HELP, IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE FORUM?: A FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS

OF THE STUDENT DOCTOR NETWORK FORUMS

Except where reference is made to the work of others, the work described in this thesis is my own or was done in collaboration with my advisory committee. This thesis does not include proprietary or classified information.

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Josh Hillyer

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Josh Hillyer, son of the late Theodore Larry Hillyer and Dr. Brenda Joyce Hillyer
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THESIS ABSTRACT

HELP, IS THERE A DOCTOR IN THE FORUM?: A FANTASY THEME ANALYSIS

OF THE STUDENT DOCTOR NETWORK FORUMS

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This thesis uses an applied methodology based on Bormann's (1972b) fantasy

theme analysis to study the Internet communication in the Student Doctor Network

(SDN) Forums. The Internet posts of several thousands of pre-medical and medical

students were placed into categories based on subject matter and shared understandings

of reality and major life decisions.

Several fantasies are present in the SDN Forums. These shared fantasies explain

the SDN community's love for some medical schools, desire to give each other advice,

dislike of "typical" pre-medical students, understanding of how medical students and

doctors succeed, and their thoughts on what really matters in life. The fantasies are part of a larger rhetorical vision, "It's Still Worth It," which encourages the SDN community to continue trying, no matter how difficult medical school might seem.

This thesis concludes with a look at how this fantasy theme analysis can be applied to college advising, as many members of the SDN Forums ask each other for serious advice. The results of this thesis also suggest that an applied version of the fantasy theme analysis methodology is effective for studying Internet forums and other online communities.

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I. INTRODUCTION

Doctors work in a stressful, high-stakes environment. Stebbing and Powles (2007) explain that the stress that young doctors feel affects their personal relationships and financial situations. This thesis focuses on these young individuals who are in varying stages of their careers, ranging from applying to medical school to practicing medicine. While other studies exist on stress and uncertainty in the workplace, they take a different approach than that of this thesis. Rather than drawing a sample of medical professionals and periodically interviewing them, this thesis searches for themes within the unfiltered conversations of thousands of medical professionals, students, and their family and friends. The Student Doctor Network (SDN) Internet community features hundreds of forum posts every day, allowing for a rich body of communication for analysis. This thesis analyzes conversations within two of the SDN's most popular forums, both largely populated by medical professionals and students. As the SDN Forums community allows these individuals to communicate freely about issues related to practicing medicine and managing a personal life (and potentially socialization and uncertainty issues), it is a useful group to analyze in this study.

This thesis seeks to add not only to the body of research on uncertainty reduction and organizational socialization but also to Bormann's (1972b) fantasy theme analysis methodology. It is apparent that Bormann's method is useful for this particular study because it allows for the discovery of shared values and belief systems in groups. As this

thesis is concerned with the communication of a large group of individuals, it is necessary to use Bormann's method to accurately assess the group's communication. The results of studies by Bormann (1973) and scholars such as Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne (2001), Cichy (1988), and Putnam, Van Hoeven, and Bullis (1991), assert the validity of the method. However, as this thesis analyzes an Internet community rather than newspaper articles or films, it cannot rely solely on the framework provided by Bormann and other scholars. Instead, this thesis expands upon the methods used by Alemán (2005) in a fantasy theme analysis of an Internet community.

This thesis provides a comprehensive literature review, the key terms and methods used in conducting the fantasy theme analysis, the results, and a discussion of the implications and a suggestion for future research. After reviewing the relevant literature, the thesis explains my applied fantasy theme analysis methodology and moves to a look at a pre-test of the SDN Forums community. It concludes by presenting the final analysis of the community and the resulting fantasy themes and rhetorical vision (if present).

