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Virtual Escapes and Intercultural Explorations: How Members of Interpals Are Using
Their Online Community as a Window to the World

Ryan S. Bartlett

A thesis submitted to the faculty of
Brigham Young University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of
Master of Arts

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ABSTRACT

Virtual Escapes and Intercultural Explorations: How Members of Interpals are Using Their Online Community as a Window to the World

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This study utilized in-depth, one-on-one interviews to examine the experiences, attitudes, and opinions, with regard to their use of the Internet for online intercultural communication (OIC), of a culturally diverse sample of 17 members of the global online social community, Interpals. The purpose of this study was threefold: first, the study sought to determine how OIC is shaping the intercultural perceptions of English-speaking Interpals members; second, the study sought to determine how OIC shapes and/or reinforces the cultural identities of English-speaking Interpals members; and finally, the study set out to examine the various ways that English-speaking Interpals members are using their community to engage with people from a variety of different geographical locations and cultural backgrounds. The themes and subthemes that emerged during analysis of the interview data led to the discovery of a typology of three distinct uses, each of which provided valuable information about how members are coming to feel more interconnected with—and understanding of—cultures that differ from their own. Through the first use, *Interpals as a Place to Connect*, participants demonstrated that the online community puts them in contact not only with people from countries and cultures that they originally intended to interact with when they joined the community, but also with people from countries and cultures that they knew nothing about. Participants claimed that these unanticipated interactions often caused them to become more knowledgeable and understanding of cultures that differ from their own. As to the second use, *Interpals as an Escape*, a number of participants claimed that the community gives them a way to escape the tedium, monotony, and poor living conditions of everyday life in their own villages, towns, and cities, by providing them with a way to virtually explore alternative and unfamiliar people, places, and lifestyles. Through the final use, *Interpals as a Classroom*, participants demonstrated that the community is a place where they can teach and learn foreign languages, which helps them to feel more connected to people from around the world. Several participants also claimed to use Interpals as a tool for teaching and showing other members what life is *really* like where they live. The study also found that OIC, at least in the context of the global online social community, can facilitate the shaping of a global village where the villagers maintain their own unique cultural identities and come together to form a cultural mosaic, as opposed to being shaped and transformed by the dominant global cultures.

Keywords: Interpals, online community, culture, intercultural communication, globalization

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Chapter One

Introduction

Tracing the history of the online community back to a definitive origin or point in time is a difficult—if not impossible—task considering there is no single accepted definition of the term “online community,” and considering the large and undetermined number of public and private projects that were undertaken throughout the 1960s, 1970s, and 1980s to link together individual computers and networks (Preece, 2000; Preece, 2001; Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). Some milestones in the development of the modern online community were: the development of email by ARPAnet in 1972; the development of listservers in 1975, which allowed one user to post content to many other users simultaneously; and the development of online message and bulletin boards at around the same time (Preece et al, 2003). Even as early as 1969, online services, such as CompuServe, were creating and utilizing technologies, such as dialup, that evolved and paved the way for the modern online community (Feenberg & Bakardjieva, 2004; Preece et al., 2003).

One system that has been referred to as the earliest pioneer of online communities is, “Programmed Logic for Automatic Teaching Operations” aka PLATO, a timesharing system developed by electrical engineers at the University of Illinois in the early 1960s (Smith & Sherwood, 1976; Woolley, 1994). PLATO connected users at different terminals to a single mainframe; these users were able to work together to write educational software in a programming language called TUTOR (Woolley, 1994). Before 1972, PLATO could only be used in a single

classroom on campus, but in 1972, PLATO expanded to a new generation of mainframes that could support up to 1000 users simultaneously. These users could contribute code and other messages to an open text file called “notes,” other users could then respond with messages of their own (Woolley, 1994). As PLATO continued to expand throughout the 1970s, its users and programmers slowly worked out the kinks in the system and added new features to make the system more efficient. Through this slow process of trial and error, PLATO gradually began to incorporate many of the features that are now essential and integral components of the modern online community (Woolley, 1994).

In the fall of 1973, for example, a program called Talkomatic was designed to allow PLATO users to chat together as a group, but because there was no feature that allowed one user to contact another specific user, “Talkomatic was more like a virtual water cooler than a telephone substitute; people would hang out in a channel and chat or flirt with whomever [happened to] drop by” (Woolley, 1994, n.p.). The limitations of Talkomatic led programmers to develop “term talk,” which allowed virtual conversations to take place between two people. With “term talk,” one user would page a user at another terminal, at which point the two could begin a virtual conversation (Woolley, 1994). Personal Notes, a feature added to PLATO in 1974, allowed users to send personal messages to one another in a format that greatly resembles what has come to be known as email (Woolley, 1994). Woolley (1994) suggests that these interpersonal communication features of PLATO quickly gave rise to a sense of community among users:

The sense of an online community began to emerge on PLATO in 1973-74, as Notes, Talkomatic, 'term-talk', and Personal Notes were introduced in quick succession. People met and got acquainted in Talkomatic, and carried on romances via 'term-talk' and Personal Notes" (Woolley, 1994, n.p.).

Between September 1978 and May 1985, PLATO users spent a combined total of about 3.35 million hours engaging with one another using the Notes feature; during the same period of time, users posted about 3.3 million messages, and people interacting with other people through PLATO accounted for more than half of all of the system's usage—all of this on a system whose creators "never envisioned that communication between people would play more than an incidental role" (Woolley, 1994, n.p.). By the late 1980s, a majority of the networks and systems that combined to form PLATO were sold or shut down. Today, many of these systems are owned and operated by a number of private companies that no longer refer to the systems as "PLATO" (Woolley, 1994).

On April 1, 1985, around the same time that PLATO was disbanding, and about a decade before the public Internet was unleashed, one of the first online communities, "Whole Earth 'Lectronic Link", aka the "WELL," opened for business, "allowing customers to register online to use the service for eight dollars per month plus two dollars per hour" (Pernick, Figallo, & Willams, 1995). The WELL's initial staff consisted of just one full-time and one part-time employee who ran the service on a leased VAX 11/750 computer and hard disks, UNIX system software, and a conferencing program called Picospan. When first launched, The WELL had a total storage capacity of only 800 MB—about the equivalent of a modern compact disc

(Barnatt, 2012; Pernick et al., 1995). After several major overhauls and changes in ownership over the past three decades, The WELL is now one of the oldest online communities still in operation, existing alongside countless additional communities that have sprung up since the Internet went mainstream in 1996 (Song, 2009; Woolley, 1994).

Howard Rheingold, who conducted much of the early research on online communities, defined the online community as, “social aggregations that emerge from the [Internet] when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, and with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace” (Rheingold, 2003, p. 5). Most people who use the Internet on a regular basis participate, to some extent, in at least one of these communities, which serve the needs of everyone from the faith-seeker, to the broken-hearted; from the bird watcher, to the stamp-collector (Song, 2009). Facebook, one of the largest online communities, which serves the social needs of those who wish to share updates and information about their lives with family and friends, has over one billion registered accounts, which means that there is one registered Facebook account for approximately one-seventh of the global population (Vance, 2012).

Each online community fulfills a specific need for its members (Ridings & Geffen, 2004); the WELL, for example, became a gathering place for fans of the jam band, *Grateful Dead* (Hafner, 2004). Members of The WELL paid for access to the online community so that they could discuss recent and upcoming *Grateful Dead* performances, and share information with other “Deadheads” about the experience of being on the road with the band. The community brought *Grateful Dead* fans

together into a single online location where they could communicate with one another regardless of the physical distance separating them (Fuchs, 2007). Other online communities serve a variety of needs that range from helping people to maximize returns on their investments in the New York Stock Exchange—ValueForum.com—to helping the mothers of those serving in the military to reach out to one another for moral support and encouragement while their children are serving on active duty—Militarymoms.net. Regardless of the plethora of specific and unique social needs each individual online community was originally created to fulfill, all online communities have one thing in common, and that is that they bring people together, whether those people live on the same city block, or thousands of miles apart from one another; online communities are, therefore, a prime example of Marshall McLuhan's concept of the "global village," as the nature and extent of the interactions within these communities are global in scale, yet consolidated in nature (Rheingold, 1993; Walkosz, Jolls, & Sund, 2008). The concept of global village is discussed in greater detail in the next chapter.

Because online communities have become such a common forum for human interaction, and because these communities are now accessible throughout most of the world, the study of their impact on culture at a global level has become increasingly popular among scholars of mass communications (Rheingold, 1993; Rheingold, 2008; Song, 2009). From the pioneering studies of online communities conducted by Rheingold—who personally joined The WELL to get a firsthand experience of the new online phenomenon—in the early 90s (Rheingold, 1993), to the contemporary studies of online religious communities conducted by Heidi

Campbell (Campbell, 2012), to the studies of the effects of online communities on democratic values conducted by F.W. Song (Song, 2009), scholars are working to discover what effects these communities, and the interactions that occur within them, are having on various aspects of culture, such as religiosity, political ideology, beliefs about education, global interconnectedness, etc., as well as on the shaping of society and public policy at local, national, and global levels (Campbell, 2007; Song, 2009; Warlaumont, 2010). These, as well as many other social scientists, have stressed the importance of further studies on the effects of online communities because of the potential for these communities to create social cohesion, and because online interactions are largely replacing offline, face-to-face interactions, especially among younger Internet users who grew up entirely in the digital age (Campbell, 2007; Dawson & Cowan, 2004; Rheingold, 2008).

Other scholars believe that studies of online communities are important because they could lead to the discovery of the potentially negative implications that the intercultural interactions within these communities might have; for example, some scholars believe that because American ideals are so ubiquitous on the Internet, web users from around the world have begun to lose their own unique cultural identities due to their exposure to American ideals in online community settings, and in other places on the Internet (Ess & Sudweeks, 20001; McQuail, 2010; Preece, 2001). These scholars fear that America's prevailing influence in the online world erodes intercultural distinctions as people around the world become more and more American, not only in the language that they use, but in the way they

dress, in the beliefs they espouse, and in the media and popular culture products they consume (Ess & Sudweeks, 2001; McQuail, 2010).

To date, much of the research that has been conducted on online communities has focused on impression management, identity formation, and friendship performance, leaving other important research areas, such as online intercultural communication (OIC) open to further explorative studies (Boyd & Ellison, 2008; Yuan, 2013). The limited number of studies that *have* examined OIC within global social online communities, have tended to focus their attention on online discussion forums, language exchange websites, and Internet-based global education efforts (Aragon & Poon, 2011; O'Brien, Alfano, & Magnusson, Talalakina, 2010; Yuan, 2013). Studies such as these have exacerbated the dichotomy between the scholars who are optimistic about the future of OIC, and the scholars who are more cynical about it, with the optimists envisioning the rise of a more open-minded and culturally interconnected “global village,” where strong affinities and friendships that transcend national and cultural boundaries are formed (see Levy, 2001a; Preece, 2001), and the cynics envisioning the rise of a global, deterritorialized, “cyberculture” that embraces and recreates the American, domineering, capitalistic, consumer mentality from which the Internet sprung (Castells, 2001; Ess & Sudweeks, 2001; McQuail, 2010). The one thing that scholars on both sides of the debate *do* agree on is that the Internet—and the many online communities that have been developed using the Internet—are bringing people from various parts of the world together in ways that were not possible before the age of the Internet. Whether this phenomenon has more positive or more negative

implications for cultural diversity at a global level remains to be seen (and it is likely that the debate will continue for quite some time), but the best way to make progress on this front, and to uncover clues that might provide more definitive answers to questions about cultural globalization, is to begin conducting more thorough examinations of OIC within the global communities that now pervade the online world (Boyd & Elison, 2008; Mustafa, Hamid, Ahmad, Siarap, 2012).

This thesis utilized in-depth, one-on-one interviews to explore the attitudes and experiences of a segment of the population of Interpals, a global social online community with nearly two million members where one can find and interact with others, irrespective of geographical, cultural, and political boundaries (About Interpals, 2013). Many of these members engage in daily interactions—via Skype, instant messaging, and email exchange—with other Interpals members from around the world. Like the WELL and other online communities, Interpals brings people together into a virtual forum where stories and ideas can be shared, and where friendships can be forged; unlike the majority of other online communities, Interpals was created for the very purpose of facilitating interactions between members who come from cultural, political, and religious backgrounds that differ greatly from one another. To get an idea of the broad range of intercultural interactions occurring on *Interpals*, one needs only to look at the public profile of any Interpals member; member profiles include pictures of each member's Interpals friends, and under each friend's picture is a flag icon that represents the country that that friend is from. It is not uncommon to come across member profiles with "friend flags" from various countries all around the world.

The following exploration of the personal experiences of the members of Interpals creates a contextual image of how certain members of the community feel their OIC is shaping their perceptions of cultures that differ from their own. Although this study is not intended to be generalizable, the contextual image of Interpals that it provides could serve as a foundation for the development and expansion of theory related to OIC within global online social networks. Additionally, this study identifies some of the key concepts and issues that might be further examined in future studies of OIC. The stories and impressions shared by the online community members in this study also provide insight into the ongoing discussion between the scholars who believe OIC is creating a world that is over-Americanized, and the scholars who believe OIC is creating a global village, where heightened levels of interconnectivity facilitate a greater understanding and acceptance between people from different cultures, while still allowing those cultures to retain the characteristics that make them unique.

Chapter Two

Literature Review

Each of the major mass communication media (printing press, telegraph, radio, television, and Internet) has had its own profound impact on the way people view the world, interact with one another, and go about their daily lives (Federman, 2003; Postman, 1985). The decisions that people make in life are largely based upon—and limited to—the information that is available to them, and each of these communication media has modified not only the amount of information that is available, but also the accessibility of that information, and the ways in which that

information is presented (Federman, 2003; McLuhan, 2001; Postman, 1985). It comes as no surprise, then, that the various media through which people receive their information have the potential and the ability to shape the way that people perceive and make sense of their world (McLuhan, 2001; Reese, 2001). Following Vacker (2000), “information is meant here to include any kind of communication or expression that uses aural, written, printed, or visual symbols to represent things such as ideas, facts, feelings, knowledge, stories, theories, worldviews, or any other item that can be communicated” (p. 3). Vacker (2000) stresses the importance of examining the cultural and social impact of past media revolutions in order to better understand the cultural and social impact of the Internet, which is essentially an amalgamation of the existing media forms. The following brief examples, drawn from the history of mass communications, will illustrate how the introduction and integration of some of the major mass communication media technology contributed to the shaping of culture and society by providing the means for a greater and more widespread dissemination of information. “History suggests that a ‘media convergence’ occurred with Gutenberg’s invention of the printing press, which then generated the ‘information revolution’ that ushered in modernity and industrial society” (Vacker, 2000, p. 2).

The printing press, the telegraph, the radio, and television will each be examined in turn. A basic understanding of how these mass media innovations were—and are—able to shape and interconnect societies and cultures at a global level will serve to provide background and context for a better understanding of how the Internet and its online communities have the potential to increase global

interconnectivity and intercultural understanding among online community members.

The late media theorist and cultural critic, Neil Postman is one example of a scholar who was ambivalent about the potential of the electronic mass media—such as the telegraph and the television—to bring people from different parts of the world together as part of the process known as globalization. In his 1985 book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman, in describing the cultural impact of the telegraph in America, wrote: “The telegraph may have made the country into ‘one neighborhood,’ but it was a peculiar one, populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other” (Postman, 1985, p. 67). Postman, like McLuhan, understood that technological advances in the ability to send and receive information across great distances would inevitably bring people and nations closer together, but he did not think that this was necessarily a good thing. Postman believed that having access to information about the affairs of people who we would never actually see and interact with on a personal level would only serve to fill our minds with a clutter of facts, figures, and disjunctive stories, useless for anything other than shock value and cheap entertainment (Postman, 1985). Postman did not see the interconnectedness that mass media engendered as a force that would bring about social cohesion, open-mindedness, and a greater understanding between and among cultures, but as a force that would lead to a global society that had no authentic understanding at all, a society driven by a constant desire for entertainment and hedonistic stimulation, like the civilization described in Aldous Huxley’s *Brave New World* (Postman, 1985). In spite of

Postman's apprehensions in regard to the potential effects of media technologies, it is important to remember that intercultural interconnectivity can also be a good thing, and some of the ideas of the scholars who envision an interconnected global society as something to be optimistic about will be discussed below.

After a brief examination of the globalizing effects of the printing press, telegraph, radio, and television, this literature review will shift focus to the crux of this thesis, namely, OIC. This section will focus on some of the guiding theories and concepts that have been applied to previous studies of OIC, or that have been suggested as tools for future studies of OIC. Because the theory that arises from this study will be grounded in the data that is procured from the interviews, these guiding theories and concepts will be important for formulating interview questions; they will also be important in the analysis and write-up in the final chapter. These guiding theories and concepts include: globalization, cultural globalization, the global village, and Americanization; it is anticipated that some, or all of these theories and concepts will arise in the final analysis of the data. Before a more in-depth discussion of these theories and concepts can take place, they must be defined in terms of how they will be used throughout this literature review and throughout the remainder of the thesis.

Key terms defined. *Culture.* For the purposes of this thesis, the term "culture" will be defined using the definition favored by American anthropologist, Clifford Geertz, who described culture as, "a system of inherited conceptions expressed in symbolic forms by means of which people communicate, perpetuate, and develop their knowledge about and attitudes toward life" (Geertz, 1973, p. 89).

Geertz's definition of culture is based on a number of assumptions, one important one being that culture refers to the shared histories of social groups as they pass on inherited conceptions from one generation to another (Geertz, 1973). For the purposes of this thesis, groups that share these inherited conceptions, symbols, and attitudes about life will be referred to as "cultural groups" (Harrison, 1999).

Harrison (1999) describes cultural boundaries as boundaries that exist between cultural groups that separate one group's cultural identity symbols from those of another group; however, the boundaries that determine where one cultural group ends and another cultural group begins are not as easy to demarcate as national boundaries, and many countries have several cultural groups living within their boundaries (Harrison, 1999).

As advances in communication technology (as well as other forms of technology) have allowed for a more interconnected, globalized world, cultural groups have begun to have much more contact with one another, which has resulted in the widespread transfer, dissemination, and adoption, between various cultural groups, of knowledge, symbols, and traditions that were not previously known to them; this process can lead to transformations in individual cultures, and to a process known as "cultural globalization" (Geertz, 1973; Harrison, 1999; Martens et al., 2008; McGrew, 1992).

Globalization. According to Held et al. (1999), globalization is defined as:

A process (or set of processes), which embodies a transformation in the spatial organization of social relations and transactions—assessed in terms of their extensity, intensity, velocity, and impact—generating

transcontinental or interregional flows and networks of activity, interaction, and the exercise of power. (p. 16)

Martens et al. (2008), McGrew (1992), Thompson (1995), and Waters (2001), agree that certain stress should be placed on global “interconnectedness” when defining the term “globalization.” Block (2004) states that, “...no matter how disputed aspects of globalization may be, greater interaction is indisputable” (p. 14). For the purposes of this study, the term, “globalization” will follow the definition provided by Held et al. (1999). As will be discussed below, there is no single agreed upon definition of “globalization,” but the scholars who write about the process tend to be in agreement that advances in communication and transportation technologies, have created—and allow for—greater social interconnectivity and interaction at a global level (Martens et al., 2008; McGrew, 1992; Thompson, 1995; Waters, 2001). The term “globalization,” as applied to this thesis, will be understood to mean the heightened social interconnectivity at a global level that has been made possible by advances in technology, particularly communication technology.

Cultural globalization. Cultural globalization is the theory that the increased exposure to other cultural groups that all cultural groups inevitably experience as a result of globalization leads to transformations in the knowledge, symbols, attitudes, and traditions of various cultural groups (Robertson, 1992; Waters, 2001). Waters (2001) and Harrison (1999) describe how cultural globalization causes cultural groups to redefine themselves as they incorporate some of the elements from other cultures while, at the same time, trying to retain a

certain degree of autonomy; this can sometimes lead to the creation of a wholly separate culture or cultural element (Waters, 2001).

Block (2004) describes the use of language on the Internet as one example of cultural globalization. Because the primary language of the Internet is English, Internet users from non-English-speaking countries—particularly in the earlier days of the Internet—have been required to learn and adopt a certain level of understanding of the English language; sometimes, this leads to the fusion of English with the non-English language, resulting in a variant language that is an amalgamation of the two (Block, 2004). The study cites the example of “Singlish”, a local variant of English that came about in Singapore as a result of Singaporeans who wished to retain their own language as an identity marker in a world where the English language appeared to be threatening their own official languages: Malay, Mandarin, and Tamil (Block, 2004; Warschauer, 2003).

For the purposes of this thesis, “cultural globalization” will be defined as the changes and transformations that cultural groups experience as a result of globalization. Because the Internet facilitates the transfer of symbols and ideas across cultural groups, it has the ability to play a role in cultural globalization (Block, 2004).

Intercultural. For the purposes of this thesis, “intercultural” will be defined as interactions and exchanges that take place between two or more cultures; for example, when someone belonging to an Asian cultural group engages with a person from a cultural group in the United States, an *intercultural* exchange is taking place. One term that will be used repeatedly in this thesis is “intercultural perception,”

which will be defined as the perception or perceptions that a member of one cultural group, or of an entire cultural group has with regard to a different cultural group; for example, an intercultural perception might be a person, or group of people from the Middle East perceiving American culture (symbols, ideals, attitudes, etc.) as too liberal and secular. Hofstede (1983) explored the differences in values, social actions, and attitudes among people from over 50 countries and discovered that our perceptions of the world and of other cultures are developed early on in life and reinforced in the social institutions that exist within society. Hofstede found that these perceptions and “mental programs” are largely determined by the predominating values of the countries in which people live (Hofstede, 1983).

The term “intercultural” is important for this thesis because most of the interactions that take place within global online communities are intercultural interactions, which means that the values, perceptions, and attitudes that people from various cultural groups maintain are likely being exchanged—whether implicitly or explicitly—in the interactions that take place within the community.

Popular culture. Parker (2011) describes how popular culture, like culture itself, has been a difficult term to define, as the most common definitions of the term suffer from a presentist bias and cannot be applied to pre-industrial and pre-capitalist societies. Parker (2011) takes a Weberian approach and looks to Bourdieu’s “cultural capital” and Danto’s and Dickie’s “Industrial Theory of Art” to provide a framework for a possible definition of popular culture. For the purposes of this thesis, “popular culture” will be defined as, “products that require little cultural capital either to produce or else to consume” (Parker, 2011, p. 161). These products

include artifacts such as films, records, clothes, TV programs, modes of transport, etc. (Parker, 2011).

Popular culture is an important concept in this thesis because it encompasses the cultural elements and artifacts that are most easily and most frequently disseminated across national and cultural boundaries, at which point they are consumed by those belonging to cultural groups that differ from the ones in which they were originally created (Parker, 2011; Warlaumont, 2010). Some studies have argued that popular culture can lead to the transformation of the traditional culture of certain cultural groups. Nicolaides (2012), for example, makes the case that the widespread dissemination of American popular culture is causing the erosion and Americanization of traditional African cultures—morals, values, ideals—by inundating these cultures with a new and foreign set of morals, values, and ideals. The study makes the case that because African nations do not have the power or the resources to compete with the dissemination of American popular culture, Africans, particularly of the younger generations, are beginning to lay aside their traditional values and replace them with American values (Nicolaides, 2012).

Yet other studies, such as Kuipers (2011) argue that the increased dissemination of popular culture at a global level is not causing the erosion or the Americanization of traditional cultures, but the hybridization, or cultural globalization of culture. The study argues that although American popular culture (and the popular culture created by other nations and cultural groups) is increasingly making its way into the lives of people belonging to other cultures, this process is not necessarily detrimental to the composition of existing cultures. The

study argues that as cultural groups adopt certain values and elements from one another, particularly through popular culture products, through the process of globalization, they become more interconnected and understanding of each other, while still maintaining a level of their own independent cultural autonomy (Kuipers, 2011).

