings on Self-Categorization and Mobilization Methods**

Data from interviews do not support my second set of hypotheses. Anon mobilization efforts do not reflect any patterns or relationships between the level of activism (Franke and Armstrong, 2017) and the use of ingroup-based or outgroup-based messaging. This counters social movement literature (Hewstone et al., 2014) that negative information will more strongly affect attitudes about other groups than positive information. These hypotheses may warrant retesting with a larger n in order to determine if the small sample size and snowball sampling approach influenced findings. Despite no measurable support for these hypotheses, I do find two distinct forms of mobilization based on the same data.

**Passive and Active Mobilization.** Passive mobilization occurs via social media platforms, websites, and trainings/tutorials. It is considered passive when the message asks for or suggests participation through membership or action, is not directed at one specific individual, and does not require a specific skillset. Active mobilization most often occurs in private one-on-one chats and within group chats and messaging applications. Mobilization is considered active when it asks directly for membership or action, is directed toward one specific person or small group, or it requires a specific skillset. While not directly related to my hypotheses, these findings did align with some literature (Klandermans, 1984) that suggests mobilization often takes two forms: consensus mobilization (building support) and action mobilization (participation). Some passive mobilization amongst Anons does venture into Klandermans’ definition of action mobilization because it moves beyond basic support, but in general, my two
categories of passive and active mobilization reflect the general boundaries of Klandermans’ definitions as well. Neither, however, provide understanding inclusive of several levels of activism—as Franke and Armstrong’s spectrum of activism does (Franke and Armstrong, 2017).

**Mobilization Methods and Self-Categorization.** I find support for my third set of hypotheses that focus more on the mobilizer than the action they are seeking with their efforts. When focusing specifically on the level of self-categorization (Turner and Oakes, 1986; Turner et al., 1987) of the mobilizer, this trait appears to connect to the type of mobilization method they employ. Individuals whose social level identity is salient tend to utilize passive mobilization methods (66 percent), where Anons whose individual level identity is salient tend to utilize active mobilization methods (63 percent). These findings suggest that emphasis on the mobilizer rather the operation are appropriate in attempting to dissect the dynamics of the mobilization process. Anons were clearly categorizing themselves within these two distinct categories, suggesting that SCT transfers well to the digital sector.

**Anon Mobilization Orientations.** To combine all this information into a format more usable and applicable beyond this case, I propose the *Anon Mobilization Orientations Matrix* (See Table 6). This matrix is inclusive of the emergent variables of mobilization method and level of self-categorization, and also includes categories for both pro- and anti-mobilization Anons. By mapping these variables within the matrix, Anons in my sample can be categorized into one of four general orientations toward mobilization.
The four orientations: Active mobilizers, passive mobilizers, impeders, and indifferent observers are inclusive of nearly every respondent from my interviews. These four categories take into account traits from self-categorization theory and provide a mobilizer-centered approach for understanding mobilization efforts.

**Levels of activism and mobilization methods.** My final key finding examines the level of activism (Franke and Armstrong, 2017) in relation to the type of mobilization method. This application of the *Anon Mobilization Orientations Matrix* provides new information that clarifies questions from both my second and third set of hypotheses. Overall, passive mobilizers (who support mobilization and have a salient social level identity) work to mobilize at all levels of activism. Active mobilizers who have a salient individual level identity almost always sought to
mobilize to the activist level of participation. In returning to Klandermans’ (1984) definitions of consensus and action mobilizations, it would appear that active mobilizers only work toward action mobilization, while passive mobilizers engage in both consensus and action mobilization.

**Taking a Knee, Digital Propaganda, and Reframing Identities: Implications**

**Conflict and Social Identity in the Digital Sector.** Findings from this research indicate that Anons effectively articulate their shared norms and values across multiple digital locations. Their social identity and its main traits are recognized by collective members and nonmembers alike. Anons utilize their social identity to mobilize for support, membership, and for actions. If these identities can be articulated and internalized online, and used to mobilize for action, this indicates that online interactivity likely influences offline experiences as well. This has implications for scholars, policymakers, and social movement organizers.

**Social Identity Theory and conflict mitigation.** First, if social identities do function online, they must be studied. This information could then be harnessed to try and resolve conflict or prevent its escalation. When the salient components of a social identity that may be driving conflict are known, we can seek to temper these identities. For example, in the fall of 2017, discourse across many social media platforms is focused on NFL players who are kneeling in protest of police brutality against unarmed black men in the United States. Many US citizens are opposed to this form of protest and have been articulating their position as ‘real patriots’ who would not kneel. This ingroup, while not official, still has a clearly articulated outgroup - the players who kneel during the national anthem. Ingroup ‘patriots’ as they seem to identify have a very salient social identity that is being reinforced in online debates, through memes, and across op-eds appearing in digital news outlets. The outgroup of players and supporters criticizes this position and the salience of in- and outgroup distinctions solidifies. If instead, it were possible to
decrease the salience of the ‘patriot’ identity, it might decrease outgroup comparisons of the players protesting and their supporters. This might be done through player-fan events, through efforts to increase the ‘fan’ identity with advertising, or more politically, through efforts to show the players in their other daily roles aside from athletes, which might serve to minimize outgroup denigration by humanizing them and showing ‘patriots’ other facets of the players that they might identify with. Then, the animosity might deescalate to a place where the nation could have productive dialogue about the players’ grievances.

