

Study of a Virtual Safe Space for Men r/CleanLivingKings



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1.0 Introduction

With the internet beginning to take great prominence in the average person's everyday life, their social needs and opportunities arose alongside. The internet allowed for more people to gather in one place and carry meaningful interactions; one was no longer limited to one's physical presence. This resulted in forums of shared interests, including virtual safe spaces. These virtual spaces exist in different sizes, different meeting points and different interests. However, for this project, the main focus will be of virtual safe spaces for men. Where men can go and share their feelings, serious experiences or simply share small anecdotes with others of their own gender. Specifically, for this project we wished to dive deeper into that of the fairly anonymous Reddit community that is r/CleanLivingKings (hereafter CLK).

1.1 Group Work

As a group, we wished to investigate what exactly people posted in this subreddit, as well as the general tone and language they used with each other. In correlation, we wished to look further into what roles anonymity and trust can play when it comes to participating in a virtual safe space such as CLK, as these two variables can have great influence in whether one chooses to forego the passive or active membership. Additionally, we discussed reaching out to a danish Facebook group alike, to compare whether or not anonymity truly plays a role, and to look into the differences between a smaller national group to a bigger international one.

These interest areas led us to formulate the following research question:

- Does trust and anonymity facilitate the members' investment as well as the motivation for joining the virtual safe space r/CleanLivingKings - and if so, how ?

Additionally, we formulated the following operational questions to help answer the research question:

1. How often and in what way are the central topics/values of r/CleanLivingKings posted and discussed?
2. What are the primary differences in motivation and interaction when comparing the international r/CleanLivingKings with a smaller national support group?
3. With the two focus points of 1) length and 2) language & tone, what characterizes the user-written content - posts and replies - in r/CleanLivingKings

4. Are there signs of taboo topics - if so, do people merely adhere from discussing them, or does the norms of the community not allow it?

1.2 Individual Research Question

For my individual research question, I chose to focus primarily on the main ways in which the members engage with each other, mainly through looking at the subreddit's defined topics and the official rules of the community. From this, I wanted to investigate if these variables can have an effect on the level of activity from the individual members, as to uncover if the norms and general tone of language has an effect on the motivation for participating in such spaces.

From this area of interest, I formulated the following research question:

- In what way does the members of r/CleanLivingKings engage with each other, and what effect does this have on the level of participation among the members?

To answer this research question, I formulated the following operational questions:

1. What are the general themes of the comments in response to a new post on the subreddit?
2. How are the official rules of the subreddit reflected in the ways the members interact with one another?
3. What motivates members to join and stay within the subreddit, furthermore, what motivates the active members to stay as such?

2.0 Theory and Concepts

2.1 Defining culture

Firstly, before working and analysing a community and its culture, we must first define what culture entails. Jensen (2014) presents three different approaches to cultures and how they are defined: descriptive cultural concept, culture as systems of meaning and culture as practice. However, for this project, the focus will be solely on that of culture as practice. In this perspective, culture is seen as something that is practiced, something that shows through actions and everyday behaviour (Jensen, 2014). Rather than saying one is part of a certain culture, with this approach you look into what definite practices you share with others of the same culture (Jensen, 2014). The reasoning for choosing this approach compared to that of the descriptive cultural concept or culture as systems of meaning, is that when researching CLK, the primary focus will be to gather knowledge of their shared norms and practices. As previously mentioned, the wish is to understand how the actions and practices of the members shape the culture and levels of participation of the community.

2.2 Online communities

Additional to culture, before diving into the project and analysis of the community, we must first understand the theory behind said online communities. Baym (2015) identifies communities or the behaviour of members in five different qualities, whereas primarily three of them are relevant to this project: space, shared practices, and shared resources and support.

In this context, space does not refer to a geographical point, rather the lack thereof. Users of the internet and members of the communities it holds often refers to the smaller parts of the internet as “spaces” (Baym, 2015). Thus, space is a widely used metaphor for the internet as a whole, as well as the smaller spaces it holds. The second one, shared practices, is about the norms and common practices of the community in question (Baym, 2015). This is the aspect of communities that the previously mentioned culture as practice uncovers as to understand the particular culture better. Part of these practices are that of the language, hereunder style, acronyms and slang specific to these respective communities (Baym, 2015). Shared resources and support being the last one but still very relevant to the study of CLK, is about seeking help and receiving resources and support in exchange from the other members of the respective community (Baym, 2015). It is especially interesting to look into how the space, shared practices and finally resources and support help establish CLK as a

place where members feel comfortable enough to share their stories and provide practically strangers with the support and guidance requested.