Global village. For the purposes of this thesis, “global village” will be defined as the theory that, as the interconnectedness between cultural groups increases as a result of globalization, the space that exists between those cultural groups becomes eliminated causing all cultural groups to become a part of one single global village. For the purposes of this thesis, the global village will be imagined as a condition where various cultural groups share and participate in the culture of other cultural groups while maintaining their own cultural autonomy. This theory will be discussed in greater detail below.

Americanization. For the purposes of this study, “Americanization” will be defined as the process by which globalization leads to cultural groups becoming more Americanized in their language, symbols, beliefs, and practices the more they utilize modern technologies, particularly the Internet (Nicolaidis, 2012). This theory stems from the assumption that American ideals, such as capitalism and consumerism predominate the modern world, including the online world. This theory will be discussed in greater detail below.

Cultural unifiers: precedents in other media forms. *Printing press.* Over five centuries ago, when Johannes Gutenberg invented the printing press—which made possible the mass production of copied texts—the religious and social

perceptions of much of Western society began to change (Grafton, 1980). Martin Luther used the printing press to produce and disseminate copies of the bible to the common people of what is now Germany (Grafton, 1980). Luther's printing and distribution of the bible was revolutionary. Until that time, only the Catholic clergy were permitted to own, read, and interpret the bible; if the bible fell into the hands of the commoners, they (the commoners) might become educated; they might begin to make their own interpretations of the sacred text and jeopardize the authority and legitimacy of the Catholic Church; they might revolt. In fact, a revolt, known as the Protestant Reformation, is precisely what occurred (Shaff, 1910). Schaff (1910) describes the societal effects of the mass dissemination of Luther Bible, which was made possible by the print medium:

Luther's New Testament was so much multiplied and spread by printers that even tailors and shoemakers, yea, even women and ignorant persons who had accepted this new Lutheran gospel, and could read a little German, studied it with the greatest avidity as the fountain of all truth. Some committed it to memory, and carried it about in their bosom. In a few months such people deemed themselves so learned that they were not ashamed to dispute about faith and the gospel not only with Catholic laymen, but even with priests and monks and doctors of divinity. (Schaff, 1910, p. 6)

Luther's bible was revolutionary for a number of reasons, not only did it serve to educate the common people by giving them the opportunity to learn to read and interpret scripture for themselves but, being that it was the only book available to most people at the time, it became the guidebook that linguistically and culturally

brought the German-speaking people together (Schaff, 1910). Wanting the bible to be understood by as many people as possible, Luther infused his translation with the language and words of the common people of Saxony. He went out into the streets and asked strangers, friends, and fellow scholars which words would be the most effective at getting the Christian message into the minds of the people (Schaff, 1910). Once the bible was printed and distributed en masse, it spread throughout the region and through much of northern Germany, accustoming the people who had once been separated by a plethora of various regional dialogues to a common dialect, which eventually became what is today known as High German, the language upon which Germany, with its many economic, political, and social institutions, is built (Schaff, 1910). By enabling the publication and widespread dissemination of information, the printing press was able to play a significant role in facilitating the eventual unification of the German-speaking people. Vacker (2000) notes:

At the time of the invention of the printing press, approximately fifty thousand books existed in the world, most of which were under the control of the Church. By 1500, there were an estimated ten million books and an information revolution was born which was to have enormous individual, group, national, and global consequences. (p. 4)

A little more than 250 years later, on the other side of the Atlantic, the printing press made possible the mass publication of Thomas Paine's *Common Sense*, which has become known as "the most incendiary and popular pamphlet of the entire revolutionary era" (Wood, 2002, p. 55). Before the pamphlet was published,

the average colonist was leery about independence from British rule (Wood, 2002). Many colonists had heard the term “revolution” being discussed by the more radical thinkers of the time, but they (the average colonists) were, for the most part, content with their lives and did not want to go to war against Britain. Within months of the dissemination of Paine’s pamphlet, the colonies were united in their determination for liberty; just short of 25 weeks after the first copy of *Common Sense* was published, the Declaration of Independence was issued (Wood, 2002).

Without the printing press, it is likely that the discussions of political ideology and revolution that eventually fomented into the war would have remained limited to a small number of radical, pro-independence social circles—at least for quite a while longer (Wood, 2002). The pamphlet was published in January 1776 and quickly reached saturation point within the colonies; 120,000 copies were sold in the first three months alone (Wood, 2002). Some New England newspapers were publishing *Common Sense* in its entirety; colonists circulated partial—and complete—handwritten copies; by the end of 1776, sales within the colonies and Western Europe totaled about 500,000 copies (Wood, 2002). Even those who were unable to read became engaged in the discussion when ideas and passages from the pamphlet were read aloud and deliberated at town and city taverns (Wood, 2002). Unlike many of the political pamphlets that were written during the Colonial Era, *Common Sense* was written in a plain, uncomplicated style so that it could reach a popular audience of common men and women (Wood, 2002). With 25 published editions in 1776 alone, it is no surprise that by the middle of the year, most of the colonies’ 2.5 million inhabitants had been exposed to the ideas and appeals of

Common Sense. The pamphlet quickly became a cultural icon and served to inform, influence, and unify the colonists in a common cause. Foot and Kramnick (1987), in an introduction to *Common Sense*, wrote:

Common Sense appeared on Philadelphia streets in January 1776. It was an instant success, and copies of the pamphlet were soon available in all the thirteen colonies. Paine's was an unequivocal call for independence, and many Americans wavering between reconciliation with and independence from Britain were won over to separation by Paine's powerful polemic against monarchy, in general, and the British monarchy, in particular. (p. 65)

Just as it had done in Martin Luther's time two and a half centuries earlier, the printing press had once again demonstrated its ability to provide a means by which people of varying geographic locations, political ideologies, education levels, and social statuses could become united in a common cause.

Although several additional mass communications media have come into existence since the times of Luther and Paine, the printing press continues to be an important tool for various authors, journalists, political activists, religious and secular leaders, etc., who wish to disseminate information that brings shared ideas, goals, and narratives to the attention of people from various backgrounds and cultures (Postman, 1985; McLuhan, 2001).

Telegraph. On May 24, 1844, the first electronic telegraph message was sent by Samuel Morse from the old Supreme Court chamber in Washington D.C. to his assistant, Alfred Vail, stationed in Baltimore, about 30 miles north (Hochfelder, 2012). The words of the message, selected from the Old Testament by Annie

Ellsworth, the daughter of a friend of Morse's, were: "What hath God wrought?" A post hoc assessment of the impact of the telegraph on society yields a variety of answers to that question. For one thing, the telegraph allowed for messages to be transmitted almost instantaneously. Communications that were once subject to the delays of human travel were, with the invention and development of the telegraph and its infrastructure, able to be sent, without delay, across a network of cables that connected major cities and towns throughout America, and even across the Atlantic (Hochfelder, 2012).

Before the telegraph became functional on a large scale, letters, pamphlets, books, and all other printed communications had to be carried between towns by messengers who traveled on foot, or on horseback. Information could take days or weeks to get from the larger East Coast cities to the cities and towns on America's western interior; information concerning major events in America and Europe sometimes took months to reach some of the cities and towns on the other side of the Atlantic (Schwartz, 1983). To give an idea of how slowly information traveled before the telegraph became functional on a large scale, Schwartz (1983) points out that when Abraham Lincoln was assassinated in 1865, it took about eight months before 85% of Americans knew about their president's death. The difficulty and delay of transporting information had the effect of keeping news (with the exception of major events) relatively confined to the areas affected by the events that had occurred (Postman, 1985). Once the telegraph became functional on a large scale, information about major events, as well as information about more trivial events, such as deaths, births, fashion trends, entertainment, pop-culture, and social

practices, could be communicated quickly, without difficulty, far beyond the people directly affected or influenced by the events that were occurring. Morse, reflecting on the potential of the telegraph to connect people and communities all across America, said that the telegraph would make “one neighborhood of the whole country” (Postman, 1985, p. 65).

In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Postman, who had the benefit of hindsight, where Morse had only foresight, agreed with Morse that the telegraph helped to shape America into “one neighborhood” (Postman even used McLuhan’s term, “global village”), but unlike Morse, Postman believed that this “neighborhood” of interconnectedness was more harmful than it was beneficial to public discourse. Postman wrote about how the telegraph did, indeed, annihilate the space that separated one person or community from another, but he believed that the information and communications that filled that space were hollow and of little practical value to the people and communities on both ends of the telegraph:

In a sea of information, there was very little of it to use. A man in Maine and a man in Texas could converse, but not about anything either of them knew or cared very much about. The telegraph may have made the country into “one neighborhood,” but it was a peculiar one, populated by strangers who knew nothing but the most superficial facts about each other. (Postman, 1985, p. 67)

In Postman’s opinion, it was in the best interest of the people of a community to receive, discuss, and make decisions based on information that directly affected *their* particular community; this information possessed what Postman called “action

value,” meaning that people could act on it. The telegraph, by connecting the people from one community to the strangers in another community, only served to open up a line for the transmission of useless, trivial facts and tidbits of “context-free” information that, although interesting, was of no use to the decision makers of, and to the democratic discourse within the community receiving the transmissions (Postman, 1985).

Shortly after the telegraph was introduced, its presence and influence began to grow very rapidly in both the United States, and in Europe, and one of the areas upon which it had the greatest influence and the most lasting impact was culture and society (Anderson & Johnnesson, 2005). For example, some historians attribute the telegraph with fostering “a wider idea of nationality” in America (Anderson & Johnnesson, 2005, p. 13). The historians believe that the telegraph is what caused people to begin to feel that their nation and culture extended far beyond their own towns and communities, and that a common culture was something that could be applied to much wider stretches of land, and to much larger numbers of people (Anderson & Johnnesson, 2005). In addition to binding faraway towns and communities, and creating a sense of common culture among Americans and western Europeans in the mid-to-late 19th century, the telegraph also shaped the way business was conducted by allowing markets in different locations to become more tightly coupled, and by allowing for a greater symbiosis between transportation and communication (Hochfelder, 2012). In the military realm, the telegraph gave governments greater control over their generals during wartime. Before the telegraph, political leaders would simply send their generals to the

warfront with the hope and expectations that their generals would make the right tactical decisions; once the telegraph became operational, political leaders, now able to communicate directly and instantaneously with their generals, had much more control over military decisions (Anderson & Johnnesson, 2005). As can be seen, the telegraph—the world’s first instantaneous mode of communication—had a great impact on society, binding remote communities, towns, and countries together, and changing the way that people viewed others and themselves.

Radio. On November 2, 1920, KDKA, of Pittsburgh, Pennsylvania became the first commercial radio station to begin broadcasting in the United States; within a year, 28 additional radio stations were operating (Gugliotta, 2007). By 1922, radio began to be incorporated into everyday American life; in that year, radio sales sharply increased, and popular advertisements began to make distinctions between “modern Americans” and “old-fashioned Americans” based on whether they owned radios. 1922 was also the year that the White House, under President Harding, got its first radio (Moore, 2011; Taylor, 2002). By the end of the 20s, approximately one in three American households owned a radio; by the end of the 30s, that number had jumped to nine in ten (Taylor, 2002). During the 20s and 30s, radios also began to appear in automobiles, offices, and public spaces, and it wasn’t uncommon for Americans to take portable radios to the beach with them (Taylor, 2002). Unlike any mass communication medium that came before it, the radio allowed people all across America—and, eventually, all across the globe—to listen to the same information at the same time; often, this information was broadcast live. For the first time in history, people had the ability to consume news updates, musical

performances, theater productions, and other information and entertainment without leaving their homes. (Taylor, 2002).

The format and ubiquity of radio caused the medium to have a tremendous impact on the consolidation and massification of culture; by popularizing short songs, radio dramas, voice actors, singers, and commercial jingles, the radio provided a means by which common, widespread narratives and ideas could enter everyday conversation (Dominick, 2013; Folami, 2010). American housewives would gather together to listen to and discuss their favorite radio serial dramas; American men would meet at cafes on the weekends to listen to a boxing match or a baseball game; teens would drive around town in their parents' cars and listen to popular music with their friends (Hilmes & Loviglio, 2001). This was not something that was specific to just one area, either, this was happening all over the country, which meant that a man traveling from Chicago to Los Angeles on business, or a family taking a vacation from St. Louis to Miami, could listen to and discuss the same icons, news events, songs, and stories with the people in the area they were visiting that they had discussed with the people in the area from which they had come (Hilmes & Loviglio, 2001). Like newspapers, magazines, and the telegraph, radio caused a reshaping of American culture by disseminating popular culture programming and other information to Americans at a national level (Folami, 2010; Moore, 2011).

Other countries also experienced the mass unifying effects of the radio. Adena, Enikolopov, Petrova, Santarosa, and Zhuravskaya (2013) examine how radio propaganda in Germany in the early 1930s was instrumental in establishing

national popular support of the Nazi party. Using detailed geographic variation in radio signal availability, the authors of this study found that between the years of 1929 and 1932, when the Nazi party began to utilize political radio programming, public support of the party increased significantly. Support for the party was strongest in the areas with stronger signals, where significantly larger shares of votes were cast for the Nazi party; the authors controlled for the Nazi vote share in previous elections (Adena et al., 2013). The authors also found that Nazi radio propaganda had a positive and significant effect on the public support of anti-Semitic state policy (Adena et al., 2013). This study demonstrates that the radio and radio programming can have a significant impact on the attitudes and actions of radio listeners. In the space of just four years, the Nazi party was able to gain widespread public support and shift and consolidate public opinion in support of its policies (Adena et al., 2013).

At a global level, the power of the radio to bring people from different cultures together was demonstrated when Charles Lindbergh became the first person to fly an airplane nonstop across the Atlantic Ocean in 1927. During the flight, it was the radio that played the largest part in bringing people together—in both the United States and in Europe—by providing them with the information needed to follow the story and take part in Lindbergh's courage and adventure (Moore, 2011). When Lindbergh made it to France on May 21, over 100,000 people who had been following the story showed up near the landing strip in Paris to wait for the *Spirit of St. Louis*—and the legend that was flying it—to touch down (Moore, 2011). It made no difference to the multitude of citizens from various nations that

had assembled around the tarmac that the person flying the plane was an American; the media had erased any concerns and prejudices about his national identity by simply turning him into something that every culture and nation could relate to: a hero (Moore, 2011). The case of Lindbergh demonstrates how radio, along with print media, facilitated a coming together of people from various societies, cultures, and religions from all around the world by mediating events that captivated the collective imaginations of people everywhere (Folami, 2010; Moore, 2011).

Although the consumption of radio programming has been largely displaced by newer media, such as television and the Internet, radio is still an important and ubiquitous channel of communication in the contemporary world (Dominick, 2013); global Top 40 stations, public radio broadcasts, and hourly news updates continue to manifest radio's lasting presence, influence, and impact on culture.

Television. The American inventor, Philo T. Farnsworth, first successfully demonstrated the electronic television to the public in the late 1920s, but it wasn't until the mid-1950s that most American households had a television set (Edgerton, 2007; Steinberg, 1980). Today, nearly 97% of all American households have at least one television set (Stelter, 2011). Globally, the number of households that have at least one television is over 90% in 76 countries, over 80% in 95 countries, and over 50% in 122 countries ("Countries Compared," 2007). Television ownership is the lowest in the countries of central and south-central Africa, and also in a number of countries in south Asia, such as Myanmar and Nepal, where less than 15% of households have a television ("Countries Compared," 2007). The percentage of households with access to television in various countries is important to consider

because, like the media discussed above, television has the ability to influence and shape culture, and to bring people from different parts of the world together, which means that people living in countries with low percentages of television ownership will not be as susceptible to cultural change through the consumption of messages relayed and exchanged through that medium (Edgerton, 2007; Schwartz, 1983).

Like radio, television is able to deliver identical messages to mass audiences over wide geographic areas in real time; one of the primary differences between the two media is that television is able to supplement its messages with moving visual images, which can enhance the emotional impact and effectiveness of its messages (Bianculli, 2000; Bushman, 2006; Hazlett & Hazlett, 1999; Peacock, Purvis, & Hazlett, 2011). Bianculli (2000) describes how the ability to see images in motion adds to the value and impact of the mediated message:

Still photographs from the moon can show Neil Armstrong on the ladder of the lunar module, about to take that giant leap for mankind, but only television can show the reduced-gravity, pseudo-slow-motion descent leading to man's first steps on the moon—and show it while, literally, a whole world is watching. And while the still photo of that lone Chinese student, bravely stepping in front of a column of Chinese tanks to impede their progress, is an incredible image in its own right, it's even more powerful as a moving picture, when you can watch the tanks rumble to a stop, turrets slowly rotating, as the man waves his arms and implores his countrymen to turn back. (p. 67)

Bianculli (2000) goes on to describe how television, with its ability to affect the emotions and discourse of its audiences, plays a significant and powerful role in shaping culture and society. In addition to providing society with uniform symbols, characters, stories, and other cultural artifacts, television has largely replaced and/or redefined how people view and participate in longstanding social institutions, such as religion, politics, and education (Bianculli, 2000; Couldry, 2013; Postman, 1985). Bianculli (2000) describes how television has become the place where Americans go to heal their wounds after a national catastrophe. When President Kennedy was assassinated in 1963, Americans didn't go to Pat Robertson, or to Jerry Falwell, or to Oral Roberts, they went instead to Walter Cronkite, who reassured them that "everything is all right," and that, "we're going to get through this" (p. 67). The late Don Hewitt, creator of CBS's *60 Minutes*, considered television to be a sort of religious experience; referring to the assassination of President Kennedy, Hewitt said, "On that unforgettable weekend in November 1963, television provided a personal experience which all could share, a vast religious service which all could attend, a unifying bond which all could feel" (Bianculli, 2000, pp. 68-69).

Like the mass communications media discussed above, television works to interconnect people from different parts of the world, and to shape and create culture (symbols, shared beliefs, etc.) by providing viewers with messages, information, and ideas that are uniform among all television consumers, regardless of geographic, political, and cultural boundaries (Bianculli, 2000; Kuipers, 2011).

Television also has the ability to shape and construct social perceptions of reality through the information that is included in—or excluded from—its

programming content; this often happens with regard to *how* and *what* events are covered in the news broadcasts of the major networks (McChesney, 1990; Tuchman, 1978). Obviously, there are far more events, ideas, and stories occurring in this world than there are the resources and time necessary to disseminate them through television (or through any communications medium, for that matter), which means that those with the power to make content-inclusion decisions often do so based on what they believe will be the most profitable or beneficial to the networks they represent, even if their decisions aren't necessarily in the best interest of society as a whole, and even if the information that *does* end up being selected for inclusion overlooks or downplays established facts and opposing ideas (Bennett, 2005; McChesney, 1990). Bennett (2005), for example, shows how some of the major television news networks in the United States were able to influence the beliefs of the American people with regard to President Bush's invasion of Iraq. In late 2003, when evidence had established that Saddam Hussein and Iraq were not linked to the 9/11 attacks, Fox, CBS, ABC, NBC, and CNN continued to run stories and popular spin programs about Iraq's alleged involvement. By the fall of that year, 80% of Fox viewers, 71% of CBS viewers, 61% of ABC viewers, 55% of NBC viewers, and 55% of CNN viewers still believed that Iraq was, in some way, involved (Bennett, 2005). Because most Americans receive their news from these networks and their subsidiaries, a majority of Americans continued to believe that Iraq was involved in the 9/11 attacks even after the facts demonstrated otherwise. Those who realized that Iraq wasn't involved and, therefore, opposed the ongoing use of military force in Iraq, were labeled as "anti-American," "unpatriotic," "unsupportive of the troops,"

or even as “traitors” by those who did not have a full understanding of the facts, or who supported military force regardless of their understanding of the facts (Bennett, 2005). This is one example of how television is able to influence beliefs and create—or perpetuate—societal perceptions of reality.

The dichotomy between a global village, where people of many different cultures can come together to form a cultural mosaic and share and celebrate their uniqueness with one another, and a world where American ideals and popular culture dominate the global landscape, has frequently been discussed among scholars with regard to television programming. McQuail (2010) explains how television is likely still the most potent influence on media globalization due in large part to the way its visual characters are able to transcend international language barriers. One example of this intercultural transcendence is the American media icon, Oprah Winfrey, who has been referred to as one of the most powerful and influential celebrities in the world, and whose television show, in 2008, was viewed by more than 46 million people in over 140 countries (Conlon, 2008; Pomerantz, 2013). Even in countries where English is not widely spoken or understood, American television programming is often dubbed or subtitled, allowing it to reach and influence audiences in all parts of the world (McQuail, 2010). A 2006 study by the BBC found that seven of the ten most popular television shows in the world were American shows, with *CSI: Miami* in the number one spot, and *Lost*, and *Desperate Housewives* coming in at numbers two and three respectively (“CSI Show,” 2006). And, while the United States *does* successfully export much of its popular television content into foreign media markets, it does *not*, on the other hand, import

much of its television content *from* foreign media markets, which means that it is much more a distributor than a collector of mediated culture (McQuail, 2010).

McQuail (2010) describes how this model of media distribution has led to a cultural homogenization, as non-American populations continue to consume American media products, such as American television programs, Hollywood films, American music, etc., they become more and more imbued with American popular culture and American ideals, and their sense of their own unique culture begins to wane.

Other scholars have a much different opinion about the impact of television on culture. McLuhan (2001) describes how electronic media, such as television, have contracted the globe into a sort of village where information from one part of the village can be delivered to any other part of the village instantaneously. Essentially, these electronic media eliminate space and time and bring all social functions together into one *here and now*, creating heightened human awareness and a greater sense of global responsibility (McLuhan, 2001). Television allows one to see those who are living in other parts of the global village, which may cause one to feel a greater sense of compassion for, and unity with them; in essence, television can help to create a unified global community. In contrast to a world that is shaped and altered by the mediation of American popular culture and ideals, a global village can be a world in which individual cultures from all around the world are able to thrive as they maintain, develop, and share the characteristics that make them unique.

Kuipers (2011) examined cultural globalization as a result of transnational television programming in four European countries: France, Italy, the Netherlands,

and Poland. The study found that although the four countries differed in the amount of foreign television programming that they purchased, all of the countries depended on America as the main center for their foreign programming (Kuipers, 2011). The study also found that the purchase and broadcast of foreign television programming in these countries was not leading to cultural imperialism, or an erosion of national institutions, but to an ever-increasing intersection of transnational fields, where “national fields maintain their own dynamics and relative autonomy even when incorporated into a transnational arena” (Kuipers, 2011, p. 555). In other words, the dissemination of foreign symbols and ideas through transnational television shows does not, as this study found, lead to cultural imperialism, or an overtaking of one culture by another, but to the adoption of certain cultural products (language, symbols, ideas, etc.), into the predominating culture into which the programming is disseminated; this, as mentioned, is the process of cultural globalization (Kuipers, 2011; Waters, 2001).

The mass communications media described above have played a large and significant role in the process of globalization through their facilitation of the spread of information and knowledge at both the intracultural and the intercultural levels. These media were described in order to introduce the reader to the concepts of globalization, the global village, cultural globalization, and the globalizing effects of mass media, each of which will be discussed with regard to the Internet and OIC in the remainder of this literature review, as well as in the final analysis of the interactions within the Interpals community. The next section will further explore

the concepts of globalization, cultural globalization, Americanization, and the global village with regard to the Internet and its online communities.