Alternatively, it might be possible to expand the ‘patriot’ identity to be inclusive of the players, though this would likely necessitate the identification of a more salient outgroup, and would still leave the root causes of the protest unaddressed. The players and supporters may also be able to articulate more clearly how their behaviors are patriotic, which might blur the lines between the in- and outgroups. Overall, however, being able to identify when online interactions are reinforcing in and outgroup differences is an important first step in establishing how it might be possible to reframe these identities to prevent or limit conflict.

There are, of course, implications for violent conflict as well. In returning to the discussion of ISIS propaganda within social media platforms, it may be useful to utilize counter-messaging to minimize the likelihood that message recipients perceive a sense of shared norms and values with those who mobilize for violent extremism. From chapter 5, the perception of shared norms and values, and the belief that there is a shared outgroup accounts for 46 percent of the reasons for Anons engaging in activism of some kind for Anonymous. The US Department of Defense does have a contingent of military, civilian, and contract employees working on counter-messaging measures (Parrish, 2016), but ISIS mobilizers have responded to counter messages and efforts to remove their materials. They oftentimes have numerous backup accounts
and have been communicating via private group chats of social media platforms and encrypted chatting apps like Telegram, which are harder to penetrate once an individual has been mobilized into such a location. Likewise, counter-messaging coming directly from one of the Islamic State’s main outgroups is likely to be ineffective when coming directly from the enemy. Indeed, the Canadian government’s review of counter-narrative programs finds that “There is a limited role for governments in producing and disseminating counter-narratives because of their credibility gap” (Briggs and Feve, 2013, p. 17). Instead they recommend the utilization of former extremists, victims of violence based on the extreme ideology, and political and community leaders as much more effective sources of counter-messages.

If it were possible to limit the success of ISIS mobilization propaganda by nearly half through counter-messaging coming from credible sources, this would be an enormous step in limiting US and other Western fighters traveling to the region. Counter-messaging could also be used against passive mobilization efforts by highlighting where the ISIS and broader Muslim identities conflict. By keeping the Muslim identity more salient for message recipients than the ISIS identity, and showing that they do not share norms and values, it may be possible to quell mobilization (Phalet and Baysu, 2010), though findings on this vary somewhat by location.

Exceptions. While Anons often behave as SIT would predict, their sheer size and heterogeneity appears at times to hinder their ability to function as a cohesive and cooperative ingroup. Instead, they occasionally split into smaller, more salient subgroups that are often at odds with each other. Anons notice this size challenge as well and believe it to be the source of infighting including age conflicts, doxing protocol disagreements, and strong opinions on the ethics of government collaboration. Having a massive membership makes it impossible for the
group to be homogenous enough to maintain a universally accepted set of shared norms and values about all these topics.

This can be indirectly traced to their digital location. Anons’ large membership is possible because physical proximity is not a prerequisite for membership. Therefore variation that wouldn’t normally exist in local groups is quite common amongst Anons. This does not necessarily mean that SIT cannot exist digitally, however. Instead, it appears that the circumstances of digital group formation may provide opportunities for the establishment of larger identities that may suffer from a size-related degree of diluted cohesiveness.

Limitations

Limitations of Anonymous as a case. The most problematic limitation of this project is the lack of generalizability due to the uniqueness of Anonymous. There are also some questions about the internal validity stemming from the sample; though with an undefined total population, absolute confidence in this regard was not possible.

Sampling. My sample size, sampling method, and the undefined population of Anonymous contributed to a degree of uncertainty regarding internal validity. While interviews provided data that were much more rich and detailed than surveys or basic quantitative studies could provide, my sample size was small at 36 interviews total. As mentioned in my methodology chapter, I did discard 7 interviews based on language, technology, and questionable membership so some data loss occurred of my own accord. The quality of the remaining interviews, however, was measurably greater both in length of conversation and in depth of discussion.