3.0 Methodology

3.1 Data collection

Going into the project, the group was discussing different online communities and spaces to focus our data collection and thus research on. This is the initiation process as described by Kozinets (2019), as it is where the group establishes the direction of the project. It is the first phase of netnography (Kozinets, 2019) and it was also during this initiation CLK was decided upon, rather than, for example, a private danish Facebook group.

After this, the group agreed upon a method of data collection, being that of a nonprobability sampling method called quota sampling (Bernard, 2000). We decided upon a quota of all posts and comments made in the span of 10 days in a row. In choosing this strategy, our data collection is biased but still provides us with a resemblance of the results of a probability sampling (Bernard, 2000). This sampling strategy left us with a total of 29 posts and 459 comments. When collecting the data, we made sure to allow for the post to have been uploaded to the subreddit for exactly 5 days before noting down the relevant data from it. This allowed the members of the subreddit time to interact with the post, and thus get a fair picture of the level of engagement for the different kinds of posts. Additionally, the group made a post (appendix 1) with the permission of the moderators and requested some members of the subreddit who were willing to be part of a semi-structured interview (Lichtman, 2013). A lot of members reached out, however, only three of the ones we reached out to responded to our direct message and one interview was cut short due to issues in further contacting the member.

3.2 Data analysis

When finishing the collection of the empirical data from the group, we approached the analysis of said data inductively (Mayring, 2000). We defined categories and the criteria thereof (Mayring, 2000) and then went and coded all of the comments to the aforementioned 29 posts. We wished to investigate how the members interact with each other, and most of the interaction lies in the comment sections of the different uploaded posts. Same thing was done with the few conducted semi-structured interviews, although on a smaller scale and with different categories.

3.3 Ethical considerations

When deciding on which community to focus our research on, ethics was one of the primary areas discussed. As previously mentioned, it was briefly considered to include a private men's Facebook

group, however, it was decided against. This was because of the private nature of the group, as well as the members being easily recognisable through use of personal Facebook profiles. Instead, CLK is a public subreddit and the members have a chance of anonymity in avatars and obscure usernames. Although, the usernames will still be removed and the posts, comments and interviews used will be completely anonymised for this project. With the vulnerable nature of the subreddit, and the sharing of personal anecdotes and experiences, the obligation to protect the members of the chosen community is great and should be considered (Markham & Buchanan, 2012).

4.0 Analysis and findings

4.1 Categorizing and frequency of topics

The first step after collecting the public posts and comments, was to then code them, to get an overview of the themes and tendencies in the comment sections. Nine categories were defined (appendix 2), although they were revised and fitted accordingly throughout the categorizing and distribution of the comments into these categories (table 1) (Mayring, 2000). Table 1 is ordered by most to least occurring themes of the comments, and thus provides a good overview of the usual flow of conversation of the comment sections on this particular subreddit. It shows that the members carry a lot of casual conversations, are willing to provide advice and resources, when possible, as well as support. Furthermore, it also shows that a lot of personal anecdotes are shared, and aggression and ridiculing are fairly uncommon. In addition, table 2 is an overview of the 14 flairs (topics) of CLK, as well as the frequency of use spanning over the observed 10 days. Likewise with table 1, it is ordered after most to least frequent, with 4 flairs remaining unused throughout the data collection. The top 3 most prominent flairs tell us, that CLK is a place to seek help and recommendations as well motivate others to be the best version of themselves, equal to that of the categories of the comments.

Category	Number of comments and percentage
Internal chatting	88 \approx 19%
Advice/Resources	86 \approx 19%
Personal experiences and reflections	74 \approx 16%
Supportive	71 \approx 15%
Discussion	44 \approx 10%
Berating/Pushing	36 \approx 8%
Thankful	35 \approx 7%
Religious	15 \approx 3%
Banter and sarcastic remarks	10 \approx 2%
Total	459

Table 1: Overview of categories and the amount of comments

Category	Amount	Category	Amount
Question	8	Meme	1
Motivation	6	Other addictions	1
Recommendation	3	Sexuality and relationship	1
Exercise	3	Diet and cooking	0
Hobbies	3	Religion	0
Field report	2	M E T A	0
Reading	1	Porn addiction	0
Total	29		

Table 2: Overview of frequency of flairs

4.2 Established rules

As already stated, this project will mostly focus on culture as practice, and how culture is identifiable and made through shared practices as described by Baym (2015). Often times these described practices can be unconscious and simply part of everyday behaviour, however, it can also be affected by official rules set in the community and reinforcing hierarchy within it (Baym, 2015). In CLK there is 7 displayed rules of the subreddit (appendix 3, figure 1) as well as the aforementioned 14 flairs, to distinguish posts (appendix 3, figure 2). These two factors being displayed as part of the main page of the subreddit helps inform new members of the practices of the group and helps keep the established order. It also works to set a common goal in participation in the subreddit, such as having rules that states to “Be a constructive member” and “Don’t advocate for mediocrity, push people forward” (appendix 3, figure 1). These goals clearly send a signal of this subreddit being for help and support, and to interact with the other members means to be critical and helpful. These are the main official practices, with the additional flairs that tells of the topics that are discussed and exercised in the subreddit. Furthermore, there is a rule that states “No politics”, which also separates CLK from subreddits such as r/MensLib and r/MenRights, that is majorly used for discussing topics such as feminism and the concept of masculinity (LaViolette & Hogan, 2019).