II. LITERATURE REVIEW

This literature review focuses on a variety of topics relevant to a fantasy theme analysis of an Internet community. First, the literature review presents the basic concepts underlying fantasy theme analysis, including a discussion of Bormann's early explanation of the theory and resulting studies, studies conducted by other scholars, and new applications of the method. Second, the literature review turns to a discussion of uncertainty reduction and its relationship to communication and information seeking. Third, the literature review focuses on how uncertainty reduction relates to organizational socialization in a variety of settings including groups and teams, universities, and health organizations.

Many significant areas of research examine fantasy theme analysis, a concept that emerged from symbolic convergence theory. As symbolic convergence theory (SCT) spawned many of the concepts that scholars use when conducting fantasy theme analyses, it is relevant to briefly review SCT. Bormann (1982c) states that, "Symbolic convergence creates, maintains, and allows people to achieve empathic communion as well as a 'meeting of the minds'" (p. 51). The theory provides scholars with a means of observing communication behavior and understanding when individuals have come to a shared meaning. Bormann further explains SCT by looking at the words "symbolic" and "convergence."

Bormann (1982c) notes that communicators try to decipher what other communicators' actions symbolize, as multiple meanings can be applied to signs and actions. According to SCT, actions symbolize meanings. Cragan and Shields' (1992) review of SCT's theoretical assumptions is useful in explaining the use of the word "symbolic," in noting that reality is a symbolic construction, understood through actions and communication. Bormann goes on to look at convergence, asserting that the term applies to communication situations in which two individuals' symbolic worlds "incline towards each other, come more closely together, or even overlap" (1982c, p. 51).

Once these symbolic worlds overlap, one can observe the formation of a community, in which individuals share meanings and discuss their experiences. Bormann (1982c) notes that, over time, these group members will share more and more interpretations of worldly events and experiences, ultimately leading to shared interpretations of reality. Still, a more dramatic element of SCT explains how some groups go beyond shared interpretations of events to holding deep emotional commitments to their interpretations that explain how group members move into identifying with each other. This element revolves around shared group fantasies, the foundation of fantasy theme analysis studies.

While the theoretical assumptions behind SCT make sense, they lack the ability to completely explain how individuals come to share meanings. However, Bales (1970) and Bormann (1975) bridge the gap between the theoretical assumptions and actual experience in noting that symbolic convergence occurs when individuals share group fantasies. One of the most significant aspects of Bales' small group research is the category of "tension release," which has since been slightly altered and renamed.

Bormann (1972b) notes that the term "tension release" later became "dramatizes." Still, the idea of tension being released through communication (marked by a change in the conversation's tempo, higher levels of intensity, and a lack of self-consciousness) has stayed the same. Through multiple individuals' use of dramatizing statements, one can see evidence of sharing or participating in a drama. The notion of dramatizing statements or messages is of interest to Bormann; the scholar compares them to inside jokes, as they allude to a shared group fantasy.

Bormann (1985) states that, "A dramatizing message is one that contains one or more of the following: a pun or other wordplay, a double entendre, a figure of speech, an analogy, an anecdote, allegory, fable, or narrative" (p. 4). A symbolic cue lets groups members know that they are referring to a shared fantasy. Bormann (1972b) notes that what Bales refers to as "dramatizing" is related to a group fantasy chain, in which a conversation develops or "chains out" through group discussion on something that might not immediately seem to be relevant to the task. This chaining is referred to as a "group fantasy chain" (Bormann, 1972a), and results in group members establishing their values, goals, and most preferred types of leadership.

Although Bales (1970) provides the foundation for several of the ideas used in fantasy theme analyses, Bormann is responsible for expanding on this foundation and explaining the relevant terms. The first important term to define is "fantasy." Although this word is commonly associated with things that have no basis in reality, it means something different in the context of SCT. Bormann (1985) states that, "The technical meaning for fantasy is the creative and imaginative interpretation of events that fulfills a psychological or rhetorical need" (p. 5). The group or community uses the fantasy to

explain something or reinforce its way of life. Understanding this concept before moving on to other fantasy theme analysis terms is critical.