My sample of 36 interviews was a combination of Anons from 6 continents and 15 countries, though 11 Anons declined to provide a country location. Along with this, it was
impossible to know how saturated each country was with Anons, so I was mostly unable to
purposively sample based on location. My overall sampling process could most accurately be
defined as initial access through key informants, which I then expanded into a general snowball
approach once I had access to a variety of Anons from various segments of the collective. This
also likely limited any representativeness I can claim. To temper this, I sought out Anons that
were underrepresented in my early sample including women, newer Anons, and non-American
Anons, though again not knowing the demographics of the entire population made any attempts
at achieving representativeness somewhat futile. The other sampling limitation that concerned
me regarded Anons fearing speaking to me because of their reputation for engaging in illegal
activities. Through the IRB process and my own efforts, I tried to reassure Anons that their data
was safe, that I would anonymize their responses to their desired degree, and that their
participation would not put them at risk. I did approach several Anons who declined interviews
based on perceived risk to their privacy though so I know this was a genuine limitation.

The interview process. Interviewing Anons required accessing respondents via multiple
communication platforms, sometimes engaging in an interview over the course of several days,
or very quickly while they were on breaks from jobs or other obligations. Technological
difficulties interrupted more than one interview and respondent resistance to certain questions
limited my total number of responses into some areas of inquiry, including subgroup
membership and basic demographics. Because of these, there were some inconsistencies
between interviews in length and quality, and access to demographic data that might help me
control for demographic variation as an intervening variable. Finally, intentional deception was a
concern during interviews that had the potential to threaten internal validity. I took every effort
to minimize this and did discard 3 interviews because I was not confident that the respondents
truly identified as Anons, but it would be impossible to know if other interviews were legitimate, as I have no guaranteed way to verify that respondents did in fact internalize the Anon social identity. I took efforts when collecting data to verify across platforms and through Anon social networks that respondents were interacting with other Anons, and also asked for referrals from Anons who were clearly active and respected within the collective to temper this potential pitfall. One final internal validity limitation during the interview process was Anons’ tendency to boast. Bragging to me about their accomplishments, contributions, and abilities was common across many interviews, and I cannot be sure that this behavior did not influence the honesty of their responses. While questions in my interview guide were not dependent on honesty about their skills and experience hacking, I cannot be sure that respondents’ tendency to boast did not shape responses in a way that influenced my analysis.

**Limitations of the data.** Going through the uncomfortable process of realizing my second set of hypotheses were unsupported and then reconsidering variables I hadn’t previously considered was a useful experience, but a threat to internal validity as well for a portion of my findings. My findings from chapter six regarding the relationship between mobilization methods and self-categorization emerged from failing to find support for my second set of hypotheses. By formulating a third set of hypotheses and returning to my data to define a new variable, I was seeking information about unanticipated relationships, and thus many comments from respondents touched on the subjects of interest, but often indirectly. Interview questions were not included to target this particular set of hypotheses so though not an overt threat to internal validity, I lacked questions that targeted these specific topics and may have collected more informative data had such questions been included. There was no way to anticipate this, however, and the learning process was valuable even if the findings were not as robust as
possible. By muddling through the process, I learned firsthand how to let go of where I thought my data ‘should’ go and subsequently saw it more clearly for what it was: emergent information on a different facet of the same topic. What I was left with were findings in which I cannot be completely confident, but certainly a valuable area of inquiry to add to my future research platform, and a renewed enthusiasm for the analysis process.

**Recommendations and Reflections**

**Recommendations for Future Research.** While this study is valuable in providing initial insights into the applicability of Social Identity Theory in the digital sector, some areas of inquiry are not addressed, either because of limitations related to the methodology, case selection, or emergent information. Based on questions that remain unanswered after analysis, I recommend the following as areas of future research:

1) Comparative case studies to determine if other online groups see membership increases based on a perception of shared norms and values.

2) Further examination of Anonymous in particular with a larger N to explore variables that appear to limit group cohesion and contradict Social Identity Theory expectations including increased membership numbers, geographic dispersal, and demographic variation.

3) Examination of subgroups within Anonymous to compare with the findings presented here of the collective as a whole. In particular, do subgroups behave the same regarding mobilization or do the unique traits of subgroups influence the mobilization process?

4) Application of the *Anon Orientations Matrix* to other online groups to determine its applicability beyond Anonymous.
5) Comparative case studies of online groups to determine if the mobilizer or the activity being mobilized for is a more accurate predictor of mobilization methods employed.

6) Application of Franke and Armstrong’s *Spectrum of Social Movement Activism* to other offline and digital social groups to see if trends regarding active and passive mobilization to various levels of engagement hold.

7) Exploration of the recipient receptiveness to online mobilization messages from different types of mobilizers and for different levels of activism.

8) In general: As much as is possible, each of these recommended areas of research should take time to focus on demographic characteristics as potential intervening variables, as the population studied in this dissertation provided little opportunity for these to be taken into consideration.

**Recommendations for Policymakers.** Though only discussed briefly in this dissertation (regarding the sharing of intelligence about ISIS propaganda), the relationship between digital groups/collectives like Anonymous and government organizations and policymakers is an area that will likely see more and more crossover in the future. The amount of social, political, and economic activity shifting online essentially guarantees that the US and other governments will cross paths with these groups. Already, governments have worked to infiltrate Anonymous and other hacking networks, but infiltration is not the only means to engage with hackers.

