



## **Why are Discord social communities gaining popularity?**

A case study of the ChillZone Discord server

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## WHY ARE DISCORD SOCIAL COMMUNITIES GAINING POPULARITY?

### ABSTRACT

Discord, a voice-based communication platform focused on gamers, has soared in popularity ever since its release in 2015. Along with a rapid increase in user count, the platform also saw a rise in public servers created for the purpose of providing a virtual space for people to meet and “hang out”. With the surge of people’s online activity in the context of the COVID-19 pandemic, these social hubs are growing in size more than ever before, some of which having attracted hundreds of thousands of members. “ChillZone”, a Discord community with over 350.000 members in total as of 2022, is one example of such cases. This study examines the main reasons to which ChillZone members join, and more importantly, actively participate in the server. As one of the only platforms allowing voice-based communication in a community setting, Discord’s unique combination of affordances and how they play a part in facilitating community participation is a significant focus of research. As such, the present study asks the following research question: “How do Discord’s affordances encourage members’ participation in the ChillZone Discord server?” By performing thematic analysis on a combination of qualitative interview and naturalistic observation data, this study aims to draw out patterns to paint a holistic picture of the appeal of voice-based communities such as ChillZone. The data revealed four main motivations to participate in the ChillZone community, namely social contact, relationship among members, entertainment, and community values. The current study suggests that these four motivations are underpinned by intrinsically motivated gratifications, giving a possible passage of explanation to members’ prolonged participation in the community. It was also found that the unique combination of affordances, most notably the real-time, voice-based communication, synchronous content broadcasting, were able to create a sense of virtual social space among members, with enhanced social presence, allowing members to engage in activities that were otherwise impersonal or non-social, as well as the formation of high-quality relationships and connection that had traditionally been more associated with face-to-face relationships. Thus, the findings of the study indicate the emergence of new possibilities with VoIP communities, especially in terms of providing an alternative for real-life social interactions.

**KEYWORDS:** *Discord, Online community, Social interaction, Affordances, Covid-19*

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## I. Introduction

Jimmy Donaldson, better known as MrBeast, one of the most recognizable Internet personalities in the world, has just received over 500 thousand members in his official Discord server, making it one of the most populated Discord servers as of 2022 (Discords.com, 2022). The famous content creator only made the Discord server publicly available to fans in early 2021. Ample success on Discord is certainly not exclusive to Donaldson, as Internet celebrities and online influencers such as Pewdiepie, Marques Brownlee, Markiplier, brands like Microsoft, Gucci, Adidas, Sephora, StockX Chipotle, and even tech start-up projects, are acknowledging the emerging platform's potential to facilitate large connected communities, and thus have adopted Discord as a new way to harness collective power (Discord, 2022; Eisenbrand & Peterson, 2021; McDowell, 2022).

Discord, a voice and text-based communication application utilizing voice over internet protocols (VOIP), was originally designed for teams of players to communicate with each other in a videogame when it was first launched in 2015 (Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021; Ayana et al., 2020; Curry, 2022). Often compared to the likes of Skype and TeamSpeak, and later on Slack and Microsoft Teams, Discord was meant to be a means of online communication, with a specific focus on the gamer demographic (Curry, 2022; Mykhoparkina, 2022). By June 2020, the service grew its user base sixfold from 45 million users in 2017, to over 300 million total registered users across the globe without a sign of slowing down, dethroning TeamSpeak as the "number one gaming voice chat service" (Curry, 2022; Statista, 2022). During this time, Discord has not only earned the title of "the best VoIP service available", but also grown beyond its original purpose (Marks, 2016). The platform's main attractiveness now comes from its huge aggregations of users called "servers", where people with similar interests converge, and tight-knit online communities are formed (Curry, 2022; Hellinga, 2019). The platform's slogan, "Imagine a Place", marks the app's effort to diversify its use and broaden coverage (Discord, 2022). Nowadays, there is a Discord server for just about anything, from specialized hubs focused on knowledge-sharing, collaborative projects, and user/customer feedback, to communities centred around specific topics, interests, and hobbies such as games, music, arts and crafts, brands, celebrities, content creators and so on (Benet, 2021; Discord, 2022; Vladiu & Constantinescu, 2020; Warni et al., 2021). In most cases, however, communities surrounding these topics are formed by users who are passionate about them. For instance, there are fandom Discord communities entirely dedicated to discussing everything Taylor Swift-related, from upcoming projects to opinions on her latest songs, as well as sharing links to users' current Spotify playlists and chat about their favourite music ("Taylor Swift", 2022)

Besides these education-oriented, interest dedicated, and project/collaboration-based servers, one of the most common uses of Discord social servers for new people to meet and interact with others. Essentially, Discord has become a social space where users can hang out every day via a myriad of servers created specifically for social interactions. In fact, many of the top Discord servers with the number of users amounting to the hundreds of thousands are social hubs dedicated to this purpose (Discord, 2022). In the context of the Covid-19 pandemic when most parts of the world were undergoing lockdown, rendering interactions in an offline setting unfeasible, online interactions are playing a bigger role than ever before to an individual's mental health and wellbeing (Canale et al., 2021; Stuart et al., 2021). The increase in people's need to socially connect with others from their home during the pandemic has resulted in a huge uptick in usage Discord, reaching its record of peak concurrent users at 10.6 million (Curry, 2022).

Differing from other social media applications where there is usually an undefined global space where all kinds of content can be posted and made available to the public, what sets Discord apart is its focus on enabling real-time communication within a community with its intuitive voice and text channels, its invite-only access which evokes a sense of exclusivity among members, as well as the diversity of tools used within these channels such as custom permissions, roles, and open API (Discord, 2022). This unique combination of features opens up significant possibility for seamlessness and diversity in real time peer-to-peer communication in a community that traditional content-based social platforms such as Facebook or Reddit lack, while maintaining high degree of organization and structure. These specific technological affordances, which kickstarted the popularity of voice-based communities, set Discord apart in the current social media landscape. Yet, given the novelty of this platform, relatively little is known about how such affordances contribute to the building blocks of strong online communities.

Thus, how and why Discord's unique technological affordances are used by a highly engaged community is a topic this thesis aims to explore. A case study is used to analyse one of the most popular servers on the platform with over 350 thousand members, "ChillZone". The public social-oriented server, which now houses an active community generating a significant amount of daily traffic, was created in 2017 with the sole purpose of becoming a virtual social space for people around the world to gather and hangout (DiscordMe, 2017). It also features a plethora of channels to facilitate interaction, and activities to keep its members engaged. Being a social hub, a type of online community that remains one of the most distinct and common uses of Discord, the ChillZone server represents a unique case of successful adaptation of Discord affordances to not only address growing social demands but also build

a healthy and robust community. This leads to the following research question: ““How do Discord’s affordances encourage members’ participation in the ChillZone Discord server?” The current study explores the case of ChillZone Discord server based on a theoretical framework drawn from self-determination theory, uses and gratifications theory, and affordance theory, which will be elaborated further in later sections. Method-wise, this study makes use of interviews of server members, as well as observation and documentation data from real-time interactions happening within the channels of the server.

By analysing the ChillZone Discord server, which can reveal informative findings related to online community participation and the motivations behind it, this research aims to provide practical implications to individuals as well as organizations standing to benefit from the enhancement of online community experience on Discord. Findings of the study can serve the personal interests of individual users wishing to join or create a community on Discord, be it a purpose-driven or social-oriented server, by increasing the understanding of the platform’s affordances and use, and how needs for social interaction of individuals are fulfilled. The study also benefits organizations aiming to utilize Discord as a community-building tool or tap into its millions of users through the platform in order to harness its collective prowess. As Discord are growing more popular and widely adopted by not only the average users but also online personalities, celebrities, brands, projects, and organizations, the platform is being gradually explored for its potential business use, such as collaboration, boosting brand engagement and loyalty, as well as a form of social listening to serve marketing and public relation purposes (Eisenbrand & Peterson, 2021). This requires insights into the affordances of Discord, and how they have been effectively applied in successful cases, which this study provides in depth.

Academically, this research adds to the further understanding of human social needs, as well as the relationship between such needs and the motivations to participate in online communities, offering more insights into the examination of member needs satisfaction as a proxy measurement for online community success. Ideally, findings of the study can contribute to a more comprehensive uses and gratifications framework in the context of online communities (Katz et al., 1973). Additionally, as voice-based communities are still an emerging phenomenon, the study may provide initial theoretical understanding of the implications of real time voice-enabled communications in the process of community-building, as well as online social interactions in general. Thus, this study fills a research gap on Discord’s affordances beyond its e-learning capabilities, especially in the area of socialization, as little academic attention has been paid to this unique social platform outside of its potential as a remote education tool (Kruglyk et al., 2020; Wahyuningsih & Baidi, 2021).

## 2. Literature review

### The affordances of Discord

Affordances, according to Gibson (1979), are the possibilities of action that an object or environment offers organisms within. He argued that people should be studied in isolation, but the affordance theory in social media study, then, suggests that a media platform and what its functions can afford its users to do can potentially influence platform adoption and usage (Bradner, 2001). Discord is a voice and text-based communication application utilizing voice over internet protocols (VOIP) originally designed for gamers to communicate with each other while playing a video game (Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021; Ayana et al., 2020). A brief literature review suggests that Discord as a platform has only received academic attention for the last two years for the purpose of remote learning in the context of Covid-19, due to its unique combination of digital communication technologies (Arifianto & Izzudin, 2021; Ayana et al., 2020; Barnad, 2020; Kruglyk et al., 2020; Vladioiu & Constantinescu, 2020). Research found that Discord not only has higher accessibility to new users due to its less demanding hardware requirement and higher compatibility with modern operating systems, but also provides a significant advantage over other online communication platforms like Skype or Google Hangouts. This is due to Discord's more fully featured and high quality online synchronous communication facilities (such as text messaging, voice calls, video calls, screenshare, media share), which have been found to effectively support distance learning (Barnad, 2020; Kruglyk et al., 2020).

In a comparative study by Kruglyk et al. (2020), a number of key features were highlighted, such as the ability to conduct live broadcasts simultaneously, which allows reliable quality transmission of information and live feedback in real time during lectures. This is done via voice channels which allow synchronous real-time communication with Voice over Internet Protocols (VoIP). Voice channels are one of the main affordances of Discord, and is arguably its defining feature compared to other social media platforms (Discord, 2022). Unlike what the name implies, voice channels not only allow voice communication, but also enable users to show their faces via a video feed if they have a camera connected, or conduct live streaming of media content (Barnad, 2020; Kruglyk et al., 2020). Survey results by Ayana et al. (2020) indicate that apart from possessing sufficient services to accommodate online classes, a better e-learning environment can be created with Discord because of the ability to drop in and out of voice channels at any time of day, which generates a sense of virtual social space. Supportive of this finding, Swan and Shih (2005) found a positive correlation between perceived social presence, or the degree to which students perceive one another as 'real' in mediated communication, and their satisfaction with online discussions. Thus, this combination of features can almost fully

reproduce the format of physical classes and greatly increasing the level of activation among students (Kruglyk et al., 2020). Furthermore, various studies have suggested that although VoIP-mediated communication cannot completely replace face-to-face interaction, it works well as a viable alternative to activities that have been traditionally face-to-face, such as qualitative research interviews or clinical consultation (Io Iacono, 2016; Sutherland et al., 2020). These findings can have important implications for what kind of interactions are enabled in more social-themed servers such as the ChillZone Discord server. As VoIP-mediated communication comes closer to direct, real-life interaction, the lines between online and offline social relationships may be further blurred, the latter of which have been associated with higher quality and value in academia (Cummings et al., 2002).

Furthermore, the ability to create, add detailed description, and configure servers as well as parallel voice and text channels within a server was another significant advantage of Discord (Kruglyk et al., 2020). Server customization means server administrators can add or remove channels at will, allowing high degree of flexibility in server setup. Not only can the server host a great variety of dedicated channels for specific needs of server members, and channels can be added to accommodate more members as the server expands in scale (Discord, 2022). According to Kruglyk et al. (2020), server customization helps setting up an optimal system of simultaneous learning streams for separate academic groups. The user interface also acts as a significant contributing factor to the students' acceptance and adoption of the platform. This is supported by the findings of Arifianto and Izzudin (2021), which posits that the friendly and intuitive Discord interface creates a relaxed and dynamic atmosphere for students via its gamification affordances, which promotes engagement among students. Some challenges to Discord effective usage, however, were observed by Wahyuningsih and Baidi (2021), including lack of access to stable internet connection, unavailability of suitable electronic devices, and unfamiliarity with the application, although said obstacles were successfully mitigated in the end. These studies give an overview of Discord as a communication tool, and how its affordances allow for the creation of dynamic and effective systems of continuous real time communication that can mimic physical environment to some degree of success in an education context.

Finally, on top of server and channel customization, it was found that Discord can give users a significant degree of control over server functions with "Discord bots" ("Discord Bots", 2022; Verma et al., 2021). Discord's API allows for the development and integration of AI-driven accounts, popularly referred to as "Discord bots" by anyone with sufficient programming knowledge (Verma et al., 2021). They are tools run by commands that can be used to automate processes or integrate third party features to the server, ranging from entertainment such as games, live music playback reward systems,



to server tools for server admins such as schedule events and meetings, automated server moderation, or even a combination of them (“Discord Bots”, 2022; Verma et al., 2021). Most often used in more populated servers, Discord bots can aid the process of server operation and moderation, as well as provide new possibility to diversify interactions via the execution of text commands, which can improve the overall experience of members (Kiene & Hill, 2020; Verma et al., 2021). However, Discord bots are not automatically implemented in the server itself upon creation, but have to be added manually by server owners. Similarly, the way a server and its channels are configured to provide for members’ needs is heavily dependent on users themselves. Therefore, the current study does not separate Discord’s affordances from their configuration in the ChillZone server, as the focus is less about the Discord’s intended use for each affordance, but more on how and why they are used by members of the ChillZone server. The unique possibilities of the platform itself is considered in order to understand the nature of interactions in the server and how this contributes to the reinforcement of community, a concept that will be discussed more in-depth in the following section.