The next term of significance to this study is "fantasy theme." A fantasy theme includes a dramatizing statement or message that depicts characters participating in an event removed from the here-and-now of the individuals involved in the conversation (Bormann, 1982c). To explain more simply, fantasy themes refer to events from the past or potential events in the future. Bormann (1972b) notes that although the drama is played out in a time separate from the present, it often relates to the group's current situation or the relationship dynamics between group members.

Two final concepts of significance to fantasy theme analysis are "fantasy types" and "rhetorical visions." Fantasy types emerge from past fantasy themes that resulted in a chaining conversation. Bormann (1985) states that, "A fantasy type is a stock scenario repeated again and again by the same characters or by similar characters" (p. 7). The scholar gives the example of evangelistic preachers, who often rely on stories (dramas) in which they are the protagonists and must overcome some sin that is keeping them away from spiritual enlightenment. After identifying the common traits of a drama, a scholar is able to name it. Bormann calls this example the "Pauline conversion fantasy." Bormann (1972b, 1985) explains that these dramas are used to tie the community together and to encourage them to act on the group's ideals.

This example relates to the term rhetorical vision, which applies to fantasy themes that emerge from group or mass media interactions, leading individuals into sharing symbolic realities. Bormann (1985) states that, " a rhetorical vision is a unified putting-together of the various scripts which gives the participants a broader view of

things" (p. 8). Rhetorical visions, therefore, are the end results of shared fantasies and represent a group's sense of values.

While some aspects of fantasy theme analysis are a result of small group communication and SCT research (Bales, 1970), it is apparent that Bormann is the father of fantasy theme analysis methodology. Bormann (1972b, 1972c, 1985) explains the terminology of relevance to fantasy theme analysis. Through years of researching concepts such as "dramatizing," "fantasy theme," "fantasy type," and "rhetorical vision," there is a clear foundation that scholars can use to conduct fantasy theme analyses and expand upon Bormann's methodology. Although other scholars have and continue to use fantasy theme analysis in their studies, Bormann is responsible for most of the early studies that use the fantasy theme analysis method.

Early fantasy theme studies

Fantasy theme analysis studies apply to a wide array of scholarship in areas such as politics, media, persuasion, organizational communication, and online communication. While fantasy theme analysis covers all of these areas (and a few others), Bormann's early work on the subject tended to focus on politics. For example, Bormann's (1973) first study related to fantasy themes looks at the rhetorical visions of the 1972 U.S. presidential elections. The scholar focuses attention on the fantasy themes used by McGovern, as they positioned politics as fundamental to life and did not use much satire or irony like other campaigns. The scholar finds that McGovern relied heavily on the fantasy of a "last chance" or turning point for American voters in the 1972 election. Also of interest to Bormann is how the McGovern campaign chose to emphasize the candidate's persona rather than emphasize action. The study ultimately finds that the

emphasis placed on McGovern's persona hurt the candidate when a fantasy began to chain through journalists and media viewers that McGovern's running mate, Eagleton, was not emotionally stable. This shared fantasy, coupled with McGovern's rhetorical vision of a strong individual persona leading the country, greatly damaged his campaign. This study validated the method through finding the presence of the theoretical concepts developed in the years before it.

Not all of the fantasy theme analyses conducted by Bormann or other scholars require as much analysis as the Eagleton affair, as many of them are not as ground-breaking or applicable to this study. Bormann, Koester, and Bennett (1978) look at the 1976 U.S. presidential election. The scholars focus a great amount of attention on the function of political cartoons and propose that these comics and cartoons might serve the same role in campaigns as inside-jokes do in small groups. By looking at the reactions of several respondents as a means of understanding whether they accept the inside-jokes (based on popular shared fantasies of each candidate displayed in political cartoons), Bormann, Koester, and Bennett find that the cartoons do serve as inside jokes in media communication. They also find that the cartoons split the respondents into three political groups, and that the respondents voted in line with the rhetorical visions and fantasies expressed in the cartoons that they liked. Benoit, Klyukovski, McHale, and Airne (2001) conducted a similar study on political cartoons about Clinton and Lewinsky. However, the scholars find that the nature of the cartoons did not split the population into different groups but instead include fantasy themes that can appeal to readers of different political leanings.