The Internet as a global village. As mentioned above, “culture” has always been a difficult term to define; currently, there are over 160 scholarly definitions of the term (Spencer-Oatey, 2012). Hofstede (1994) defines culture as, “the collective programming of the mind which distinguishes the members of one group or category of people from another” (p. 5). Matsumoto (1996) defines culture as, “... the set of attitudes, values, beliefs, and behaviors shared by a group of people, but different for each individual, communicated from one generation to the next” (p. 16). Looking over the various definitions of culture, it becomes obvious that most of the social scientists who coined them agree that culture is deeply rooted in the beliefs, values, and shared symbols of various groups of people. As mentioned above, people are able to form ideas, values, and beliefs based only upon the information that is available to them; a fact or belief system that exists outside of a person’s or a society’s scope of knowledge and influence obviously cannot be incorporated into that person’s or that society’s individual or collective construction and understanding of reality. The differences in constructions and understandings of reality that exist between the world’s various ethnic groups, tribes, societies, religions, etc., are what create the world’s unique and diverse cultures (Geertz, 1973; Spencer-Oatey, 2012). The more interconnected the world becomes, the more the information and traditions that individual groups act upon in their own realms begin to blend together, leading to an amalgamation of culture at a global level (Martens, Dreher, & Gaston, 2008).

The term, “globalization,” like the term, “culture,” has no unanimously agreed upon definition among scholars. Block (2004) claims that globalization means different things to people living in different parts of the world:

For different groups the word has different resonance. For the international jet set, globalization means that their business and leisure activities know no borders. For those who work in offices or factories around the world, globalization might simply mean that they constantly exchange emails with colleagues located on different continents and that decisions taken in central headquarters, far away in kilometers but within immediate reach electronically, have a direct effect on their lives... However, for the majority of the planet’s inhabitants, particularly in sub-Saharan Africa and some parts of South America and Asia, globalization may mean economic conditions associated with worsening life circumstances rather than changes associated with having access to the kind of technologies that make possible instant communication and watching television. (pp. 14-15)

McGrew (1992) refers to globalization as:

[The] multiplicity of linkages and interconnections that transcend the nation states (and by implication the societies), which make up the modern world system. It defines a process through which events, decisions and activities in one part of the world can come to have a significant consequence for individuals and communities in quite distant parts of the globe. (p. 23)

Martens et al. (2008) refer to globalization as, “... increased global economic integration, global forms of governance, [and] globally inter-linked social and

environmental developments” (p. 2). Both of these definitions, and most of the other definitions of globalization that I have come across, as mentioned in the key terms section above, acknowledge—whether explicitly or implicitly—that globalization implies integration, interconnectivity, changing forms of governance, a transcendence of former social and political boundaries, and intercultural social and political influence at an international level. Each time a new mass communications medium is created, the ways in which information is transmitted and consumed are altered, necessitating a reexamination of the effects of technology and information transfer on globalization. Pinker (2011) points out that the Internet has essentially made all technologies except the jet airplane, obsolete—the jet airplane standing as a reminder that there can be no substitute for face-to-face communication.

The Internet, which has been referred to as the latest and most spectacular of the information media, has rapidly accelerated the pace of globalization through its facilitation of instantaneous information exchange (Luthra, 2009). The Internet allows advertisers, corporations, NGOs, educators, clergy, special interest groups, and the general public to disseminate information and ideas to one another through a global system of interlinked computers and networks. Lawson-Borders (2003) describes the Internet as the convergence of all past communications media into one new medium. With all of its blogs, print-formatted news stories, and written books and articles, the Internet is, in a sense, print media; with its spoken-word podcasts, its audio files, and its relay of many of the world’s radiobroadcast signals, the Internet is, in a sense, radio; and, with its countless moving images, its massive video storage databases, and its transfer of live and taped television broadcasts, the

Internet is also, in a sense, film and television. By merging all past communications media into one, the Internet gives its users control over which medium, or which blends of media will be accessed for the purpose of information distribution and information consumption (Lawson-Borders, 2003). Vacker (2000) points out that “a convergence in media technology amplifies the collective informational power of the previously separate media, effecting a media revolution that subsequently generates an information revolution” (p. 2). This information revolution challenges prevailing worldviews and reshapes existing culture (Vacker, 2000).

Unlike mass print media, radio, and television, which are, for the most part, controlled by corporations and other entities whose owners, shareholders, and gatekeepers ultimately decide what information will be distributed to the public, the Internet gives users the ability to create and disseminate their own content; in this way, the Internet breaks down some of the barriers that have long existed between content creators, content distributors, and content consumers (Federman, 2003; Lievrouw, 2011). Using the Internet, a young writer in Japan can create a multimedia blog where she shares stories about her life—complete with accompanying videos—with her friends, family, and anyone else interested in hearing what she has to say. Using the Internet, an environmental NGO in British Columbia can increase its revenue and public support by creating an online multimedia campaign consisting of podcasts, a YouTube channel, and a webpage that directly appeal to potential contributors, without the NGO having to go through traditional media outlets that serve as middlemen through the distribution of press releases and news footage. When viewed in this light—as a place where the

formerly voiceless have a voice, where people from all around the world can come together and participate in the flow and exchange of information, and where the formerly marginalized can disseminate their ideas, worldviews, and goals alongside the entities that formerly had exclusive control of content distribution—the Internet does, indeed, appear to be a promising, information-rich landscape that promotes equality and intercultural understanding (Negroponte, 1995). Scholars who are optimistic about the potential of the Internet to create a global, unified, cultural mosaic, consisting of people from all cultures, belief systems, and backgrounds, often point to the concept of the global village to support their views.

The *global village*, as discussed above, is the concept that the electronic media (radio, television, and the Internet) create an interconnected world where time and space are diminished and all people, places, and events become present in the *here* and the *now* (McLuhan, 2001). McLuhan believed that in this global village, people would exist as a single tribe spanning the entire globe, and that in this tribe, people would have a heightened awareness, and a heightened feeling of responsibility towards their fellow tribespeople (it is important to note, however, that McLuhan himself was not entirely optimistic about the social conditions that the global village would create; it was other media scholars who began using McLuhan's term in reference to a potential global utopia. McLuhan's reservations about the global village will be addressed in the next section) (McLuhan, 2001; Vacker, 2000). Ess and Sudweeks (2001) and Vacker (2000) point out how the Internet has further intensified the interconnectedness that exists within the global village by allowing the village's tribespeople to interact and share information

directly with one another. Prior to the age of the Internet and social media, the information that spread throughout the global village was limited to that which the mass media gatekeepers were willing to broadcast. The Internet revolutionized the way that information is disseminated by giving ordinary users control of content creation and distribution (Ess & Sudweeks; 2001; Vacker, 2000).

Before the Internet, tribespeople living in one part of the village would learn of events that had occurred in another part of the village, but the part of the village that the information came from, and the specific events that had occurred, were selected by an outside entity—a middleman (with private interests) existed between the tribespeople involved in the events and the tribespeople who received information about the events. The Internet gave tribespeople the ability to eliminate—or at least diminish the role of—this middleman by allowing them to interact directly with the tribespeople in other parts of the village (Lievrouw, 2011). Using the Internet, tribespeople could ask their own questions, disseminate their own information, and draw their own conclusions; in this way, the Internet shifted the global village from a strictly consumer culture to a participatory culture (Jenkins, 2006; Lievrouw, 2011; Walkosz, Jolls, & Sund, 2008). Scholars who are optimistic about the impact that Internet-facilitated media participation could have on intercultural relationships within the global village often discuss the potential effects of social media interactions, as well as interactions and intercultural exposure within certain online communities (Benkler, 2006; Ess & Sudweeks, 2001; Rheingold, 2008; Van Dijck, 2012; Walkosz, Jolls, & Sunds, 2008). These scholars make the argument that the Internet, populated with people, ideas, and cultural

artifacts from all around the world, will expose users to new ideas, beliefs, and worldviews that ultimately make them more accepting—or at least more understanding—of cultures that differ from their own. Ess and Sudweeks (2001) claim that:

The Internet can promote a better understanding between cultures and cultural identities by enabling people from different cultural backgrounds and with different social and cultural identities to come together and communicate with each other under conditions that are conducive to cultural exchange. (p. 259)

One area of the Internet that has not received much attention from media scholars when it comes to researching the effects that OIC has on how people from different cultures perceive each other is the online community. Online communities have been almost as difficult to define as the term “community” itself (Porter, 2004). Through its online communities, the Internet has made it possible for people to gather together and interact without having to meet face-to-face in traditional public spaces, such as barber shops, churches, cafes, etc., to fulfill their need for a sense of camaraderie. The inherent hunger that people have to belong, and to feel like they are a part of a social group can, with the Internet, be filled through online interactions. (Rheingold, 1993). The protocols of most online communities make it possible for users to search out and connect with previously unknown people and exchange small talk that eventually strengthens bonds and forges online friendships that often end up becoming offline friendships, as well. (Van Dijck, 2012).

In an age of continual fast-paced globalization and the rapid innovation of media technologies, online interactions have also begun to redefine traditional ideological and cultural boundaries and give increased validity to the term global village (Song, 2009; Vacker, 2000). Warlaumont (2010) examined the effects that social networks, such as Facebook, YouTube, and Twitter were having on breaking down political and cultural barriers that had been erected by France's anti-globalization and cultural protectionist policies. The study found that these online social media sites were causing a redefining of cultural and political boundaries, and that people—particularly of the younger generation—were beginning to view themselves as part of a global community, as opposed to part of a strictly French community. The study reported the potential for global change that could be brought about through online interactions on an international scale. Warlaumont (2010) states:

We see that with increasing use of the Internet over time, the differences between cultures will diminish, creating a trend toward one global culture.

The theory can be applied by looking at the world as a system and the nation states as subsystems. Therefore, it is the interaction between the subsystems that will create a change. (p. 208)

The ideas and hypotheses put forth by the media and globalization scholars in this section have helped to lay the foundation for research into the effects of OIC on how people from one culture perceive people from cultures that are different from their own, but because the Internet is still a relatively new medium, there is much work to be done. The evidence in favor of the Internet as a peaceful, utopian

global village—one of intercultural interconnectedness and global hybridity is far from conclusive, and the following section will elaborate on the concept of Americanization by addressing some of the theories and hypotheses put forth by scholars who have been more skeptical about the potential of the Internet to ameliorate ignorance and discord at an intercultural level.

The Internet and Americanization. Most of the media scholars who have expressed doubt about the potential of the Internet to facilitate greater interconnectedness at an intercultural level and create a global cultural mosaic don't necessarily disagree with the fact that the Internet has sped up the process of globalization and brought people together into what can be called a global village; they simply disagree with the conclusion that the global village that the Internet would create is desirable; after all, greater virtual interconnectedness and proximity are not incontrovertibly favorable conditions. On December 28, 1977, during what would be his final television appearance, Marshall McLuhan explained why he was apprehensive about the increasingly interconnected world created by electronic media. McLuhan claimed that a tribal world would not be a harmonious place, but a savage place, "When people get close together, they get more and more savage [and] impatient with each other. . . the global village is a place of very arduous interfaces and very abrasive situations" (McLuhan, 2005, p. 264). Winner (1997) describes how the Internet's ability to bring together people with like interests and goals could actually result in cultural fragmentation by replacing the traditional community—those with whom we live, interact, and associate with on a daily basis—with empty, virtual communities that consist of nothing more than weak,

superficial associations of people who do not truly understand and support one another, but who gather together around a love of skiing, or some other hobby or interest.

McLuhan *did* believe that global village conditions would increase intercultural awareness and a global sense of responsibility, but, like Postman, he did not believe that these conditions would cause a more open-minded and tolerant people. Using the example of the strained relations between Ireland and England, McLuhan explained how heightened awareness could actually make it very difficult for the global tribespeople to relate to one another. McLuhan described the English as a highly literate society, and the Irish as a more oral and communal group, where tribal feelings are very strong. He claimed that as electronic media make the world a more interconnected place, tribal people begin to feel that they are losing their sense of identity; people everywhere are pushed together into one group, but nobody has time to adjust to, or accommodate the changing global situation; this creates tension, and often leads to violence and hostility (McLuhan, 2005). McLuhan cites terrorism and hijackings as extreme examples of how tribal people will sometimes deal with the loss of identity that accompanies globalization (McLuhan, 2005). Today, more than 35 years after McLuhan discussed these negative implications of the global village, the Internet has been added to the list of electronic media that are facilitating globalization and interconnectedness, and media scholars continue to voice their concerns about the intercultural friction and loss of identity that this increased interconnectedness is causing.

Elaborating on McLuhan's hypothesis, Federman (2003) describes the Internet as "a place that is everywhere and nowhere, that is at once global but renders the globe obsolete, that globalizes the individual yet strips our individuality..." (p. 1). Federman explains how culture—the unique attitudes, values, and beliefs that are shared by a certain group of people—is stripped away when independent groups of people are brought together in cyberspace. The Internet allows people to transport themselves from their homes out into a new (online) world, where they encounter values, ideas, and beliefs that are much different from the ones that make up the culture and society in which they exist. Cyberspace, by allowing people to "literally go out of [their] minds," causes them to lose their own sense of reality, and replace it with a sense of reality that consists of many more dimensions of experience (Federman, 2003, p. 6). Instead of preserving and promoting the uniqueness of individual culture, the Internet erodes an individual's sense of cultural identity and replaces it with a new sense of identity. Sarmela (1975) explains how a loss of cultural identity can also lead to a loss of a sense of meaning of life, which is then replaced with some substitute meaning:

Cultural identity is perhaps generally understood to mean the concept of reality held by a member of a particular culture, the way in which he comprehends and motivates his own socio-cultural existence. A vital part of cultural identification is therefore the community's concept of the purpose or meaning of life around which the individual organizes his own existence. In this respect global cultural change has meant the disappearance of any

generally held concept of the meaning of life and the emergence of numerous substitutes. (Sarmela, 1975, p. 21)

Although written almost 40 years ago, Sarmella's description of the disappearance, within various cultures, of generally held concepts of the meaning of life and the subsequent emergence of substitute meanings, is even more applicable in the age of the Internet, when many media scholars have claimed that America's dominance of the web has been causing the world's numerous and diverse cultures to be overshadowed by American culture; this phenomenon is often referred to as "Americanization" (Federman, 2003; Kraidy, 2002; Nicolaides, 2012).

In 1971, Coca-Cola ran a TV commercial that featured a jingle called, "Buy the World a Coke." In the commercial, teenagers from around the world are gathered together on a hilltop singing a catchy tune about global unity and harmony; they are, of course, singing the song in English, and everyone in the group, Asians, Africans, Indians, and Westerners alike, is holding a bottle of Coco-Cola—an *American* product. This commercial speaks to all of the ideas and concepts that have been discussed in this thesis thus far: globalization, cultural globalization, global village, intercultural interconnectedness, and the ability of mass media to create a shared cultural experience; but it also speaks to the concept of Americanization. In the commercial, the people from various parts of the world are portrayed as united, peaceful, and happy, but they are united around American popular culture and American corporatism. The statement that the commercial is making is, "this American product has the ability to unite the world by creating a shared intercultural experience" (Martens, Dreher, & Gaston, 2008).

Americanization occurs when American policies, products, ideas, and values influence and reshape the way that people in other parts of the world think, act, and behave (Castells, 2001; Ess & Sudweeks, 2001; Kraidy, 2002; Nicolaides, 2012). The process of Americanization is facilitated and intensified through mass communications media, such as television, film, and the Internet, which consist mainly of American/Western culture, although McQuail (2010) points out that other, non-Western countries, such as India, China, and Korea are beginning to produce and disseminate a lot more of their own cultural programming. Sarmela (1975) explains this process:

The cultural heritage of every race comes more and more under the control of... the supremacy of western communication. A standardized western epistemological superstructure standardizes the cognitive, ethical, social and historical world picture of every race. The technological superpowers and the communications controlled by the west, not forgetting audio-visual mass communication and the pop culture, are instituting a cultural imperialism that is rapidly supplanting ecologically and socially localized knowledge with globally standardized knowledge. (p. 27)

Ess and Sudweeks (2001) explain how the Internet has greatly exacerbated the process and the extent of Americanization. Although the Internet provides people with the ability to create and disseminate their own content, most of the content on the Internet is *not* created by users, but by commercial enterprises, most of which are located in America and other Western countries. Kraidy (2002) points out that the Internet followed exactly the same trend as the mass communications

media that came before it, “where a new information technology is appropriated by commercial enterprises as soon as it demonstrates potential for financial profit” (p. 5). Because most of the commercial enterprises and content that dominate the Internet originate in the United States, Internet users around the world naturally encounter a great deal of American popular culture whenever they use the web. The fact that the United States has legacy control over the Internet, and the fact that English is the lingua franca of the Internet world, also speak to the power and influence America has on the Internet (Davis & Johnson, 2002; Kruger, 2014). Davis and Johnson (2002) claim that it is unlikely that universal meaning and intercultural understanding can ever be achieved through a medium that is dominated by English alone. Kramarae (1999) claims that English, in addition to broadcasting a dominant language on the Internet, also broadcasts a dominant culture. American corporate interests, American news content, American entertainment content, and American social media platforms make up a large portion of the information that is accessed and consumed on a daily basis by global web users, and this is why many media scholars feel that the Internet could lead to the various cultures of the world being subsumed and transformed into one predominant American culture (Castells, 2001; Ess & Sudweeks, 2001).

The more optimistic media scholars believe that the fears of online Americanization via the Internet are exaggerated, and that those who believe these trends are inevitable are not taking all of the facts into consideration. Federman (2003), for example, points out that “cultural imperialism is a conception influenced by several hundred years of history that was grounded in a world of linearity and

mechanization” and that “it makes no sense to extrapolate the past into the future. We must instead foretell the present” (p. 8). Federman is claiming that the Internet, unlike the mass media that came before it, does not operate linearly, so new approaches to examining its impact have to be conceived. Print media, radio, and television operated in a top-down, one-to-many, linear format; the Internet, on the other hand, operates in a variety of different formats: top-down, bottom-up, one-to-many, many-to-many, one-to-one, etc.; therefore, it cannot be assessed using the same theories and criteria; a new way of thinking, one that applies to the present, must be undertaken. McQuail (2010) claims that non-Western countries are increasingly contributing more of their own content to the web, creating barriers to online Americanization (often through the control of content), and developing their own networks and social platforms (see also King, Pan, & Roberts, 2013). And Shuerkens (2011) claims that the scholars who support the “Americanization” via Internet viewpoint are making ungrounded assumptions that Western cultural elements are automatically and uncritically adopted by non-Western nations, and that these elements necessarily suppress existing local meanings and values.

Whether the Internet and its many global online social communities are moving the world in the direction of an interconnected, global village, where people can enjoy, celebrate, and share their intercultural differences with one another, or in the direction of a world that is dominated by American ideals and a capitalistic, consumer mentality remains to be seen; thus the debate between media scholars continues. As is the case with many debates and polarizations, it is quite possible that the answer to the question “*how is the Internet affecting culture at a global*

level?” lies somewhere between the two sides of the argument that have been presented in this literature review. Perhaps the Internet *is* facilitating Americanization, but also bringing people together into a global village, and making them more tolerant and understanding of those who differ from them at the same time, an argument in line with that made by Kuipers (2011). Perhaps America’s hegemonic presence on the Internet is not stripping away the differences that exist between various cultural groups, but showing those various cultures some of the things they have in common, and perhaps this will lead to greater intercultural understanding and acceptance. To better understand how culture is actually being affected in the context of online intercultural interactions, this study will examine the stories and experiences regarding their online interactions, of a diverse sample of the members of Interpals, an online global social community that facilitates and encourages intercultural interaction.

Interpals. To date, only one scholarly study involving Interpals has been published, and that study, Lupher, Engle, and Xin (2012), deals with the ways in which Interpals administrators and users deal with spam messages, not with the experiences of Interpals members themselves. *Interpals* is an international social community for cultural exchange and language practice available to people of all ages (Lupher, et al., 2012). The community now has close to 2 million active members from more than 160 countries, representing nearly every geographical and political region of the world. The current corpus of data from the Interpals site includes over 100 million private messages, 40 million “wall” comments, 5 million photos, and 8 million photo comments (Lupher et al., 2012). Like most websites and

online communities, the lingua franca of Interpals is English, and most members have at least a basic understanding of the English language.

Interpals provides a platform for people to come together for friendship, romance, networking opportunities, and language exchange. Many members of Interpals joined the community to learn a foreign language; Interpals' "language exchange" feature allows these members to find and interact with native or fluent speakers of the language they wish to learn. Like Facebook members, Interpals members can add friends and post photos, personal information, and status updates as often as they like; unlike Facebook, Interpals provides its members with the ability to search for other members based on gender, geographic location, religion, native language, etc. Most social networking sites, like Facebook and MySpace are designed to allow users to interact with people they already know; although users on these sites *do* have the ability to search for people and groups from other countries, most users choose to interact primarily with those from their own existing social circles (Parks, 2010). Interpals, on the other hand, was created for the purpose of allowing users to find pen pals, form online social circles, and interact with people from foreign countries and cultures; therefore, those who join the Interpals community likely do so for reasons that are different from those of the people who join social networks like Facebook and MySpace; in fact, it is quite likely that most people who join Interpals know few—if any—other Interpals users when they sign up to be a part of the community (Lupher et al., 2012).

Interpals also allows members to search for other members by keyword; to utilize this feature, a member simply types in a word or phrase that he or she wishes

to locate in the profile of another member, this word or phrase can be anything from the title of a book, to the name of a band, or song; it could also be a hobby, a quote, or any activity of interest (About Interpals, 2013). By allowing members to search for other members by keyword, Interpals opens up the opportunity for its users to meet new people based on shared interests. Privacy settings on Interpals allow members to block individual members, or entire groups of people based upon location; for example, Interpals members have the ability to block all contact with people from an individual country, or from an entire continent. Privacy settings also give members the option to block people by age and gender (About Interpals, 2013). These search and privacy options are also ways in which Interpals significantly differs from major social networking sites, like Facebook and MySpace.

To the best of my knowledge, very few scholarly studies have been conducted on OIC within online global social communities, such as Interpals. With an increasing number of people discovering and joining these communities, it is important that studies of OIC turn some of their attention toward these communities, as they can provide clues as to how OIC affects how people from one culture perceive people from cultures that differ from their own (Warlaumont, 2010).

The initial focus of this study will be centered on the following research questions; however, as this study follows the naturalistic paradigm, it is anticipated that these research questions could be refined, and that further research questions could emerge as the study progresses.

RQ1: In what ways, if any, are the intercultural perceptions of English-speaking Interpals members being shaped by their interactions within the online community?

RQ2: In what ways, if any, is Interpals shaping and/or reinforcing the cultural identities of its English-speaking members?

RQ3: In what ways are English-speaking members of Interpals using the community? (This question was added after the analysis of the interview data)

Chapter Three

Methodology

The methodology for this study will adhere to the guidelines and axioms laid out in Lincoln and Guba's 1985 book, *Naturalistic Inquiry*, which details the approach that should be followed when designing and carrying out a study that utilizes the naturalistic paradigm. Lincoln and Guba (1985) state that the naturalistic paradigm is the paradigm of choice for virtually all inquiries into the social and behavioral sciences. The naturalistic paradigm is the best fit for this study because this study will attempt to evaluate a social phenomenon that is not only context-specific, but also very prone to change. With nearly 2,000,000 members, each experiencing the community from a unique and personal perspective, it would be impossible to make generalizations about Interpals, let alone global online communities as a whole based on the information that is obtained. However, through in-depth, one-on-one interviews with Interpals members, it will be possible to compare and contrast the experiences that these members are having with regard

to intercultural interactions within the community. These interviews will also likely reveal patterns and themes in the way that these members feel about their intercultural interactions within the community, which will help me to develop theories and conclusions that are grounded in the data that is obtained. Because this study—like all naturalistic studies—is emergent, it will begin with a focus and an outline, which will develop and emerge in a continual process as the data is collected and analyzed. As the study progresses, it is likely that new questions and ideas will surface; these questions and ideas will help to shape the study and refine its focus, making it more structured as the data collection process proceeds.