**Opportunities for collaboration.** The US government is a fairly firmly articulated outgroup for Anonymous and no amount of good will gestures or olive branches are likely to completely remedy that. There are, however, Anons within the collective who are willing to collaborate with the government against other outgroups (as shown by the cooperation of Anon subgroup, Ghost Security Group). This type of cooperation is likely to increase in importance as
more conflict shifts to the digital sector. We need only look at the 2016 presidential election to see that digital locations are the new fronts for tampering, interfering, and intentionally misleading by enemy states. From Russian efforts to hack voting machines in 21 states (Fessler, 2017) to their trolling farms where individuals were paid to spread anti-Clinton propaganda via Facebook and Twitter (Filipov, 2017), there has been a clear shift toward online conflict tactics and engagement. Having relationships with individuals and groups who specialize in digital conflict and know how to identify and counter such actions may be vital to protecting the credibility of our elections, and our sovereignty.

In terms of specific recommendations for establishing contact with Anonymous and similar groups, the use of an intermediary, either academic or a private sector actor like Michael Smith was for Ghost Security Group would be a safe start. Connecting with respected Anons or other leaders and building a network of cooperative contacts could be a path toward reconciling the outgroup status of the government. The more positive contact Anons are able to experience with governments, the more likely a minimization of outgroup status could be (Allport, 1954; Amir, 1976). Emphasizing cooperation with specific agencies might be beneficial for relations as well, as subgroups of the federal government may experience less outgroup denigration because the subgroup is being emphasized, rather than the more salient larger outgroup. There are likely Anons and other hackers who will never be willing to collaborate with the government, but for those who will, incremental steps and a slow buildup of trust could temper initial backlash.

Additionally, programs like the Department of Defense (DoD) Vulnerability program, *Hack the Pentagon* should be expanded. ³⁰ These will not directly mobilize Anons to work for the government, but rather appeal to hackers self-categorizing at the individual level who would be

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³⁰ For more information about the DoD’s Hack the Pentagon program, see https://www.hackerone.com/resources/hack-the-pentagon.
motivated by both money and recognition. Rather than just offering bounties, the program should shift toward more sustained relationships that would foster prolonged goodwill rather than occasional financial advantages. To tap into those hackers identifying at the social level, these bounty programs could also be reimagined as team competitions, capitalizing on the already salient social identities of hacking groups. Though international law may prohibit such programs to be used to locate vulnerabilities of US enemies abroad, the ability to utilize the skills of hackers for defense of government information, infrastructure, and anything else digitally accessible is going to be critical in the future.

The pedohunters are also a subgroup of Anons with whom the federal government should expand relations. These individuals work for free to identify and expose individuals who produce and distribute child pornography. A firm line preventing a vigilante justice type attitude would need to be articulated, but for those Anons who wish to locate and report such activity, every effort should be made to provide them with trusted channels of communication to those who are able to charge and prosecute these crimes. The Anons who engage in this type of work are also the most likely to be untrusting and overly cautious due to the questionable lines of legality and previous prosecution of Anons for their activities. Therefore, as mentioned previously, any efforts toward collaboration should be presented slowly, with the use of intermediaries interacting with respected members of the collective. The pedohunters, in particular, have a social identity that is highly salient when contrasted with pedophiles as an outgroup. Pedophiles are arguably Anons most pronounced outgroup and thus beginning government/Anon dialogues with this subject might be an ideal place to begin breaking down barriers.

**Lessons on Mobilization.** Beyond Anonymous, governments need to be cognizant about the influence of other social identities being used for mobilization on the Internet. While ISIS has
already been mentioned, groups in the US, such as the alt-right,\textsuperscript{31} and other extremist groups are always working online to mobilize for support and membership. In a global context, there are likely thousands of groups working to mobilize online. Governments who are concerned about the potential for these groups to threaten citizen safety and state sovereignty ought to look directly at the messaging to identify the norms and values being articulated. This project has shown that these are effective mobilization tools and if rogue or extremist groups are using the same social identity messaging, then counter-messaging ought to focus specifically on the problematic aspects of those norms and values or opportunities to make that component of the social identity less salient.

Governments should be examining the types of mobilization being employed by extremist groups. This could help with risk evaluation. If messaging is generally passive and primarily composed of broad assertions about norms and values, they are likely mobilizing for general support and building membership. When mobilization is active, there may be more immediate risks, as this type of mobilization is often for a specific action tied to a skillset the message recipient possesses. If extremist groups are successful in mobilizing for higher levels of activism, violence may be more likely. Therefore, any uptick in observed active mobilization should be prioritized.

**Recommendations for Social Movement Leaders.** Because some Anons choose to focus their time engaging in social movement activism and not actual hacking activities, there are both relationships that could be forged with social movements, and lessons that movement organizers could learn from the way Anons ‘do’ activism and mobilization.