Bormann, Kroll, Watters, and McFarland (1984) conducted research similar to that of Bormann et al.'s (1978) work. However, they do not focus on political cartoons and instead look at the four rhetorical visions most commonly expressed by publicists in the 1980 U.S. presidential election. The scholars find that a relationship exists between these visions and the shared fantasies of committed voters.

Cichy (1988) reports similar findings in a study on the 1980 North Dakota Gubernatorial race. The scholar explains that voting patterns were much easier to predict after gaining an understanding of the fantasies shared by voters. While these two pieces produce related findings, Bormann et al.'s (1984) study proves to be more useful theoretically because of its expansion of the discussion of symbolic cues that allude to a previously shared fantasy. These cues form what is often thought of as an inside joke. However, the scholars explain that the symbolic cue included in a dramatizing message does not have to refer to something humorous in nature. Bormann et al. (1984) state that, "The allusion to a previously shared fantasy may arouse tears or evoke anger, hatred, love, and affection as well as laughter and humor" (p. 289).

Bormann's (1982) study looks at the television coverage of a busy day of news that included Reagan's inaugural address and the release of American hostages being held in Iran. The scholar finds that the fantasy type of restoration was most commonly used that day, to symbolize a return to a more idealized time than the current here-and-now conditions. More interesting, however, is Bormann's assertion that this theme of restoration used in Reagan's address spilled into the news coverage of the hostage release as well. Newscasters shared the fantasy, and it chained into other coverage. The last important aspect of this study is its implications for fantasy theme

analysis as a then-new form of research. Bormann notes that this study shows the usability of the method, as it can be applied to other texts besides print media and speeches.

Other Scholars' Studies

While Bormann's early studies of fantasy theme analysis are relevant, they tend to be concerned with proving that the method is effective and should be used in future research. The research of other scholars illustrates how the method can be applied to other areas, as Bormann suggests in a study on Reagan's inauguration day. A great deal of this work comes from studies on SCT, as it relies heavily on fantasy theme analysis.

For example, Putnam, Van Hoeven, and Bullis (1991) use fantasy theme analysis to look at how school districts develop their values and desires in negotiations with teachers. The scholars note the importance of stories in building group fantasies that create common goals, heroes, and villains within the organization. Once these dramatizing messages become shared fantasy themes, the members are likely to act and react similarly. Another useful aspect of this article is the scholars' relating of fantasy themes to rites and rituals. While rites and rituals are similar to a fantasy type, in which common themes are repeated, Putnam et al. use them to explain the act of bargaining, as it relates to negotiations. They note that individuals bargain in particular ways and that fantasy themes are visible from these bargaining rituals. One fantasy type exhibited is "we don't need lawyers," which shows the teachers' shared value of self-fulfillment (Putnam et al., p. 95). The scholars ultimately find that different fantasies tie into the act of negotiating in the two school districts that they studied. Finally, they note that the study is important because it expands fantasy theme analysis to cover ritualistic

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ceremonies, such as negotiating. Putnam et al. explain that the ideas expressed in these events are quite possibly a result of fantasy themes displayed in public forums and organizational meetings. Bormann (1982c), Cragan & Shields, (1992) and Stone (2002) conducted similar studies, which support fantasy theme analysis as a means of understanding decision-making.