### **Online community – definition and success metrics**

According to MacQueen et al. (2001), a community can be characterized by shared interests or perspectives, joint action or participation, interwoven relationships or ties among members, and diversity or social complexity within. An online community, then, distinguishes itself from a community via its means of participation that are usually based on Internet technology, such as online forums, online chat, or VOIP (Hammond, 2017; Lee et al., 2003; Preece & Manloney-Krichmar, 2006; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Thus, online communities can be defined as social aggregations existing in cyberspace, in which webs of relationship among members are formed, a shared objective, interest, or activity that acts as the primary participation reason, and their activities which include participant-driven communications and interactions are supported by computer-mediated technology (Äkkinen, 2005; Preece & Manloney-Krichmar, 2006). There are other characteristics, although not as essential, are also observed in many online communities, such as varying member roles, collective identity, joining criteria or requirements, community events and rituals, and substantial history of existence (Äkkinen, 2005; Hammond, 2017; Lee et al., 2003; Preece & Manloney-Krichmar, 2006; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). According to these criteria, the ChillZone server appears to possess the surface-level requirements necessary to qualify as an online community as it presents itself with a consistent primary purpose: being a virtual social space where people can interact, make friends and “chill”, which act as a shared goal among members. The server and its channels are computer-mediated, and provide stable environment for interaction to take place and act as a consistent mechanism of interaction or

communication. However, whether its members perceive them as part of a community remains to be seen, as this includes the examination of the deeper web of relationships and connections between members that are not apparent on the surface.

With regards to community success, empirical studies have made use of both qualitative and quantitative metrics to evaluate how lively a community is. The most common qualitative metrics, which corresponds more with this study's focus, mainly deal with the extent to which members' needs are satisfied, and the quality of member's relationships (Iriberry, & Leroy, 2009). The two authors found that lower quality of community members' relationships is associated with limited communication and high turnover. This means that promoting participation and maintain a tight-knit community is crucial to successful community-building. How these qualitative metrics apply to the ChillZone server will be taken into consideration in the present study. On another note, quantifiable metrics have also been used to assess the success of online communities. These metrics include size (number of members), participation (number of visits, logins, hits, reactions), contributions (number of messages per period, amount of active time in voice chat per period), and relationship development (extent of contact between members) (Iriberry, & Leroy, 2009). Although the latter two factors are harder to gauge with accuracy, the ChillZone server's member count of around 369.000 individuals with thousands of concurrent active members everyday are initial signs of a healthy community. Nevertheless, as discussed previously, success in recruiting members and receiving a significant volume of traffic does not necessarily translate to retaining members long-term, as this depends more on the extent of needs satisfaction and relationship quality. The study therefore poses the question of whether the ChillZone server is able to satisfy community members' needs, including allowing members to build strong relationships with others in a space populated with such a large number of participants.

### **Sustained participation - extrinsic versus intrinsic motivations**

To gain a deeper understanding of human needs on a psychological level and how this affects sustained participation in online community, this study employs elements from Self-determination theory (SDT) (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Most significantly, it can be argued that SDT integrates motivations with theoretical consideration to relative autonomy, an important component of high-quality commitment to behaviors (Lev-on, 2015; Iriberry & Leroy, 2009; Ryan & Deci, 2000; Zhou, 2011). Highlighting this theory is also important to the study at hand as studies have pointed out that sustained participation in a community is more likely when motivations are self-determined or emanating from the self (Molix & Nichols, 2013; Seddon et al., 2008; Wang & Hou, 2015).

According to SDT, every action or behaviour can be motivated by intrinsic motivations and extrinsic motivations (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Actions that are primarily driven by intrinsic motivations, or internal sources of motivations, are done because said actions are inherently satisfactory. According to Ryan and Deci (2000), intrinsically motivated actions are performed to fulfil innate psychological needs, such as the needs for autonomy - a sense of agency and choice; competence – the mastery of task and control of outcome; and relatedness – a sense of connection with others. These are natural motivational inclinations that persist across all stages of life, and thus do not require extraneous incentives to display. In fact, SDT argues that intrinsic motivational tendencies, such as the seeking of novelty, the creative application of skills, or active assimilation, is a crucial factor in cognitive, social, and physical development. The psychological liberty felt when performing tasks that are intrinsically interesting is therefore an important facilitator of performance, persistence, and well-being, and is theorized to yield the highest forms of motivation and engagement in activity (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

On the other hand, extrinsic motivations refer to performing an action to achieve a separable outcome, such as financial rewards, social pressure, and time constraint. As opposed to intrinsically motivated actions, those extrinsically motivated are not done out of inherent enjoyment or interests, but for external benefits, and thus can result in lower performance or commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nonetheless, SDT posits that extrinsic motivations are not completely nonautonomous, but rather vary greatly in terms of relative autonomy. This means that while an action can be performed due to extrinsic motivations, meaning they involve instrumental values, they may receive personal validation and endorsement. For example, an individual may choose to participate in a public Discord server because of external pressure from his friends, or he may genuinely believe in the value that it brings to his social skills despite not being fond of socializing with unfamiliar people. In both instances, instrumental values are sought after, yet the latter gives the actor a sense of choice and autonomy despite not necessarily being inherently interesting to them (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Human motivations, therefore, can be understood as a continuum, going from impersonal (amotivation), to external values (extrinsic motivation) which may solicit passive compliance, to internal values (internalized extrinsic motivation or intrinsic motivation) which may prompt active personal commitment (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The process of transition from impersonal to internal perceived value is coined by the two authors as the process of internalization, and is associated with persistent and quality commitment to behaviour. This means that the importance of extrinsically motivated behaviors can be identified and integrated by the self, and thus be self-determined (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Nevertheless, it should be noted that motivations do not always follow the process of internalization, or

necessarily transition from external to more self-deterministic. This means that some behaviours are motivated by an internal need regardless, such as engaging in conversations that pique one's interests, or the casual social interaction with other members of the community as a leisure time activity, both of which are intrinsically motivated and can drive community participation.

### **Motivations to join an online community – a Uses and gratifications perspective**

It is also crucial that the current study can integrate the concept of self-deterministic drives with actual motivations from empirical studies on online communities, which largely approach the subject behind the lens of Uses and Gratifications theory (U&G). As suggested by Uses and Gratifications theory, media users are aware of their needs and thus are motivated to select the most suitable means to fulfil such needs (Katz et al., 1973). In other words, the theory assumes that the audience is not passive in their consumption of information, but active and goal oriented, which prompts them to take the initiative to engage with media based on needs gratification. Participating in an online community, thus, can be the result of individual motivations and the satisfaction thereof from participation (Dholakia et al., 2004; Lev-on, 2015; Sangwan, 2005). Supporting this argument, online communities that adequately fulfil members' needs has been found to sustain more success, making the understanding of the needs which online community participation satisfies for its members a key component in the construction of a healthy and sustainable community (Sangwan, 2005). It is also important to highlight the distinction between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained. As members may approach the server initially for specific motivations, but upon receiving additional gratifications from the community, return for other reasons, this means that motivations to participate can change over time (Katz et al., 1973; Lampe et al., 2010).

Previous studies have found diverse uses and gratifications in online environments. Whiting and Williams (2013) suggested ten uses and gratifications for social networking sites usage: social interaction, relaxation, pass time, expression of opinion, information seeking, information sharing, and surveillance/knowledge about other people. Sangwan (2005) found that members of a paid knowledge community participate to fulfil functional, emotive, and contextual needs. To navigate the vastly diverse and complex nature of human motivation, this study utilizes the five primary categories of needs in the context of media use, namely cognitive, affective, personal integrative, social integrative, and tension release needs, as posited by the uses and gratifications theory (Katz et al., 1973). The next sections will describe each of these five categories further and connect these to the organisation of the ChillZone server.

Cognitive needs point to the desire of acquiring knowledge, strengthening understanding of one's surrounding, or one-self (Katz et al., 1973). Information access is one of the most frequently cited reasons to join an online community according to previous research, which could be related to the innate drive for discovery and exploration (Ardichvili, 2003; Gilbert, 2016; Lev-on, 2015; Sangwan, 2005). In addition to the intrinsic motivation to gather knowledge out of genuine curiosity or interest, information can also be sought after to fulfil instrumental goals outside of the inherent enjoyment of learning new things (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Despite heavy focus on communities of practice in the aforementioned academic works, information exchange, often in the forms of useful knowledge, advice, expertise in members' areas of interest, or information about happenings in the world, is an important aspect of an online community and plays a significant role in motivating participation (Lev-on, 2015; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Sangwan 2005). What makes online communities unique is that information is almost always user-generated, meaning the more members there are in a community, the more diverse and appealing content is presumably posted, creating a self-sustaining process that attracts even more members (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Thus, it is reasonable to assume that the ChillZone Discord server, with a member count of over 350 thousand, constantly draws in new members based on the prospect of abundant informational content catering to diverse interests from a large pool of active members. Nevertheless, there is an important distinction between the motivations to obtain information, and share information, as the latter could be triggered by more social needs than cognitive (Lampe et al., 2010; Ray et al., 2014). Additionally, research has also focused more on the informational aspect of communities of practice which are explicitly centred around learning and information exchange, and less on social communities which emphasize social interaction (Gherardi, 2009; Lev-on, 2015). Therefore, what role information exchange plays in members' motivation to partake in a social community, one like the ChillZone Discord server, is an interesting aspect that is examined in the current study.

Another category proposed by Katz et al. (1974) is affective needs, which is tied to hedonic desires, or the innate needs for emotional experiences such as pleasure, excitement entertainment, and aesthetics. It is cited in U&G research that Internet users actively look for fun, enjoyable and pleasurable experiences online, and commonly do so via usage of social media (Whiting & Williams, 2013). Studies showed that playing or interacting with others is a source of entertainment, by exploring fictional identities, or solving virtual challenges together (Dohlakia et al., 2004). In addition, individuals may also find following online interactions, such as funny comments, jokes, Internet memes, or even casual online chatting a form of comic relief, and engaging in such casual conversations may also yield hedonic benefits, leading to a member spending more of their leisure time interacting in the community (Kuo &

Feng, 2013; Whiting & Williams, 2013). Thus, individuals may participate in online communities for the recreational values such communities can provide, be it from entertaining or aesthetically pleasing media content shared by members, or from casually interacting with them (Kuo & Feng, 2013; Lampe et al., 2010; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Sangwan, 2005). An example of the ChillZone community catering to affective needs is its various channels dedicated to entertainment content, such as memes, music recommendations, or pet photos, all aptly placed under the channel category “Fun”. Members of the ChillZone server can also utilize the “Go Live” feature of Discord to livestream a movie, music, or even themselves playing videogames to a voice channel which others can tune in and enjoy together. Furthermore, despite expanding its use and thus its main target demographic, the gaming community still makes up the largest section of Discord’s user base, making it a platform of choice where people can play games with each other (Pilipović, 2022). This makes the pursuit of hedonic experiences a potential self-deterministic motivation for community participation.

Personal integrative needs are the desire to strengthen confidence, credibility, stability, respect, status, power, and self-esteem (Katz et al., 1973). In the context of online community participation, one of the most common ways to earn respect and status is to contribute to the community and help others (Ridings et al., 2006). Based on a person’s value system and the inherent need for self-efficacy, an individual may gain personal fulfilment from helping others and providing social support (Seddon et al., 2008). In this regard, studies have found repeated and high-quality contribution to a community improves one’s self-image as an efficacious person, because of the greater perceived impact they can have on the group, which in turns increases self-esteem (Youcheng & Fesenmaier, 2003). The need to provide support to a community can also be looked at through the lens of social exchange theory, which posits that community members act based on self-interested assessment and may decide to assist other members in response to having received help or expecting to receive help in the future (Jahan & Kim, 2021). Thus, enhancing one’s social standing can enhance intrinsic motivations by appealing to the self-deterministic need for autonomy and competence: to have a sense of choice and expectation of success (Ryan & Deci, 2000). On another note, McKenna and Bargh (2000) found that to strangers in an online environment, the anonymous nature and control over the time and space of interaction give users significant freedom to construct and reconstruct their identity. Thus, people tend to present themselves as their ideal self, or a version of themselves that they want others to see, which could be a way to enhance their social standing. Although this tendency is still present in face-to-face interactions, it is more difficult to achieve than online, and thus is more successful in affecting other people’s perception online than in real life (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). To that end, this category can be related to the self-

deterministic need for autonomy, which refers to an individual's ability to freely act according to their integrated self and the psychological liberty felt when their actions are primarily driven by internal values and motivations, instead of external sources like social norms, pressure, or obligation (Ryan & Deci, 2000). However, if the tendency to appear confident and capable originates more from external sources of regulation, such as social pressure or contingent self-esteem, contribution may not be experienced as a part of the self and thus may be unsustainable in the long run (Ryan & Deci, 2000).

Social integrative needs are an individual's desire to build social relations between people, and be integrative with the world. This means being accepted and recognized by others, to feel a sense of belonging, and to develop group identity (Katz et al., 1973). This category of needs may also be associated with the intrinsic need for relatedness, which alludes to an individual's innate desire for social interaction, connection and support to and from others, and identification with a social group (Hammond, 2017; Ryan & Deci, 2000). Social interactions, especially real-time interactions with direct contact can be intrinsically rewarding (Pfeiffer et al., 2014). It has also been found that prosocial activities are beneficial to both physical and mental wellbeing, as a socially engaged life can lead to healthier habits and state of mind (Ristau, 2011). Because of this, people can be motivated to actively engage in certain activities because they allow social contact, (Crandall, 1979). Leisure activities, such as playing video games or watching movies, are thus suggested to have non-social and social components. The former comes from the activity itself, while the latter involve engaging in the activity with others, which can factor into the decision to participate in said activity, and the enjoyment derived from it (Crandall, 1979). Social contact, therefore, can be an important incentive to partake in any activity that permits it, such as actively participating in an online community like ChillZone, and engage in leisure activities or even just casually conversing with others around the world.