\textsuperscript{31} For a definition and more information about the alt-right, see https://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/alt-right and https://www.splcenter.org/fighting-hate/extremist-files/ideology/alt-right.
Opportunities for collaboration. Anons engage in operations that touch hundreds of social and political causes. From environmental protection to animal cruelty to preventing partner and child abuse, Anons are working to affect change. Organizers who work within these areas have an enormous untapped market of Anons who are willing to work on these issues and who have established networks of likeminded colleagues. As this research has shown, many of these Anons have been mobilized for membership and action based on a perception of shared norms and values, and are also willing to act for the groups in which they identify when they are recruited or when they perceive a shared outgroup. Activists in any of the arenas where Anons work should be reaching out to them for assistance and inviting them in to share the identity of that movement. While not all social movements will have a defined social identity, many have shared traits and beliefs that approach one. Where these overlap with the values and beliefs of Anons is where the opportunity lies.

Anons want to help. They can spread messages, create materials for the dissemination of information about causes, and attract media attention readily. Anons can hunt information online and their skillsets for most online activities more than likely exceed that of general citizens. Even in areas where Anons are not yet working, many social movements fight to advance rights, meet needs, or remedy injustices of groups that could be perceived as underdogs, and this could be used to draw Anons in.

Lessons on Mobilization. Anonymous has arguably built one of the largest digital social identities to date. Their membership spans the globe and their ability to mobilize new members from all walks of life are reflected even in my small sample for this research project. Social movement organizers can look to Anons for a model of online mobilization and learn where and how to build silent support, support, activism, and even more mobilization (Franke and
Armstrong, 2017). Anonymous relies on passive mobilizers to build its ranks and promote its basic norms and values. They build the Anon “group brand” (identity) and reputation and perpetuate the ideals embodied by the prototypical group member. They utilize passive mobilization efforts to mobilize for all levels of activism. Active mobilizers on the other hand, are working on the ground on very specific tasks, which also necessitates very specific skills. The salience of their individual-level identity makes them ideal members to carry out these tasks, as they can focus on the micro-processes of day-to-day operations, while passive mobilizers worry less about the specifics, but are better at promoting the Anon brand. Combined, this allows Anons to grow their general ranks and maintain relevance, while also recruiting skills hackers who engage in the activism that initially brought them notoriety.

When seeking activists, social movement leaders ought to follow the Anon model and utilize one-on-one or small group mobilization messaging. Targeting those with the specific skills needed will limit the target recipients of the message and make mobilization efforts more efficient. This project has shown that Anons were successfully mobilized online for direct action in this way, and themselves had success mobilizing others for direct action as well.

For all other levels of activism, passive mobilization should be utilized. Anons’ habits of using social media platforms, websites, and tutorials for mobilization to other levels of activism would be easily adopted by social movement organizers. These methods of mobilization are typically either no cost (less a time investment) or low cost (such as the cost of website hosting). It takes relatively low levels of skills for passive mobilization, and Anons report these approaches are successful. Passive mobilization efforts help articulate to potential members what the norms and values of the group are, and what they are not.
Finally, social movement leaders and mobilizers should consider how they might seek to make salient the social identities of potential supporters or participants. When the Anon social identity is salient, group cohesiveness is high and conflict is low. It is easy to build momentum and support for different operations and even with a heterogeneous population, cooperation and understanding remain high. When individual level identities are salient, infighting, personal attacks, and conflicting ideas of how Anons ‘should' engage in activism were elevated. Therefore, any opportunity to temper the individual level identification would likely lead to more harmony and productivity within a social movement.

**Reflections on the Study of Anonymous**

While many researchers engage in projects that include some degree of risk, my work with Anonymous taught me several lessons that are worth including here, and may be of use for others seeking to access Anonymous or other similar groups in the future.

**Lessons Learned.** From the first day I interacted with Anons I was learning. Much like an anthropologist might seek to understand a culture they are immersing themselves in, I took great care to be as observant as possible and to record everything I could. In all, I spent approximately 9 months working to gain the trust of Anons and gain acceptance within their circles. There were several lessons I took away that may be of value to future researchers who work with suspicious groups, groups that engage in social activism, or groups that could be potentially dangerous.

**Flexibility.** The biggest lesson I learned from working with Anonymous was a need for the researcher to remain flexible. In building initial relationships, to soliciting interviews, to conducting interviews, I was constantly required to maintain a high degree of flexibility and responsiveness. When initially reaching out to Anons, I was called a Fed, threatened, mocked,
and grilled for more information. Many of my early approached bombed miserably. After a bit of practice though, I was welcomed with curiosity, gratitude, and eagerness. In approaching potential respondents, I learned that each approach would be different, and would necessitate accessing a different facet of my own personality. Before I approached many Anons, I would observe how they interacted with others. If they seemed generally friendly I would mirror that with a friendly, upbeat attitude. If they were sarcastic, I would throw out a few callous jokes while speaking to them. If they were suspicious, I would try to provide as much information as possible and anticipate things that might be red flags for them. This flexibility in approach made my later solicitations for interviews much more productive, and garnered me several referrals as well.

