The Texts of Online Magic: Revealed

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As the world entered the modern era, the presence and popularity of magic began to decline. It was and still is a dying art. In an effort to consolidate and educate magicians, an online community for magicians was formed in 2011 by a mentor in the art, Asad Chaudry. This group is an internet hub for magicians young and old, novice and experienced to meet as well as to exchange ideas and resources to hone their skills in the practice. This web of interactions can be thought of as an activity system, which Donna Kain and Elizabeth Wardle, published English professors, define as "a group of people who share a common object and motive over time, as well as the wide range of tools they use together to act on that object and realize that motive" (275). Though interconnected across many online platforms, this group is best tracked through its presence in its Facebook group, where over twelve thousand individuals are recorded as members. The Facebook group is named Area 52 after Chaudry's online alias over social media, 52Kards. While the community is not solely on Facebook, the official list of members is; thus, the community as a whole, though connected through other platforms as well, will be referred to as Area 52. Those individuals part of the group communicate through a variety of online mediums and texts, such as Youtube, Facebook, and the official 52Kards website and store.

According to James Paul Gee, Discourses are "forms of life which integrate words acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities" (6). A broad application of this concept is to call the entire realm of magicians its own Discourse. To define the scope of this research, the discourse community will be identified as the magicians' community of Area 52. To expand on Gee's definition, a discourse community creates the expectation that its members behave, think, and portray themselves in a certain way. Therefore, it can be expected that members of Area 52 will exist according to the rules of their Discourse. I collected twenty Facebook posts and looked for common characteristics to examine how the Area 52 community use Facebook posts to create a community preserving magic as well as improve its members' skills, and what those texts reveal about the values and identities of the members.

Methodology

In order to textually analyze the community of Area 52, I had to gain access to their texts. I was able to gain access to the normally closed group by being a member myself and thus examining its texts. I collected twenty Facebook group posts from the group's wall. Each of the Facebook posts were checked for containing each of the ten chosen units of analysis: images of males, new member interaction (or novice magician), posts by male members, use of jargon or abbreviations, video posted, social media link, evidence of tension, casual speech, gate suggested by text, and images of females. Those containing said units were marked with one X regardless of how many instances of the theme was present. These posts may include text or video posted by any member of the group, and each can be thought of as a random and independent sample from each other.

However, twenty posts are not completely representative of the twelve thousand members of the group. The twenty posts were all relatively short, containing only a few sentences from each member. Also, no single member was represented in more than one post.

Results

Figure 1 shows the full range of the results. The frequencies they appeared in the studied texts are as follows: Images of Males: 65%; New Member Interaction (or Novice Magician): 30%; Posts by Male Members: 100%; Use of Jargon or Abbreviations: 45%; Video Posted: 50%; Social Media Link: 50%; Evidence of Tension: 50%; Casual Speech: 65%; Gate Suggested by Text: 45%; and Images of Females: 0%. The results gathered are telling. With 80% of the categories showing a frequency of 50% or more, there appear to be many strong underlying themes between these posts.
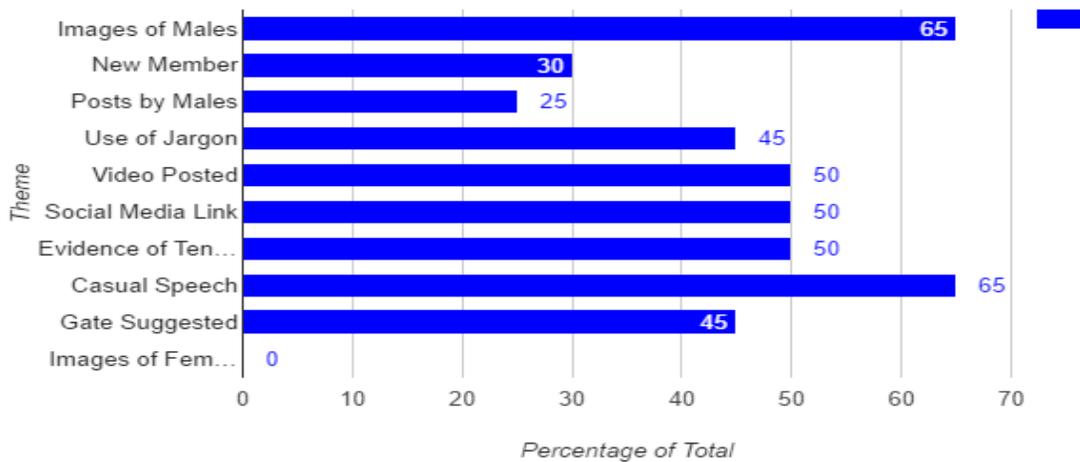

Figure 1: Frequency of Themes in Texts

Discussion

In order to become a member of a certain Discourse, one must master its way of speaking and use of specialized terms. According to Gee, Discourses are "forms of life which integrate words acts, values, beliefs, attitudes, and social identities" (6). The community within 52Kards is a prime example of a Discourse and those looking to function within it must gain certain literacies. For example, one of the posts mentions the acronym "ACAAN," which, to the average magician, means "Any Card At Any Number." This phrase refers to a large group of effects performed with a deck of cards that involves producing a freely selected card at a freely selected position in the deck. The poster asked for a criticism of technique regarding his version of an "ACAAN." To a reader lacking its understanding, the majority of the meaning of the post was inaccessible. With 45% of posts analyzed containing forms of jargon, it is apparent that the vocabulary of the trade is important. To achieve respect in this community and to derive meaning from its interactions, one must first become well versed in the Discourse -specific speech of the Area 52 community. In other words, they must have certain literacies that allow them to function within a Discourse.