Another crucial aspect of social integrative needs is a sense of belonging or collective identity, which can be explained via the process of identification (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Identification refers to the process of self-classification into social categories that helps identify themselves as distinct from others. The process encompasses both cognitive and affective components, the former including the self-awareness of membership, perception of similarity/difference, and the latter comprising of emotional commitment and kinship felt towards other members in the same social group (Dohlakia et al., 2004; Hsu et al., 2012). In the context of an online community, identification may be characterized by the conscious viewing of oneself as a community member and affective connection with fellow members, and is argued to be a crucial facilitator of community commitment based on membership (Hsu et al., 2012).

On a more personal level, establishing and maintaining one's interpersonal network also falls under social integrative category (Katz et al., 1973). However, whereas community identification and trust provide social support by the act of seeking help or helping others in a community, friendship yields value from the notion of belonging to a close group, companionship, socializing, and networking, on top of the social benefits gained from a deeper level of identification and trust (Deng & Tavares, 2013; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Thus, people may join online communities simply for the purpose making friends and "hanging out" with people of similar interests (Hsu et al., 2012; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). This naturally leads to the expanding and reinforcing of one's social network (Hsu et al., 2012; Norris, 2002). Studies have shown that the anonymity of the Internet may encourages self-disclosure in online interactions, which may lead to some advantages over face-to-face relationship, such as faster development of intimacy (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Interestingly, although some aspects of friendship such as socializing and feeling the presence of others can be pursued for the inherent enjoyment of social contact and do not require one to develop personal relationships, those who have successfully built long-lasting relationships in online communities have been found to be more committed to said communities (Quinton & Harridge-March, 2010; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). On top of this, online friendship, given enough time to fully developed, are found to be identical to face-to-face friendship in intimacy and close, and can be equally fulfilling (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). For these reasons, widening and deepening one's social circle is a major social integrative value gained from sustained participation in an online community, especially one that is centered on social purposes like ChillZone (Norris, 2002).

From the perspective of social exchange theory, it can also be said that individuals strive to build social relations with the expectation of gaining social support, which includes emotional and instrumental aid, and companionship from reciprocal acts, as the process of social exchange happens when interactions generate obligations to reciprocate (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Hammond, 2017; Hsu et al., 2012; Jahan & Kim, 2020; Lampe et al., 2010; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). However, as there is no definite guarantor of reciprocity in a virtual environment supposedly full of strangers, many authors on this matter emphasize trust as an important prerequisite to reciprocity in an online community (Hsu et al., 2012; Ridings & Gefen, 2004; Li, 2015; Youcheng & Fesenmaier, 2003). Community trust, specifically, indicates a level of confidence in other members' credibility, goodwill, and ability to deliver what is promised (Hsu et al., 2012). When one is willing to ask for social support, potentially putting themselves in a vulnerable position, he must possess some degree of trust that others will reliably reciprocate with respect and goodwill (Ridings et al., 2006). One way to reinforce this trust is



via connecting with like-minded individuals or those who are in similar situations, as people with the same interests, goals, and objectives, are more likely to express goodwill towards each other (Hsu et al., 2012). To this end, joining an online community that an individual can identify with, or one that allows an individual to strengthen their social circle, can be said to contribute to the exchange of social support via increased trust. This process is made easier by the searching capabilities of the Internet and the sheer number of online communities available (Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Moderators can also be appointed to monitor interactions and ensure an environment of respect and positivity, increasing in the community's trust to support one another.

Finally, tension release needs are closely connected to the desire for escapism and diversion from problems and routines (Katz et al., 1973; Nambisan & Baron, 2009; Sangwan, 2005). Components of this category include the need for relaxation and the relief of day-to-day stress, but also the general tendency to avoid unpleasant realities, which could signify the weakening of contact with self and one's social roles (Katz et al., 1973). Although some studies conceptualize escapism as a part of entertainment, which is an affective need, an important distinction can be made between the two. While entertainment focuses on the enjoyment of the experience, escapism is a form of distraction from or relief of something else, typically unwanted issues or tension in a person's daily life (Whiting & Williams, 2013). As such, people who use the Internet to pass time or alleviate boredom also possess motives stemming from tension release needs. Additionally, as discussed previously, an online community also enables them to perform aspects of identities usually not possible or accepted in offline settings, such as sexual minority or niche interests (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Ergo, a community member can be said to be motivated by tension release needs if the expression and control of their identity in their online environment is a passage to escape the constraint of reality and enter a space where they have more autonomy, which is a naturally self-deterministic desire (Ryan & Deci, 2000). Moreover, the more a group's identity corresponds with important aspects of a member's identity, the greater the validation of his self-identity, and subsequently self-acceptance. This is especially relevant to aspects of identities that are more uncommon or stigmatized in one's offline social setting (McKenna & Bargh, 2000). Once more, the trust that the virtual environment within the community is friendly, supportive, and/or inclusive enough, to respond with kindness and not take advantage of member's self-disclosure or self-expression, is crucial to this process.

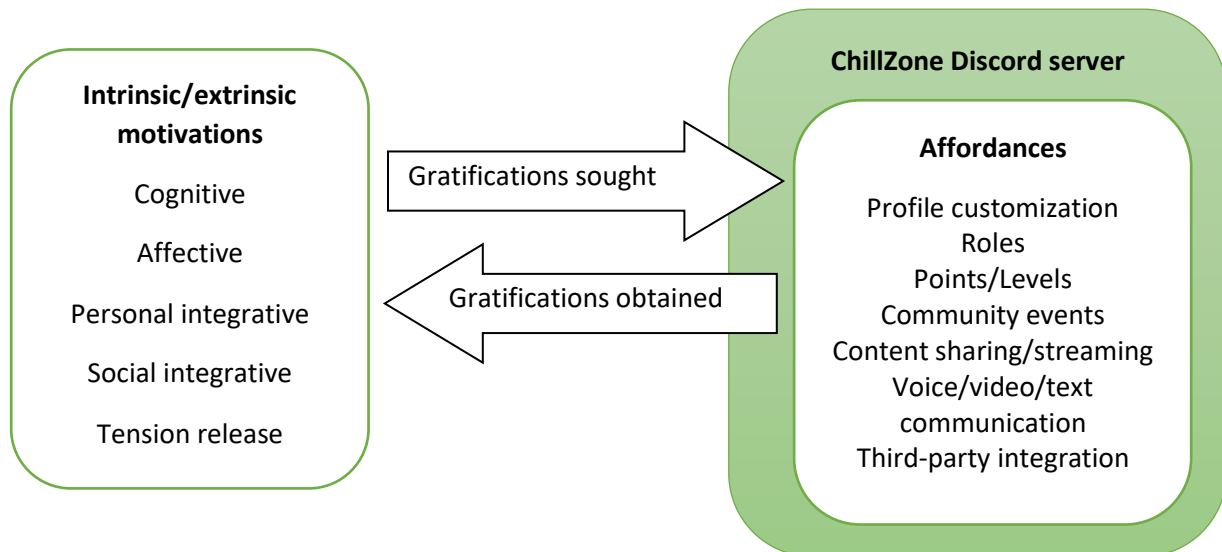
### **Integrating SDT, U&G theory, and affordances theory**

The current study integrates SDT, U&G, and affordances theory into a theoretical framework for analysis, positing that healthy, long-term community participation is explained by the harmonic

compatibility between user self-deterministic motivations and platform (Figure 1). In other words, a sustainable online community is underpinned by a transition from extrinsically to intrinsically motivated community members, as it can lead to greater satisfaction, and thus more persistent or involved behaviour overtime, so long as this is allowed by the affordances of the platform in which the community resides. For example, the reward system for participation of a Discord server like ChillZone, aided by a wide range of activities and events made possible by the server’s bots, can provide extrinsic or instrumental values for participation, which can be enticing to the server’s newcomers to participate. Overtime, social interactions with more compatible or like-minded individuals that might be harder to find in the users’ immediate vicinity can lead to relationships that fulfil the social integrative needs that are more intrinsic. Interaction with the community over time can also foster a sense of belonging and connection to people, a strong passage to social support, and a crucial intrinsic motivation for community participation. Whether and how the satisfaction of these motivations lead to long-term community commitment in the ChillZone server will be further explored in the analysis.

**Figure 1**

*Theoretical model based on U&G, SDT, and affordances theory*



### **3. Method**

#### **Main method**

This section delineates the proposed method and clarification for its use in this research. The study employs instrumental case study as the main research method. The main data sources come in the form of fieldnotes from observation sessions on the ChillZone server, as well as qualitative interviews. The research opted for a qualitative methodological approach because of the inherent explorative and interpretive nature of the research question, which attempts to explore the Chillzone community in order to increase in-depth and detailed understanding of community participation motivations, as well as the affordances of the platform (Creswell & Poth, 2017). Thus, the subject at hand cannot be studied in separation from the context in which it resides. On another note, a case study was selected as the main method of research due to its ability to produce in-depth description and analysis of a bounded system (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). Dissimilar from an intrinsic case study which focuses on the case in order to understand the case itself and is often exploratory in nature, an instrumental case study settles its lens on a phenomenon, into which insights can be provided, or about which a theory can be refined, with the illustration of one bounded case (Merriam & Tisdell, 2015). In the context of this research, the case here is defined as the ChillZone Discord server, the analysis of which can be useful to examine group culture and practices on the platform that promote community-building potential on the basis of needs fulfilment, and how they occur in a naturalistic setting. The method was also chosen to better accommodate the type of data, or the diversity thereof, that the author wishes to analyse. As only by the examination of a variety of data such as text, voice, and qualitative interviews can adequately account for the complexity of interactions occurring in a Discord server, a case study was selected as it permits the study of raw data from multiple sources with the bounded system that makes up the case, allowing for the triangulation of data via consistency of evidence across various data sources (Creswell & Poth, 2017).

#### **Data collection**

The research is designed based on the methodological guidelines of Merriam (2009), which has been successfully adapted to the case study of a Twitter community by Britt and Paulus (2016), as well as in Anderson's study of the Harbormen Gaming Discord community (2019). In both aforementioned cases, the authors combined the analysis of observation data and qualitative interviews of key members of the community in order to make sense of what has transpired in the bounds of the case. The present study more closely applies Anderson's (2019) research design, as it was also used to examine a Discord community to some degree of success.

Observation data contributes to greater understanding of the case and an “incontestable description” of events occurring for further analysis (Stake, 2008). For this research, a non-participant observation method was applied, as the author was more interested in the reified patterns that arose from interactions. This was enabled by the online and public nature of the community, which provided open access and anonymity, making observation as unobtrusive as possible (Williams, 2008). By observing and analysing the daily interactions happening within the server, a few key areas such as which channels or functions are used by members, how they are used, and for what purpose, can be investigated. As the current study is concerned with how motivations of members are fulfilled by participation, observing participation as it occurs may uncover community practices that cater to members’ needs. Monitoring interactions in real time is necessary as implicit and context-dependent interactions may require direct observation and an understanding of the social setting in which the interaction takes place, as well as lingos used, including but not limited to multimedia content that is difficult to procure and interpret in other methods such as qualitative interviews (Stake, 2008). The author observed activity in both public text-based and voice-based channels of the server over the course of two weeks, from May 23 to June 3, 2022. For chat text channels, 6 observation sessions were conducted, each observation session lasting about 30 minutes, totalling to 3 hours of observation. During each session, the author periodically jumped between text channels based on the level of activity therein. Channels receiving the most engagement were therefore noted and subsequently prioritized. The content of the chat was monitored closely to reveal pattern of use that may illuminate motivations. For voice-chat channels, observation sessions lasted around 45 minutes to an hour per session at different times of day, for a total of 3 hours of observation. During observation, the author joined the public Discord voice calls with at least 2 members active therein but did not participate in conversations. For both voice-based and text-based channels, fieldnotes were then taken in great descriptive details about the interactions happening therein, including but not limited to the content in each channel, topics of discussion, members’ response or behavior towards one another, media content shared, the general atmosphere, as well as the affordances used. Field notes help to fashion a narrative or unique descriptor of a case by documenting the highlights within observation and establish points of interest related to the research question in both messages and voice chat, with special attention paid to standard practices as well as anomalies. This data can act as supplemental material providing further insights into interviewees’ responses (Anderson, 2019). All observation were done following the permission of the Discord server’s moderators.

For qualitative interviews, a purposeful sampling strategy was adopted to give relevant and adequate experiential data within the constraint of this project. The purpose of the interviews is to provide a first-person account of what uses and gratifications community members actually sought and gain from the server, and how these motivations dictate their participation. It also gives a deeper insight into how the affordances of Discord are configured by users with administrative control to accommodate members' needs and serve the community's purpose, acting as contextual references to the former objective. A total of 7 participants from the server were handpicked to be interviewees, including the one admin, one moderator, and five members of the group of diverse background and participation level to maximize motivations variation. Participants were chosen based on nationality, age, and sex, as well as duration and frequency of participation on ChillZone. All respondents are above 18 years old. The research applies snowball sampling, in which previous interviewees act as informants and provide recommendations on participations to fit the above criteria. After obtaining consent from the participants, 7 interviews were conducted via a voice channel of Discord, recorded using the Craigbot Discord bot, which allows for audio recording of Discord calls, and manually transcribed. Each interview lasted 45 to 60 minutes each, totalling to approximately 7 hours of interview time. The interviews were semi-structured to allow for flexibility in the interviewing process, meaning in addition to open-ended questions focused on the experience of members, follow-up questions will also be given based on their responses. The interview protocols were developed with two overarching topics: the motivations of members participation, and how the affordances of Discord as configured in the ChillZone server satisfy their needs. Sub-topics of interest for members include the general perception of the server as well as Discord as platform, users' experience with the server, their usage habits, what drives them to join the community and participate, and what benefits have been gained from such participation. For the participants in the leadership team, questions involving intentions behind server setup, hierarchy, roles, rules, events, and reward system, were explored to better understand the server's configuration that accommodate different motivations. The interviews functioned as the primary source of data that work in tandem with naturalistic observation data, by providing the members' own subjective interpretations of their experience, supported by interactions observed and recorded in the server.