During interviews, flexibility became even more important. Some Anons would not speak to me via social media platforms or chat applications such as Skype so I would have to email them questions or set up private chat locations in the IRC so that they could mask their IP address better. I also had to tailor questions to each respondent as some would only provide a few word responses, where others would write responses that filled several pages. Soliciting deeper answers from those still suspicious of me was challenging, but keeping some of the more loquacious Anons on-topic was sometimes impossible. The broad spectrum of individuals that make up Anonymous likely made studying the collective more complicated than studying a homogenous population. I did feel some fatigue at constantly needing to adjust my behavior, but the effort and initial legwork paid off both in providing me with a better collection of interview data, and in creating a more comfortable experience for the individuals that were willing to share their own personal experiences with me.
Enthusiasm. Some of the richest data I collected from Anons came not from direct questions I had composed, but from conversations that trailed off into the specific interests of each respondent. While these sidebars were sometimes frustrating during an interview, as I was trying to make sure I asked all my questions, during analysis they revealed a wealth of information about the perspectives of Anons. By sharing enthusiasm for their operations and trying to understand more about their relationships, I was able to collect more detailed, relevant data that Anons felt passionately about. When an Anon wanted to show me something they had created, I asked more questions about it. When they revealed personal stories of love and loss, I shared in their joy and grief. I mention this not to encourage manipulation of respondents during interviews, but to encourage researchers to take the time to view any participant not just as a unit of scientific inquiry, but a person who may be just as invested in the exchange of information as we are.

One Anon thanked me profusely for the interview, expressing excitement about reading my dissertation once complete. She told me that no journalist or outsider had ever asked her questions that she felt they didn’t already have an assumed answer. She thanked me for showing interest in her projects, and told me that if all researchers were like me, she hoped that she’d get the chance to help one again. Another Anon who was at the Million Mask March I attended told me that he couldn’t believe that I too took the time to get a mask and make signs to help them out. He expressed deep appreciation for taking their efforts seriously and trying to contribute in my own way. While I worked conscientiously to keep interactions professional and mitigate any bias I might have toward respondents, showing them the same enthusiasm for their work as I had for mine was critical in helping them open up to me as an outsider.
Safety. Not all aspects of this project were fun however. As described in the opening of my methodology chapter, I received threats early on and spent an enormous amount of time working toward building basic rapport and being able to approach Anons safely. Taking the time to protect myself, however made interactions less stressful, and showing Anons that I took their world seriously also served to earn their respect.

I took two approaches to safety that in combination may seem counterintuitive, but worked splendidly in reality. First, I went through a rigorous process of protecting my personal data (banking and etc.) and school work. The details are provided in chapter 4 but overall, I did everything within my skillset to restrict access to things I needed or could be used against me in any way. I increased the security on my laptop and learned about how to navigate the Internet more privately. I also let Anons I trusted teach me about what they thought would be important for interacting with them. They taught me about red flags to watch for that might indicate someone snooping, and what not to click on. Their digital expertise helped me feel more confident when I was approaching other Anons who did not come by referral or other easy introduction.

The second approach I took was being completely open and honest with Anons about anything they asked me. When they wanted to know about my PhD program in International Conflict Management (INCM), I told them. When they traced my Twitter account all the way back to 2012 and grilled me about the details of my old jobs, friends, and schooling, I accommodated. I also offered to provide them with as much information about my dissertation as I could once I had interviewed them (explaining that I didn’t want to share too much beforehand that might introduce bias). What several Anons communicated to me eventually was that none of what I shared was anything they didn’t already know. But my willingness to share with them
allowed them to trust ME. Had I tried to hide things or kept a firmer line between my own life and the project, they told me that they would have been less open with me. Essentially they understood the need to protect myself, but wanted a degree of reciprocal vulnerability. While this may be unique to Anonymous (or perhaps any hackers who can access these types of information), other researchers interacting with suspicious or paranoid individuals might employ similar tactics, where appropriate, as a way to earn the trust of their respondents. My willingness to open up, while attempting to remain safe contributed to the quality of the data collected, not to mention kept the process interesting from day one until drafting this final chapter.

Conclusion

In an early conversation with one of my original key informants, I asked about the number string 127.0.0.1. Many Anons incorporate it into the main pages of their social media profiles as part of the phrase:

‘There’s no place like 127.0.0.1’.

I (along with the majority of digital immigrants) recognize the phrase as ‘There’s no place like home’, and so I wondered how the two connected. He explained to me that the number 127.0.0.1 is the localhost of whatever computer a person is using, or basically, their ‘home’ network.