Bormann, Cragan, and Shields (1996), and Endres (1997) provide solid looks at the rhetorical vision aspect of SCT. Using some of the concepts of fantasy theme analysis, they assert that all rhetorical visions adhere to a consistent life-cycle involving an effort to sustain consciousness by holders of the vision. The scholars go on to discuss the master analogues (righteous, social, and pragmatic) behind most of the rhetorical visions present in the study, asserting that they prove to be effective in categorization. Finally, Bormann et al. note that "rhetorical vision" is a useful term for scholars looking at almost any rhetorical community, as "seemingly unrelated rhetorical visions may be combined into a masterful rhetorical vision providing rhetorical continuity over time" (p. 26). Shields (2000) expands upon these findings by noting that the critical autoethnography special theory's life-cycle can be explained by the scholar's understanding of rhetorical visions.

Endres (1997) focuses less on developing the concept of rhetorical vision and more on finding examples of them through a fantasy theme analysis of popular examples of father-daughter relationships. The scholar explains four key types of rhetorical visions that emerged from the fantasy theme analysis; these include "the Buddy" and "the Shadow." Finally, Endres suggests ways that these fantasy themes and rhetorical visions can be useful for counselors or parents. Stone's (2002) study on the motives of

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individuals enrolling in master's programs also relies on fantasy themes to find the

overarching rhetorical visions of the new students. Stone uses Bormann et al.'s (1996)

three master analogues of rhetorical visions to further categorize these findings. These

three analogues, the pragmatic, the social, and the righteous, prove to be effective in this

study. Stone reports that the majority of the respondents identify with fantasy types that

fall into the overarching category of "righteous." These fantasy types are marked by

terms such as "strong university reputation" and "program rigor" (Stone, 2002, p. 238).

While not all scholars conducting fantasy theme analysis use these master analogues,

they prove to be relevant in categorizing fantasy themes and types.

Foss and Littlejohn (1986) and Marambio and Chew (2006) use fantasy theme

analysis on films with great social relevance. Not only do these studies show that films

are useful texts for the fantasy theme method, they also provide examples of some of the

concepts that can be applied to the method. Foss and Littlejohn's study on the nuclear

war film *The Day After* produces interesting results by applying the concept of irony to

the method of fantasy theme analysis. The scholars state that, "Irony is characterized by

incongruity between what is expected and what occurs. In its narrowest form, it is a

specific figure of speech in which words express a meaning different from their literal

denotation" (Foss & Littlejohn, p. 328). They go on to explain why this concept is useful

to their study. Foss and Littlejohn note that irony requires subjects to detach themselves

from the ironic situation in order to separate and understand the relationship of the two

meanings (literal and intended) present.

Foss and Littlejohn (1986), like Stone (2002), feel that analyzing the deep,

categorical structure of fantasy themes is relevant to understanding shared realities. The

scholars note the existence of the pragmatic, righteous, and social analogues (or structures), but they explain that these three terms do not cover enough concepts to be completely useful. They propose that a fourth analogue, irony, is necessary. Although Littlejohn and Foss do not call these three terms "analogues" like Bormann et al. (1996), they ultimately are very similar concepts. The scholars add to analogues by explaining the concept of deep structure. Deep structure is "the underlying frame in which the entire drama is placed" (Foss & Littlejohn, 1986, p. 328). This expansion of the master analogue concept is one that still could prove to be relevant in fantasy theme studies, as it helps explain situations with unclear, ironic meanings. Marambio and Tew (2006) also conduct a fantasy theme analysis on a film. The scholars look at the film *A Day Without a Mexican*. While this study does not expand Bormann's method in the same way as Foss and Littlejohn's analysis of *The Day After*, it does provide support for film as a relevant text for analysis.

One of the most useful points from Marambio and Tew's (2006) work is its acknowledgement of the "lifestyle rhetorical vision." The scholars explain that this type of rhetorical vision, which is present in *A Day Without a Mexican*, is characterized by "an awareness of a narrative, such as the Latino populations' awareness of the Anglo reaction to them" and further note that the "notion begins to control lives, self-definitions, and self expression" (Marambio & Tew, 2006, p. 480). Fantasy theme analysis provides a means of analyzing how the themes present in films might affect minority groups. Marambio and Tew prove the significance of studying media portrayals of marginalized groups through fantasy theme analysis.