4.3 Interaction

Based on the categorizing of the comments and the official rules of the subreddit, the interaction between members can be further uncovered and understood. Through looking at the interactions seen

between members, e.g., by comments such as: *“Dude, your commitment is inspiring, and I hope you meet your goals.”* (appendix 4, figure 1) and *“That’s wonderful, congratulations King. Truly, no higher, purer calling than that of fatherhood.”* (appendix 4, figure 2) it is evident that the first stated rule in the subreddit *“This is a positive sub, engage with Kings in that way.”* (appendix 3, figure 1) is followed and practiced. This is also visible in table 1, as comments of supportive nature or containing advice makes up a total of 34% of the collected comments. The category *“Personal experiences and reflections”* also often times include supportive content based on personal anecdotes, such as: *“I’ve been in depression recovery for over 10 years. There have been ups and downs. Only thing I can say is there is always a way out of my pain. Wait for a door to appear.”* (appendix 4, figure 4). It is not uncommon for members to provide advice through their own experiences, which also partially explains the percentage (16%) of comments that is self-including through personal experiences and reflections. Members rarely promote themselves or make them the immediate topic of interest on other members’ posts.

In relation to self-including, many members also include their religion in their responses to posts. In the span of the 10 days in which we collected data, no member made an explicitly religious post (table 2), however, religion still showed through in the comments, with 15 total comments relating to it. E.g., *“Study the example of Christ and the teachings of scripture. I’ve been on a 8-year project of struggling to improve in this area and this was the decisive step that broke through for me just this year.”* (appendix 4, figure 5) It is not unusual for commenters to relate the original poster’s (OP) troubles or advice-seeking to their own personal religion. However, these comments are often well intended, as they also tend to carry the same purpose of those of the *“personal experiences”* category; to help through personal experience and give advice based on own beliefs and workings. This is also visible in the comment above, as this member tells of how religion helped his own situation, and thus he recommends that OP tries the same approach. CLK is also quite an accepting community when it comes to religions, displayed by one of their rules stating: *“People of all religions, non-religions, areligions etc. are welcome here and you should act that way”* (appendix 3, figure 1). Members are allowed to express and practice their religion freely in the community, as showcased.

The members most often engage positively with each other, wishing to be part of a good-natured and nourishing community, it can come across negatively in some cases. For these comments the category *“berating/pushing”* was established, as to get an overview of just how many comments of this nature was posted. Examples of this type of comment are: *“Cutting yourself isn’t cool or edgy bro, it’s*

cringe. Nihilism is for sissy fem boys that can't take the punches of life. You are not a sissy fem boy you are a STRONG CLEAN LIVING KING." (appendix 4, figure 6) and *"If you plan on staying with this child for their entire childhood, marry this woman. If you can commit to fatherhood you can commit to being a husband."* (appendix 4, figure 3). Both of these comments carry an intention of providing advice, however, it comes out demanding rather than suggesting. The tone of these comments can be quite harsh, which in some cases is what OP needs, however, it still separates them from the others in this community. These comments can be seen as members trying to follow the rules of "Be a constructive member" and "Don't advocate for mediocrity, push people forward", as they often are pushy in nature and again seems to be driven by the want to help other members become the best version of themselves.

A final observation of practices and norms based around the official rules of CLK, is that of the last rule that states; "Meme and Motivation image post days" (appendix 3, figure 1), where the moderators have provided certain days for these two flairs, to avoid spamming. In doing this, the rule directly shapes how and when members post certain types of contents, and thus affects their practice and stance on these flairs.

4.5 Motivation between members

To gain a better understanding of how a community such as CLK came to be, we reached out to the subreddit and requested a few members who were willing to construct semi-structured interviews (Lichtman, 2013) in private messages. Many members reached out, and we ended up with three total interviews, where we asked about their motivation for joining and engaging with the community and whether or not they had experienced personal improvement as a result of this.