‘So it’s a joke?’ I questioned. ‘Or a pun?’ He told me that yes, it was, but that to Anons it meant a little more. I asked him to elaborate but instead he told me to put myself in the shoes of an Anon and asked what I thought it might mean to them. I thought for a long time, not wanting to say the wrong thing. I did not want to lose this contact that could connect me to a wealth of potential respondents. Eventually, I answered, ‘I guess I take it to mean that when I am here, with these people, I am home’. His response: “Exactly” (personal communication, May 2015).
That social identities behave in the digital sector as SIT would predict has broad implications. The swift nature of digital evolution only makes these implications more important. Understanding how our identities are influenced via digital stimuli can help us better understand how identities online contribute to conflict escalation, and how they might be harnessed for conflict mitigation. This research has shown that social identities can function online similarly to the way they do offline. Future research should pay special attention to where on- and offline social identities vary, and what that may mean for our understanding of digital conflict. In a world where the only guarantee is that things will continue to change, we cannot afford to fall behind in our understanding of the way we interact with each other, regardless of the location of that interaction. As long as we do not fail to keep pace in understanding our own evolution, we have a chance. We have a chance to express the best in ourselves and encourage the best in others.
References


Onorato, R.S., & Turner J.C. (2004). Fluidity in the self-concept: The shift from personal to


## Appendix A

### Interview Instrument

**Interview Guide**

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>1) Background and identity internalization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><em>Prompt:</em> Thank you for taking the time to talk with me today. I will be asking you questions about your experience as an Anon, and some of the feelings and activities associated with that.</td>
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<tr>
<td>(1) Would you describe a little about how you came to be familiar with Anonymous?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. For instance, where did you first hear about Anons and what were your initial feelings about it?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(2) People define Anonymous in different ways. Would you consider Anonymous a group? A collective? Some other thing?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(3) How would you explain Anonymous to someone who knows nothing about the group?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(4) How long have you identified as an Anon?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. Did anyone in particular assist or encourage you to do so? How?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(5) What appeals to you most about Anonymous?</td>
</tr>
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<td>(6) What kinds of people do you think are most drawn to Anonymous?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(7) Do you feel a sense of community with other Anons?</td>
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<tr>
<td>a. <em>If yes,</em> What kinds of things make you feel this way?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(8) Others?</td>
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</tbody>
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<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>2) Subgroups</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(9) Are there any smaller groups or Operations within Anonymous that you support? Which ones?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>a. <em>If yes,</em> what are their goals?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(10) How did you find out about the Operations you support/participate?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(11) Would you consider yourself a part of those smaller groups?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(12) Does your participation/support of name subgroup make you feel more a part of Anonymous?</td>
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<tr>
<td>(13) Is there a difference in importance to you between name subgroup and Anonymous as a whole?</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

<table>
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<tr>
<th>3) Outgroups and non-normative behavior perceptions</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>(14) Do Anons disapprove of certain types of behaviors? Why?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><em>Prompt with self-promotion for example if necessary</em></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(15) What happens if an Anon does these things?</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(16) In your opinion, what would be worse, someone outside of Anonymous promoting himself or herself excessively, or someone within Anonymous doing it?</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
(17) Are there any groups that you would consider enemies of Anonymous? Enemies of the smaller collectives within Anonymous?

(18) What kinds of things help distinguish Anonymous from other groups or collectives that have similar goals?

4. Interactions with other Anons

(19) Where do you interact with other Anons digitally? *Prompt with examples as needed*

(20) Do you prefer any of these places to other places? Why?

(21) How often do you typically interact with other Anons? For how long?

(22) Have you ever encouraged another person to become Anonymous or participate in an Operation?

(23) What do you think triggers Anons to become more active with Anon Operations?

(24) Have you ever tried to get others to be more active? How?

5. Personal Information

(25) Is there any demographic information that you would be interested in sharing with me?

*Omit if probing has been recommended against for specific participant by gatekeeper.*

(26) Is there anything else that you think would be useful for me to know about Anonymous?

*Prompt: Thank you for taking the time to speak with me. I appreciate your insights.*
Appendix B

IRB Consent Cover letter

CONSENT COVER LETTER

Title of Research Study: Mobilization for Online Activism in the Digital Age

Researcher's Contact Information: Crystal Armstrong (Douglas), cdoug17@kennesaw.edu, Twitter @aka_miss_rico, Kik XtalAnn.

Introduction

You are being invited to take part in a research study conducted by Crystal Armstrong of Kennesaw State University. Before you decide to participate in this study, you should read this form and ask questions about anything that you do not understand.

This study is being conducted by Crystal Armstrong in partial fulfillment of academic requirements for receiving a PhD in International Conflict Management from Kennesaw State University, Georgia, USA. This research is conducted under the supervision of Dr. Volker Franke, Professor of Conflict Management and Political Science. If you have any questions, please contact Crystal Armstrong at any of the above locations, or Dr. Franke @ vfranke@kennesaw.edu.