### **Data analysis**

All data sources were entered into ATLAS.ti, a qualitative data analysis software, including interview transcripts and field notes. Thematic data analysis was then performed adapting the 6-step methodological guideline by Braun and Clark (2021). In the initial phase of the analysis, the author

familiarize himself with entirety of the data corpus by reading and re-reading interview transcripts and fieldnotes, highlighting early impressions using observational notes and memos in ATLAS.ti. This is followed by a process of open coding, where the author was opened to any notable patterns that emerged from data source. In this process, the author did not rely on pre-set codes, but developed and modified codes as the data were examined, with a focus on segments of texts that seem to be relevant to the research question. With each new data source added, the same process of analysis was applied, the list of codes were modified in accordance with new data, but also informed by findings from previous data sources. After the open coding process, the categories were revisited with reference from the five basic categories of needs proposed by Katz et al. (1973) as sensitizing concepts, which helped the author understand how Discord affordances are connected to psychological needs based on users' experiences, and form preliminary themes. Being directly related to the research question, the interview data acted as the primary input for themes refinement in this second stage of analysis, after which were cross-examined with observation data. This process repeated until the author had reached a point of saturation, when continued examination of the data no longer revealed additional themes. Next, the themes entered a refinement process in which the author developed more concise, relevant, and representative themes. Finally, the themes were reviewed in conjunction with the data in order to identify any thematic overlapping, subthemes, logical flaws, adequate supporting data, and omittance of other themes within the data. The resulting four themes were set in answering what uses and gratifications the Discord server fulfil for its members, and how this is achieved with Discord affordances. For each theme, connections to psychological needs and the affordances of Discord were drawn to illuminate how the ChillZone server sustains communal participation, which is the primary goal of this research.

#### **4. Results**

A thematic analysis of interview and naturalistic observation data revealed four themes embodying primary participation motivations from members of the ChillZone Discord server. The four themes that emerged from the coding process are: social contact, relationship, entertainment, and community values. The following section explores each theme in greater detail, as well as connects them to various psychological needs discussed in the theoretical framework. For each theme, Discord's affordances and their role in enabling the fulfilment of these motivations will also be addressed. Finally, some consideration will also be paid to the interconnectedness of these four themes, and how they work in tandem with each other to facilitate member engagement.

##### **Social contact**

One of the most cited motivations of participation in the ChillZone server, supported by both interview data and naturalistic observations, is to engage in activities that allow social contact with others. The analysis revealed that almost all members of the server, including those observed and those interviewed, seek social contact via interactions with others on the server. It is important to note that the ChillZone server features more than just activities meant to facilitate social contact, and that there are many ways of participating without ever communicating with another member, often made possible by "Discord bots". However, the recurring theme is that people engage in the server for its social aspects, or features that allow social interactions. From analysing the interview data and naturalistic observations, it seems that social contact is a gratification both sought and obtained by members of the server. These interactions come in many forms, but most significantly the casual conversations in voice channels and texting in the public text channels. Social contact as a primary gratification sought is made more apparent when the author examined the initial motivation to join the server of interviewees, their experience, as well as naturalistic observation of actual interactions taking place in the server.

As discussed previously, social contact is a major component in satisfying social integrative needs as suggested by Katz et al. (1973). Social interaction can be inherently enjoyable and rewarding, which makes it an intrinsic motivation to human beings in general (Pfeiffer et al., 2014; Ryan & Deci, 2000). A decrease in social contact, such as in the context of Covid-19 pandemic where social distancing is enacted, however, can lead to undesirable consequences on mental and physical health (Canale et al., 2022; Ristau, 2011). Therefore, the need for social interaction has increased during the Covid-19 lockdown, leading to a surge in social media use and online activity within the last two years (Beech, 2020; Canale et al., 2021; Stuart et al., 2021). In accordance with this trend, the majority of the respondents mentioned social contact as an important driver of participation, especially as the result of

lack of social interaction in real life. User “MaxMinutiae”, a 38-year-old male staff member, shared that the ChillZone server, with its primary attractive point being socialization itself, had seen a “substantial boost” in user count over the course of the pandemic. A 21-year-old female member of the staff, user “Rosee”, when asked whether the pandemic had affected the server in any way, confirmed a positive growth spurt, and gave a more in-depth explanation of how this occurred:

When the pandemic hit, people had no source of meeting other people or just socializing in general. I feel like the server grew so much compared to the server state before the pandemic hit. I feel like it has a huge impact because people had to look for services to socialize in, you know, and they found ChillZone.

The rise in popularity of the server matched up with the general trend towards computer-mediated communication as society enters a phase of limited face-to-face interaction (Beech, 2020). User “Nadia”, a 25-year-old female participant from the United States who joined the server around April 2020, when the lockdown was in effect where she lived, shared that social contact was one of the main reasons she joined ChillZone:

I would say, you know, two years ago during COVID it was probably communication and just socializing, you know, when you're trapped in doors, it's the only real way to keep yourself from going insane with that, with a lack of communication.

When prompted to elaborate further on her initial motivation to join the Discord server, she expressed her ‘excessive’ need to communicate with others in a joking way: “I talk a lot. I'm a complete narcissist who, like, starts up casual conversation at the supermarket.” Therefore, a case can be made that the pandemic is an especially significant instigator of membership in the ChillZone community to people with higher needs for social contact.

Other users also mentioned their lack of social contact in real life, although this may have less to do with the effect of the Covid-19 lockdown. To respondent “EpicSquare”, a 21-year-old male member from Canada, using the server’s voice channels is a way for him to compensate for the lack of social interaction he has in real life. This is not the result of the pandemic, as “EpicSquare” expressed a personal disinterest in social opportunities in their own environment:

I'm not in like college university. I don't go to places where a bunch of people, I don't know, gather, I don't go to bars and stuff like that. I don't really like the gatherings of where I'm from locally. It's just not the environments I want to be in.”.

The same can be said for another male user from South Africa, “Smegginton” (19 years old). As he put it, “It's my form of communication with other people because see, I don't go out at all in real life. Discord is



my way to communicate with people without being like with people IRL.” Inadequate social contact can also be the result of a member’s own circumstance, such as the cases of user “MaxMinutiae” who do not receive a lot of social interaction from work:

Cause I work from home. And my job, I don't have to talk to a lot of people on there. And that was one of the reasons that I started hanging out on Discord. Because when I was told I had to work from home, there were months that went by where I wasn't really able to talk to anyone.

For 22-year-old female member “IckyWizza”, the issue lies in her personal life, which she felt like was missing social interaction outside of her close relationships:

My in real life situation, I don't have that social kind of interaction with other people that I know in real life, other than my partner and my family. So I don't know if you know, the Maslow's hierarchy of needs, but it definitely is something that you are required. So this, I definitely would say it's kind of a necessity at the moment.

Therefore, it can be argued that a combination of personal circumstances and pandemic related reasons lack of communication led to an increased need for social contact, which is a commonly seen gratification sought by ChillZone members.

It is interesting to note that by this time, the server was already relatively populated, which increased the chance of social contact and the likelihood of finding the “right” people to talk to. To this end, a five out of seven respondents indicated a preference towards servers with high member counts. User “Rosee”, who is a member of the staff from North Africa shared that she “joined a lot of other different, big servers, like socializing servers and such. And ChillZone was amongst them.” To many respondents, the larger the number of users who occupy a server sets up expectation of higher activity, and higher chance of one coming into contact with users whom he perceives as socially engaging, which could result in more diverse and meaningful social interactions. This point is further substantiated by “Epic Square”, who stated that a merit of joining a big server is the number of “interesting people” one can run into. A populated server such as ChillZone, hence, attracts new members because high member count acts as an indication of greater amount and quality of social contact. A link between the social gratification sought by users and Discord’s affordance can be drawn here. According to “MaxMinutiae”, the platform traditionally allows up to 250.000 members to occupy a server, server owners whose servers are approaching this limit can submit a Server Member Cap Increase request to Discord, which was successfully applied for by the owner of ChillZone. Therefore, it is safe to assume that there is no universal hard limit to the maximum number of members in a Discord server, allowing ChillZone to accommodate a large userbase. This also makes highly populated servers like ChillZone stand out even

more due to consistently high rankings on public server lists such as “disboard.org” and “top.gg”, which gave them more exposure to non-members who would often frequent these websites to search for communities to join, a point brought up by staff member “Rosee”.

Not only a prominent gratification sought, social contact with other people is also a gratification obtained by ChillZone members. A closer examination members’ experiences, based on both observational and interview data, highlighted the many ways social contact is obtained, one of which is engaging in conversations with other members in the three public text channels, labelled General 1, General 2, and General 3, as well as the various voice channels (Figure 2, Figure 3). Based on observation data, these conversations are not necessarily among acquaintances or are consistently about any specific topic. Members’ interests or hobbies, world new or significant events, public figures, members’ opinions on things, daily happenings in members’ life and other random casual banter without a definite topic are all possible discussion matters. For example, discussions could be about significant news or events in the world and members’ opinions on them, such as the recent firearm-related crimes happening in the United States, or they could be about members’ interests such as anime and video games (Fieldnote, May 25, 2022). Discussions can persist for an extended period of time, often times up to multiple hours per day in a channel. This is due to the constant change of actors in the conversation, as members leave the discussion, others would join in, allowing for the flow of the conversation to perpetuate. Although focus of the conversations can also be changed just as spontaneously as they are brought up as one topic is led to the next, there are constant on-going conversations in a public channel. This constant stream of social interactions, combined with the lack of a consistent topic, suggest that many members come to these public channels to primarily fulfil their social contact needs instead of specific cognitive needs such as information or knowledge. Thus, the community brings value in the venues of social interactions that it provides to those participating.

**Figure 2.**

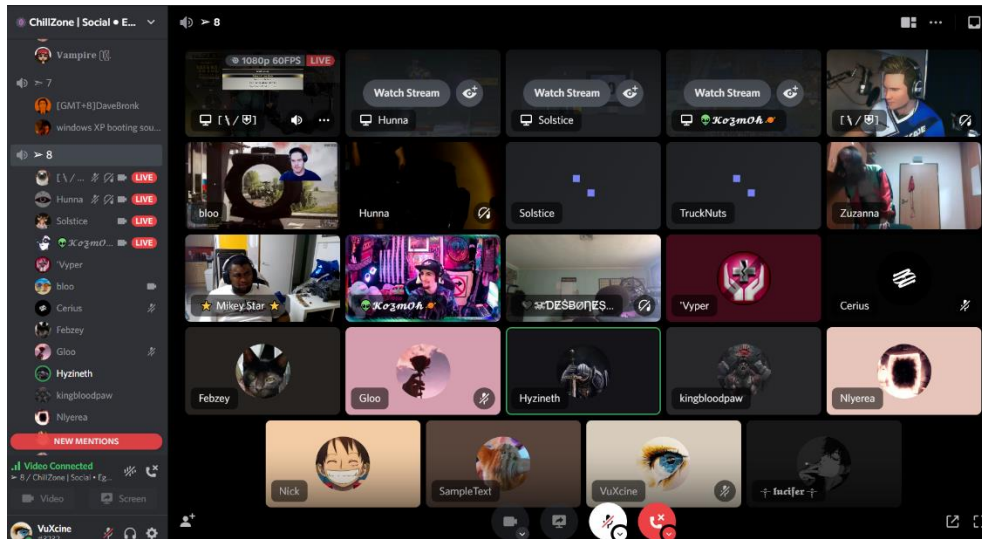
*Interactions in “General 1” (May 25, 2022)*



Social interactions typically occurs either via the voice channels or text chats, although the former is by far the more popular option of the two among interviewees. In particular, six out of seven interview participants identified voice chat as their go-to activity when it comes to casual social interaction with other members of ChillZone. When asked about her typical session on the server, respondent “Nadia” (15-year-old female member) said she basically “just used the VC channels”, or voice channels, to “talk to people”. She then proceeded to state that if the voice channels did not exist in ChillZone, she would not participate in the server at all. The real-time voice-based communication that these channels allow seems to represent a more desirable form of social contact than text-based channels from the perspective of most of the participants. User “EpicSquare”, who exclusively engages in voice channels, shared that he regularly enjoyed the casual conversations that he has with people in the server’s voice channels, and is one of the main reasons behind his participation. He explains his preference of voice chat over texting: “Being in text chat, it's just, it's words. I don't hear anybody's voice.” This response indicates that participants look for real-time social contact via Discord voice channels because they provide a higher sense of social presence during interaction, or the degree to which members are perceived as “real”, something that text channels seems to be lacking in.

**Figure 3.**

*Public voice channel 8 and concurrent users (May 24, 2022)*



However, this is not to say that text-based communication does not provide some level of social contact to members of ChillZone. Some respondents do find use in both voice channels and text channels and switch up in between the two from time to time, while a few others even stay mainly in text channels. When asked about what channel on the server that had seen the heaviest use from her, user “IckyWizza” responded:

Currently, I would say mainly voice channel, but that has fluctuated when I first joined, I was mainly in chat. I was big, heavy on being in chat that was 2019. 2020, I didn't really use ChillZone. And then 2021, I was VC main. Then towards the end of 2021, I was back in chat. And now 2022, I'm back in kind of doing both equally last week. I think I was top 10 ranked on the leader board for text and voice chat.

“IckyWizza” also added that it was ‘highly unusual’ of her to alternate between the two types of channels like that, yet she found enjoyment from it and would continue to do so.