In regard to the motivation, one of the active members we interview responded that; *"Primarily the satisfaction of being able to assist or inspire others to better live the way they want."* (appendix 5, figure 1) motivated his membership of CLK. As described, this member wishes to help the other members and provide support. Another member, who described himself as "a lurker", said he instead found motivation in seeing a community with likewise interests to his own: *"(...) It's mainly just knowing that there are other people who share similar values and stuff. It motivates me."* (appendix 5, figure 2) Evidently, there is a difference in the reasoning for members to join, but they share a common ground of positively viewing this community and the way in which the members engage and learn from each other. Although, the final person that was interviewed brought on a new, broader perspective: *"Society has sort of "abandoned" many men. People do not care about men anymore*

and men (and masculinity in particular) are under attack coming from every single influential structure in society (...)” (appendix 5, figure 3) It can be interpreted that he sees CLK as a product of a societal situation, where men can share their thoughts and views, away from the pressure of society and its inflicted standards.

Furthermore, members also mentioned personal gain from being part of this community. One of them mentioned that as a part of his motivation for joining: “*(...) to learn new ideas or habits of mind for my own self-improvement.*” (appendix 5, figure 1) This member finds inspiration to improve his own ways through CLK, and additionally stated that: “*Yes the time in CLK has improved my life and well-being.*” (appendix 5, figure 1). The subreddit is also a place where members can share personal improvements, even if it is not the doing of CLK. E.g., a member posted: “*I am 15 years old, I wanted to share what i’m doing to try to be cleaner.*” (appendix 5, figure 4) followed by his welldoings. This type of post often leads to supportive responses from other members encouraging the OP to continue or sometimes even further their improvement with small steps. As a community CLK encourages self-bettering and pushes its members to further each other. It is a supportive community, whose practices and norms translates into its members’ everyday life, often times with positive results.

5.0 Discussion

Culture as practice can be described as being held together by three total factors, which is: understanding, written and unwritten rules and norms for emotional engagement (Jensen, 2014). As shown through the analysis, this fits well with CLK, as all participants in the community has a shared understanding of not only the community, but also values and ideals as stated by one of the interviewed members. Additionally, the subreddit has written rules which evidently guides the members in their interaction with one another, as well as help establish the community as a safe space to seek guidance and support. The flairs also signal to new members what topics are discussed in this subreddit and thus communicates a surface level of the norms practiced in the group. The personal nature of the subreddit in the shape of personal anecdotes (appendix 4, figure 4) as well as the motivation of members to provide assistance and inspiration shows that participants also invest emotionally in this community. There is a shared understanding between the members, that it is a safe place to share as well as positively affect other people.

In regard to Bayms (2015) five identifiers of online communities, CLK fits within the aforementioned three that is space, shared practice and shared resources and support. Members are not limited by their location, as this community share a space through reddit. Through the display of rules and flairs, this space has been personalized to the community's needs and wants. Furthermore, the group shares practices and norms, as previously mentioned, and these rules and flairs plays a partial role in establishing these. The rules help dictate the norms of the language used in the community, which is that of keeping positive and constructive tone when posting, whether it is a post or a comment. The final of the three uncovered identifiers is that of shared resources and support. As shown in the analysis, both in categorizing of response comments as well as how the interviewed members described their motivation for being active in the community, CLK is a key point for providing resources and receiving support. The advice/resources category being the second most prominent observed type of comment in our 10 days data collection, shows that the members are very willing to assist and inspire one another, as well as provide resources and guidance when needed. Thus, CLK is an established safe place for members to engage personally with others, either sharing their own stories or helping others further theirs.

6.0 Conclusion

The subreddit of r/CleanLivingKings is a positive and safe place for men to provide and seek guidance from other people of shared gender identity. Based on the content analysis, the content posted, whether it's a post or a comment, is very positive and often times is posted with intentions of a good outcome. The rules establish a healthy community in allowing free expression of religion and well as avoiding political discussions. Furthermore, the rules states that to be an active member means to be constructive and positive, which comes through in the mostly supportive and non-toxic responses as well as posts made to the subreddit. This general behaviour and nature of the subreddit works well, as through interviews it is established that members enjoy inspiring others, learning from others as well as being validated in their viewpoints through sharing them with the community. The motivation for being active is that of a pure wish to provide assistance as well and receiving in return when needed. The added layer of self-improvement as a result of participation in the community also provides motivation and a want to see the same effects on other members.

Overall, the members of CLK shows shared practice in their engagement, as well shared interest in fellow members wellbeing. From the 10 days of data collection, it shows to be a community with a positive ridden culture riding on mutual respect and communal understanding of how to support others in need. The act of self-improvement goes to show that this community's positive effects is not tied to that of the virtual space but carries into the behaviour in the members' everyday lives. The values are practiced in real life, and thus the membership shows itself outside of virtual engagement in the internet space for these men.

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