Description of Project

The purpose of the study is to explore online activism and the role of digital identities and collectives. The study focuses specifically on Anonymous, and you are invited to participate because of your unique knowledge and perspectives.

Explanation of Procedures

Participation involves an interview conducted via messaging, email, IRC, or some other online format of your choice. Participation in this study is expected to take no more than 30 minutes of your time.

Risks or Discomforts

There are no known risks anticipated because of taking part in this study.

Benefits
Although there will be no direct benefits to you for taking part in the study, the researcher will be conducting a systematic analysis of digital identities and mobilization, which will be of significant benefit to the academic community.

Confidentiality

The results of this participation will be confidential. At the completion of the interview, transcripts will be transferred to an alternative laptop without internet connectivity. All chat history logs will be deleted, and identifying information in transcripts will be assigned pseudonyms. Data will be aggregated for write-ups to help maintain confidentiality.

Inclusion Criteria for Participation

Participants in the study must be 18+ years of age. By agreeing to participate in this study, you confirm that you are at least 18 years old.

Statement of Understanding

The purpose of this research has been explained and my participation is voluntary. I have the right to stop participation at any time without penalty. I understand that the research has no known risks, and I will not be identified. I understand that I will have the opportunity to request that specific information will be treated as off the record and will not be used for any purposes after having participated in the interview. By completing this interview, I am agreeing to participate in this research project.

Research at Kennesaw State University that involves human participants is carried out under the oversight of an Institutional Review Board. Questions or problems regarding these activities should be addressed to the Institutional Review Board, Kennesaw State University, 585 Cobb Avenue, KH3403, Kennesaw, GA 30144-5591, (470) 578-2268.

Appendix C
### NVivo Coding Nodes

#### Codebook and Coded response data

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<td>Increased salience of larger group identity</td>
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Appendix D

Passive Mobilization Examples
RT @OpSafeWinter: Where is the humanity? Where is the compassion?
#OpSafeWinter pic.twitter.com/ZiXe0QRuGn bit.ly/164t4NF
Appendix E

OpSafeWinter Pastebin and text.


Raw Text of OpSafeWinter Pastebin

Anonymous #OPSafeWinter Re-Engaged 2015-2016

Fellow Anon and Citizens of the world, We are proud to re-announce #OPSafeWinter. In this age of consumerism there is very little love or care about each other and we are here to change that. No longer shall we stand by and watch isolation and fear be spread by the establishment, which is killing and destroying community and lives. We all have a voice, so make yours heard, you are the power, your choice, your life, you are the motivator for justice.

OP mission is to highlight the homeless situation in areas throughout world. Build up a resource network for food supply, blankets, clothes, socks etc. that can be donated.

Amenities for warm showers, warm food, warm places to sleep and the like.

1st Mission: Please list the current homeless count in alphabetical order by town/City Country. Within each town contact local charities, shops, businesses that will support with any of the above list and more.

You can get the latest figures from your local council by sending them a freedom of information request if you are not sure of the figures in your town.
2nd Mission: Coordinate with Anons and others willing to participate in the execution/distribution of services we are able to provide. Whether it's transport, collection of donations etc. This is not definitive, any other suggestions and ideas are welcome. Please list at the bottom of the pad as bullet points to make it easy to follow.

Let’s make winter as safe and comfortable as possible for as many people within our reach and beyond.

Please share this OP with as many people as possible

Work together online or RL, everyone can help no matter how small or big the activity.

@OpSafeWinter #OpSafeWinter

https://opsafewinter.net/.

Appendix F

IRB Approval Notification

From: <irb@kennesaw.edu>
Date: May 5, 2015 at 10:21:22 AM MDT
To: <cdougl17@kennesaw.edu>
Cc: <irb@kennesaw.edu>
Subject: Study 15-441: Mobilization for Collective Action in the Digital Age

5/5/2015

Crystal Douglas


Dear Ms. Douglas:

Your application for the new study listed above has been administratively reviewed. This study qualifies as exempt from continuing review under DHHS (OHRP) Title 45 CFR Part 46.101(b)(2) - educational tests, surveys, interviews, public observations. The consent procedures described in your application are in effect. You are free to conduct your study.

Please note that all proposed revisions to an exempt study require IRB review prior to implementation to ensure that the study continues to fall within an exempted category of research. A copy of revised documents with a description of planned changes should be submitted to irb@kennesaw.edu for review and approval by the IRB.

Thank you for keeping the board informed of your activities. Contact the IRB at irb@kennesaw.edu or at (470) 578-2268 if you have any questions or require further information.

Sincerely,

Christine Ziegler, Ph.D.
KSU Institutional Review Board Chair and Director

cc: vfranke@kennesaw.edu