The methods that will be used to obtain and analyze data will be outlined here and laid out in greater detail below. First, interview requests will be sent to a number of Interpals members to see if they would be interested in participating in one-on-one interviews for research purposes. In the interest of obtaining a diverse sample, interview requests will be sent to community members from a variety of geographic locations and cultural backgrounds; this information will be determined through the profiles of the community members. Second, a purposive sample of community members will be selected from those who express interest in participating in the study; once again, diversity will be taken into account when selecting the sample. The diversity of the sample will be determined by my own tacit knowledge. Third, interviews will be scheduled and carried out using Skype video chat, Skype audio chat, and email exchanges; the interviews will be audio-recorded (when possible) and transcribed. Throughout the interviewing process, I will keep records and take notes of the process and check in, as needed, with my committee

chairman to report progress and receive feedback. This process of reporting and receiving feedback will help to ensure that the study is proceeding as planned, that I am adhering to the strictures of naturalistic design, and that the trustworthiness of the study is enhanced. Interviewees will continue to be selected through ongoing purposive sampling until redundancy in data is achieved. During the interviewing process, emerging patterns will be determined and the scope of the study will be fine-tuned and refined, as needed. Fourth, all those who participated in the study will be contacted by me for the purpose of member checking. Fifth, an inductive analysis of the data will take place with the assistance of NVIVO, all interview data will be unitized and categorized, rules regarding inclusion and exclusion of data into categories will be determined, and the final categories, patterns, and themes will be determined. Sixth, the organized and categorized data will be used to develop theory and conclusions that are grounded in the data, or to expound on the OIC-related theories discussed in the literature review above.

Purposive sampling. Because this study is naturalistic in design, purposive sampling will be used to recruit a segment of the Interpals population that will be suitable to the purpose of this study. The purpose of this study is not to facilitate generalizations about the Interpals community as a whole, but to better understand the experiences of Interpals members within the community, and how those experiences are shaping attitudes and perceptions of members from countries and cultures other than their own.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that the naturalist begins with the assumption that context is critical. Because naturalistic inquiries are tied so closely

to contextual factors, random sampling is not necessary; the naturalist is looking for a particular segment of the population. Lincoln and Guba (1985) elaborated on the importance of focusing on context—as opposed to generalizing—by stating: “The object of the game is not to focus on the similarities that can be developed into generalizations, but to detail the many specifics that give the context its unique flavor” (p. 201). Purposive sampling allows for the ‘detailing of the many specifics’ by giving the naturalistic inquirer the ability to choose subjects that would provide for maximum variation at the onset of the study (Patton, 1990). Once the initial data are gathered and analyzed, additional subjects may be selected based on the information that has been obtained; for example, if an Interpals member who is interviewed talks about a friend he or she has made through Interpals, that friend may be contacted, with the interviewee’s permission, to see if he or she would also like to participate in an interview. This process will allow for the research questions to be revised and refined until it takes all cases and accounts into consideration. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985; Erlandson, Harris, Skipper, & Allen, 1993).

Lincoln and Guba (1985) outline four characteristics of the purposeful sample: an emergent design, serial selection of sample units, continuous adjustment or focusing of the sample, and selection to the point of redundancy. This outline will be used to guide the sampling process for this study. Because the sampling design is emergent, and subjects will be selected until redundancy is achieved, it is impossible, at this point, to state to any degree of specificity how many subjects will be needed for the interviewing process; however, Lincoln and Guba (1985) point out that in interviewing, redundancy is often reached after about 12 interviews, and

usually never exceeds 20 interviews. The initial plan for this study, then, will be to interview between 12 and 20 Interpals members; however, the interviewing process will be terminated when it has been determined that redundancy has been achieved.

To begin the selection process, interview requests will be sent, via email, to a broad range of Interpals users. Interpals gives its users the ability to search for other users based on characteristics such as: age, nationality, religious affiliation, native language, personal interests, and even the length of time that a particular user has been a member of the community. The ability to search for users based upon these characteristics will enable the construction of a sample that brings a wide range of various elements and contexts into the study. In the initial interview request, Interpals members will be asked if they prefer using Interpals to interact with members from countries, cultures, and religious backgrounds that differ from their own, or if they prefer engaging with members who share similar cultural and religious backgrounds. The initial interview requests will also seek to determine, whether or not the recipient feels that Interpals has played a role in shaping his or her opinion about those who belong to cultural backgrounds that differ from his or her own. The initial interview requests will create a pool of potential interview candidates by determining who is interested in participating in the study, and by determining who would be a good fit for the purposes of the study. Once the potential interview candidates are determined, they will be informed about the nature of the study. My name and contact information, as well as the name of my research institution, and the purpose of the study will be provided to each potential

interview candidate. Providing potential interview candidates with this information, in addition to being a vital and necessary part of any serious qualitative study, also serves to build initial trust between the inquirer and potential research participants by showing the participants that the study is intended to be legitimate research (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). A copy of the interview request can be found in Appendix C.

Interviews. In-depth, one-on-one interviews will be used to obtain the data for this study. Interviews are particularly well-suited to understanding the social actor's knowledge and experience because interviews are ports of entry into a person's ideologies and worldviews (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Guba and Lincoln (1981) describe two categories of interviews, the structured and the unstructured:

In the structured interview, the problem is defined by the researcher before the interview. The questions have been formulated ahead of time, and the respondent is expected to answer in terms of the interviewer's framework and definition of the problem... In an unstructured interview, the format is non-standardized, and the interviewer does not seek normative responses. Rather, the problem of interest is expected to arise from the respondent's reaction to the broad issues raised by the inquirer. (pp. 155-156)

Dexter (1970) defines the unstructured interview as one that:

stress(es) the interviewee's definition of the situation; encouraging the interviewee to structure the account of the situation; and letting the interviewee introduce to a considerable extent his notions of what he

regards as relevant, instead of relying upon the investigator's notion of relevance. (p. 3)

At the beginning of the data-gathering process, when information is being gathered from the first few interviewees, the interviews tend to be relatively unstructured, but as more information is gathered, and a sufficient amount of data becomes available to make comparisons, the interviews usually become more structured (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). The interviewing process in this study will follow this format. The initial interviews will be guided by general questions aimed at determining whether or not Interpals members feel the community has shaped their opinions about other community members from various cultural backgrounds. Once the data from the initial interviews begins to accumulate, and patterns emerge in the responses, questions will be formulated around those patterns, making the interviews more structured and better-focused on the issues and ideas that emerge as the research proceeds. This approach will make it possible to gradually refine the questions in accordance with the multiple realities that are encountered (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Interviews will be conducted using Skype's video chat feature, Skype's audio chat feature, and through email correspondence. Skype video chat is the preferred mode of conducting interviews for this study, but because not all participants will have access to Skype video chat, and because some participants may not feel comfortable using video or audio chat, email correspondence will also be utilized. The reason video chat is preferred is that "[t]he immediacy of this real-time interaction allows participants to ask and answer questions efficiently, and it

contributes to a climate of intimacy in which understandings can be carefully developed and explored (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Video chat will make it possible to pick up on the non-verbal cues and unvoiced reactions that the participant might display throughout the interview. Often times, the non-verbal cues and physical reactions of the participant provide valuable clues to the inquirer as to how the participant might be feeling about a question that was asked or a statement that was made. The inquirer can use these non-verbal clues as guides to follow-up questions that help to further reveal what the participant might be thinking (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As mentioned, in order to obtain a fuller and more representative sample, email correspondence will also be utilized to accommodate those who do not have access to the technology needed for real-time interviews.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) stress the importance of preparation for each individual interview so that the inquirer can be as informed about each participant as possible. In preparation for each of the interviews in this study, information will be gathered from the Interpals profile of each participant. Gathering information about the participant's interests, hobbies, public Interpals interactions, and personal reasons for joining Interpals will aid in the process of formulating and modifying questions for each particular participant at the onset of, and throughout the interview. The inquirer can build trust and make the interview more comfortable for the participant by showing the him or her that research and information gathering took place before the interview (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Lindlof and Taylor (2011) describe two instruments that are used to keep the interviews focused and on-track: the interview schedule, and the interview guide.

The interview schedule is used when a project requires uniformity in the wording and sequencing of questions. An interview guide consists of a list of topics and questions that can be asked in different ways for different participants. With the interview guide, the inquirer is free to remove, add, or amend questions as necessary (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Because this study follows the naturalistic paradigm, an interview guide will be the instrument used to add structure to the interviews. As mentioned above, the interviews will become more structured as the study progresses, but an interview guide will be used—even in the early stages of the study—to make the interviews more organized and efficient.

At the onset of each interview, participants will be asked general questions about their hometowns, families, jobs, etc. in order to make them comfortable with talking about themselves. The information gathered in the interview-preparation phase will help with the formulation of these general questions. Lindlof and Taylor (2011) stress the importance of participant and interviewer self-disclosure at the onset of each interview. Self-disclosure helps to build rapport and establish goodwill between the interviewer and the participant, creating an atmosphere of trust and openness between the two (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011). Initial participant self-disclosures also gives the inquirer the opportunity to take note of the participants' speech patterns, storytelling performance, and willingness to share confidences, which helps the inquirer make adjustments to the interviewing strategy (Lindlof & Taylor, 2011).

After the initial questions are posed, and the participant and I have had the opportunity to build a certain level of trust and become comfortable speaking with

one another, the interview will turn to the focus of the study. The following questions will make up the initial interview guide, but these questions are merely a roadmap of inquiry, and will likely be amended and refined as the interview process moves forward. As suggested by Taylor and Lindlof (2011), a nondirective question will be used to shift the focus of the interview from self-disclosure questions to questions about the Interpals community itself. The interview guide used for this study can be found in Appendix B.

Notes will be taken throughout the interview so that final thoughts and questions can be addressed at the conclusion of the interview. When possible, the interviews will be audio-recorded and transcribed so that they can be compared and contrasted, and so that questions can be developed and refined based on the data that accumulates. Transcribing the interviews will also make it possible for member checking to take place at the conclusion of the entire interviewing process. Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe member checking as the most crucial technique for establishing credibility in qualitative interviews. Member checking is a process “whereby data, analytic categories, interpretations, and conclusions are tested with (those) from whom the data were originally collected” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). In essence, member-checking is a way for the inquirer to play back the interview to the participant so that he or she has an opportunity to provide feedback, clarify certain responses, amend responses that he or she does not feel adequately addressed the question, etc. Member checking helps to ensure that the information obtained during the interview actually represents how the participants

feel and what they believe about the issue under investigation; this, in turn, greatly enhances the credibility of the findings (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Member checking can be done both formally and informally, and it occurs continuously (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Informal member checking takes place throughout the interviewing process when participants are asked to clarify or repeat some of the responses they are providing. Sometimes, informal member checking also includes sharing parts of responses that other participants have provided to get the opinion or reaction of the person who is presently being interviewed (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Formal member checking takes place when the interviewing process comes to an end and the participants are given copies of the inquiry report so that they may have one last chance to react and offer feedback (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Member checking is also important because it “provides the respondent an opportunity to give an assessment of overall adequacy in addition to confirming individual data points” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 314). Member checking will take place both formally and informally throughout the course of the interviewing process to ensure that accurate and credible information is being recorded and analyzed. The interviewing process will come to an end when redundancy is achieved. Lincoln and Guba (1985) define redundancy as the point when no new information is forthcoming from newly sampled units.

Inductive analysis of the information will take place continually throughout the interviewing process. After the interviewing process comes to an end, and after feedback is received from the respondents through member checking, a final

analysis of the data will take place, and a results section will be written to convey the findings of the study.

Inductive data analysis. “Inductive data analysis may be defined most simply as a process for ‘making sense’ of field data” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 202). The analysis will be conducted at the conclusion of the interviewing process, when the interviews are recorded and transcribed and member checking is complete. Inductive analysis is very similar to content analysis, which uncovers embedded information and makes it explicit (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Lincoln and Guba (1985) describe two essential subprocesses in the inductive analysis: unitizing and categorizing.

Unitizing is a process of coding, whereby “raw data are systematically transformed and aggregated into units, which permit precise description of relevant content characteristics” (Holsti, 1969, p. 94; Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Units are single pieces of information that can stand by themselves; they are interpretable in the absence of any additional information. These units may be simple sentences, or long paragraphs (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). “Categorizing is the process whereby previously unitized data are organized into categories that provide descriptive or inferential information about the context or setting from which the units were derived” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 203). Essentially, categorizing involves sorting units into provisional categories on the basis of ‘look-alike’ characteristics, which may initially be only tacitly understood (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). As more of these categories arise, the inquirer endeavors to write rules that serve as a basis for inclusion/exclusion decisions; although the rules can be amended as needed, every piece of unitized

information that fits into the category must, in the end, follow the final form of the rule (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

To assist with the unitizing and categorizing of interview transcripts, this study will use the 9th edition of NVIVO, which is a computer-assisted program that provides researchers with a platform for inductive analysis by allowing for the coding of data to organize material into categories, themes, and topics. Once all of the information is collected, unitized, and categorized, interpretations and conclusions can be drawn and recorded based on what the data show (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

Trustworthiness Issues. Trustworthiness is often a concern when it comes to naturalistic designs. Unlike the conventional inquirer, who knows what he is looking for, postulates a relationship, and uses tools that have been formulated specifically for the purpose of testing the hypothesis to obtain results that are expected to be generalizable, the naturalistic inquirer is engaged in an emergent design; he does not know exactly what he is looking for and the hypotheses and postulations are continually refined as the study progresses (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). This emergent and loosely-structured approach has led many scholars to view naturalistic inquiry as arbitrary and unverifiable, however, if the proper planning and precautions are undertaken, the naturalistic design can be just as trustworthy and worth paying attention to as the conventional design.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) provide an outline of the criteria upon which the trustworthiness of a naturalistic study might be established. Because the naturalistic approach utilizes methodologies, instruments, and designs that differ greatly

from the conventional approach, the establishment of trustworthiness for a naturalistic design cannot be achieved by adherence to the same standards of trustworthiness that are associated with the conventional design. Where the conventional inquirer seeks internal validity, the naturalistic inquirer seeks credibility; where the conventional inquirer seeks external validity, the naturalistic inquirer seeks transferability. Likewise, in the naturalistic approach, reliability is exchanged for dependability, and objectivity is exchanged for confirmability. These four criteria will enhance the trustworthiness of the naturalistic design, and ensure that the study is worth paying attention to (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Each of these four criterions will be applied to this study as described below:

Credibility. Lincoln and Guba (1985) list *prolonged engagement* as the first of five techniques that are likely to make the findings of the study more credible. It is important to immerse oneself in the culture and routine of the site under analysis before the formal investigation begins. Doing so helps the inquirer to understand the phenomenon with reference to the context in which they are embedded (Lincoln & Guba, 1985) Many studies have been criticized and discredited because the researchers did not take the proper amount of time to familiarize themselves with their sites of analysis, but entered as “strangers in a strange land” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 302). Prolonged engagement will help the inquirer to rise above his preconceptions and hasty judgments about the site (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Prolonged engagement also gives the inquirer the opportunity to build trust with the members of the community by allowing him to become familiar with the habits, customs, and idiosyncrasies of its members; it is natural for respondents to be

skeptical of someone who simply drops in and begins asking questions without prior knowledge of the ins and outs of the site of analysis (Lincoln & Guba, 1985).

As the inquirer of this study, I have been an active member of the Interpals community since 2009. In that time, I have become familiar with the layout of the community, as well as with its rules and customs, and the practices of its members. I have spent many hours interacting via email, snail mail, live chat, and Skype with community members from North America, Europe, Asia, South America, and Africa. Several such interactions with a member from Homs, Syria prompted the idea for this study. My knowledge of and familiarity with the community will aid in establishing credibility in the selection of the potential respondents and in their level of trust toward me. This trust and familiarity will be beneficial during the interviewing process.

Persistent observation goes hand-in-hand with prolonged engagement:

If the purpose of prolonged engagement is to render the inquirer open to the multiple influences that impinge upon the phenomenon being studied, the purpose of persistent observation is to identify those characteristics and elements in the situation that are most relevant to the problem or issue being pursued and focusing on them in detail. If prolonged engagement provides scope, persistent observation provides depth. (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 304)

As mentioned, I have been interacting with members of the Interpals community since 2009. These interactions have given me much insight into the motives and desires of Interpals members. Although no formal research has taken place as of yet, I have spent a considerable amount of time questioning and observing the

interactions within the community. These observations have helped me to reach a greater level of understanding of the potential of Interpals to bring people together, no matter where they live or what they believe.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) list triangulation as the third mode of improving the probability that findings and interpretations will be found credible. There are several different types and modes of triangulation, but data triangulation will be the type that is used in this study. Data triangulation involves using different sources of information in order to increase the validity (credibility) of a study (Patton, 2002). These sources are likely to be stakeholders in a program, participants, other researchers, program staff, other community members, and so on (Patton, 2002). In this study, the sources will be other Interpals community members. Once the data are gathered from the first few interviews, and patterns and similarities begin to appear in the responses of the interviewees, questions regarding the validity of those similarities will be created and used in subsequent interviews in order to verify or check that information. By checking the information that is obtained against the subsequent respondents, otherwise known as triangulating the data, patterns will begin to become more concrete and a greater level of credibility will be achieved.

Negative case analysis, which is somewhat similar to data triangulation, is yet another technique that will be used to increase the credibility of this study. Negative case analysis may be regarded as the “process of revising hypotheses with hindsight. The object of the game is continuously to refine a hypothesis until it *accounts for all known cases without exception.*” (Lincoln & Guba, 1985, p. 309). As the study gets

underway, the initial hypothesis may be too specific to account for the data that accumulates as the study moves forward. Checking the data with other respondents, and asking the respondents relevant questions that pertain to the data will make it possible to adjust the hypothesis to fit the sum total of information that is obtained. Whenever patterns in the data appear to contradict the hypothesis as it stands, the hypothesis can be revised to eliminate the contradictions by absorbing the contradictory data patterns. By the end of the revising process, the hypothesis will be worded in such a way that all cases are taken into account, which will increase the credibility of the study.

Finally, member checking will take place at the end of each interview, and again once the interview process is complete. Lincoln and Guba (1985) listed member checking as the single most important provision that can be made to bolster a study's credibility. Member checking will enhance credibility by ensuring that the respondents actually meant what they said. Member checking is described in greater detail in the *Interviews* section above.

Transferability. External validity is concerned with the extent to which the findings of one study can be applied to other situations. In positivist studies, the concern often lies in demonstrating that the results can be applied to a wider population (Merriam, 1998). Because the findings in naturalistic studies are specific to a small number of individuals, usually within a single environment or community, it is impossible to generalize the results to a larger population (Shenton, 2004). Many naturalistic inquirers believe that even conventional generalizability is impossible because the observations are defined by the contexts in which they occur

(Erlandson, et al., 1993). Lincoln and Guba (1985) suggest that it is the responsibility of the inquirer to ensure that sufficient contextual information about the research site is provided to enable the reader to make any desired transfers. The naturalistic inquirer cannot claim that his study can be applied to similar sites or contexts, but he can provide enough information about his research site that any future inquirers might make such a decision.

The following information, as suggested by Shenton (2004), will be provided to allow future inquirers to make their own decisions about the transferability of this study:

1. A description of the research site (Interpals.net);
2. Any restrictions in the type of people who contributed data;
3. The number of participants involved in the study;
4. The data collection methods that were employed (one-on-one interviews);
5. The time period over which the data was collected

Dependability. The positivist counterpart of dependability is reliability, or the ability to show that, if the study were repeated, in the same context, with the same methods and the same participants, similar results would be obtained (Shenton, 2004). By this definition, reliability is unobtainable in a naturalistic study; the phenomenon and research sites that are examined by naturalistic inquirers are ever changing, rendering repeatability unfeasible. Florio-Ruane (1991) goes so far as to say that the naturalistic inquirer's observations are tied to the specific situation of the study, and that published descriptions are static and frozen in the

ethnographic present. Therefore, a naturalistic inquirer makes his study trustworthy by making it dependable.

Lincoln and Guba (1985) note the strong similarities between credibility and dependability and state that a demonstration of credibility goes a long way in ensuring dependability. To make a study even more dependable, it is important to make a detailed report of the processes that took place within the study; this will enable future researchers to repeat the work, even if the same results are not necessarily obtained (Shenton, 2004). The final section of this chapter will include a detailed report of these processes.

Confirmability. The final criterion for establishing trustworthiness in a naturalistic study is confirmability, which is similar to the positivist's objectivity criterion (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Objectivity is achieved when the instruments that are used are not dependent on human skill and perception (Shenton, 2004). To achieve objectivity, positivist researchers take measures to eliminate any bias from the study. The elimination of bias is not possible in a naturalistic study, where the inquirer is the primary tool for gathering information, and where the inquirer's tacit knowledge and intuition largely shape the direction of the study (Lincoln & Guba, 1985). Therefore, when a naturalistic inquirer takes measures to make his study confirmable, he is not attempting to eliminate bias, but ensuring that, as far as possible, his study's findings are the result of the experiences and ideas of the informants, rather than something that comes about from his own characteristics and preferences (Shenton, 2004).

Data triangulation goes a long way in promoting confirmability in naturalistic research (Shenton, 2004). By checking previously-obtained data with subsequent respondents, and formulating questions around the data that has been obtained, the inquirer helps to ensure that the data is confirmable among the participants themselves (Shenton, 2004). Miles and Huberman (1994) encourage the inquirer to increase the study's confirmability by admitting any predispositions, as well as beliefs underpinning decisions and methods adopted. Any preliminary theories that were not borne out by the data should also be discussed (Shenton, 2004). These suggestions will be followed in this study. Data triangulation will be carried out once patterns begin to emerge, and reflective commentary on all decisions, beliefs, and findings will be included in the following chapters. Following these four criteria, and taking the measures and precautions that have been discussed in this section, will help to ensure that this study is indeed trustworthy, scholarly, and worth paying attention to.

This naturalistic exploration of the beliefs and experiences of Interpals members in regard to their interactions within the Interpals community, will provide important and detailed insight into how one online global community is potentially shaping the intercultural perceptions of its members. Perhaps the members' interactions within the community help them to become more interconnected and accepting of other cultures by exposing them to new belief systems and causing them to look at certain aspects of their own lives from a different perspective. Perhaps a higher level of interest in—and tolerance of—other cultures is what led them to join the community in the first place. A thorough

examination of the attitudes and mindsets of those engaged in frequent intercultural interactions on Interpals could provide us with some clues that lead us to a better understanding of what track we are on, and what that might entail for the future.

The interviewing process. This section will provide an account of the interviewing process and the participants who were interviewed; this account will include brief biographical descriptions of the participants, it will provide the timeline of the interviewing process, and it will outline the means by which each of the interviews was conducted (Skype, email, online messaging, etc.). This account will also include a brief description of the interview guide and how it evolved in response to patterns that emerged throughout the course of the interviewing process, as well as in response to feedback that was provided by the participants during post-interview member checking.

The interviewing process began in mid-December 2013, when interview requests were sent via email to over 30 Interpals members from various countries around the world; these members were selected at random from a site-provided list of all members who were logged in at the time. Although most of the requests were ignored, two members from the initial group of email recipients agreed to participate in the study; these interviews were conducted over the next couple of days using Skype video chat and live online messaging. Following the first two interviews, the responses were recorded and examined, and additional interview requests were sent out. The process of sending out interview requests, conducting interviews, and examining and comparing the results for the purpose of modifying and adding or removing questions continued throughout the duration of the

interviewing process. Each time additional Interpals members were sought for participation, I took the diversity of the participants into consideration by paying special attention to the age, gender, and home country of those being selected to receive interview requests. I also read all of the information provided in the members' public profiles to determine whether or not the members would be a good fit for the study.