On the one hand, a voice channel allows up to 25 members to participate simultaneously through a ‘opt in - opt out’ mechanism, which lets users choose to tune in and out of the conversation at any time. It also lets members know the concurrent occupants of said voice channel by displaying the occupants’ avatars under it in the channel list (Fieldnote, May 24, 2022). On the other hand, text channels, also labeled “Chats” channels in the server, are opened to all of the members to view and post content within, without the need to opt in. Because of this, interactions in text channels may feel more public, as members perceive them as talking to the server as a whole and not to any specific group of

people. Some members are found to prefer this form of less personal, less committed interaction over the real-time participation in the voice channels. User “Cinder”, who primarily used text channels, shared that text channels are easier for him to just to “see what people are doing” and “barge into the conversation”. Unlike voice-based interactions, textual content is saved permanently on the server to be viewed at any time by anyone, meaning members do not have to actively follow the conversation in real time in order to understand the context if they wish to contribute to the discussion later on. Thus, it could be argued that voice channels and text channels represent affordances that offer distinct values to members, prompting users to develop preferences according to the type of social interaction they need. Regardless of the sense of social presence provided by the more personal real-time interaction in the voice channels, or the public chat channels that requires less active commitment to follow and interject at any time because of the nature of its content form and openness, members consider participation in ChillZone as an effective way to fulfil their intrinsic need for social contact, and in many cases as even more desirable over real-life interactions.

It is important to note that the term ‘VC main’ which “IckyWizza” used to talk about people who participate in voice channels primarily, however, implied a norm or tendency of members committing to a certain type of channel on the server, such as voice channel or text channel. This trend is supported by observational data, which seem to suggest at the existence of two subgroups in the server, “VC main” and “Chat main”. It had been observed that members tend to interact primarily in one type of channel, most commonly either voice channels or text channels, a trend that was seen widely across the server, from veteran members to newcomers. This is supported by the response of “Rosee” about the matter: “I would say they formed a bond kinda the most, those people who text regularly and most people who have voice chat regularly most of them definitely formed like some sort of bond that makes the community stronger.” “IckyWiza”, who said she had been deterred from using public text chats in the past because she found it hard to have conversations with when “the things that they find important aren’t the things that I find important”. Therefore, it can be argued that voice channels and text channels generally attract two separate types of users, whose interests and needs are different from one another, forming somewhat separated subcommunities dedicated to these two distinct affordances, a finding consistent with that of Anderson (2019).

## **Relationship**

As previously discussed, social contact is one of the main gratifications sought, and often obtained, by members of the ChillZone server. However, as much as social contact with people in general sufficiently stands on its own as an intrinsic motivation that drives participation at least initially,

more dedicated members have also indicated that socializing with those they are familiar with is an imperative value of social interaction. In fact, the majority of the more active respondents talked at length about personal relationships on the server, especially with those they consider like-minded to them. User “EpicSquare” shared that although he had definitely met people in the server that were not like-minded with him, they ultimately did not get along. For this reason, although he did not mind interacting with those with drastically different mindsets, in was in his experience that “a lot of people who don't have the same mindset tend not to stay around that often.” Similarly, user “IckyWizza” found herself actively surrounding herself with like-minded people on the server, citing her frequent use of voice channels to talk to her friends. User “Smegginton” also found that he could talk to others for an extended amount of time to people who he perceived as having the same interests as him: “When I find people that like the games, I just flip out and go like, Ooh. And I talk to them, talk to them for hours about the game.” Thus, being like-minded plays a role in the development of friendship with other members on the server. This is consistent with the findings of Hsu et al. (2012), which stated that “Social experience in an online community facilitates interpersonal networking for those with similar interests.” (p. 83)

Based on interview data, it was found that members are inherently motivated to build friendships on the server, making it a gratification sought. An analysis of the interview response suggests that although social contact played a huge role in participation at the beginning, members who successfully made friends considered hanging out with people they know a primary reason that keeps them coming back to the server. User “Rosee”, when talking about her experience with the server in general, stated: “It was kind of a good environment sorta to talk to people and stuff. So that drew me in and I started to make friends, started to voice chat a lot with people. And eventually I got to know the staff and the moderators in there and admins. And then I was like, this is the place for me. I want to experience this.” “Rosee” was far from the only respondent that successfully built and maintained intimate personal relationships on the server. User “IckyWizza” said about her experience on the server:

At this point I've just made like a friend group, and we normally just hang out every day in voice channel. I would say that would be up to 10 of us that are like the regular people that like hang out with each other.

She expressed her appreciation for the friends she had made on the server, as talking to her friends gave her genuine enjoyment, especially when she had had such a limited social circle in past. In the case of user “Smegginton”, he recounted his experience as having “lots of ups and downs” at first, but chose to stay in the server and participate because “the ups are pretty good and I've got some friends on it.” In

fact, the pattern of interacting with one's social circle as a driver of participation seems to be the norm both in regular users and staff members. Staff member "MaxMinutiae", while sharing his own experience, revealed that he had also developed personal connections with people that he would have otherwise not met in the course of his regular day-to-day life:

I mean, one guy that I talked to every day, that's about my age lives in, in near Amsterdam. We got another guy that lives in the UK that I consider him a close friend, another guy that lives in on the east coast of the United States. These are all people that I love talking to on a daily basis that if it wasn't for Discord, I never would have met.

Additionally, "IckyWizza" mentioned that she was friend with the majority of the staff, including respondent "MaxMinutiae". User "MaxMinutiae", upon being asked whether staff members interact with regular users, seemed to also confirm it on the basis of social relations:

Oh yeah. All the time. Every day. I mean, I'm interacting with other people that are not, you know, staff. We have regulars in chat. We have people that are friends. We have staff that we know. We know users.

Friendship, thus, can be argued to satisfy members' intrinsic need for relatedness and connection with others (Katz et al., 1973; Ryan & Deci, 2000). This is consistent with the work of Ridings and Gefen (2004), who found that more commitment to online communities can be seen from members who have developed quality relationships in said communities.

Relationship seems to play a significant role to participation on a social server like ChillZone, as all five interviewees who have made friends on the server confirmed that the majority of their interactions nowadays are with people they already know. This includes "IckyWizza", "EpicSquare", "Smegginton", "MaxMinutiae", "Rosee", and at one point, "Nadia" as well. Thus, it can be reasonably inferred from participants' responses that strengthening one's social circle plays an important role in sustaining members' participation. This is the most apparent in the case of user "IckyWizza", who has successfully built and maintained close friendship on the server, some lasting for almost 4 years at the time of interview. When asked about the importance of these relationships to her, "IckyWizza" considered the people whom she had befriended with on the server as valuable as or even more valuable than real life friends. Thus, she intended to keep contact with them, and was even planning to meet them in person at some point in the future: "I've watched some of their children grow up, so it's definitely like definitely just friendships that I think I will have for a long time." These findings seem to support the assertions made by Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013) that computer-mediated

communication can help build and sustain closeness in friendship, to the point of being identical to face-to-face friendship in terms of intimacy if enough time is given.

The question remains, however, as to what specific needs are gratified by these personal relationships. To this end, Amichai-Hamburger et al. (2013) proposed two important values of friendship, companionship and social support, both of which respondents seem to have sought and obtained from the relationships they developed. This works both ways, however, as these two components are also crucial in strengthening the quality of the relationship, which in turns enhances these values even more (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). Companionship can be achieved when people spend good times together, either by talking, engaging in other activities with one another, or just feeling the presence of each other. Participant “IckyWizza” described her usual topic of conversation with her friends as “just what we do in our everyday lives”, citing her friends’ interest in aquatic life or Marvel movies as prominent examples. Through observation, the author also detected other topics that relate to members’ interests, such as videogames, music, movies, TV shows, anime, and technology. Conversations can also be about world events, such as the Johnny Depp and Amber Heard defamation trial, or the Russian-Ukrainian conflict, which were hot concurrent topics at the time of the interview (Fieldnotes, May 23, 2022). Members are also usually observed to engage in leisure activities together, such as playing videogames or listening to music. Although there is no specific or consistent pattern among the type of activities, what is consistent is they are done with or in the presence of their friends, which can greatly enhance the enjoyment of said activity (Crandall, 1979). Supporting this point, user “IckyWizza” shared that she valued her friends’ presence when they interact on the server, no matter what that specific interaction involved: “ we talk to each other every day and even if there isn't anything to talk about, it's just, you know, sitting there while we're either playing different games or whether people are working and they're just passively on Discord or, you know, just doing other stuff and sitting there for each other's company.”

Participants also reported giving and receiving social support on the basis of friendship. Social support can come in many forms, including emotional support, practical advice, helpful information, or in some cases even tangible, materialistic assistance (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Lampe et al., 2010; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). Some respondents, such as “EpicSquare” and “IckyWizza”, admitted having received social support from their friends, albeit in different ways. In the case of “EpicSquare”, he recalled a particular occasion where a conflict between him and another member that he was particularly close with resulted in unwanted tension he felt in their presence: “Both people want to hang out in the same place, but at least one party doesn't want to, and it becomes a little hectic that



way.” A one-on-one talk with a staff member whom he also knew personally, however, had somewhat alleviated this tension. When asked about how this member had helped him specifically, he added: “Just advice and also making sure that as a staff member, trying to remove conflict from the server, if someone tries to escalate things, this person, the staff member would intervene and make sure it does not escalate.” The exchange with this member, whom he approached “as a friend first, staff member second”, had given him a sense of security and peace of mind, greatly increasing his overall comfortability during his participation in the server.

On the more instrumental side of social support, user “IckyWizza” is also an exemplary case of a member who benefits greatly from her social group on the server. She recounted multiple instances in which she had received help from her friends, such as getting her computer fixed for free, and from whom she had learned many useful things in life: “I have a friend who's a voice mod. He's like fixed my computer multiple times for free. He's taught me a lot of things. And helping me with doing that.” Nevertheless, this social support is by no means one-directional. For “IckyWizza” specifically, she actually identified herself as “more on the giving end than the receiving end”. The 22-year-old went on to elaborate that although she would definitely come and speak to her friends should she had any issues, she felt she did not need to because she was “pretty good in life at the moment”. Thus, she had been focusing providing social support to her friends, by lending an ear to listen to their personal issues and offering words of sympathy and emotional support, and giving advice as often asked of her. She proceeded to share more details about a note-worthy example of this:

Recently, this person, he lives with his mom, who's almost 60. I believe he's 24. And he's been complaining about how she lives her life or some things that she participates in that he doesn't agree with. (...) just talking to me about the past issues in his family. Just like really trauma dumping on me. It's all good. I'm the figurative psychologist of the group.

The case of user “IckyWizza” is only one of many examples of social support exchange, as other respondents have also reported having given and received advice and support among their friends, although this is less frequent, as some users such as “EpicSquare” and “Smegginton” tend to steer away from conversations of personal nature and focus on the casual side of interactions. From naturalistic observation, members, especially those who seem to be familiar with one another, seem to frequently confide in each other about personal issues, and in most cases receive support without explicitly asking for it. Thus, these instances are clear signs of expectation of reciprocity as the result of connection between members, which is a fundamental mechanism that enables the exchange of social support in an online community (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013; Chen et al., 2013; Lampe et al., 2010; Ridings &

Gefen, 2004). As long as these expectations continue to be fulfilled with constant reciprocal acts, trust and affective attachment are reinforced, resulting in a stronger friendship (Chen et al., 2013; Lampe et al., 2010). Reflected in a statement by “IckyWizza”: “I definitely will find time to talk to these people, cause you know, I've helped them in times and they've helped me.”, this cycle of giving and taking process, is a facilitator of the relationship fostering process making it a crucial component of participation on the server.

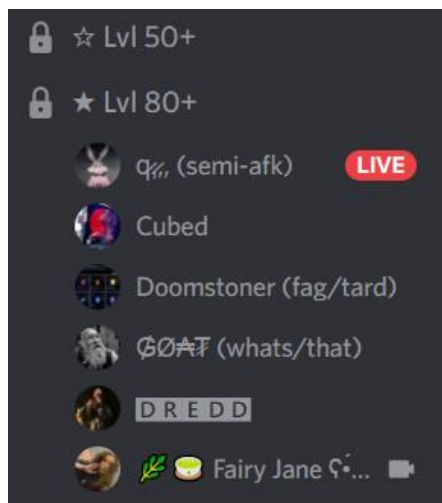
While many respondents have developed and maintained close relationships on the server, others have not expanded their social circle in any significant way. An example is respondent “Cinder”, who when asked about his social relation status on the server, denied having made any acquaintance: “I talked to whoever and I don't really have any specific people. I don't know anyone's name. I don't know anyone.” There are also users who have had most of their previous friends leaving the server, and as of the time of interview no longer truly knew anyone on a personal level on ChillZone, such as the case of Nadia. She also confirmed that this is the reason why her participation in the ChillZone had become infrequent to the point of becoming negligible, as she only dropped by once every few months to say hi to some people and stay for a few conversations should they capture her interests before becoming inactive again. To both “Cinder” and “Nadia”, relationship is not a gratification that is obtained on the server in any significant capacity. However, on the contrary to the drastically reduced participation by user “Nadia”, this had not hindered “Cinder” to participate in the server, as he had reportedly been active for an average of 30 minutes daily on the ChillZone server for almost a year, and intended to continue doing so in the foreseeable future.

Although seemingly paradoxical at first glance that a user maintains his participation even when his needs are not gratified, a closer examination of member's usage of affordances revealed an interesting pattern that might potentially explain this discrepancy. As mentioned prior, user “Cinder” was the only interviewee that identified as a ‘Chat main’, meaning he primarily engaged in text-based interaction on the server. The content of text channels is opened to the entire server, making it easily viewed and interjected, but also require less commitment to participate. Voice channels, on the other hand, which only allow up to 25 concurrent members each, require more commitment to follow and meaningfully contribute. A case can already be made here that friendship more easily flourishes among voice channel users, because of the unique technical affordances of the voice channels that allow interactions more resemble a face-to-face conversation among a small group of people in real life. In particular, the drop in and out feature allows a sense of social virtual space, while VoIP-mediated communication provides higher awareness of each other's social presence (Ayana et al., 2020; Swan &

Shih, 2005). Nevertheless, a feature arguably even more important in fostering friendship on the server is the segmentation of voice channels, access to which is dictated by a member's 'level'. Members can increase their levels by simply being active on the server over time, an affordance enabled only by the 'ChillZone bot', which constantly tracks members' active duration. As such, some voice channels are made to only be accessible to higher-level users, who are often referred to as 'regulars' by interview respondents that have been active in the server for a substantial amount of time, while no equivalent mechanism is in place for text chats.