The findings for the rate of New Member Interactions (or Novice Magicians) show that the Area 52 community has a large presence of beginners and newcomers to the group. With 30% of the posts by beginners and novices in the group, this goes against Gee's theory of a Discourse. Gee argues that in order to be part of a Discourse, one must be fully literate in its practices (9-10). Gee

defines literacy as "the mastery of or fluent control over a secondary Discourse" (9). Contrary to this, Area 52 demonstrates that this Discourse is not exclusive to those proficient in it. This may be the case because although the group is "Closed" on Facebook to the public, virtually anybody who requests membership is granted access within a few days.

Therefore, in order to gain membership into the group of about twelve thousand, there do not appear to be any formal versions of a gate, which is a test or obstacle designed to "exclude non-natives of a Discourse" (Gee 8). However, there seems to be an unspoken trend among the group that can offer an explanation to these contrasts. Those posts identified as New Member Interaction were rarely responded to by anyone other than another beginner. However, in the case of posts with a clear demonstration of core concepts and jargon, many knowledgeable members replied with sophisticated and appropriate responses. This may suggest that those truly involved in the Discourse and that possess the right kind of literacy ignore or look past those posts that lack the display of literacy in the Discourse. As a result, a possible gate is derived from this observation: to gain acceptance in Area 52 is to post with the appearance of knowledge surrounding the literacy of the community. There may exist within Area 52 a more elite group of magicians that do conform to Gee's definition of a Discourse, and perhaps they constitute the other 70% of posts that were not flagged as New Member Interaction. It is apparent that new members and novices are a significant part of the group's constituency, but may experience a divide with those more literate in the Discourse of Area 52.

> **Building upon Gee's Discourse theory, I propose that this ideal of secrecy may act as a sort of "reverse gate" to gain entrance to the Discourse.**

Another key part of Gee's Discourse theory is conflict within the individual. Fifty percent of posts had the category Evidence of Tension within them. These posts highlighted a major source of tension within the Area 52 community. According to magicethics.com, an ongoing magician-created list of ethical beliefs regarding the practice of magic, the first rule of magic is "Do Not Openly Expose Magic." This is obviously a belief widely held throughout the magic community and even the layman knows the expression: "a magician never reveals his secrets." However, when magicians are involved in such a group as Area 52, the line between conversation and exposure is very thin. This leads to conflict within the individual member. The member wants to improve their skills in magic and further their knowledge through interaction with other magicians; however, to converse and teach each other is often in violation of the code of magic. In fact, the rules for posting are detailed in a pinned post on the group's Facebook wall. It clearly states that reveals are not allowed and that there is a "ZERO TOLERANCE approach to piracy." Piracy is the illegal downloading of content, usually through torrents or backdoors in websites. Specifically in the magic community, people may post links to pirated material or post the material itself on the forum. Posts violating these rules are immediately removed and the poster is punished, often with expulsion from the group. Although the community is clearly against it, its members find themselves torn between ethics and discovery. The value placed upon secrecy is perhaps one of the defining characteristics of the subject in the activity system as defined by Kain and Wardle. Yet another defining characteristic of the subject is the ambition to improve. The struggle to find a middle ground almost has a tangible presence within the posts of Area 52. In response to one post asking for guidance, a member responds, "I described the effect cuz reveals are not allowed. If you have stack already mentioned you should have no Problem to work out how the effect is accomplished." The responder obviously wants to help the poster learn, but can only offer so much assistance under the strict rules of the Discourse. Building upon Gee's Discourse theory, I propose that this ideal of secrecy may act as a sort of "reverse gate" to gain entrance to the Discourse. Conventionally, a gate would take the form of an obstacle to be passed or completed; however, the idea of a "reverse

gate" could take the form of an activity or deed that shall never be done. In this case, to reveal magic within Area 52 results in banishment and disqualification from the discourse.

Perhaps one of the most overlooked trends was the alarming difference in gender representation. Of twenty posts, 100% were posted by male members of the group. This means, conversely, that there was no female activity within the Facebook postings. This suggests that the discourse community is mainly comprised of males, or at least its activity is dominated by them. Other categories provide support for this speculation as well. The criterion Images of Males, which simply means an image of a male was present in the post, was present in 65% of the posts, in either photos or videos. On the other hand, the category of Images of Females was recorded a total of zero times. This lack of female representation shows that the activity system of Area 52 could be playing into the larger stereotype that magic as a community is mainly comprised of men. Under Kain and Wardle's definition of activity theory, the subjects of Area 52 can be more narrowly assigned the description of male.

Conclusion

After viewing the community of Area 52 through various units of analysis, it has become apparent how the community uses Facebook posts to preserve magic and improve its members' skills as well what values and identities each member holds. The almost exclusively male group of Area 52 works through cryptic posts to further the greater magic community's values as well as its own member's skillsets. Through the use of a specific vocabulary and a discourse specific literacy, the members of Area 52 can create meaning within the community. And in displaying this literacy, members can prove their worth and earn respect with other members, while overlooking those who do not possess the necessary literacy. Through the discovery of internal tension among members rooted in the balance between discovery and secrecy, a new form of an obstacle to acceptance can be created. I have proposed the idea of a "reverse gate," which bars members from acting in a certain way for risk of disownment by the community. Despite conflict with some already widely accepted research, these interesting results may in fact be representative and applicable to discourse communities outside the scope of the Area 52 community.

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Julian Brown is a freshman at UCF and is pursuing a major in Aerospace Engineering. Now a passionate amateur magician, Julian has been captivated by the magical arts from a very young age. He hopes to earn a degree at UCF and become a professional engineer, while at the same time honing his skills as a magician on the side. Although he works hard in his studies, Julian is never without a deck of cards and spends his free time practicing and performing tricks and illusions.