The participant selection and interviewing process took place from December 2013 to June 2014, during which a total of 17 members were selected and interviewed. Nine of the interviews were conducted from mid-December to mid-January; the eight remaining interviews were conducted from early May to early-June. The three-month hiatus in the interviewing process was an inevitable consequence of my educational obligations in my doctoral program; however, comparisons of the data obtained during the early round of interviews with the data obtained during the later round of interviews did not reveal any noteworthy or unaccountable changes in the attitudes and perceptions of the participants. Four of the interviews were conducted using Skype video chat; four were conducted using Skype audio chat; four were conducted using online instant messaging, and five were conducted through email.

Together, the 17 participants comprised a diverse and comprehensive blend of geographic locations, religious beliefs, educational and socioeconomic backgrounds, political ideologies, and cultural backgrounds. Nine of the participants were female and eight of the participants were male; all of the inhabitable continents were represented in the study; the ages of the participants ranged from

19 to 36; the length of participant involvement in the online community ranged from six months to ten years; ten of the participants had attended, or were attending a university; the various belief systems of the participants included: Islam, Judaism, Christianity, Buddhism, and atheism—although the topic of religion was *not* discussed in some of the interviews. All of the participants were fluent or proficient in the English language; however, there were some moments during the interviews when either the participant or I had to be asked to speak more slowly, or to rephrase a question or a response in order to be adequately understood. The following section provides demographical information about each of the participants in this study; the participants are listed in chronological order based on when they were interviewed, beginning with the earliest. A list of the participants' names (pseudonyms have been used), along with basic demographical and interview information, can be found in Appendix A.

Description of participants. 1. Anita, a 26-year old nanny from the town of Quilmes, a suburb of Buenos Aires, on the Rio de la Plata in Argentina, was the first participant to be interviewed. Anita is a devout Jehovah's Witness who attends church services and activities several times each week. According to her Interpals profile, the Bible is the greatest influence in her life as it continually reminds her to be a better person. Anita was born and raised in Nicaragua and moved to Argentina with her family when she was 16 years old. She joined Interpals because she wanted to learn more about the Asian culture, and make friends with members from Japan and Korea.

I began the interview with Anita by reminding her that her responses were being recorded, and that she was free to withdraw her consent and terminate the interview at any time (this procedure was repeated for each subsequent interview). She said that she understood this option and that she was happy to participate in the study. The initial questions were intended to break the ice and build rapport; I used the information from Anita's Interpals profile to formulate some general get-to-know-you questions. As this was the first interview, I used the interview guide to navigate the interview, and asked follow-up questions when further elaboration seemed necessary. This interview, which lasted for about 45 minutes, was conducted with Skype's video chat feature.

2. Samira is a 33-year old Sunni Muslim woman from Karachi, Pakistan. She prides herself on being open and honest and on never disparaging others, whatever their religious beliefs or political leanings may be. Of all the participants, Samira has been a member of Interpals the longest, having joined the community back in 2004, shortly after it was launched. Samira has always loved traveling and learning about other cultures. She has been to many foreign countries, including the United States, England, Scotland, Malaysia, Singapore, Japan, and the United Arab Emirates, but she says that her favorite place will always be her home country. Samira's primary reason for joining Interpals was to dispel rumors about Pakistan and Islam in the wake of the September 11, 2001 terrorist attacks on the United States. Her public profile is filled with links to songs and short YouTube videos that promote Pakistani culture. Samira is an avid news watcher who enjoys following the major news organizations from a number of countries. She is appalled with what she referred to

as the biased, ethnocentric media coverage that is produced and circulated by Western media outlets. Samira wants to share a Pakistani's view of Pakistan with as many Interpals members as possible.

The interview with Samira was conducted using Skype instant messaging. Samira had access to Skype video chat, but she was uncomfortable using that feature, as well as the audio feature; she said she only uses those features with her family and close friends. The questions used for the interview with Samira followed the same interview guide that was used for Anita; however, the interview with Samira caused me to add a question about participant perceptions of foreign media coverage. Samira's interview lasted for approximately one hour.

3. Alexandra is a 23-year old woman who lives with her boyfriend in Saint-Maur-des-Fossés, France, a suburban town southeast of Paris. Alexandra works in a bakery, where she encounters a number of foreign tourists every day, mostly Americans and citizens of other European countries. Whenever Alexandra has customers who are from English, Italian, Portuguese, or Spanish-speaking countries, she attempts to speak with them in their native language; she does this to make them feel more at home while they're in France, but also—she admits—to show off her foreign language skills. Alexandra, whose mother is from Brazil, grew up in a bilingual home, and began learning Italian and Spanish before she started high school. Alexandra joined Interpals when one of her friends told her about the online community's language exchange feature; since then, Alexandra has been accumulating dozens of friends from all around the world who hope to learn or improve their French. Alexandra said that her favorite interactions on Interpals are

her interactions with American users because she is fascinated by American culture, humor, and cinema; she even went so far as to refer to herself as an “Americanophile.” Alexandra’s profile is filled with quotes from, and references to, popular American films and American top-40 songs.

The interview with Alexandra was conducted using Skype video chat and lasted for about 40 minutes. This interview utilized the same interview guide as was used in the previous two interviews, but there were a lot more follow-up questions and side discussions that took place during this interview. Alexandra’s English-speaking skills were outstanding and when I brought this to Alexandra’s attention, she attributed her English speaking ability to all of the American films that she watches.

4. Cortney is a 25-year old law student from Adelaide, Australia. He is studying international law and hopes to work as an international human rights attorney and activist. His Interpals profile states that he would love to chat with anyone and everyone regardless of age, gender, race, religion, and sexual orientation; however, Cortney said that he prefers to interact with Spanish speakers because he is currently trying to learn that language. This upcoming summer, Cortney will be teaching English at an elementary school in China. Cortney joined Interpals one year ago, after he began studying Spanish in his spare time.

The interview with Cortney was conducted through email. I sent the set of questions from the interview guide to Cortney on the morning of December 28, 2013 and Cortney responded to the questions later that day. This was the first interview conducted by email. After going over the responses, I sent a response

email to Courtney for the purpose of member checking, and Courtney responded by saying that his responses were just as he intended them to be. This process of sending a follow-up email for the purpose of member checking was used for all email interviews.

5. Nele is a 24-year old Muslim from Cankiri, Turkey, a city not too far from the capital city of Ankara, but her profile states that she is from Keflavik, Iceland. Nele admitted that she falsified her profile information because she did not get as much attention as she had hoped for when she listed her actual information. To create her false profile, Nele uploaded a photo that she took from Google images after typing "beautiful white girl" into the search query. Nele also learned a few common Icelandic words and phrases, and conducted some background research on the Icelandic town in which she claimed to live. Nele emphasized that she was not trying to abuse the trust of other community members by falsely reporting her location; she just wanted to be able to interact with more members from Western Europe and North America, and she wasn't receiving many messages from these members when she indicated that she was a Turk. Nele opined that community members from wealthier, more-developed countries tend to ignore members from poorer, developing countries, so she decided to take on the virtual identity of a member from a more-developed, Western country to open up more opportunities for interaction with Westerners. Although Nele identifies as a Muslim, she admitted that her religion is more of a cultural tradition than an actual belief system to which she strictly adheres. Nele plans to begin studying nursing at a university in Israel

later this year. She said she does not wish to return to Turkey after school; she would rather live in France, or the United States.

The interview with Nele was a bit difficult because of her strong Turkish accent and her limited knowledge of the English language, but by slowing down the pace of the questions, and by repeating and clarifying what she said in her responses, the interview was successful and provided a lot of new, rich data for this study. The interview, which was conducted with Skype audio, lasted for about 45 minutes.

6. Ingmar is a 24-year old Swiss German who lives in Hamburg, Germany and works as a computer programmer. When Ingmar was in high school, he spent a year as an exchange student in Pleasanton, California. Ingmar said that his year in Pleasanton really changed his perspective of other cultures. On most weekends, he would go into San Francisco or Oakland with members of his host family and experience the culture and atmosphere of the American big city. It was during this time that he made several friends from China, Korea, India, and the United States. Not too long after returning to Germany, Ingmar signed up for Interpals in hopes of expanding his cultural horizons by interacting with people from around the world. Since joining the Interpals community, Ingmar has gone on a number of trips to other countries in Europe to visit friends he had made through Interpals. Ingmar doesn't spend as much time with the online community as he used to, but, from time to time, he still likes to sign on and chat with old friends, or with anyone else willing to reach out to him. Ingmar said that his time in California, and his time spent engaging with foreigners in the online community have made him much more open-

minded. He also mentioned that he has become much more skeptical of how other cultures are portrayed on television and in films, and that he would much rather learn about other cultures by engaging with them directly.

The interview with Ingmar was conducted using Skype's audio feature and lasted for about 45 minutes. Ingmar seemed really interested by the question about perceptions of foreign media coverage, as this led him to explain his lack of trust in German media and his practice of engaging with media from a variety of different sources. Ingmar's story about being a foreign exchange student in the United States led me to add a question about physically visiting foreign countries and engaging with their local customs and cultures.

7. Anna is a 26-year-old English professor from Izhevsk, a city situated in the Western Urals of Russia. Anna explained that she is tired of living in central Russia because she feels like life is passing her by and she is missing out on the arts and cultural opportunities of a big city. She has come to a point where she is torn between continuing to stay in Izhevsk, and moving to Moscow or St. Petersburg to try to find a teaching position in one of those cities. Anna said that it wouldn't be too hard for her to get away from her current teaching position and move to a bigger city because teaching positions in Russian universities are assigned for one year at a time, after which the professor must seek to renew the teaching contract for another year. To Anna, Interpals is a way to escape what she considers the monotony of life in Izhevsk without having to physically leave the city. She said she has made several really good friends from around the world through Interpals, and she hopes to be able to visit them someday. All of the books, movies, and television shows that Anna

listed as her favorites on her profile page are American. She is currently using the Interpals language exchange to help her learn German, Italian, and Hungarian. Like Samira, Anna also mentioned how disappointed she is with how Western media is covering Russia and its leaders.

The interview with Anna was conducted using Skype instant messaging and lasted for about an hour. Anna's grasp of the English language, and her understanding of Western culture were impressive. This interview followed the interview guide, and focused heavily on Western media dominance and the effects of globalization on Russian culture.

8. Gio is a 22-year-old university student living in Rome, Italy. He considers himself an adventurer and a world traveler—although, the 11 countries he has visited outside of Italy are all in Europe. Gio is studying engineering because he felt a lot of pressure from his parents to study a physical science, or a math-based subject; he would have rather studied psychology. Gio said he joined the Interpals community when he was 17 years old because he was getting bored with his Italian friends; he felt that there was a much bigger world out there and he wanted to explore it the only way he could: virtually. Gio said that if he could go anywhere in the world he would go to Hollywood, California. All of the bands, movies, and television shows listed on his profile are from the United States.

The interview with Gio, which lasted for about 35 minutes, was conducted using Skype video chat, one of the first things that I noticed in the video stream was a California Republic flag hanging on the wall above Gio's bed. When asked about

the flag, Gio said that he put the flag there to remind him where he is going to live some day.

9. Tahel, a 23-year-old Jewish woman from Jerusalem said that her guiding belief is to get as much out of life as possible. Tahel received a bachelor's degree in English literature and linguistics, with a minor in East Asia studies. As part of the foreign language requirements for her degree, she chose to learn Korean. After graduating from college, she took additional Korean language courses at the Korean Culture Center in Jerusalem. Tahel is now a lieutenant in the Israeli army, where she works as a high school English teacher in remote areas of the world. Tahel said she was born with a deep interest in other cultures and languages, which is what caused her join Interpals. Tahel mostly enjoys meeting and interacting with Koreans in the online community. She said that her time spent engaging with others on Interpals has helped to put into perspective how much the people of the world really are part of one large family. She talked about how she eventually became really good friends with a man from Papa New Guinea after contacting him to learn more about the practice of cannibalism in the area. In her spare time, she plays the guitar, dances salsa, and builds her portfolio as an amateur photographer. The interview with Tahel was conducted through email correspondence.

10. Mya is a 22-year-old Swedish-Lebanese Muslim woman who is currently living in Sweden. Mya has lived in several countries, including Lebanon, Malta, and Korea. Her English skills are impeccable. Her mother, who spent a lot of time living in England as a child, insisted the Mya begin learning English at a young age. In her spare time, Mya participates in a local theater group, practices martial arts, and

travels as much as possible. Mya said she respects the Islamic faith, but she does not practice the strict, orthodox brand of Islam; she is much more relaxed and heterodox in her religious beliefs and standards, sometimes wearing the hijab (the head scarf worn by Muslim women), and sometimes wearing a t-shirt and jeans, depending on her mood. Mya became interested in the Interpals community when someone recommended it to her at her university, where she worked as an international ambassador. She said that her experiences moving around the world while growing up caused her to develop a curiosity in all people and places. Mya's profile is cluttered with pictures and short video clips from American television shows and movies, and she confessed that her guilty pleasure is "trashy American reality television." The interview and member checking with Mya were conducted through email.

11. Peter is a 27-year-old university student from Budapest, Hungary. He is currently studying history, and he hopes to become a high school teacher or a university professor in a school somewhere outside of Hungary. Interestingly, Peter spent several minutes during the interview sharing all the reasons he is proud of the culture and heritage of his home country, and his profile—in which he states that he is proud to be Hungarian—has links to several Hungarian music videos and Hungarian bands' homepages, yet Peter said that he cannot wait to move away to London or New York City. Unlike the several of the other participants in this study, who have traveled extensively outside their home countries, Peter has only left Hungary twice: once to Croatia for only a few hours, and once to a village in Slovakia—a part of Slovakia that used to belong to Hungary. Peter joined Interpals

to experience what people from other countries are like, and to meet girls from Poland, Russia, the United States, and Western Europe. Peter also frequently uses Interpals for English language exchange, as he said he hasn't had any formal English lessons for seven years and he knows that the English language is the most important language in the world.

The interview with Peter was conducted using Skype audio chat. At first, it was difficult for me to understand what Peter was saying because of his thick Hungarian accent and his trouble with the English language, but as the interview went on, I became more familiar with his speaking style and the interview proceeded very well. The interview, which was also structured around the interview guide, lasted for about 45 minutes.

12. Andrew, a 28-year-old electrical engineering student from East Rutherford, New Jersey, has been in the United States military since he was 25. Andrew, who will be returning from deployment in Afghanistan in November, said he joined Interpals because he sometimes gets lonely and wishes he had more people to write to and receive letters from. Andrew's father was also in the military, so Andrew has traveled to, and lived in, many places around the world, including Japan, Italy, Germany, Canada, Australia, and Iraq. Andrew said that all of his traveling and moving around have caused him to feel like the world is more of his home than any one country in particular, although he does plan to return to the United States, finish his degree, and settle down somewhere in New York. Andrew feels connected to people from all cultures and backgrounds and has been using

Interpals to keep his feeling of global interconnectedness strong. The interview with Andrew was conducted through email correspondence.

13. Jen, a 29-year-old mother of two from Peterborough, Canada, said that she spends over an hour a day meeting new people and keeping in touch with friends on Interpals. Jen joined the community when she was 22 because most of her friends had moved away from Peterborough, and she got a crushing feeling that she was living life too narrowly. She had always wanted to travel and explore the world, but with a husband and two young children, she felt that her opportunity to travel had passed. Her husband suggested that she fill the void she was feeling by finding friends from foreign countries online; Jen stumbled upon the Interpals community while doing a Google search in response to her husband's suggestion; since then, Jen has become close friends with community members in several countries around the world, and she has even met three of these friends in person. Jen said that Interpals has literally helped her to feel like she is traveling and experiencing the world through the lives and stories of the people she meets.

14. Denis is a 25-year-old university student from the city of Wakiso in central Uganda, not far from Lake Victoria. Like many of the Interpals members from the developing countries in Africa, Denis is wearing clothes with English words written on them in his profile picture. In one of his pictures, Denis is wearing a shirt that has "The Shins" written across the front of it—The Shins being a popular American band that Denis claimed is his favorite. Denis' favorite books, movies, and television shows are also made in America, his favorite book being *Sons and Lovers* by D.H. Lawrence, and his favorite television show being *The Oprah Winfrey Show*.

Denis, who is studying business administration, is a faithful, active member of a small Christian church in his community. He said that the motto he lives by is, "Fear of the almighty Lord is the beginning of wisdom." Denis joined Interpals because he has a strong desire to learn about the world beyond Uganda. On his profile page, Denis wrote, "I was born and raised in Uganda, but my heart has always been out there in the world in places I've never been and with people I've never met." The interview with Denis was conducted using Skype's instant messaging feature and lasted for about 45 minutes. Denis' laptop broke a couple of weeks before the interview, so he had been using his roommate's laptop to keep in touch with his Interpals friends.

15. Marco is a 19-year-old medical student from Chia, Colombia. He is fluent in Spanish, English, French, and Italian, and he has been trying to learn German. In his spare time, Marco writes songs for piano and guitar and watches popular American television shows, such as *The Simpsons*, and *Modern Family*. As a hobby, Marco studies German poetry, and British literature, and philosophy; Marco said that he particularly enjoys reading Schopenhauer and Nietzsche. Marco joined Interpals when he was 15 because he wanted to find people from Germany with whom he could exchange snail mail letters to improve his German. Marco was raised Catholic, but became an atheist shortly after beginning his studies. He said he questioned the existence of God from a young age, but didn't take the time to really think it over until he was living on his own, which is when he began reading German philosophy.

The interview with Marco was conducted with Skype video chat and lasted for about 35 minutes. Marco's English was a bit difficult for me to understand, and I noticed that Marco used a lot of English slang that was likely picked up from listening to popular American music, or from watching American films and television. The same interview guide that had been used to conduct all previous interviews was also used to guide the interview with Marco and no new changes to the guide resulted from the discussion with Marco.

16. Adia is a 23-year-old student working on a degree in international studies at the University of Nairobi in Kenya. Of all the participants in this study, Adia has been a member of Interpals for the shortest amount of time—only six months. Adia is also an entrepreneur, having started a small vitamin and nutrition shop in her hometown. Like Denis, the other African who took part in this study, Adia is a faithful Christian and lives by the motto, "Charity begins at home." Adia has never left Kenya, but she has always been interested in learning about other cultures and hopes to travel to Western Europe and North America when she graduates and saves up enough money from her nutrition business. Adia joined Interpals to meet and make friends from countries around the world, but she blocked members from Russia, Turkey, and Algeria from being able to contact her because she has received a number of what she called "perverted messages" from the male community members from these countries. Adia said that although she desires to travel and explore the world, she would only leave Kenya permanently if a golden opportunity arose. The interview with Adia was conducted using Skype instant messaging and lasted for about 45 minutes. Adia mentioned that the laptop she used to participate

in this study was purchased for her by her grandmother as a “going off to college” present. Her grandmother had to save extra money for several months to purchase this gift.

17. Tsinmin is a 36-year-old international education counselor from Shenzhen, China, a city of nearly 11 million inhabitants, just north of Hong Kong. Tsinmin was the oldest and the final participant interviewed for this study. Tsinmin travels to countries all throughout eastern Asia for his job, but he has never left the Asian continent. Like the younger participants, Tsinmin joined Interpals to expand his horizons and meet new people from a variety of cultures. Tsinmin said that he also uses Interpals to improve his English, and that his many conversations with native English speakers have helped him with English vocabulary, grammar, and slang. Like most of the other participants, Tsinmin is also a big fan of American entertainment; his favorite movie is *Star Wars*, and his favorite book is *The Sound and the Fury* by William Faulkner. Tsinmin said that he is a faithful Buddhist, just like his parents and grandparents were. The interview with Tsinmin, which lasted for about 40 minutes, was conducted using Skype audio chat, and followed the same general guide that all of the previous interviews had followed.

After the interview with Tsinmin, I determined that original data was no longer being obtained from the participants, and that all of the stories and responses from the latest participants, although unique, did not give rise to new themes or patterns in the data—they were simply variations on themes and patterns that had already been discovered; in other words, I had discovered that redundancy, as defined by Lincoln and Guba (1985) had been achieved and that it was time to move

on to the analysis and organization of the data into themes and subthemes. The next chapter will outline the themes and subthemes that were discovered through analysis of the interview data; the chapter will also include relevant quotes from the participants under each of the several themes and subthemes.

Chapter Four

Results and Discussion

The results of the analysis of the interview data will be presented in this chapter through an account of the major themes that arose during the analysis process; this account will include pertinent quotes from the participants, as well as additional data that have been drawn from the participants' public profiles, and from my own observations. Quotes from the participants and my own thoughts and interpretations will be organized according to theme. This section will also address how the theories that were discussed in the literature review relate to the themes that were discovered through data analysis. In conclusion, this chapter will outline some of the limitations of this study and provide suggestions for future OIC research.

Typology of uses. After redundancy was achieved, member checking was completed, and the last of the interviews were transcribed, I uploaded the transcripts to NVIVO to search for and identify themes and subthemes within the data. Before I uploaded the transcripts to NVIVO, I had already identified some themes from the unitizing and categorizing that took place throughout the interviewing process, but NVIVO was useful for a more in-depth inductive analysis. NVIVO made it possible for me to determine word and phrase frequencies, and to

organize chunks of data into categories based on the patterns that emerged. From the patterns and themes that emerged, a typology of three distinct uses of Interpals was discovered; each of the three uses also included subcategories that fell under the general umbrella of each distinct use. The typology of uses can be found in Table 1, where the three main uses are listed across the top row, and the subcategories are listed below them. Each of these uses, along with the subcategories that emerged in relation to them, will now be discussed.

Table 1

Typology of Uses

| Interpals as a Place to Connect with People from Other Cultures | Interpals as a Virtual Escape | Interpals as a Classroom |
|---|--------------------------------------|---|
| Reaching Out to People from Places I have Always been Interested in | Escaping the Tedium of Everyday Life | Teaching and Learning Foreign Languages |
| Making Friends from Countries I didn't Even Know Anything About | Escaping Unfavorable Circumstances | Cultural Evangelism |
| Escaping from the Self | | |

Interpals as a place to connect with people from other cultures. The most common use of Interpals reported by the participants, and one that manifested itself early on in the interviewing process, was the use of Interpals to connect with people from other cultures. The participants in this study felt strongly that their interactions within the community were eliminating traditional cultural, political, and geographical boundaries. Like the various media forms discussed in the literature review, Interpals facilitates an interconnectedness that transcends the communication barriers that exist in everyday life. Unlike television and radio, most

of the information that is exchanged within the Interpals community is exchanged at an interpersonal level; messages are not sent from the top down, or from the few to the many, but horizontally, from person to person, which allows members to ask questions and receive answers, to move at their own pace, and to engage directly with the source of the information that is being disseminated, which, in this case, is other community members. While these characteristics are true of most online social communities, what sets Interpals apart is that its members reported using these horizontal, person-to-person interactions for the specific purpose of connecting with people—mostly strangers—from cultural groups that were little known—or even unfamiliar—to them in order to develop a better understanding of the world and people outside of their own immediate surroundings and social circles. Most of the participants in this study reported that the interpersonal, horizontal exchange of information facilitated by Interpals was effective in creating a greater understanding between individual cultural groups, and in bringing people together from countries and cultures that other forms of media sometimes lead one to believe are at odds with one another. To this point, Andrew, the 28 year old from New Jersey who is stationed in Afghanistan with the U.S. Army, said:

I think all of us are a bit naïve. We have a tendency to judge and stereotype because of how little we know about people living in foreign countries. In America, you're always hearing about the War on Terror, suicide bombers, and the conflict in the Middle East. From what you see in the news, you'd think everyone over here [in the Middle East] is out to get you, and a lot of what you see in the news here is exactly the same way towards the States.