**Figure 4.**

*Private channels for members over level 50 and level 80 (June 2, 2022)*



Because of this, a smaller, more active portion of users frequent the high-level voice channels and are thus more prone to constant social exposure with one another, naturally forming a connection between them. This includes user "IckyWizza", "EpicSquare", "MaxMinutiae", "Rosee" and "Smegginton". This point is further substantiated by user "IckyWizza", who emphasized the role of high-level voice channels in relationship building:

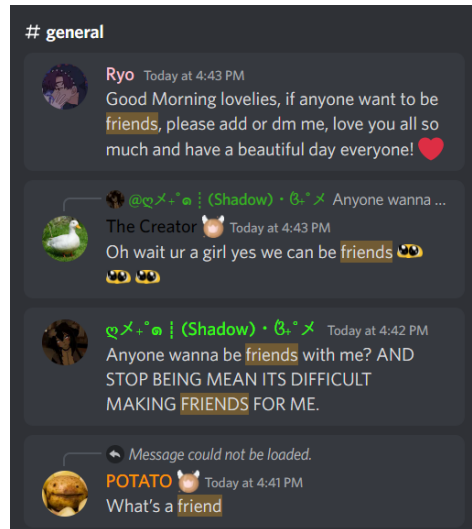
The channels that are specifically for regular users and users that are above level 80 plus in voice chat, I feel like that's important because once you get to that stage, everyone that's 80 plus just kind of knows each other. And that's the OGs, the people who've been around for a while to people you've built friendships with and you like, you've known for a long time.

Text channels, hence, are a less popular affordance when it comes to developing and fostering meaningful relationships because of their less personal nature. Nevertheless, it should be acknowledged that members who are primarily in text chats were also observed to show signs of need for friendship, although their success in obtaining this gratification is harder to gauge via observation data (Figure 5).

Some members interacting via text could be observed to be familiar with each other, especially those that are regulars to the channel, but the nature and quality of their relationship as well as their preference to interact with one another over strangers were not apparent in text forms.

**Figure 5.**

*Text chat users seeking friendship on the server (May 25, 2022)*



However, the possibility of members gaining genuine connection over text chats should not be ruled out, as this has found to be completely feasible, despite potentially taking over a longer period of time (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). Seemingly aware and accepting of this trade-off, user “Cider” intended to take a more long-term approach to relationship building, by “talking to them for a few years and, and then see if they want to meet up”. Thus, meeting people with the same interests, befriending them, and eventually meeting them in real life, was still undeniably a significant gratification sought by “Cider”, albeit with a longer timeframe. It also recontextualizes what obtained gratifications members perceived to sufficiently justify future participation in the absence of another. This is made more apparent in his following response, which implied that social contact with other members in text chat is also an adequate motivation of participation for “Cider”:

I normally just talk to people, barge into the conversation. Sometimes I joke around with them, sometimes I try to be their friends. Other times, I just go in ‘General 1’ text, see how, what people are doing and what's the commotion about, and I'm okay. Then I just go about my day.

In the case of user “Nadia”, however, her responses revealed that friendship was no longer a gratification she obtained or sought via Discord due to her friends’ inactivity on the platform, and her finding other ways to keep in contact with them. This led to her eventually phasing out her participation on ChillZone, and even her usage of Discord as a platform in general, suggesting that relationship was an

important factor in keeping her engaged. This illustrates the distinction between gratifications sought and gratifications obtained, and how this affects participation, as it has been found that motivations to participate in an online community can evolve over time based on benefits obtained, a point echoed by Lampe et al. (2010). In other words, one can come to the server looking for social contact, and stay for the sense of belonging and attachment to its people, such as the cases of “IckyWizza”, “Smegginton”, and “EpicSquare”. Conversely, users such as “Nadia”, who obtain less relationship values from the server, may cut down their level of participation should they perceive that the additional benefits gained are insufficient. The need to expand and sustain one’s social circle, therefore, can justify long-term participation, so long as members expect to be gratified via continued participation.

### **Entertainment**

Many members see participation in the ChillZone server as a source of entertainment or recreation. In other words, they look for experiences that evoke the feeling of excitement, pleasure or relaxation via interacting on the server. Interestingly, “having fun” is the only aspect of participation that all interview respondents universally reported having sought and received, albeit in different forms. Entertainment is also a value that can be obtained without engaging with other members on the server, but is nevertheless often enhanced by it. As found by Crandall (1979), leisure activities can have social and non-social components, with the former focusing on the people that participate while the latter emphasizing the enjoyment of the activity itself. A crucial component of entertainment is, therefore, its affective, and to some degree, social nature, which are two of the most cited gratifications of media use by Katz et al. (1973), a finding consistent with the procured data. A synthesis of observation and interview data revealed the various forms of leisure activities on ChillZone, such as joining or just following casual conversations, consuming entertaining media content shared by other members, and engaging in entertainment-focused activities on the server.

The majority of the interview respondents seem to engage in leisure activities both for social and non-social reasons, although this varies between members. On the more social end of the spectrum, one of the most common sources of pleasure on ChillZone originates from the humour that naturally occurs in casual conversations between members. These conversations typically happen in a laidback and relaxed manner, in which members would often employ humor for comedic effect. Words like “have fun”, “laugh” and “joke” are used by user “MaxMinutiae” to describe such interactions, which can range from sharing funny experiences and making jokes to sharing Internet memes. User “Cinder” also acknowledged his tendency to “joke around” in public text chats, which he found enjoyment in doing on the server. Similarly, user “EpicSquare” also found great enjoyment in conversations characterised with

humour, often referring to them as “random garbage to make jokes”, indicating that they are not usually taken too seriously by members. Interestingly, because of this laidback environment, the community has a certain level of leniency towards behaviors that would be traditionally considered disruptive or undesirable, such as the use of expletives and “trolling”, which are behaviors that bait or provoke other members to get some sort of reaction out of them for one’s own amusement (Buckels et al., 2014). For example, user “Nadia” admitted having engaged in some form of light-hearted “trolling” on the server, which involved seeing how members respond to her presumably ‘unorthodox’ religion for people of her ethnicity:

It's really funny to me as a white, American Muslim to come into the server to get some reactions. There's a bit of a, I guess, trolling, as you could say, like baiting, you know what I mean? When people come in and are like White American Muslim, what?

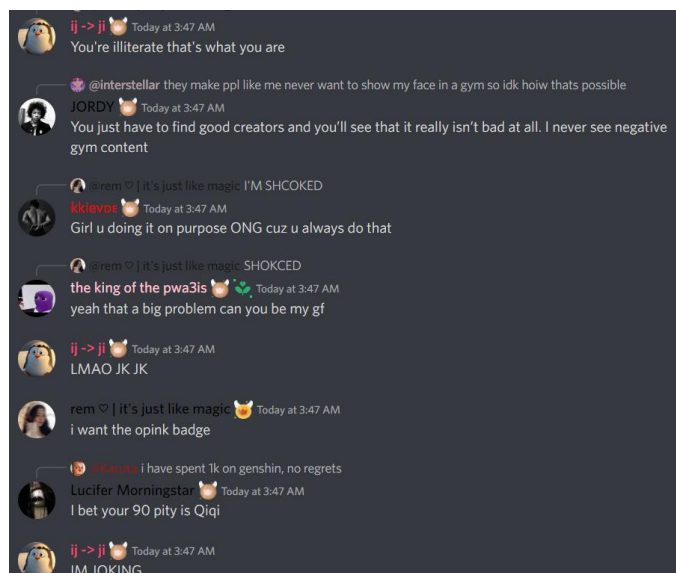
In addition, she also did this by typing a certain random phrase in the public chat channel and watch people’s confused reactions:

The only thing I've ever typed in the text channels, as far as I know is every like three months, I would just type in one word. And I don't know why, just as like a meme for myself, I just typed in ‘Obama.JPG’. If you look on the server, I probably said Obama dot JPEG, like 50, 40 times or so.

Thus, respondents' described experiences on the server reveal a pattern of playful exchanges aimed at eliciting laughter. Naturalistic observation data backs this up, indicating that a huge share of social interactions on the server feature some type of humor. Members have been observed recounting hilarious anecdotes or experiences, making jokes, sharing funny content, and occasionally engaging in "trolling," though this activity is less common because it is easy to cause others discomfort, ending in a server ban (Figure 6).

**Figure 6.**

*Text chat users joking with one another (May 29, 2022)*



Furthermore, there are channels dedicated just to the sharing of media content intended to evoke pleasurable affective responses, such as the 'memes' channel, which receives vast amounts of user-generated content that can be passively consumed each day.

**Figure 7.**

*Funny images posted on the “memes” channel (May 29, 2022)*



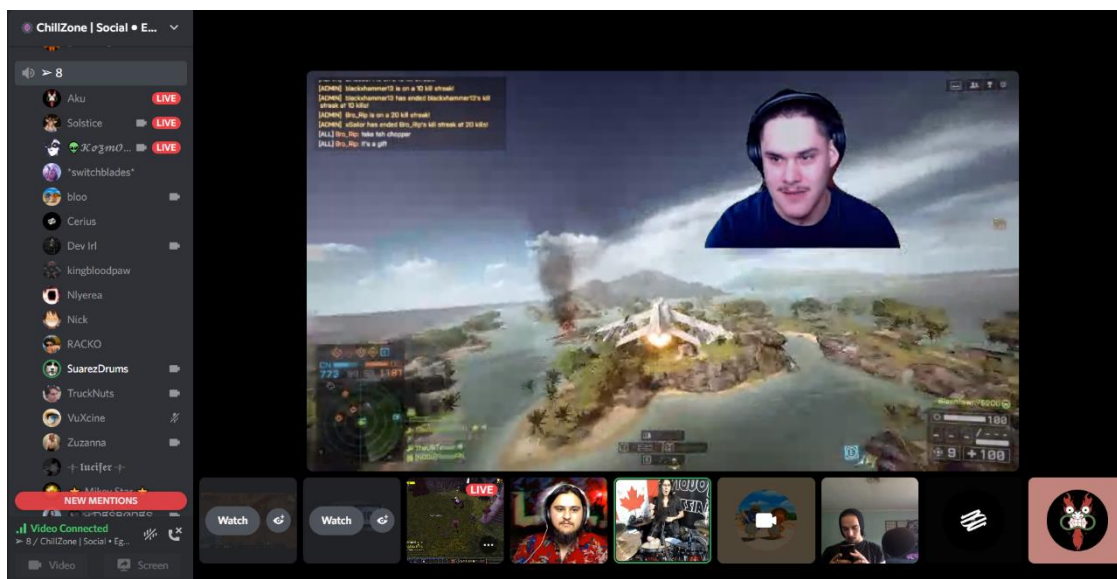
Because of this, members can benefit from humor not only by actively participating in these exchanges, but also by passively following them, as Whiting and Williams (2013) have discovered. Humour and laughter, thus, can be seen as an amusement stimulus that is universally appealing on the server because of the affective needs it satisfies, the experience of which is greatly enhanced by the presence of others (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). Therefore, humour on the server can be argued to gratify both affective and social needs for members.

Members of ChillZone also participate in various leisure activities that, while not generally requiring the presence of others, are typically done with other members to enhance the enjoyment of said activity. According to staff member “MaxMinutiae”, these activities include playing videogames, watching movies or other video content, or listening to music together. From observation, these activities mostly make use of the affordances provided by the voice channels in the server. Apart from

allowing communication between teams of players while in a videogame, the “Go Live” function enables the live broadcasting of video feeds to be viewed by members in the channel, forming what is often referred to as a “watch party” by “MaxMinutiae”. “Watch parties” enable the mutual consumption of digital content in real time, as well as live discussion and commentary from everyone in the same channel. From observation, this was not only a common occurrence on the server, but there can and often are multiple “watch parties” in one voice channel, giving users the choice to tune in to any content that captures their interests. This newly added affordance also enabled players, in addition to communicating with others in-game, to broadcast their gameplay to members in the voice channel to watch while they play, a commonly observed practice on the server referred to as “livestreaming”. For example, a member broadcasted himself playing the game Battlefield 4 in a voice channel for others to watch (fieldnote, May 22, 2022). Although other forms of media content, such as music or movies, are occasionally streamed on the ChillZone server, videogames are by far the most prevalent. According to user “IckyWizza”, this could be explained by Discord’s popularity among the gaming community due to the focus of its original design: “Well, Discord as a whole was just made as like a gaming platform, so I do believe that the main derivative would be around gaming.” To date, 70% of the platform’s servers are still gaming-related, ChillZone being one of them (Pilipović, 2022).

**Figure 8.**

*Gameplay being streamed to public voice channel 8 on ChillZone (May 22, 2022)*



Livestreaming gameplay as a form of content is commonly seen on global entertainment providers such as YouTube and Twitch.tv, with some of the most popular content creators reaching thousands of concurrent viewers each day (Gandolfi, 2016). While there are certain limitations in some



respects such as the maximum number of members in a voice channel, what sets Discord apart is its ability to host broadcasts while maintaining synchronous voice-based communication between users in a channel, which ultimately allows for a more exclusive and involved experience. This experience resembles “a small group of friends enjoying their time watching a movie together”, instead of going to a “public showing of said movie” (“MaxMinutiae”). Therefore, voice channels represent a combination of affordances that enables a uniquely intimate and social entertainment experience only found on Discord.