Ford (1989), and Novek (2005) conducted similar studies on rhetorical visions. Both scholars looked for fantasy themes relating to individuals who have faced personal vices and failures. Ford analyzes *The Big Book*, which focuses on Alcoholics Anonymous. The scholar explains that the rhetorical vision of "Fetching Good Out of Evil" (Bormann, 1977) emerges from this book. This vision displays the purpose of Alcoholics Anonymous, as it presents the group as one that shares a new, sober identity and common interpretation of the world around it. Ford asserts that this study reinforces Bormann's original work on fantasy themes. As many of Alcoholics Anonymous' ideas emerge from Puritan and war rhetoric, evidence suggests fantasy chaining from larger societal groups. This fantasy chaining shows the potential for larger groups to influence those that are not in power (positively and negatively) through rhetoric. The chaining also shows evidence of "a fundamental cultural rhetorical form, a form whose origins are deeply historical and whose manifestations in American life may be many" (Ford, 1989, p. 13). Novek analyzes a newspaper produced by women in an American prison. While this article ultimately seeks to show the value of journalism from society's "outsiders" (p. 298), it also finds the presence of a rhetorical vision within the prison community. Novek explains that a fantasy theme analysis of the prisoners' newspaper shows that these individuals are most concerned with sharing narratives of personal transformation. The method of fantasy theme analysis allows the scholar to suggest that this newspaper is beneficial to the prisoners and should continue to be funded in the future. It also provides free Americans with an opportunity to understand what prisoners actually think and aspire to do with their lives after prison.

Dobris and White-Mills (2006) and Endres (1989) conduct fantasy theme analyses to uncover rhetorical visions associated with unmarried and married motherhood. Although both studies are concerned with these individuals' interpretations of being mothers, they differ somewhat in approach. The scholars begin their studies by searching for fantasy themes in texts associated with motherhood. Endres analyzes several periodicals such as *Ebony* and *Seventeen*, while Dobris and White-Mills look at self-help books such as the *What to Expect* series. Each study produces several fantasy themes. Dobris and White-Mills conclude that these texts serve the interests of a patriarchal vision of motherhood, in which women should embrace the role of child-bearer. This study extends Bormann's methods by showing that fantasy theme analysis can be used to highlight the ways in which some groups are marginalized. Endres finds similar results, although the scholar is not writing from a feminist perspective. The study depicts three types of stories that are used in describing young mothers, ranging from stories of no hope to stories of upward mobility. Endres' study differs from Dobris and White-Mills' work because the scholar does not stop at the fantasy theme analysis step. Endres has 64 unmarried mothers choose imagery from these dramas that most apply to them. This stage of the study shows evidence of shared symbolic realities amongst this somewhat scattered group of women. The scholar notes that the study also shows the need for effective communication strategies between the media and the general population.

Recent studies and new applications

More recently, scholars have applied fantasy theme analysis to a wider array of subjects. Many of these scholars are concerned with issues of persuasion (Hester, 2000; Jackson, 1992; Kendall, 1993; Moran, 2002). Hester uses the method to look at

apocalyptic religious texts. Through analyzing these texts for fantasy themes, the scholar

finds that apocalyptic discourse was vital in sustaining the rhetorical visions of the

Thessalonians. While the results of this study are not ground-breaking, it serves as a

good example of how fantasy theme analysis methods can uncover instances of

persuasion in most texts. Persuasion is a common concern in fantasy theme studies,

because individuals must possess shared worldviews and meanings in order to persuade

others. Fantasy theme methods allow scholars to look for the presence of shared fantasy

types and terms in persuasive situations. An interesting example of persuasion as the

focus of a fantasy theme analysis comes from Moran's look at Arthur Barlowe's

Discourse. While this study is related more to history than communication, it uses

fantasy theme methodology to explain the strategies used to bring English merchants to

North America in the late 1500s.