Unless more people start talking one-on-one with the average people living in other parts of the world, we'll never understand that what we want in life is pretty much the same thing everyone wants in life, and that the hate and fear are being created by something else... I see Interpals as one place where we can have those one-on-one conversations with the average people from foreign parts of the world and learn for ourselves that we're not that different from each other.

And Samira, the 33-year old woman from Pakistan, said:

It's hard to feel at one with the rest of the world when there is so much disinformation and misinformation out there. Here, we get to see CNN, BBC, and so forth, so we know how we are projected as a nation. I joined Interpals because I wanted to show the world the side of my country, people, and religion not shown in the news. I thought the only way to bring us together with other nations was to show them our music, art, TV shows, normal everyday life, restaurants, malls, movies, and so forth. It's quite ironic that even though you have the Internet, the real facts and truth are still hard to get at. Luckily, Interpals brings people from different cultures directly to one another so they can bring the truth out and feel more at one with each other.

Other participants were more to the point when describing their thoughts about the intercultural interconnecting potential of Interpals. Jen, the 29 year old from Canada, wrote, "Of course Interpals brings the world together; you see and talk directly to people from countries you'd otherwise never see or talk to people from."

Each of these statements shows that members of the Interpals community believe that Interpals does more than simply provide its members with interesting conversation partners from different countries; these members believe that Interpals has the potential to shape the way people from one culture view people from another culture. As these statements demonstrate, OIC may have the potential to mitigate and, in some cases, even eliminate intercultural prejudices and stereotypes as it enables those who engage in it to bypass traditional forms of media and engage directly with those they wish to learn about and from; instead of being told *about* others, Interpals enables people to be told *by* others, which allows for more direct, unbiased, unrefined information transactions at an interpersonal level. Like Andrew said, it is the one-on-one conversations with the average, everyday people from other cultures that facilitate a richer understanding of who we are and what we desire; it is these conversations that show us that we *can* accept each other in spite of our cultural differences, and create and thrive alongside each other in a truly global village.

People from places I have always been interested in. Most of the participants in this study joined Interpals with a specific purpose in mind; they wanted to learn more about other cultures and interact with people who spoke different languages; they wanted to exchange thoughts and insights with people who held a variety of different beliefs; they wanted to learn about the people living on the other side of the world, people who were raised with a different set of traditions and ideologies; in short, they wanted to immerse themselves in a rich, intercultural experience. By joining Interpals, they were acknowledging their desire

to embark upon a virtual journey to the far corners of the Earth, where they could have intercultural experiences that were not available to them in their own cities, towns, and villages. Most of the participants said that they joined the community because they wanted to experience a greater understanding of people from cultures that differed from their own, people who they read about in books and in newspapers, people who they saw on TV, but with whom they had no direct interpersonal contact. Because of this initial, inherent curiosity—this desire to explore different cultures and regions of the world—it comes as no real surprise that the participants, upon joining the community, anticipated that they would be engaging with those from other cultures whom they had, in one way or another, become interested in.

Most of the participants said that they joined the community to learn a specific, predetermined language, or to make friends with people from a specific, predetermined part of the world, which means that the participants joined the community with a goal already in mind, and each of their predetermined goals were set in anticipation of an eventual understanding—or greater understanding—of a culture, cultural characteristic, or cultural group that was different from their own. Peter, for example, joined Interpals to meet women from Poland and Russia and to improve his English skills; in the two years since joining the community, he has become close friends with Gabi, a woman from Lublin, Poland; Vita, a woman from a small town near St. Petersburg, Russia; and Jonathon, an American who, for the past eight months, has been helping Peter with his English through Skype conversations

and email exchanges. When asked if he felt that Interpals had made him more accepting of other cultures, Peter referred to his interactions with Gabi:

Before I met Gabi, I was interested in Polish culture, but knew little of Poland. I would say I could not at first be accepting of the culture because I knew nothing of it. Now we have been speaking for over one year and I have come to know much about Gabi's home country. We like each other very much, by the way. We sent postcards for Christmas to each other, too. We speak almost every second day, so I get along with her quite well. We speak about almost everything: family, history, and everyday life in our countries. I can say I have become more accepting of Polish culture because of learning [about] it from Gabi.

Tahel, the 23-year old from Jerusalem, also believes that Interpals has helped her to become more understanding of the culture that she joined Interpals to engage with, which, for her, was the Korean culture. Of her interactions with Interpals members from South Korea, Tahel wrote:

[Interpals] has allowed me to reach out to people from places I have always been interested in, like Korea. When I first joined [Interpals], I knew only that I wanted to know more about South Koreans and their lifestyle. I could not get this knowledge here in school, or at the [Korean Culture] Center. Since then, my years of meeting with South Koreans on Interpals have given me two of my closest friends and also a better respect for the land where they are living.

In her email response to the interview questions, Tahel described the progression of her interactions with South Koreans on Interpals. When she first joined the community in 2012, Tahel would use Interpals' search tool to locate members living in South Korea, she would send them messages in Korean, or post questions about Korean life on their personal profile walls; eventually, she began interacting more frequently with a small number of South Koreans, and these interactions turned into lasting friendships. Last year, when Tahel visited Seoul, she met up with one of the friends she had met through Interpals and, together, they spent a few days touring the city and building their friendship in an offline setting.

Other participants shared similar stories about how they went about accomplishing the objectives that they had in mind when they first joined the community: Tsinmin found American members who were willing to help him improve his English, Marco found members from Germany and Switzerland who were willing to exchange handwritten letters with him, and Alexandra found American members who were willing to discuss American cinema and music with her. Each of these participants joined Interpals anticipating greater exposure to, and interaction with the people from cultures they were already interested in, and each of these participants claimed to have developed a greater understanding and acceptance of those cultures through their ongoing interactions within the online community.

The comments and stories of the participants evinced the fact that those who participate in OIC will often find ways to go about achieving the goals and objectives that they had in mind when they first began participating in OIC. These goals and

objectives were often the result of an interest in a particular culture or country that developed sometime in the past as a result of exposure to certain cultural elements from—or information about—that particular culture or country, for example, Tahel's exposure to the Korean language in school, or Marco's exposure to German literature and philosophy. What is noteworthy here is not that the participants reported being accepting of the cultures they initially sought to engage with, but that they reported becoming *more* understanding and accepting of these cultures the more they continued to engage with them.

Friends from countries I knew nothing about. That members of the Interpals community would claim to be accepting of certain cultures that differ from their own is not entirely surprising; after all, most of these members joined the community for the purpose of engaging with people who are different from them. What *is* surprising, and what may be more significant for future studies on the potential of OIC to mitigate intercultural tension and conflict, and to facilitate intercultural understanding and interconnectedness, are the unanticipated encounters that a user might have with people from cultures that differ from his or her own. Preconceived notions of what Interpals is and what can be done with it lead many members to form ideas in their minds of what is going to happen within the community, and of what sorts of interactions are going to take place, and with whom. As mentioned above, these preconceived notions often lead to anticipated intercultural interactions, but oftentimes, these preconceived notions reflect only a fraction of the experiences that members will have within the community;

oftentimes, members end up learning about cultures, traditions, and beliefs that they did not even know existed before joining the community.

Gio, the 22-year old student from Rome, Italy, for example, joined Interpals with the preconceived notion that the community would allow him to interact and develop friendships with people from America; in his mind, the community was a virtual gateway to America and to all things American. Now, five years after joining the community, Gio has, just as he anticipated, become friends with a number of Americans, but many of his closest friendships within the community are with people from countries he hadn't even considered when he joined. Gio shared the following story about his becoming friends with a woman named Han Lu, from Cheng Du, China:

The day I started Interpals, I began to get messages from people everywhere, some from Turkey, and from France, and Chile, and from many other countries, too. One of the messages was from a girl named Han Lu from China, I remember she wrote about how she liked Italy and wanted to visit Rome one day because it interested her, but she had never been there. I told her about Rome and I asked her about China. From then, we wrote messages often to each other and became better friends. I don't have contact with her much now, but she showed me a lot about her city, Cheng Du and told me about the people and places of China. Before our emails, I had certain images of life in China in my mind. I thought they were strict people, and serious and poor and closed off to the rest of the world, but when I talked to Han Lu, I learned that they tell funny jokes and worry about grades in school and

wearing the right styles and finding friends and being happy, just as the people in my country, and everywhere else.

Gio went on to describe how he and Han Lu exchanged postcards and currency from their home countries through snail mail; he also mentioned how, prior to meeting Han Lu, he didn't really know much about China and its culture and he didn't really care to know about it, either:

I could have ignored the message she sent to me, or deleted it, but she seemed to me like a nice girl when I looked at her profile, so I read it, and I wrote back to her, and I am glad for that because I made another friend and learned about a place in the world that is very different from Italy, but also the same in many things.

Gio's experience with Han Lu reflects what Andrew said about the importance of eradicating intercultural barriers and developing a greater understanding of people through interacting directly with those from cultures that differ from one's own. Before meeting Han Lu, Gio was, at best, indifferent to China and its people. When he joined the Interpals community, Gio didn't anticipate interacting with anyone from China; he was wholly set on reaching out to Americans, but when someone from China reached out to him, he accepted the offer and engaged in ongoing interactions that eventually led to a greater understanding of—and a respect for—China and its people. This is just one example of many that were shared by the participants of unanticipated interactions that eventually led to a better understanding of a culture or a country that was previously unknown to—or unrecognized by—them. Alexandra and Peter both shared stories similar to Gio's,

about how they received unexpected messages from people who lived in parts of the world that they hadn't even considered when they first joined the community, and how responding to these messages led to ongoing interactions that eventually evolved into virtual friendships and exchanges of cultural information. Alexandra shared a story about a man from Ghana, Freddie, who sent her an email in which he praised her for being beautiful, and claimed that he would like to move to France so that he could pursue a relationship with her. Alexandra said that she was used to receiving emails like that, and that she normally deleted them without responding to the sender, but that, after going through Freddie's profile, she felt compassion towards him and wanted to find out more about him and his life. About her decision to respond to him instead of deleting his unsolicited email, Alexandra said:

I know it probably doesn't make sense that I replied to him, but it must have been a feeling in the moment that came to me. On his page, he wrote how he wanted to leave Accra someday for better opportunities somewhere else. I saw in his picture that his smile seemed sincere; I guessed he loved America like me, because he was wearing a Yankees hat, and he just looked like a nice person. I assumed he probably wrote messages like this to girls because he thinks it is a way for him to get out of Ghana someday. I started to wonder what his own story was, and why Ghana was not pleasant for him, and if he really had a plan about going to another country someday. I replied to him with a short message, probably something short and simple, like, 'Thank you, that is flattering. How is your life in Ghana?' Then he replied to me and told me that he still lived with his family and that he worked with his father and

his two younger brothers at a food market in the city. I asked why he wanted to leave Ghana and he said he didn't want to leave his family and homeland, but he did feel trapped there sometimes when he read about peoples lives in books and saw them in foreign films. In his next messages, he didn't talk about how pretty I was, or how he wanted to be with me, we just had normal conversations about life and learned more about each other... I think I would be comfortable showing him around Paris one day, but only if my boyfriend was with me. I would also someday like to visit Ghana, and maybe have lunch with him, but you know, I want to have lunch with people in every country someday [laughs].

When asked if this experience taught her anything, Alexandra said:

Sure it did. It taught me to be more careful when making quick judgments about people. It taught me about a guy's life in Ghana. It taught me that I can make friends from countries I didn't even know anything about. And this sounds strange, but it taught me something about my own life, too—that I maybe sometimes take my life in Paris for granted.

I asked Alexandra if she thought her interactions with Freddie had any larger impact on her perceptions or opinions of those who came from cultures that differed from her own; she replied:

I signed up for Interpals because I have always found people from other countries to be interesting—I told you, in the bakery where I work, these are my favorite people to talk with—but, I must admit that I don't talk with a lot of people from Africa—either in person, or online—because I was never very

interested in their culture—or I even didn't like their culture because, you maybe don't know, here in Paris, many of the people from Africa are known for involvement with selling drugs, and living in bad housing, and for crime, and this is the perception of Africa that I had since I was younger. I don't think speaking with Freddie completely changed my perception on this, because I think it is deep in my mind, but talking with him did make me realize that not everybody from Africa is like that, and that I should take more time to talk with people from Africa—and other places, also—so I can form my own impressions, and not just take them from the French ideas and stereotypes that I was raised with.

Whether or not the participants' stories of developing a greater intercultural understanding extend beyond a virtual setting into a real-world setting is beyond the scope of this study, but it does not strike me as irrational to assume that positive impressions of foreign cultures cultivated through interpersonal interactions via OIC will endure once the computer is switched off. Listening to Alexandra share the story of her interactions with Freddie, and to Gio share the story of his interactions with Han Lu, reminded me a lot of one of my own experiences on Interpals with a young man from Syria named Adnan—an experience that, as mentioned in the previous chapter, inspired the idea for this thesis.

I contacted Adnan in early 2012 because I had been hearing a lot about the Syrian Civil War in the media and I wanted to find out what some of the people who were actually living in Syria and experiencing the conflict thought about it. When I first contacted Adnan, he was living in the city of Homs, which was, at the time, a

rebel stronghold that was under siege by the Syrian Army. Everything I knew about the conflict had been learned through short network news broadcasts and through skimming over blogs and articles online. My impression of the conflict was, therefore, formed by the dominant narrative in those broadcasts and articles; more specifically, I was under the impression that a large majority of the Syrian people were attempting to overthrow an oppressive government regime, but that they (the people) were having a difficult time accomplishing their objectives and gaining ground because they lacked adequate supplies and military training. In my mind, it would be a long, tedious fight, but the rebels would end up victorious.

I began my email correspondence with Adnan by asking him if he was directly affected by the conflict; he told me that there wasn't a day that went by that he couldn't hear gunfire, protests, and fighting in the streets near his home. I told him I was sorry he had to experience so much violence and instability, and that I hoped there would be a quick victory for the rebels. From his response, I could tell that he knew how limited my understanding of the conflict was. Adnan told me that he didn't care who won; he just wanted the fighting to end. He told me that any possible outcome would not be worth all of the spilled blood and destroyed buildings and homes. He told me that he hated both sides equally and that he just wanted to be able to go to the parks and the teashops again without having to fear for his safety. He told me that he believed the media in America and Western Europe were using the conflict for their own economic and political advantage, and that one side of the story that was not being shown was the side of the average Syrian. He

told me that I had no idea how many Syrians just wanted to have peace so they could get on with their normal lives.

Over the next few weeks, my interactions with Adnan began to shape my perspective of Syria, its people, the conflict, and how the conflict was being reported. I realized that I had been viewing the fighting as a sort of game—as something entertaining to catch up on for the 15-minute gap between lunch and my next class—and that I wasn't even taking the lives of those fighting, and those affected by the fighting into consideration. Adnan told me about people he knew who had been killed in the fighting, he told me about how the fighting affected everyday life in Homs, and he told me about his plans to start a blog that promoted peace among the younger generation in Islamic nations. He told me that he had lost most of his hope in the older generations, but he believed the younger generation of Muslims could join together to create a more peaceful world. He said that his blog would include stories and voices from young Islamic people—Sunnis, Shias, Orthodox, and non-Orthodox alike—from all around the world. He also mentioned that the format of Interpals had helped to inspire the idea for his planned “peace-promoting” blog.

RQ1 asks: In what ways, if any, are the intercultural perceptions of English-speaking Interpals members being shaped by their interactions within the online community? An analysis of the data shows that members of the community are using it to connect with people from around the world and that doing so is causing them to become more interested in, and understanding of cultures that differ from their own. As the first major use, “Interpals as a Place to Connect with People from Other Cultures” demonstrates, the OIC that takes place within the Interpals

community transcends traditional cultural, political, and geographical boundaries by allowing members from one part of the world to engage in interactions with members from other parts of the world. Most of these interactions take place at an interpersonal level after one member reaches out to another member through a personal email or through a post on that member's profile wall, but these interactions can also take place at a community level in the Interpals discussion forums, where members can read and respond to general questions and comments posted for larger groups of members; either way, the coming together of members from all around the world creates a unique community atmosphere where frequent exposure to—and interaction with—cultures that differ from one's own leads to a greater awareness and understanding of these cultures.

As the participants in this study expressed, exposure to, and one-on-one interactions with people from different cultures can help to eliminate the intercultural misunderstandings and prejudice that exist in this world. As mentioned in the literature review, people form their judgments and makes their decisions based upon the information that is available to them; currently, most of the information people receive about other cultures is mass-mediated to them through television, books, and radio, which essentially means that most of our judgments about foreign cultures are outsourced to the entities that gather and disseminate the information (Lievrouw, 2011). As the stories that emerged from the participants in this study demonstrate, OIC allows people to bypass these entities and gather information about foreign cultures directly from those who make up those cultures. Although time, language, and financial constraints make it impossible

for anyone to engage with people from *all* cultures, the lessons learned from the limited number of foreign cultures we *are* able to engage with using OIC can be extended and applied to a broader context, creating a global village that is more interconnected and more interculturally aware.

Interpals as a virtual escape. *Escaping the tedium of everyday life.*

Another common use that was discovered during interviewing and data analysis was the use of Interpals as a virtual escape. Many of the participants reported using the online community to break free from the tedium and the monotony of everyday life in their own villages, towns, and countries, and to explore unfamiliar people, cultures, languages, and regions of the world. Participants who reported using Interpals as a virtual escape viewed the community not only as a place where they could connect with new people and gain new insights and experiences, but also as a place where they could get away from common and familiar people and experiences. Jen, the 29-year-old mother from Canada, claimed that she joined the community specifically for the purpose of getting away from her hometown of Peterborough and immersing herself virtually in an intercultural experience that financial constraints and other circumstances prevented her from enjoying physically.

Describing how she came to be an Interpals member, Jen wrote:

I was complaining a lot to my husband about not having traveled much and how most of my close friends have moved away and that I was feeling lonely, cheated out of missed opportunities to explore the world, and probably even a little trapped in this town. Obviously, I love my children, and I wouldn't give up the opportunity I have to be a mother, but when my close friends started

traveling and moving away for college, and for careers, and relationships, I began to feel stuck here. We didn't have money to travel—except for down to Toronto once in a while—so I got this dreadful feeling that the years would just start to pass away and that I would get old here in Peterborough—it was a feeling like I had already lived my life and now I was stuck in a waiting room, waiting for someone to come in and tell me it was officially over. Then one day, my husband—who was probably sick of my complaining—suggested looking into pen pals, or meeting people online for friendship—whether close by, or far away—so I Googled and found Interpals. It sounded like an ideal site where I could not only learn about other places in the world and cultures, but also make new friends, it was like the perfect way to get out of Peterborough without having to give up my family, or win the lottery, or something crazy like that.

In a follow-up email, I asked Jen if she thought the escape that she claimed Interpals provided for her actually filled the void she was describing, and she replied that, for the most part, it did:

Traveling to different countries and talking with their people through Interpals is the next best thing to doing it in person. Someday, when my kids are older and we have some money saved up, I still want to get out and see as much of the world as possible, but chatting with friends on Interpals has done a pretty good job of taming my wanderlust for now, and showing me some of the people and places I haven't been able to see and experience in person.

I asked Jen if she had any examples of how Interpals has allowed her to “escape” and “tame her wanderlust”, to which she replied:

Well, for example, I’m excited that I’ve had the chance to learn many things about various cultures (from the odd new word that I’ll sometimes learn in Russian, Polish, and Italian) to finding people who are very similar to myself on different levels. I’ve learned new recipes, been sent music from a number of different countries, movies to watch, books suggested to me, pictures. It’s been a way to experience other cultures when I don’t have the access to go there and experience it first-hand. I’ve made some amazing friends—some of which that I talk to daily on Whatsapp, Facebook, and other platforms. I now have open invitations to travel to different locations where I have a guaranteed place to stay. I’ve pretty much accomplished what I set out to accomplish, I’ve “gotten out” of Peterborough, and I continue to do so and learn from these experiences daily.

Jen also described how the opportunity to meet new people and engage in intercultural experiences that are not available to her in Peterborough, a town which she described as being, “predominantly white Canadian,” has caused her to gradually become more open-minded and racially aware:

Through talking to people from different areas of the world, I’ve come to realize just how many similarities there are between people, and my eyes have been opened to how these different people think and live. I’ve talked with a lot of people who wanted nothing more than to discuss and put out there their views and ideas, and even when I haven’t agreed with them, I felt

myself becoming more open-minded to their views about life. At first, I realized just how similar Americans are to Canadians (and vice versa), and that led me to question if all countries are fairly similar in one way or another, and which differences we share. Well, spending time on Interpals almost every day, I've learned that there are similarities between people of all countries and races—we have our own religions and points of view, but at the core, we have the same desires to be happy, and loved, and to get attention from other people. I believe Interpals has helped me to realize this, which has made me more open-minded, and it's almost more impactful because I hear about it first-hand from real people who are experiencing life in their own ways and in their own places on a day-to-day basis.

Jen sees Interpals as an effective tool for transcending the immediate boundaries of physical place. Her initial reason for becoming a member of the community was to escape the limitations that personal obligations and financial constraints placed upon her ability to gain life experiences beyond her immediate surroundings, which, to her, had become tired and uninspiring. In using Interpals as a virtual escape, Jen has been able to satiate her desire to “leave” Peterborough, Canada to explore other regions and cultures of the world. In addition to fulfilling her initial desire to get out and explore the world, Jen's experiences as a member of Interpals have also caused—or allowed—her to become more aware of—and open-minded to—cultures that differ from her own. Jen's satisfaction with the community is, in fact, so great that she uses it to interact, on a daily basis, with friends that she has made throughout the world. Jen wrote about her daily interactions with these

friends:

There are two friends that I get along with more than any others whom I met on Interpals. One is a woman from Ukraine and the other is a male from Italy. I find that we have clicked because we have the same interests and can relate very well to one another—probably mostly because we share the same sense of humor. One of my favorite things to do, even though it may seem a little racist to someone who doesn't understand our friendship, is to find cultural jokes about their countries and to send them to them—and they do the same to me with jokes about Canadians. It's a really good feeling to know that you're laughing at the same thing as someone on the other side of the world. But anyway, we talk about everything under the sun: movies, music, day-to-day life, relationships, goals, dreams, fears, food, history, and even philosophy. We share YouTube videos, and sometimes send each other voice messages, too. I've taught both of them some English slang, and they've taught me Russian and Italian slang. I can't picture life without either person, and I've only been talking to them since February/March of last year.

Anna, the 26-year-old English professor from Izhevsk, Russia also initially joined Interpals to virtually escape her city and explore the world. In a story similar to Jen's, Anna described how she has always had a desire to travel and discover different people and cultures, and how life has always somehow gotten in the way, preventing her from doing so. While completing her studies in English at a university in the city in which she grew up, Anna joined Interpals "...as a way to get out and explore the world, and to learn to speak English better, and to get out of

[her] industrial city.” Describing how useful she feels Interpals has been as a virtual escape, even within her own country, Anna said:

[Interpals] has been good for helping me to learn of the world outside of Izhevsk. I use it a lot of time to learn English and to speak with people in U.K. and America, but even it is helpful to see Russia outside of Izhevsk. Russia is such a big country and everything changes from region to region. In Moscow are very rich people, but at the same time, there are some villages where people don't have enough money to buy good shoes and their houses are dilapidated, and it helps to talk also with these people, if it is possible. In St. Petersburg is a culture like Western Europe, and there, people are also much different from those in Izhevsk. So, on Interpals, I talk with people from all countries, but I try to talk also with Russian people outside of my own city, rich and poor people, living in big cities and also in small villages. I know, of course, I am not really leaving Izhevsk when I use it, but it is, for now the best way I can see the world and the way other people live.