Another pattern seen from observation of the text channels is the common use of bots for entertainment purposes. According to staff member “MaxMinutiae”, the bots are employed as a means of gamifying the server, providing members with interactive activities similar minigames. These games can be activated by typing in text chat certain commands, some of which do not require the presence of others to play. An example of this is the “Pokecord” bot which adds a text-based game in which players have to catch wild Pokémons randomly generated. The game has its own gameplay loop, which involves guessing the Pokémons’ names in order to capture them (Figure 9). Most members who engaged in them would often check out the channel once in a while, wait for a Pokémon they like, and capture them. This cycle repeats until the member gets bored and leaves the channel (fieldnote, May 23, 2022).

**Figure 9.**

*A member engaging with the “Pokecord” bot (May 23, 2022)*



The most popular bot-enabled minigames, however, are those that can be played with others. This was most clear observed with the “EPIC RPG” bot, which adds a text-based role-playing game to the channel. This game presents players with even more gameplay choices, many of which involve other players such as the ability to initiate duels and gift items (fieldnote, May 23, 2022).

**Figure 10.**

*Two members engaging with the “EPIC RPG” bot (May 23, 2022)*



Although the gamification features of ChillZone were not mentioned in a significant way by interview respondents, it was observed that these features constantly generate engagement from members of ChillZone. In fact, examining the message history of some of the members who actively engage in these minigames revealed that this was their exclusive way of participation in the server. This showed that some members see the server, particularly the minigames on the server, as a source of entertainment with social components. In line with this finding, Dohlakia et al. (2004) found that people may join online communities to fulfil their recreational needs, especially by engaging in virtual challenges and exploring alternative identities, which these minigames provide. Once again, the popularity of videogames among Discord users in general may play a role as to why these entertainment elements are so widely used.

## Maintaining community values

The majority of the interviewees expressed their preference for the ChillZone server over other servers because of the friendly and pleasant environment that the server facilitated. This is also consistent with the findings of Anderson (2019), who found that the Harbormen Gaming community on Discord attracts members by its codes and values. Examination of interview data revealed that members' engagement was motivated by an active effort to uphold these community values via various forms of voluntary contributions. For the two staff members, "MaxMinutiae" and "Rosee", contribution comes in more administrative forms. The staff's primary role is to reinforce the rules, which include Discord's Terms of Service as well as server rules that outline prohibited behaviors and the violation penalties, meant to prevent unwanted activities. As "MaxMinutiae" put it:

It's basically just trying to promote a fun place to hang out, you know, we have people that come in all the time that want to cause issues. Like they, for some reason, they get offended by people having either good conversations or people just enjoying their time talking to each other. So they want to come in there and scream into a mic. They want to take over channels. They want to be toxic. They want to troll. And that's basically what all of our rules are there in place to try to make it a fun place for people to spend time.

Offenses detected by staff members who moderate server interactions on a daily basis, as well as those reported by members, are immediately handled with. The consequence of rule violation often involves warning, revoking permissions to share content, muting people, or banning them from the server, according to severity of offence. According to all respondents, this is done to ensure the values of the community are maintained, that being a safe, friendly and fun environment for members to be in. Unpleasant or disruptive behaviors such as trolling, spamming, toxicity, mic abuse, offensive language, and sharing inappropriate content, can cause members discomfort and inhibit participation, negatively affecting the community's objective as a whole (Buckels et al., 2014). Thus, making sure that these behaviors cannot thrive on the server is not only important for online communities in general, but are also especially vital to one dedicated to socialization like ChillZone, of which the primary goal is to be "a fun place to hang out". As "Rosee" explained:

It's mainly the reason why it's attracting more users, because it's a very safe to speak your mind in the server and try to socialize with people without worrying that people would judge you based off like you know, who you are, where you're from (...)

Therefore, fostering a friendly and supportive environment can increase community trust in what is to be expected, leading to lower risk of participation. In other words, in addition to maintaining the core

functioning of the server, the staff plays a critical role in the promotion of community practices that are in accordance with its main objective, further driving community participation.

In some cases, regular members even seek to apply to be part of the staff and help run the server. This shone a light on some of the motivations for members to become staff. As the role of a staff member is just as demanding as it is critical to the server, a higher level of responsibility and dedication to the community is required. User “Cinder”, who is planning to apply for a chat moderator role, shared: “I wanted to be one so that I can help the community. And just in case there are no one to help, I can be there.” User “IckyWizza”, who had wanted to become a member of the staff but decided otherwise because of personal reasons, stated:

I do help out around the server, like I am known for helping people (...) I definitely would say that I would have wanted to become staff (...) I believe I would be very helpful and I'm friends with a lot of the admins, the higher up people who are more voice channel maintained.

As seen in the responses of the interviewees who expressed their wish to be part of the staff team, members who apply for staff positions are not only motivated by the desire to help others, but are also committed to the community as a whole, viewing its success as a priority. User “Cinder” believed that he could be of help to the community, as in his experience the staff seemed to need assistance to run things smoothly. The same can be said for “IckyWizza”. This indicates that the inherent self-fulfilment from helping out in the community is not the only gratification obtained from doing so, but it also improves members’ sense of self-efficacy, which is related to the innate need for Competence (Ryan & Deci, 2000). The need to enhance one’s self-efficacy, self-esteem, status, and social standing is also a personal integrative need, one of the five basic gratification categories of media use posited by Katz et al. (1973).

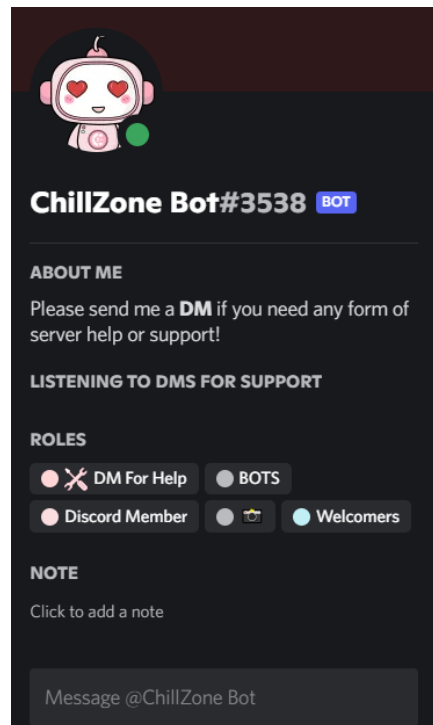
In this regard, the importance of Discord’s technical affordances is once more emphasized. Staff members’ capability to reinforce rules, support members, and facilitate pleasant and positive group environment, is greatly enhanced by the usage of Discord bots, specifically the ‘ChillZone bot’. The API of Discord as a platform allows the external programming of AI-driven accounts that adds new functionality to a server, making it a unique characteristic of the platform’s highly customizable affordances (Discord, 2022). Developed by the owner of the server, the ‘ChillZone bot’ acts as an automation tool that allows the functioning of the staff on ChillZone with greater ease and efficiency than carrying out tasks manually, a point echoed by both staff members, “MaxMinutiae” and “Rosee”. “MaxMinutiae” believed that the ChillZone bot was what set the server apart from other big servers:

I'll let you know the ChillZone bot is unique. There are precious few other big servers that have a self-made bot the way we have one. Everything that is in that bot was built from the ground up by the owner. It's all proprietary.

From the staff's perspective, the bot grants more effective moderation functions, such as the ability for staff members to easily modify permissions, mute, ban, and assign roles to members which dictates their authority over these functions. As different staff roles assume different levels of responsibilities, this allows division of labour among the staff for more effective operating of the server. From the perspective of regular members, the ChillZone bot also functions as a 'one-stop-shop' that allows members to easily find support. Members are encouraged to send private messages the bot should they need to acquire the assistance from the staff (Figure 11).

**Figure 11.**

*The ChillZone Bot Interface*



This typically includes requests for information, image and video sharing permission, technical assistance, reports of problematic behaviors or rule violations in the server, and receiving and process complaints or general feedback. The staff is responsible for responding to these requests, as well as intervening when necessary around the server in the process of moderating. The ChillZone server, in this case, made use of Discord's affordances (API), to ensure that the server rules and practices are reinforced in an organized and timely manner.

While the staff's contribution is an integral component to the operation of the server, regular members can also play a part in strengthening community values by being exemplary members and socializing others into the community's culture. Regular members mostly reinforce community values by exchanging information and advice. User "IckyWizza", who identified herself as a "veteran" member of the community, utilizes her knowledge to provide guidance to new users, most of the time voluntarily:

I would say to people who are new to the server, if I'm in chat, I welcome them to the server, inform them about some stuff. They do come to me to ask questions, like 'how do I get permissions to post pictures? Or how do I verify my face on the server?' And I'm giving that information to them.

On top of server-related matters, respondents also frequently try to be helpful to members in other aspects within their ability. User "IckyWizza" described an instance in which she had helped another member by showing him how to remove a watermark from a PDF file, based on her previous experience. User "Cinder", who works as a certified welder, often shares insights into his profession and related technical information to whomever is interested on the server. User "Nadia", who sometimes goes by the nickname "White American Muslim" in the server, claimed that helping others by sharing her knowledge about religions and culture is a major part of her Discord usage nowadays:

Mostly it's people who will ask me questions about Islam, because they're like, why is that your name? And then from there we start talking about something and it could be a good conversation where they're learning about something, or somebody calls me a 'pedophile' or 'Satan worshiper'.

In addition to interviewees' response, knowledge sharing is also a frequently observed occurrence on the server, especially when the issue at hand lies in the sharers' areas of expertise or familiarity. In a more notable instance during observation, a law student, who is also a member of the server, contributed to the group's discussion in a voice channel about the Johnny Depp - Amber Heard civil trial by offering his perspective on the matter, which others found to be highly insightful and expressed their appreciation for. In another example, Thus, by actively sharing knowledge, members help shape group norms and practices that promote community values, serving its objective of being a friendly, supportive, and fun space to socialize in. Similar to the staff's role of reinforcing the rules, regular members' willingness to support others can boost community trust, establishing group norms that encourage participation by lowering the inherent risk engaging in online environment.

ChillZone members' need to support the community generally does not stem from the expectation of concrete, tangible rewards, but instead the personal satisfaction of helping other

members voluntarily, which indicates that members are intrinsically motivated (Ryan & Deci, 2000). As “IckyWizza” explained:

I love to, you know, just help people out (...) I would say it definitely is very fulfilling because I took down a path of the medical industry and wellbeing in US. And it was the whole point. I started that career because I really loved to help people that couldn't help themselves and just putting a smile on people's face.

The same can be said for “Nadia”, whose eventual goal is to become an educator: “You know, I'm going for my master's and should be going for my PhD. And then the goal is to become an educator. So, you know, to some degree, part of my passion is being able to educate people.” Thus, the response of interviewees distinctly reflects an inherent tendency to perform altruistic actions that build towards a friendly and supportive social community, and derive enjoyment from doing so, which prompted them to participate.

In many cases, members actively contribute because they perceive that their contribution will be able to improve the situation. This is best seen when members recognize they are in the position to help with certain issues. For example, user “Nadia” said that part of the reason why she helped others by sharing her insights into religion was because she was pursuing a Master’s degree in Islamic studies and is a practitioner of Islam herself. User “IckyWizza”, who had been in the server for an extended period of time, wanted to help new users settle in as someone who is more familiar with the inner workings of the server:

Obviously if I know the answer, I'm going to want to help them out and let them know. They wouldn't necessarily have to ask me. There could be like 20 plus people in the chat and they'd send it and mainly, you know, majority of the time, no one would respond to that.

As suggested by interview data, members who actively contribute to the community feel like they have a sense of self-efficacy and higher status in the community because of it. “Cinder” reported that although it made him felt like he was “bragging”, the community does seem to see him as an “expert” on the topic of welding, making him more confident in himself in this respect. User “IckyWizza” admitted that being perceived in a positive light is part of the reason why she tries to be supportive in the community. To this end, she reported being known for helping people, and gaining more impact on the server because of it. Thus, gaining influence in the community can be related to the need for autonomy and competence: to have a sense of choice and expectation of success (Ryan & Deci, 2000).. However, when asked how “IckyWizza” achieved this, she replied with “just being myself”, implying that this is not the result of social pressure or contingent self-esteem, but of internalized values, which

intrinsically motivated her willingness to contribute long-term. As such, adding to community values and becoming exemplary members of the community is a powerful intrinsic motivator as it appeals to members' own need to contribute, as well as yielding additional benefits in terms of self-efficacy and self-esteem. Ultimately, members' desire to uphold community values not only fuels their own community participation, but also contribute to the forming of community culture that align with its original vision, further driving the motivation of others.



## 5. Conclusion

The paper studied the various motivations of participation in the ChillZone Discord server, and how they are gratified with the help of Discord technical affordances. Based on an analysis of the collected data, it was found that members participate in the ChillZone for four main gratifications: social contact, relationship, entertainment, and community value reinforcement. A deeper examination revealed these gratifications are primarily underpinned by intrinsic psychological needs, connected to the various forms of participation in ChillZone. In particular, the data suggests that various participation motivations are also intrinsically motivated, such as engaging in casual conversations, which fulfils the inherent need for social communication, especially in contexts where such communication is not possible. This could be because of social distancing, or because of personal circumstances. What is clear is that lack of social contact in real life played a significant role in creating gratification sought, which led to the conscious choice to join and participate in the ChillZone server. Secondly, as a Discord server, ChillZone naturally attracts Discord users, of which the majority are part of the gaming community. This prompted people to participate in expectation of being able to connect with like-minded people who share the same interests, a behavior fuelled by the need for relatedness or connection with others. In addition, because of Discord's popularity among people who enjoy video games, members also seem to have an innate hedonistic desire to be entertained, and do so via various ways activities dedicated to entertainment such as gamification channels, and watching other people's livestreams. Finally, as members had been shown to engage in various behaviors that are encouraged by community values which align with internal values, such as knowledge-sharing or being supportive in general, the server addresses the need for autonomy and competence: two highly related intrinsic psychological needs that give members the sense of control and influence. Therefore, the ChillZone server seems to not only adequately gratify benefits sought as motivated by intrinsic needs, but also provide additional values obtained, driving further participation.

To this end, a combination of Discord unique affordances is found to play a major role in community needs satisfaction, most notably the voice channels and Discord's API. On the one hand, the voice channels, with their accompanying features, significantly enhance social interactions, relationship quality, and entertainment experiences of members by providing voice-based communication as well as the ability to synchronously broadcast content. One of the most important advantages of the voice channels is the increased social presence, which real-time VoIP communication seemed to excel at compared to text-based communications. Social presence is desirable to many members of ChillZone, especially those who are unable to perform face-to-face interactions in their lives. Additionally, the

ability to synchronously broadcast content gives members entertainment experiences that are more personal, and arguably, enjoyable, because of the enhanced social component of such experiences compared to other platforms like YouTube and Twitch. On the other hand, Discord API allows for the creation of Discord bots, which in the case of the “ChillZone bot”, is found to effectively serve for the betterment of both members’ experience and efficiency of staff. Other bots are also added to the server, creating gamified features that engaged the community even more. The result is an online community that effectively makes use of the technical affordances of Discord while adding its own, which not only sets itself apart from other Discord communities, but also makes a prominent case for the success of voice-based communities.

Beyond the ChillZone community, the present study, through an examination of relationships formed over Discord, showed initial signs that its new technological affordances may potentially mitigate some of the traditional limitations associated with Internet-based communication, such as the inability to convey complex information, subtle emotional cues, and social presence, while still maintaining the benefit of lessened physical characteristic constraints (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). In fact, from the case of ChillZone, it can be seen that some people are more than willing to sustain their participation in a voice-based community, especially those that experience inadequate real life social interactions in general regardless of social distancing regulations. This finding seems to suggest that people with less circumstantial or temporary reasons for their lack of social interactions in real life are more motivated to participate on a voice-based community, because of the sense of more intimate ‘togetherness’ that it provides over texts. Because of this, community members were able to form meaningful relationships with each other via a Discord server, making voice-based communication potential as an effective long-term alternative to real life social interaction as a whole even greater, especially in circumstances when the latter is less practical.

Practically, this requires communities to have clear vision and goals, so that members’ needs can be effectively identified and addressed. In the same vein, member count does not directly translate to level of actual participation from members, as the expectation of values which fuels participation can only be sustained insofar as members receive the expected values. Therefore, being able to utilize the technological affordances of the platform in order to satisfy these needs also play a significant role in promoting community engagement. It is also important to take into account the characteristics of a Discord community, which thrives on social interactions and personal connections of individuals with the same interests. This means that a Discord community is not a one-size-fit-all solution to all organizations or individuals that aim to reach a huge audience. Instead, communities should place

members' values first and foremost, as well as coming up with ways to keep members engaged in the long run. For brands and organizations, specifically, this could mean that Discord servers are less of a mass marketing tool like often seen on Facebook and Instagram, but more suitable for maintaining a community in the back end, providing a social space for users who are already interested in said brand to engage with one another, further enhancing their loyalty and attachment to the brand while providing them with real values.

Academically, this study contributes to the wealth of scholarly work that emphasizes the prominence of members' needs satisfaction to the development and sustainability of online communities (Dholakia et al., 2004; Lev-on, 2015; Ridings & Gefen, 2004). This is consistent with previous findings that gratifications sought and gratifications obtained should both be present for a community member to remain engaged (Sangwan, 2005). The study also brings new academic implications to the values of online relationships, especially ones that are formed over voice-enabled communication. Despite the limitations that come with computer-mediated communication, online relationships have been argued to form and maintain just as well as real life ones because of higher anonymity and more convenient, immediate access to others (Amichai-Hamburger et al., 2013). However, these scholarly works mostly focused on text-based or content-based communities. The present study, which examined new affordances introduced to an online social environment, not only brought new justifications for a paradigm shifting on online relationships, but also a new type of online community, one characterized by a high sense of social presence, and the ability to imitate to some degree the complexity of face-to-face interactions.

Qualitative interview and naturalistic observation were employed in this study to procure data for analysis. The combination of two sources of data provides increased the overall depth of the data and more extensive interpretation, as well as provided multiple points of data for triangulation. However, there are certain note-worthy methodological limitations that may present challenges to this study's findings. Due to time and resource constraints, a non-probabilistic data collection was employed via snowball sampling, which was entirely based on the recommendations of staff members and previous interviewee respondents. Despite efforts to diversify interview sample with various demographic parameters and participation levels, it is probable that the data is heavily skewed towards long-time members with higher level of participation, who were most likely acquaintances of each other, and participated in more or less similar ways, representing potential biases in the data that are uncounted for. Furthermore, as the analysis process is inherently reflexive as characteristic of qualitative research, the study naturally reflects the author's own interpretation influenced by personal values and

world views. To increase the transparency and the integrity of the research, a detailed description of the data collection as well as analysis process is provided. Nevertheless, the use of both qualitative interviews and naturalistic observations proved to be useful for the purpose of data triangulation. Particularly, fieldnotes were effective as a supporting source of data for interviews in a few key areas such as providing real life examples which enhanced the author's understanding of respondents' experiences, as well as providing more detailed evidence to each gratification that emerged from interviewees' response. Overall, the combination of both sources of data allowed the author to grasp a more complete picture of both the deeper psychological motivations of members, as well as diverse forms that participation which satisfy these needs come in, something that would not have been possible with either source of data on its own.

Finally, because of the relatively recent emergence of voice-based online communities, further academic endeavours to explore the characteristics of these communities, including new benefits as well as challenges presented, are warranted, especially in comparison with text-based communities. As noted by the varying uses that these new affordances provide, the resulting separation of members who exclusive use text channels versus voice channels on the server formed groups of members who regularly interact with one another, indicating the existence of relatively disconnected subcommunities within ChillZone. This segmentation has been found in other Discord servers, such as the Harbormen Gaming server (Anderson, 2019). Therefore, further study on how these affordances segment communities, and whether this present distinct barriers to the collective sense of identity and commitment to community values as a whole is in order. Additionally, scholarly attention should also be paid to the role of voice communication in communities that are not centered on socialization, such as interest-based communities, Discord collaboration projects, and communities established by brands and organizations.

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## Appendices

### Appendix A: Interview respondents' information

<b>Information</b> <b>Username</b>	<b>Age</b>	<b>Sex</b>	<b>Nationality</b>	<b>Role</b>	<b>Participation mode</b>	<b>Participation level</b>
MaxMinutiae	38	Male	American	Administrator	Voice chat, text chat	Multiple hours per day
Rosee	21	Female	North Africa	Voice moderator	Voice chat, text chat	Multiple hours per day
EpicSquare	23	Male	American	Member	Voice chat	Multiple hours per day
IckyWizza	19	Female	Australian	Member	Voice chat, text chat, FUN channels	Multiple hours per day
Smegginton	19	Male	South African	Member	Voice chat	Multiple hours per day
Nadia	25	Intersex	American	Member	Voice chat	Weekly
Cinder	21	Male	British	Member	Text chat	30 minutes daily

## Appendix B: Interview topic list

Staff: Welcome My name is Vu. I'm a Master student at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. This interview's objective is to understand the different functions of Discord, and how they are used in the ChillZone Discord server to satisfy member's needs. To do this, I'm interviewing staff members of the server who are knowledgeable about the server's different functions and setups, as well as their intended use. First, thank you for participating in the interview, it will take from 45 minutes to one hour. Everything will of course confidential, so you're freely share your honest thoughts and opinions. The interview will take from 45 minutes to one hour. Before we start, I need to obtain your consent. Do you consent to this interview being audio-recorded and the interview data being used for the study?

Members: Hello and thank you for participating in this interview. My name is Vu Dao. I'm a master student at Erasmus University Rotterdam in the Netherlands. This interview's goal is to understand the different psychological needs and how this leads to extrinsic and/or intrinsic motivations to participate in an online community. The interview will take from 45 minutes to one hour. Before we start, I need to obtain your consent. do you consent to this interview being audio-recorded and the interview data being used for the study?

Both: Remember you can stop the interview at any point if you wish, and you don't have to respond to questions that you don't want to answer, in which case just let me know.

### *General*

- Name
- Age
- Nationality
- Sex

### *Participation level*

- Participation frequency
- Participation duration

### **Staff**

#### *Roles and regulations*

- What do the roles entail?
- Would you say that certain role has more power than others?
- Where do you fit in this hierarchy? Describe your main role/tasks in the Discord server?
- Why did you become (this role)?
- Outside of being a (role), do you also participate in the server as a normal member?
- Can you walk me through the rules of participation in the server and why these rules were implemented? How strict are they? How are they reinforced? What happens when somebody breaks the rule? Can you give an example?
- Does staff usually interact with members? How so?
- Has there any case where there is misuse or abuse of power?

### *General information about server participation*

- Is the server still attracting a lot of new members?
- Is the server growing in size still? Do new members stay for long after they join? Do older members tend to leave?
- What is the main goal or purpose of the server? Are there other goals aside from this? What needs does the server seek to fulfil for its members? Has this changed over the years?
- What makes members stay or leave in your opinion? Does this depend more on the people, or the way the server is setup?
- Would you say the community has an identity?

### *Server setup*

- What can a person do on the ChillZone Discord server?
- Can you walk me through the main channels and the idea behind them?
- Would you say that the way the server is setup now is to serve these purposes?
- Do you know which function is the most popular or have the most participation? Do you know why that is?
- Who is responsible for implementing new functions or channels in the server? Does this include hosting community events?
- Has there been notable changes in the server setup over the years?
- Is there a way for community members to provide feedback?
- Does feedback ever translate into the implementation of changes in the server? Example?
- What is the most common feedback that you've received from members?
- Do you relay that to people that has the power to address those feedback?

## **Members**

### *Discord usage*

- What do you usually use Discord for?
- How active are you on Discord usually? Is this for mostly that purpose?
- Are you on any other servers in addition to ChillZone?
- How long have you been in the Chillzone server?
- What's your role in the server?
- How often are you active in the server? compared to other servers?
- Daily time spent (How long does session last? Estimated daily duration of use?)
- Do you have a specific time do you often go on the ChillZone server?

### *Gratification sought*

- Why did you start using Discord
- Why did you join the ChillZone in the first place? Why ChillZone and not others?

### *Participation format*

- Describe your typical Discord session
- Is it hard navigating around the server?
- How do you know how things work, what channel is for what, or how to use certain channels?

- What channels or functions do you use in the server?
- What do you look forward to the most?
- What function or channel of the server that if removed would deter you from participating?
- Are you aware of the reward system that are in place in the server?
  - What do you think about them?
  - What do you use them for?
  - How do you earn them?
  - Would you still do it if the rewards aren't there? If this is removed, would you still participate?
- Are you aware of other channels or other things you can do outside of the main voice and text chat channels?
  - o Channels under the category of FUN (example: catching pokemon, collecting anime cards, gambling, rpg, QOTD art music memes, pets, confessions) Do you engage in them?
  - o What about channels that allow you to post stuff about yourself like your social media, your selfies, confessions?
- Are there community events? Do you join any of them?

*Main activity – gratification obtained*

- What do you normally do on the server?
- Who do you often interact with on the server? Through which channel?
- Are they more familiar to you than others?
  - o How did you meet? Would you say you interact more with them than with other members of the server?
  - o Do you feel comfortable sharing personal matters with them?
  - o Would you still talk about those topics if you were in public VC or general chat?
  - o What about if random people were talking about those topics in VC or general chat, would you participate?
  - o Do you feel like you have grown closer to these individuals because of it?
- What do you often talk about?
  - o How does it usually go?
  - o What do you gain out of this?
- Describe to me your most memorable interaction you had on the server?
  - o Why is it memorable to you?
  - o What did you obtain from it?
- Are there any differences between interacting on the server and in real life?
  - o Is it easier for you to talk to people on the server than in real life?
  - o Are you a different person on the server than in real life?
- What do you feel like being the server has helped you the most with?
- What do you think the main purpose of the Discord server is?
- Do you feel like the server achieves its goal?
- How do you like the experience so far?
- Do you feel like the server meets your expectation?

*Both*

- Why did you join the server in the first place?
- How do you like the experience so far?
- Do you feel like the server fulfils this initial purpose for you?
- Are there new values that you have obtained on top of this initial goal?
- Has your motivation to participate changed?
- Are there negative aspects of the server that may prevent you from participating?
- Do you feel like you want to sustain your participation in server in the foreseeable future? Why?
- What makes members participate more or less in your opinion?



Appendix c: Coding table - definitions and examples

	<b>Social contact</b>	<b>Relationship</b>	<b>Entertainment</b>	<b>Community values</b>
	Contact involves meeting or communicating with someone	Expanding or strengthening one's social circle	Affective experiences appealing to hedonistic desires to "have fun"	Practices that reinforce the core values or objectives of the community
<b>Gratification sought</b>	"I like talking with people." (“Nadia”, )	"I want friends and to be able to, I don't know, probably meet them if they want to." (“Cinder”, )	"It's really funny to me as a white, American Muslim to come into the server to get some reactions." (“Nadia”, )	"I wanted to be one so that I can help the community. And just in case there are no one to help, I can be there." (“IckyWizza”, )
<b>Gratification obtained</b>	"I normally just go in general on text, see how, what people are doing and what's the commotion about, and I'm okay." (“Cinder”, )	"That's why I decided to just talk to regulars in voice chat, with the friends, it's right with me." (“Smegginton”, )	"I would just be typing in the chat, the trivia questions come up and I do give them a crack. I think it is pretty fun." (“IckyWizza”, )	"And I'm giving that information to them. And I know that was helpful to them and they thank me for that." (“IckyWizza”, )

Appendix D: Coding tree