Anna went on to describe how using Interpals to interact with people beyond the borders of her hometown has helped her to make two important decisions that will affect her immediate future. One Interpals member from St. Petersburg, also a professor, has convinced Anna to apply for an English professorship at a university in St. Petersburg as soon as her current contract expires. Anna said that it isn't the fact that the university is in St. Petersburg as much as the fact that it is *not* in Izhevsk that compelled her to heed her Interpals friend's advice. “I have wanted to get away from Izhevsk for a long time now, but I have been afraid to make that big move, or I

have tried to find some reasons to convince myself to remain here,” Anna said. “I think [joining] Interpals was a sign that I was ready to go to new places, and that I needed really to see the world outside of Izhevsk; I needed only someone else to tell me what I already knew.” Anna will also be applying for a professorship at a university in Moscow. The other decision that Anna has made as a result of her interactions on Interpals is to apply for a teaching position in the United States through the Fulbright program for young English teachers. Anna first learned of the program while reading through a thread about higher education on one of Interpals’ discussion boards, she then contacted the member who posted about the program to ask her more about it. Anna said she felt that, one way or another, her interactions and networking efforts on Interpals would eventually lead to an opportunity for her to leave Izhevsk:

I’m glad I found out about [the] Fulbright program. Now, if everything is fine, I’ll be able to live my dream and go to [the] USA for nine or 10 months starting in August 2015. I should pass three tests successfully; it’s not so easy, but I really would like this chance to work abroad. If it doesn’t work with Fulbright, I will go to Petersburg or Moscow to teach, or I could use networking on Interpals to find another teaching opportunity somewhere.

Both Jen’s and Anna’s experiences demonstrate the use of Interpals as a means of escaping the monotony of everyday life in their hometowns. Jen’s use of the online community as a virtual escape is a way for her to assuage her desire to experience life beyond the town that she realizes she is—at least for the time being—unable to leave, while Anna’s use of the community is more of an attempt to

discover actual opportunities to leave her hometown.

A number of studies on Internet usage have shown that the Internet is commonly used as a means of escape for a variety of different reasons, for example, Young (1999) examines the use of the Internet as a means of avoiding real-life situations and escaping reality among individuals who have a catastrophic thinking style and who frequently anticipate negative events; Murali and Sanju (2007) examined the use of the Internet as a means of escaping daily problems among Internet addicts; and Kwon, Chung and Lee (2011), use Baumeister's escape from self theory to describe how Korean adolescent online gamers use the Internet to escape from self and from reality. Other studies have focused on the use of various forms of computer-mediated-communication for the purpose of escaping loneliness, isolation, and boredom (Ess & Sudweeks, 2001; Couldry, 2013). As these and similar studies have shown, the Internet and its online communities can be effective tools for transcending the social and geographical boundaries that otherwise limit the scope of human experience and interaction. As the stories from the participants in this study have revealed, Interpals also provides a means of transcendence for its members; by giving them the opportunity to interact with people from cultures that differ vastly from their own, and providing them with the ability to practice foreign languages with native speakers, network for international employment and service opportunities, and share stories and other cultural information, Interpals provides a unique form of virtual escape, one that is different from that offered by many other online communities.

Escaping unfavorable circumstances. Other participants shared stories

about their OIC experiences that involved different forms of virtual escape. For example, Denis, the 25-year-old business administration student from Uganda, claimed that he uses Interpals “to help [him] feel like [he is] a citizen of the whole Earth, and not just Uganda.” For Denis, Interpals is not just a way to escape boredom, tedium, and monotony, as Jen and Anna described, but a way for him to escape living conditions and political circumstances that he does not feel are fair—conditions that he feels are robbing him of the chance to live the best possible life. When I asked Denis why it is important for him to feel like the whole Earth, and not just Uganda, is his home, he said:

That mostly has to do with the big problems in Uganda that make the rest of the Earth seem more pleasing of a place to me, like a better home. I feel like the situation is not great here, and there are greener pastures where I could be. My country is okay, but it also has some weaknesses, and corruption is the biggest of these. Because of this corruption, we’ll continue to remain a third world country. There is always someone somewhere who is more greedy and very selfish. A lot of these people are in government. The common man always works hard only to be taxed heavily, and this is a problem because that money is never used to make our lives better. When I get a chance to live better, I will always take it, and I think the whole Earth is a better home for me with better conditions than Uganda.

Denis described how Interpals helps him to realize his desire to feel like the world is his home by providing him with a place where he can interact with people who are living far away from the social and economic problems he experiences in Uganda:

When I talk to people who live far away from here, I feel like I am far away from these problems. I think, “She is not my friend from the university, or my neighbor. She is living in a country far away from Uganda,” and when I talk to her, she tells me about her life and her home, and I can picture it, and I can feel like I am a part of that place.

Denis’ stories about his participation in the online community struck me as being very similar to the story shared by Alexandra about her Interpals friend, Freddie, who is also from Africa. Both Denis and Freddie filled their member profiles with pictures of—and references to—American media products and American popular culture, as if they wanted other Interpals members to identify them by their knowledge, use, and acceptance of American popular culture. Both users are wearing clothes with American brand names and American popular culture products (band names, professional American sports team logos, etc.) written on them in their profile pictures, and both users admitted to spending a great deal of time in the community reaching out to members from Western countries. Adia, the 23-year-old student from Kenya, did not seem as eager to escape her country as did Denis and Freddie, but even she admitted that she enjoyed using the community, from time to time, to virtually escape Kenya, and that she *would* leave her country if a “golden opportunity” arose.

The desire that community members have to escape their home countries for what they believe to be “greener pastures”—to use Denis’ phrase—does not seem to be a phenomenon that is limited specifically to African users; although, from the participants interviewed for this study, and from my own experiences as a member

of the community, this desire appears to be much more outwardly manifested by users from African countries. Many of the Africans who I have interacted with over the years have expressed strong desires to move to Europe, or to America some day, and many non-African members who I have interacted with over the years have admitted to blocking members from African countries because—like Alexandra—they were frequently contacted by African members who used very forward and ostensibly insincere emails to try to get something from them—the promise of a place to stay, money to travel out of their home countries, romantic relationships, etc. Other members from African countries, like Denis, frequently contact American members—or members from other Western countries—not because they want something physical or material from them, but because they want to talk with people from places that they have become fascinated with through their consumption of American popular music and American films and television shows. When I asked Adia if she noticed a particular allure for American and Western culture among other Interpals members from Africa, she replied:

I have, but that is not unusual. Most of the people who have a computer and Internet in Africa make more money than average Africans, and they often have radio and television too, so they are always hearing songs and watching programs from the USA.

Adia went on to describe how common it is for the younger generations of Africans that have access to television and radio to attempt to mimic the dress and speech of the characters from the popular programs they consume. Adia claimed that to wear Western fashions and to use Western speech and slang are ways that

younger Kenyans typically position themselves among their social circles. “They think it is cool if they speak like American movie stars and singers and wear the clothes with USA symbols on them because then they think they are not looked at as poor Africans who don’t have the ability or the means to fit in,” Adia wrote. In Adia’s opinion, this is exactly what is being done by many of the African members of Interpals—they are attempting to display how connected they are to America and to American culture by wearing American clothing and using American song lyrics and movie phrases on their profiles; by doing this, they are making a statement that they are a part of the “in-group,” and, by doing this, they are escaping—or distancing themselves from—the outmoded and impoverished conditions that many Westerners typically associate with Africa. In other words, these members are using the community as a way to escape these stereotypic narratives and to *show* others that they fit in.

One limitation of this particular finding, as it relates to Interpals, is that in Africa, Internet penetration in most countries is less than 30% (in some countries it is far less than this), and it is mostly the relatively wealthy who own or have access to a computer and an Internet connection (“Countries Compared,” 2007; Poda, Murry, & Miller, 2006). It is important to be mindful of this when reporting findings or making generalizations about data obtained from African Internet users because, in an area of the world where, on average, less than 30% of the population has Internet access, social trends among Internet users may not be representative of social trends among the general population living in that area (“Countries Compared,” 2007; Poda et al., 2006). Both Denis and Adia, for example, own laptops

and attend universities in countries where less than one percent of the population owns a personal computer, and less than three percent of the population enrolls in universities (“Countries Compared,” 2007). If Interpals and other online global social communities *are* facilitating a global interconnectedness, or helping to create a global village, or even simply allowing their members to learn more about other cultures by virtually escaping their own cultures, then a large majority of Africans, Asians, and people living in other areas of the world with low Internet penetration are automatically excluded from these uses and trends; however, Internet penetration and computer access in these parts of the world are on the rise, and future studies on OIC could help to determine whether the trends and themes discovered in this study are applicable on a larger scale in poorer, less-developed parts of the world (Poda et al., 2006).

Escaping from the self. Of the participants interviewed for this study, only one, Nele, the 24-year-old woman from Turkey, claimed to use a false name and profile on Interpals; however, several participants claimed that they had, at some point during their membership in the community, become friends with another member who had admitted to falsifying all—or some—of the information on his or her public profile. The explanations that Nele and the friends of some of the other participants provided for falsifying information on their profiles, or for creating a false identity altogether, varied, and were often complex. These stories ranged from members creating false identities to see if claiming to be from a different part of the world changed how other Interpals members treated them, to using a false identity as a way to alter or escape some characteristic—physical, psychological, social,

etc.—that the person who changed his or her identity was ashamed of.

Mya, the 22-year-old woman from Sweden, shared a story about one of her Interpals friends, Nick, who had undergone a sex-change operation, transitioning from a woman to a man. When Mya first contacted Nick, he did not mention anything about his operation, nor did his profile contain any information about his gender change; in fact, according to Mya, the Interpals profile he used was the same one that he had created as a woman, meaning that his profile indicated that he was a female, and all of his profile pictures had been taken before the operation, when he was still a woman. Mya contacted Nick—thinking he was a woman—to practice her English and to try to make another friend. It wasn't until Nick and Mya had been exchanging emails for several weeks—after Mya suggested that they have a conversation on Skype—that Nick told her that he wasn't actually a woman anymore.

In her telling of the story, Mya wrote that she was initially shocked by Nick's confession, and didn't even believe that he was telling the truth. Mya, interested in Nick's story, agreed to a Skype video chat session with him; it was during this video chat interaction that Mya could see that he was obviously telling the truth about his identity. She asked him why he continued to claim that he was a woman on his profile, and why he hadn't said anything to her sooner. Nick told her that he had considered changing his pictures and profile information, or getting rid of his Interpals account altogether, but he needed people to talk to, and he felt that nobody would want to talk with him if they knew about his operation. Mya also mentioned that, after his operation, Nick hadn't been treated very well by his family, and many

of his friends began to distance themselves from him:

He said he sees the online world as the only place where he can continue to meet people and have conversations that are not controlled by what the people he is talking to think about him. I guess Interpals is a place where he hides what pushes people away from him; he doesn't have to fear losing more friends because they don't have to know the truth about him.

In a follow-up email, I asked Mya if discovering the truth about Nick had caused her to drop contact with him, and she responded that it had not:

Sweden is a progressive country where most people accept others for who they are and let them do what they like with their own lives. Also, I think I'm a pretty open-minded and sympathetic person, so even though it was a big shock to me finding out that he was a man, I didn't let that cause an end to our friendship. He still has feelings and he needs to be cared about and respected for who he is. What's also interesting about this is, I know I would never have the courage to talk to transgenders on the street but behind the screen I could say and ask him whatever I want, and I just grew to admire him for his story and courage; to me, that was the most important thing.

Tahel also shared a story about a friend she made in the community who initially hid sensitive information about himself:

There was a German guy I used to talk to a lot on here. He was very nice and cute and I'd sometimes even think, "If he lived in Jerusalem, that's a guy I would date." But one day he wrote me, "It's been a while. I've been meaning to send you this picture of my full body" and then he was in a wheel chair. I

was so shocked, I had no idea, I remember he had three pics posted on his profile album, but in all of them it was only his face, so you couldn't know. And I found it very weird because he would tell me that his favorite sport was cycling and all. So he wrote me that the life he made up on Interpals was how he wanted his life to be and that he was sorry for lying to me. The problem is that shortly after that, he deleted his account and I never got to answer him back. I was very touched by this and it reinforced in my mind that we should not judge someone just by their looks.

Like Mya, Tahel did not get upset with her friend because he deceived her by providing misleading and incomplete information on his profile, and during their subsequent interactions. Instead, Tahel viewed the experience as an opportunity to reflect on the things that really matter about another person's identity—things that Tahel claimed go beyond mere physical characteristics. Tahel also wrote that she found it disheartening that we live in a world that causes some people to feel like they have to change who they are in order to get attention and be respected. Tahel wrote that if she would have had the opportunity to respond to her German friend before he deleted his profile, she would have told him that she thought he was beautiful, and that she had a really good time talking with him, and that it was more than enough for him to just be himself.

Other participants also shared stories about their discoveries of deception by members of the community. Like Mya and Tahel, these participants claimed to be understanding of—and even sympathetic towards—the deceiver when the deception was an attempt to cover up a physical flaw, or some other embarrassing

attribute that the deceiver had no control over. However, when the deception was committed for the purpose of getting more attention, or out of boredom, the victims of the deception were much less accepting of it, and often became annoyed and irritated. Gio, for example, said that there have been a couple of occasions when he has discovered that a girl he had been interacting with for a while was actually much older (or younger) than she claimed she was in her profile. He said there was even a time when he found out that a girl he had been talking with was actually a man who had created a female profile and put up pictures of women that he had found on other websites because he wanted to see if females get more attention on Interpals than males.

Although several of the participants claimed to have encountered identity deception at some point during their time as members of the community, most of these participants also said that they don't think that the problem is *that* common or widespread, and that, for the most part, when someone creates a profile on Interpals, that person is providing fairly accurate information. From my own experiences in the community, I would have to agree. Although I have also come across identity deception from time to time, my own experiences, and the experiences of the participants in this study, lead me to believe that most people who join and participate in the community are looking for an authentic experience and, because of this, they create their profiles and project themselves as authentically as possible. When someone *does* create an inauthentic—or partially inauthentic profile—that person does so either for some form of personal gratification, or because that person truly wants to escape some shameful or

embarrassing aspect of his or her true identity, and the anonymous format of online social communities provides that person with ability to do so.

RQ3 asks, “In what ways are English-speaking members of Interpals using the community?” As the stories shared by the participants in this study illustrate, many members of Interpals are using the community as a means of virtual escape. An analysis of the interview data revealed three different types of virtual escape, as outlined above. These three forms of virtual escape are: escape from monotony and the tedium of everyday life, as illustrated by the stories shared by Jen and Anna; escape from the poor—or unfulfilling—conditions and circumstances of one’s physical place in the world, as illustrated by Denis and Adia; and escape from self, as illustrated by Mya, Nele, Tahel, and other participants. This section does not include all of the comments and stories that were shared by the participants regarding the use of Interpals as a virtual escape; however, I feel that the stories and comments that have been included provide an accurate representation of the experiences and attitudes of the participants who *did* provide comments and share stories about their using Interpals as a virtual escape.

The fact that Interpals members are able to use the community as a way to virtually escape their physical place in this world is a further testament to McLuhan’s description of media as extensions of man (McLuhan, 2001). Members who use the community as an escape are able to extend their senses and their abilities to experience life beyond the boundaries of the villages, towns, cities, and countries in which they live. As can be gleaned from the stories and comments that have been included, participants often described *seeing* as a crucial component of

their virtual escapes. Seeing pictures and videos of the countries and towns of the members they interacted with helped the participants to feel like they were actually escaping their own places in the world and experiencing the culture and people of a different part of the world. Hearing was also an important component of the virtual escape, and many participants described transitioning their interactions from an initial written form, such as emails, wall posts, instant messages, etc., to audio and visual forms, such as Skype, FaceTime, Whatsapp, WeChat, etc.

A number of studies have addressed the use of the Internet as a means of escape, and a few of these studies have been referenced earlier in this section. Ever since the Internet has been available as a tool for exploring, learning, gaming, and socializing, people have been using it as a form of escape (Brey, 2006). Just as some people use television as a diversion, or an escape from their problems, and others use novels to help them imagine more-fulfilling, or unfamiliar worlds, some people use the Internet to get away from certain aspects of life for a while, whether it be from their jobs, their problems, their boredom, the numbing familiarity of their hometowns and everyday routines, etc. (Brey, 2006; Brown, Lauricella, Douai & Zaidi, 2012; Marcuse, 1991; Murali & George, 2007).

Like those who claimed to use Interpals specifically for the purpose of meeting people from other cultures—as was discussed in the first part of this chapter—those who use Interpals as a virtual escape also often make new friends from other countries and learn about traditions, lifestyles, and belief systems that were previously unknown—or not very well known—to them. Learning about these things, and engaging with people from other cultures can actually influence and

shape behavior and intercultural perceptions, as was the case with Jen. When Jen began using Interpals to virtually escape her hometown, she ended up finding community members from various countries who shared with her their personal stories, native recipes, home videos, local jokes, and other cultural artifacts that were previously unknown to her. These stories and cultural artifacts then became a part of Jen's own lived reality as she watched the videos, laughed at the jokes, read the personal stories, and prepared the recipes at home in her own kitchen, thousands of miles away from where they originated. Anna's story also showed how an initial desire to escape could lead to the community being used as a tool for actualizing the desire to escape. Not only did Anna meet and engage with community members living in different countries, but she actually followed the advice of some of these members who suggested employment and educational opportunities that would allow her to literally escape. What these experiences show us is that, by using Interpals as a virtual escape, Interpals members have the ability to explore the world and its people, and, through the intercultural interactions and information exchanges that take place within the community, these members can discover global opportunities, and learn about aspects of the various cultures that the community allows them to explore.

The results that can be seen from those who reported using Interpals specifically for the purpose of meeting other people and those who reported using Interpals as a means of escape are similar; in both instances, participants met people from cultures that differed from their own and, through subsequent ongoing interactions, learned more about these cultures, and eventually came to a better

understanding of the traditions and lifestyles of the people who make up these cultures. Only the initial reasons for these end results differed, with some participants using Interpals because foreign cultures interested them, *puling* them into the online community, and other participants using Interpals because their dissatisfaction with some aspect of their circumstances and a desire to get away *pushed* them into the online community; in both instances participants engaged in intercultural interactions, forged friendships with people from around the world, and developed a greater feeling of interconnectedness with people from a variety of different countries and culture groups. Through their use of Interpals as a virtual escape, the participants of this study have demonstrated another way that online global social communities are bringing people from different cultures together and, through their interactions, creating conditions indicative of a global village. This finding also speaks to RQ1, as many of the stories shared by the participants indicate that their virtual escapes frequently result in changes in their perceptions of cultures that differ from their own, most commonly in the form of a greater understanding of these cultures through repeated interactions with the people who make up these cultures.

RQ2 asks how Interpals is shaping and/or reinforcing the cultural identities of its English-speaking members. By providing a forum where its members can share their pictures, videos, stories, and languages with other community members, Interpals allows its members to reinforce their cultural identities, but the stories shared by the participants do not provide any evidence that Interpals itself is *shaping* its members' cultural identities. Several participants, including Adia, Denis,

Gio, and Alexandra, shared stories about their friends'—and their own—fascination for American popular culture, which was manifested in the language they used, in their clothing choices, and, more explicitly, in the content of their member profiles. Although these participants admitted to being drawn to American popular culture, none of them reported that Interpals was actually shaping their cultural identities.

Interpals as a classroom. I have titled the final major use of Interpals, “Interpals as a Classroom” because all of the participants in this study reported using the community, at some point, to teach other members about their own cultures, to learn about foreign cultures from other members, and/or to learn a foreign language, or improve their foreign language skills. Some of the common questions that participants reported asking—or being asked by—other members of the community in their initial contact with them are: *Can you tell me what life is like in your country? What do you do in a typical day where you live? What are some of the common/traditional foods where you live? What do people do for fun in your country?* These, and similar common introductory questions show that members have a desire to learn what is unique about the cultures of other members of the community, as well as what distinguishes their own lives from the lives of people living in other parts of the world. The participants claimed that these initial questions often led to deeper discussions in which they and the members with whom they interact talk about the similarities and differences between their countries and cultures, which, as the participants claimed, makes Interpals a great place both for both teaching and learning. The story that Jen shared about her interactions with the members from Ukraine and Italy—as reported in the previous

section—is a good example of this teaching and learning in practice. According to the participants, learning foreign languages and teaching other members about one’s culture—which I will refer to as “cultural evangelism”—are the most common ways that Interpals is used as an educational tool. The following section will address Interpals as a language-learning tool, and as a cultural-learning-and-teaching tool.

Teaching and learning foreign languages. Interpals gives members the option of participating in a community program called *language exchange*. Members who indicate that they would like to participate in the program list all of the languages they would like to learn, and all of the languages they speak, along with the level of proficiency—on a five-point scale— with which they speak them. Members are then referred to a list of other members who speak the languages that they would like to learn or practice. Those desiring to learn a foreign language can click on one of the members listed and, together, they can decide how they would like to go about teaching and learning the language. Oftentimes, members begin their language exchange by sending short emails back and forth to one another, with the member who is learning the language (the student) asking the member who is teaching the language (the teacher) to translate or explain certain words and phrases. If the teacher and the student feel they are a good match, and they wish to continue the language exchange together, they typically move their conversations and lessons to an audio/video platform, such as Skype or KakaoTalk. Among the participants, English was the language that was most often taught and learned, followed by Korean, Spanish, and German. Although all of the participants in this study speak English well enough to carry on a conversation, many of them, including

Anita, Peter, Anna, Tsinmin, Gio, Marco, and Nele still use the language exchange feature to practice and improve their English by speaking with native speakers. Gio, who has been using the language exchange feature with English-speaking members ever since he joined the community five years ago, said that Interpals has helped him to become more confident when speaking English with native speakers, which is a skill that he claimed will be of much use when he moves to the United States.

Cultural Evangelism. Most of the participants claimed to use Interpals, from time to time, to teach other members about their home countries and cultures. These participants, including Samira, Anna, Nele, Ingmar, Peter, Denis, and others, claimed that their experiences, both inside and outside of the community, have taught them that there are many misconceptions about their countries and cultures, and they feel that it is their duty, as citizens of these countries, to clear up as many of the misconceptions as possible. Samira and Anna, for example, believe that Western media has a tendency to falsely portray the political and religious situations in their countries, and they make it a point to address this when interacting with members from America and Western Europe. In fact, Samira joined the community specifically for the purpose of explaining to Westerners what she calls “the real situation in Pakistan and other Islamic countries,” countries that she claims are being continually portrayed as “backwards” and “evil” by Western media. About these Western media portrayals, and her response to them, Samira wrote:

I watch those television networks [CNN, BBC] sometimes and feel sad that they always talk about the Jihadists when they talk about the Islamic countries. People now think of Pakistan only as a place that protected Bin

Laden, and that we are a terrorist country with people still living in the dark ages. As a Pakistani, I have to teach people that this is not the way my country is. There are some evil people here, but that is the same in all other countries. We are mostly peaceful people who practice our religion, and go to school, and to concerts, and to watch movies with our friends at the cinema just like people in other countries. We also have a history of literature and cuisine and clothing here, but nobody talks about this fact on the news networks, or about how Karachi is full of history, and tradition, and also tall buildings and many lights, like London and New York City. I am not saying we need to prove we are the same as America and Europe to justify ourselves, but it is good for people in those parts of the world to know that we are not all evil here in Pakistan, but their TV programs and news are not teaching this to them, so it is a message that I feel like I need to share.

I asked Samira how she goes about finding other Interpals members to teach about the Pakistan that *she* wants to see portrayed, and she said that it's not very difficult to find people because she has plenty of members contacting her with questions and comments about the Middle East. On her profile, Samira has links to a number of articles and YouTube videos about Pakistan. She also has written, next to her profile picture, in all capital letters with asterisks next to it, "ASK ME ABOUT MY COUNTRY AND PEOPLE. DON'T ASSUME!" I asked Samira if there were any particular videos or websites about Pakistan that she recommended, and she sent me several pictures and a couple of video links that were not included on her profile. In one of the videos, Samira and her friends are at an outdoor concert in Karachi. It

is nighttime and bright lights are shining down on the band that is playing up on the stage. Young people are jumping around and dancing, and laughing, and shouting, and waving their hands in the air. If the video were silent, one would almost think it had been filmed at a large outdoor venue in a big city somewhere in the USA, but it's not silent, and one can hear Samira and her friends speaking to each other in the Urdu language. In another video, shot through the window of a moving bus, one can see the daily commotion of life in Karachi. There are people biking and walking down the crowded streets, mothers pushing strollers, bearded men selling clothes and other goods that they have laid out on tables at a street market, people wearing long white shirts and hats, buildings and street signs with the local language written on them, etc. I asked Samira why she shares these particular videos, to which she responded:

Actually, I share a lot of different videos, but I think those two are a good place to begin when showing people about life in Pakistan because they can put me and the person I'm talking to on a common ground. Everyone has been to concerts with friends and everyone has seen what life is like in a big city. I hope when they see these videos we can begin to build some common ground and share more of our stories with each other.

Samira believes that her efforts to show Interpals members what Pakistan and Pakistani culture are really like have been successful, but only on a small scale. She said that she knows of only a few other Muslim members who are using Interpals to do what she is doing, and that, due to their small numbers, there is no

way for them to effectively compete with the large media companies and other groups that are spreading false or biased messages about the Middle East:

I hope my conversations are having an impact on how people see us. But Interpals is only one small network, and there are not many other people doing this. Sometimes I think I am making no impact at all. I hope that the people I talk to on Interpals are continuing to spread this message I have shown them about my country so it doesn't disappear when we are no longer talking to each other. I always tell them to keep the message moving forward, but that is their own decision.

Anna's approach to cultural evangelism is a bit different from Samira's. Anna does not use Interpals to actively seek out other community members in order to clear up common misconceptions about Russia, but she does not hesitate to call out another member if he or she brings up something about Russia that she believes to be inaccurate or biased. Anna claimed that the most common misconceptions about her country have to do with Russian politics, the Russian economy, and foreign policy. She said that the foreign media's misrepresentations of Russia were particularly bad with the Sochi Winter Olympics approaching, and that a number of American community members had contacted her with "ignorant questions" and "rude comments" that showed they were clearly misinformed about the political and economic situation in Russia:

It's not right that the Russian government is spending so much money on the Olympics when we have problems that need to be taken care of with our country, but the news from other countries exaggerates Russia's problems.

We're not a poor country like they often tell people. We don't have a lot of people starving in the street. We have safe buildings, and clean water, and power in our homes, and the athletes and the rest of the world will see this in Sochi. But for now the news are always saying we are not prepared for this, and our country is not modern, and we have human rights problems, and this is false information. I get messages from people who think like this because they are told this in the news or in school, and I try to explain to them how Russia really is and that most of the news reports are exaggerated.

Sometimes when I talk to people about this we will have a good discussion and they're able to see things from a different point of view, but sometimes they continue to believe what they are told, even so, I will tell them there is whole other side of the issues which they are not seeing.

Like Samira, Anna believes that the impact of her cultural evangelism on Interpals is minimal. She said that she is able only to make a small impression on a small number of people, whereas the major news outlets are able to reach and influence millions of people, and, in her opinion, this means that the misrepresentations and false perceptions of Russia will continue to get worse. Still, like Samira, she continues to evangelize. I asked Anna why it is important to her to continue to present her side of Russia's story when she knows—and openly admits—that her efforts are futile, or, at best, minimally effective. Anna had two reasons for continuing to do this; her reasons boiled down to patriotism and idealism:

On one hand, Russia is my home, and I am a Russian. My parents were born here, and my grandparents, and their parents, and so on, and when somebody tells me something that is not true about my country and I know it's not true, I defend it. Isn't this a common response that people have, like protecting their homes and families? ...But on the other hand, when I look at a message and somebody has told me that Putin is a communist, or that they are sorry I live in Russia, I get mad, and I think that if I keep telling people that they are wrong, and that Russia is very different from how they imagine it, they will eventually see it how it really is and there will be some greater respect for my country.

Anna also sends other community members information about Russia in the form of links to articles that have been translated from Russian into English, and links to YouTube videos that she believes provide a more fair and accurate representation of Russia.

The stories of cultural evangelism shared by a number of the other participants were similar in nature; for some, their evangelism began when an Interpals community member emailed them with questions, or comments, or concerns about their countries and cultures, and they gave their best efforts to clear up any confusion by sharing information (often in the form of links to information that had been produced in their own countries), and by discussing their countries and cultures as long as the member who had contacted them was willing to engage them. Sometimes, like Samira, they did not even wait to be contacted by an inquisitive member, and, instead, they took it upon themselves to initiate contact

with other members by sharing—or by offering to share—stories and information about what life is like where they live. Peter, for example, sometimes sends emails to random community members with a link to a picture of a famous site or landmark in Budapest with an accompanying message that reads, “Hello from Hungary!” Peter said that sometimes members respond to him with similar messages and pictures from *their* countries, and that this initial exchange often leads to a discussion about the places that are pictured in the messages, which, in turn, often leads to a discussion about what life is like in their countries. Tahel and Ingmar both shared stories about experiences they had had with members sending them vitriolic emails that consisted of hateful language and cultural stereotypes about their countries. Tahel said that she usually chooses to ignore these emails, because she believes that most of them are sent by “trolls with nothing better to do”, but Ingmar claimed that he usually responds to such emails by correcting their inaccuracies and telling them all of the positive things that Germany does in the world, even though he realizes his responses are most likely ignored or disregarded.

The stories that the participants shared about their cultural evangelism demonstrate that, in spite of their desire to come together into a single global community where they can meet, interact with, and learn about people from all around the world, Interpals members wish to maintain, preserve, and promote the uniqueness of their own individual countries and cultures by teaching and showing other members the cultural traits and aspects that make them unique. This supports the theory that the Internet—at least in the realm of global social communities and OIC—is a place where people form a global village that is much more a cultural

mosaic—consisting of many separate, distinguishable cultures that stand out, yet come together to form a whole—than it is a place that is shaped and controlled by one dominant culture that, through its power and influence, ultimately absorbs and transforms all other cultures into further instantiations of itself.

In his book, *Media, Society, World*, Nick Couldry discusses how people use the Internet to presence themselves, and to show others about their lives. According to Couldry, presencing and showing are two ways that Internet users are able to maintain a certain degree of autonomy and individuality in a world that is rapidly globalizing (Couldry, 2013). Presencing—deciding how one wants to present oneself to others on the web—and showing—sharing information that one has personally selected from the vast array of available information on the web—are two ways that participants in this study are using the online community as a cultural teaching tool, and as a way to maintain their own cultural uniqueness. Although all of the participants in this study speak English, and many of them refer to elements of American and Western popular culture on their profiles, they have demonstrated that they have a strong desire to maintain and promote their *own* cultural heritages through their use of Interpals as a school, in which they teach other members their native languages and details about their countries and cultures by sharing stories, links to videos, articles, and other information that they believe will give these members a better idea of what life is like where they live.

In response to RQ2 and RQ3, this section has demonstrated that Interpals is being used as a place where members reinforce their cultural identities through cultural evangelism, through teaching, and through learning about the cultures of

others. By sharing information about their cultures through links, personal stories, videos, etc., the participants of this study have demonstrated that their cultures are important enough to them that they feel others should know about them and experience certain aspects of them—or at least take them seriously. Samira’s tenacious cultural evangelism illustrates how some community members are attempting to reinforce their cultural identities by getting others to see their cultures for what they believe them to be, and not for what mainstream media outlets and cultural stereotypes make them out to be.

Chapter Five

Conclusion

This study utilized in-depth, one-on-one interviews, guided by the naturalistic paradigm, to examine the experiences, attitudes, and opinions, with regard to their use of the Internet for OIC, of a culturally diverse sample of 17 members of the online global social community, Interpals. Although the original aim of the study was to develop theory grounded in an analysis of the interview data, the themes and subthemes that emerged during data analysis led to the discovery of a typology of uses that addressed the research questions, explored more deeply the theories and issues discussed in the literature review, and shined light on some areas that could be further explored in future OIC research. The three major uses of Interpals drawn from the interview data were: first, Interpals as a place to connect with people from other cultures; second, Interpals as a virtual escape; and third, Interpals as a classroom. Although the use of Interpals for each of these purposes often leads to similar results, namely, community members feeling more globally

interconnected and interculturally aware, each use is distinct in the specific needs that it fulfills, and in the implications that it has for OIC.

Through the descriptions of their use of Interpals to connect with people from other cultures, the participants demonstrated that the community can be a place where intercultural perceptions are shaped, and a greater understanding of foreign people and foreign cultures is achieved. Although the participants originally joined Interpals to meet and interact with people from around the world, a majority of these participants had specific goals and intentions in mind with regard to the types of interactions they wanted to take place. For participants such as Peter, Marco, Alexandra, Gio and Tahel, this meant using the community search tools to find people from specific, predetermined parts of the world—parts of the world that they had become interested in as a result of some prior life experience. Once the participants started interacting with community members from the countries and cultures that had interested them, they began to develop an even greater respect for—and a deeper understanding of—these members and their cultures, as was described by Peter when he told the story of his interactions with Gabi, and also by Tahel, when she shared the story about how her interest in Korean culture led her to the community, which then put her in contact with a South Korean woman who she ended up becoming friends with, and spending time with as a tourist in Seoul. The participants also made it clear that unanticipated interactions are also common within the community, and that these unanticipated interactions sometimes develop into close friendships, as was the case with Alexandra and her friend, Freddie, from Ghana.

Under the first major use, “Interpals as a Place to Connect with People from Other Cultures”, the subcategory, “Reaching Out to People from Places I Have Always Been Interested In,” demonstrates that much of the intercultural awareness that is raised in the community is anticipated, or even planned by community members based on the predispositions and personal preferences they bring to the community, but the second subcategory, “Making Friends from Countries I Didn’t Even Know Anything About,” demonstrates that this is not always the case. Oftentimes, members end up interacting with people from cultures and countries they had not planned on interacting with when they joined the community. The intercultural understanding that stems from these unanticipated interactions is important to the study of OIC because it demonstrates that people do not have to be particularly interested in, or knowledgeable of, another culture in order to quickly develop an understanding of, and a feeling of interconnectedness with it. Perhaps educators could further research these interactions to develop a curriculum where students could engage in OIC in a classroom setting in order to become more aware of foreign cultures at an early age.

In the past, teachers in the American public education system have encouraged, or sometimes even required, their students to write to students living in another part of the world. Sometimes, these letter-exchange programs were coordinated by the teachers and administrators of the two schools, located in different countries. One of the rationales for these programs was to encourage students to cultivate a global perspective at a young age. Receiving correspondence from a student living in another country allowed the students who received the

correspondence to imagine a much broader, more diverse world than he or she was familiar with. With the Internet, this activity can be implemented in public schools around the world on a much larger scale. Perhaps students could take a certain amount of time each week to go into a computer lab and engage in OIC—in real time—with students in another classroom somewhere else in the world. They could tell each other about themselves, about their language, about daily life in their countries, about the things they like to do, and about certain things that are unique to their specific cultures. Perhaps computer game developers could even create interculturally-themed computer games that allow users to virtually engage in cultural activities from other parts of the world. Implementing these sorts of educational activities would likely help students to become more understanding of the world outside their own hometowns, villages, and countries.

Through their description of the community as a place of escape, a number of the participants in this study demonstrated that Interpals is a place that can, in a virtual sense, fulfill one's desires to explore new countries, to interact with foreigners, to break free from the tedium of everyday life and repetitive routines, and to get away from unfavorable political, economic, and social situations. Using media as a form of escape is not a new phenomenon. As mentioned in the previous section, a number of studies have outlined the different reasons and the different ways that people use books, radio, television, and the Internet to cope with depression, to kill time, and to escape what they consider to be painful or unbearable circumstances in their lives. What makes the use of the Internet as a means of escape significant in the context of Interpals, and for OIC research, in

general, is the potential that this “intercultural” form of escape has for bringing people together from different parts of the world and helping them to learn about, and better understand each other through direct interactions.

Through their description of the community as a place of teaching and learning, the participants demonstrated that maintaining their own unique cultural identities, and promoting their own images and ideas of what it means to be a part of the cultures in which they live is very important to them. Samira and Anna demonstrated this through their cultural evangelism. Both participants felt that their countries were being portrayed negatively by Western media, so they took it upon themselves to combat what they considered to be mainstream media misinformation by using the online community to present their own versions of the truth about their countries to other members. Even though both participants admitted that their cultural evangelism was most likely unsuccessful in combating Western media narratives, they persisted in their efforts because they felt that it was their duty to do so, and Interpals provided them with a platform to carry out this self-appointed duty. The cultural evangelism of the participants is evidence that cultural heritage continues to be an important component of personal identity, in spite of rapid, widespread globalization; this appears to be true even among those who were born and raised in the digital era—an era when, as Warlaumont (2010) points out, physical and political boundaries between countries and cultures are becoming less and less significant.

One other important finding of this study was that the stories and experiences shared by the participants seem to suggest that the Interpals

community is more of a cultural mosaic than a homogenous space that has been Americanized and dominated by American values. To say that Interpals itself is causing its members to become Americanized would be to draw a conclusion that neglects to take into consideration countless pre-existing social conditions and variables that are either indeterminable, or far beyond the scope of any one study. It seems more likely to me that Interpals is simply a vehicle for its members to publicly display certain aspects of their cultural identities that have already been cultivated under the conditions of the societies in which they live. That many Interpals members wear American clothing, listen to American music, watch American movies and television, and speak using American slang is not surprising considering the vast exportation and consumption of American media and cultural products at a global level. Additionally, the fact that most of the participants feel a strong desire to share various aspects of their cultures with other community members (in the form of videos, pictures, recipes, jokes, language exchange, etc.) suggests that their unique cultural identities are important to them, and that they are something that these members wish to hold on to, in spite of their fascination with American popular culture. This accords with Kuipers (2011), which argues that cultural groups are able to adopt certain values and elements from other cultural groups while still maintaining a level of their own independent cultural autonomy. Just because many Africans are wearing American clothing and consuming American popular culture products as a means of conspicuously displaying their social or economic status doesn't mean that they *want* to give up their own cultural heritage and traditions and become like Americans, just like the fact that many

Americans wear Gucci and Louis Vuitton, and watch anime doesn't mean that they necessarily *want* to give up their cultural heritage to become like the Italians, or the French, or the Japanese. Much more research is required to determine exactly what the spread of popular culture is doing to culture at national and local levels.

Limitations. This study has a number of limitations that should be taken into consideration when reflecting on the findings and on the conclusions that have been drawn from the findings. First, the participants ranged in age from 19 to 36—a range of only 17 years. Additionally, most of the participants were in their early to mid-twenties at the time this study took place, which means that they have lived most—if not all—of their lives in the digital age. Interviewing a sample of community members with greater age range, and including more participants who did not grow up in a world where personal computers and the Internet were always available, could lead to different results and conclusions, as age may play a role in shaping the experiences and the opinions of the community members.

Second, this study looked at only those members who are proficient in the English language. Because I was not able to interview members in their native languages, all non-native English speakers who participated in this study were required to respond to questions and comments in a language that was secondary to them. Although all of the participants were able to communicate effectively in English, it was obvious to me during the interviewing process that some of the participants struggled, from time to time, to find the right words to convey what they wanted to say. The fact that participants were not able to communicate their responses in their native language may have limited their comfort in disclosing

certain information. Additionally, the fact that the interviews were conducted in English automatically excluded all Interpals members who are not proficient in English, which means that a sizeable portion of community members were left out of the study. The ability to reach out to *all* community members, regardless of their English proficiency, would have allowed me to put together a sample more representative of the community as a whole.

Finally, only those with access to a computer and an Internet connection were able to participate in this study. In countries like the United States, Australia, Germany, and other Western European countries, a majority of people have access to the Internet, regardless of their income levels, and regardless of whether or not they live in (or near) urban centers. In many of the countries in Asia, Africa, and South America, on the other hand, Internet penetration is very low, and it is often the wealthier people living in (or near) urban areas who have computers and Internet access. This means that the participants from the poorer, developing countries may be biased in their representations of the attitudes towards other cultures of the average people living in their countries.

Suggestions for future research. This study, being exploratory in nature, took a broad look at how members of Interpals are using the community to interact with people from countries and cultures that differ from their own. The study also sought to examine how OIC affects the attitudes and perceptions of Interpals members with regard to their own cultures, as well as in regard to other cultures. Future OIC research could take a more in-depth look at some of the issues that this study began to explore. For example, this study focused on only one online global

social community, future research could look at other global online communities to see if their members are having similar experiences with regard to intercultural communication. Do members of other global online communities feel more interculturally connected and interculturally aware as they interact with people who have different beliefs, values, and traditions than they do? Are members of other global online communities participating in cultural evangelism? Do people from certain countries and cultures feel ostracized in their online communities? In what ways are people from poorer, less-developed countries using OIC to socially position themselves, and does this differ significantly from how people in other countries are using OIC to position themselves? In what ways are members of other global online communities using their communities to promote and/or reinforce their own cultural identities? Each of these questions was touched upon in this study, but more in-depth examinations of these issues across a variety of online settings would help to give OIC researchers a better idea of how globalization and the media are impacting culture. Research that examines these issues would also give OIC researchers a better idea of how people around the world are using OIC and online communities to promote their own cultural identities, and combat any encroachments on their cultures, or on their cultural values as a result of globalization.

It would also be beneficial if future OIC researchers designed studies that got around some of the limitations that were present in this study. For example, future studies could sample online community members of a wider age range in order to get the ideas and opinions of more of the older members, which would allow for a

more representative sample of the community. Sampling older members would also allow researchers to get the perspectives of those who did not grow up entirely in the digital age. Future studies could also be conducted in a variety of different languages so that members are not excluded based on their inability to communicate in a certain language. Conducting studies in multiple languages would give a voice to online community members everywhere, which is important for any study that deals with questions of culture at a global level. Finally, ongoing, repeated studies could be conducted on those who live in developing countries, where Internet penetration is currently low, but continually rising. Conducting repeated studies on OIC in developing areas of the world would allow researchers to monitor how ideas and attitudes are shaped (*if* ideas and attitudes are shaped) as the Internet continues to reach more and more people.

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APPENDIX A

Participant Information

| Interview # and Name | Gender | Age | Location | How long a Member | Date of Interview | Method of Interview |
|---------------------------------|---------------|------------|-----------------|------------------------------|------------------------------|--------------------------------|
| 1. Anita | Female | 26 | Argentina | 4 years | 12/18/13 | Skype Video |
| 2. Samira | Female | 33 | Pakistan | 10 years | 12/19/13 | Instant Messaging |
| 3. Alexandra | Female | 23 | France | 4 years | 12/23/13 | Skype Video |
| 4. Cortney | Male | 25 | Australia | 1 year | 12/28/13 | Email |
| 5. Nele | Female | 24 | Turkey | 6 years | 1/2/14 | Skype Audio |
| 6. Ingmar | Male | 24 | Germany | 7 years | 1/8/14 | Skype Audio |
| 7. Anna | Female | 26 | Russia | 1 year | 1/13/14 | Instant Messaging |
| 8. Gio | Male | 22 | Italy | 5 years | 1/15/14 | Skype Video |
| 9. Tahel | Female | 23 | Israel | 2 years | 1/15/14 | Email |
| 10. Mya | Female | 22 | Sweden | 3 years | 5/6/14 | Email |
| 11. Peter | Male | 27 | Hungary | 2 years | 5/10/14 | Skype Audio |
| 12. Andrew | Male | 28 | United States | 1 year | 5/13/14 | Email |
| 13. Jen | Female | 29 | Canada | 7 years | 5/17/14 | Email |
| 14. Denis | Male | 25 | Uganda | 2 years | 5/22/14 | Instant Messaging |
| 15. Marco | Male | 19 | Colombia | 4 years | 6/4/14 | Skype Video |
| 16. Adia | Female | 23 | Kenya | 6 months | 6/5/14 | Instant Messaging |
| 17. Tsinmin | Male | 36 | China | 2 years | 6/7/14 | Skype Audio |

APPENDIX B

Interview Guide

1. Can you give me kind of a sketch as to how you came to be involved in the Interpals community? What made you decide to join Interpals?
2. What led you to become interested in other cultures/societies?
3. Have you ever traveled to/visited other parts of the world? Where did you visit? What impact did this have on you?
4. How often do you use Interpals to interact with others?
5. How much of that time would you say you spend engaged interacting with members from cultures that differ from your own?
6. In what ways has Interpals helped you to accomplish any goals or objectives that you might have had when you first joined the community? (Ex: learning a new language, finding pen pals or friends from other countries, finding a partner to date, etc.)
7. Tell me about one of your Interpals friends who grew up in a culture that is different from your own. Why do you get along with this person? What sorts of things do you typically talk about with him/her?
8. Do you feel that Interpals has caused you to be more open to and accepting of cultures that differ from your own? How has it done this?
9. Do you think Interpals has the potential to make people more aware and accepting of other cultures and belief systems? How?
10. Have you ever had a negative/bad experience with another member of Interpals? What happened?
11. Have you blocked people from certain regions of the world from being able to contact you? Why? Was there a certain experience that led you to do this? Has this experience changed your overall opinion of people from these regions of the world?
12. Do you prefer to interact with people from certain countries when you use Interpals? Which countries? Why do you prefer interacting with people from these countries over those from other countries?
13. Do you feel like Interpals is mostly an American online community, or do you feel like it incorporates people from all cultures?
14. How often do you have the opportunity to express and share your own cultural background and ideas with others on Interpals? How often do you get to use your own language when speaking with others?
15. Have you ever visited someone in a different country, or had someone from a different country visit you who you met through Interpals?

16. In what ways, if any, have your interactions on Interpals caused you to modify your views of people who belong to cultures and religious groups than differ from your own?
17. Do you have an example of a time when an interaction with someone on Interpals caused you to question or rethink your own perceptions of other cultures?
18. Does Interpals cause people to lose their sense of their own unique cultural identity? Does Interpals create an environment that is conducive to intercultural tolerance?
19. What, if anything, should those who are unfamiliar with Interpals know about the community? Why?
20. Is there anything else I should know about the Interpals community, or your experiences as a member of it?

APPENDIX C

Interview Request Form

Hello! My name is Ryan Bartlett and I am a student of mass communications at Brigham Young University in Provo, Utah in the United States.

For my master's thesis, I plan to interview 15 to 20 people from around the world who use Interpals on a regular basis. With the information I gather from the interviews, I plan to write a research paper that will help me and other scholars better understand global online communities.

I have looked at your profile and I feel that you are somebody who would be very helpful for the type of research I am doing. Would you be willing to participate in my study by allowing me to interview you and ask you some questions about your experiences with Interpals?

A few examples of questions I will be asking during the interview are:

- Why did you decide to join Interpals?
- Do you feel that Interpals has caused you to be more open to cultures that differ from your own?
- In what ways, if any, have your interactions on Interpals caused you to modify your views of people who belong to cultures and religious groups that differ from your own?

If you would like to participate, just email me back and I can give you some more information, and we can set up a time that works best for you.

Thanks a lot,

Ryan Bartlett