     Other examples of persuasion in fantasy theme analysis come from analysis of

corporate rhetoric and motivational books. Kendall (1993) finds evidence of fantasy

themes in the "boiler plate" messages of corporate chairpersons; as they often position

themselves in an "us vs. them" situation. This shows another use of the fantasy theme

method: explaining effective and ineffective corporate rhetoric. The method can be used

to deconstruct this rhetoric to find its trends and potential for confusing or misleading

employees. Jackson (1999) uses fantasy theme analysis in similar way; the scholar

studies Covey's *Seven Habits of Highly Effective People*. Jackson finds evidence of a

few fantasy themes relating to recurring character traits and settings that drive the

majority of the appeal of Covey's work. Almost all of these examples relate to being lost

(either in the woods or the snow) and looking for direction. These fantasy themes are

examples of the dramatic elements of fantasy theme analysis, which Jackson states that

Covey uses extensively. Another result of this study is the scholar's assertion that

fantasy theme analysis is a strong methodology to use for future studies on persuasive

rhetoric. Jackson states that, "Fantasy theme analysis is well positioned to monitor and

assess the growing hybridization of religious, political and managerial that is manifested

within contemporary popular rhetorical visions such as the one discussed in this study"

(1999, p. 373).

Another new application of fantasy theme analysis is in message board and online

forum communication. Alemán (2005), Duffy (2003), Myers and Andrews (2006), and

Perry and Roesch (2004) conducted studies on Internet communities, which are of

particular interest to this study as online discussion boards serve as an interesting

expansion of Bormann's early ideas. All of these scholars find Internet communities to

be useful sites of fantasy creation and opinion convergence. Alemán analyzes the

SeniorNet discussion forum, an online community of elderly people. Alemán's study and

analysis, which relies heavily on the symbolic cues (key words such as "knight" or

"princess") used by the SeniorNet members, finds several fantasy themes present in the

forum. Some of these themes include the knight in shining armor fantasy, which proved

to be a site of debate for members who do not accept the traditional male-dominated love

story, and the catching fish fantasy, which compared finding a good dating partner to

catching a fish. Both of these fantasies were cued by different key words and phrases,

and there was evidence of a negotiation amongst the members for the new meaning of the

original idea. Alemán notes that the different fantasies were all part of the larger

rhetorical vision held by most of the group of "good men are hard to find."

Perry and Roesch (2004) also use fantasy theme analysis to look at the messages expressed by PBS forum members after the death of Fred Rogers (also known as Mister Rogers). The scholars find that many of the show's viewers used religious fantasy themes such as "sent from Heaven" in analyzing and discussing Rogers. More interesting to the scholars is the potential for the program's values to have a long-term effect on the viewers, as there is evidence of this based on the fantasy themes expressed by these Internet users. This study shows the ability of fantasy theme analysis to find examples of long-term change in communities.

Myers and Andrews (2006) use fantasy theme analysis methods in studying the Technodyke forums. These scholars search for fantasy themes within the conversations of young, technologically-savvy lesbians. Although Myers and Andrews are more concerned with setting themes (where a drama takes place) than most scholars, they produce interesting results. Myers and Andrews assert that the individuals who use Technodyke's forums use story-telling as a means of problem solving and group identification. The scholars explain that the members of Technodyke's forums tend to discuss their feelings of marginalization, as they express a longing for "home" in the forums as opposed to the "real world," where their lifestyles are not accepted. In this case, fantasy theme analysis helps explain the groups' shared feelings on the outside world and its heroes and villains. Bormann's methods show that some members of the lesbian community feel oppressed by the more prevalent heteronormative social conditions and only feel free to express their views in Internet forums. Finally, this study suggests that issues of identity and misidentification are of significance to the users of the Technodyke forums, as most conversations are related to those topics.

The collection of fantasy theme analysis studies after the 1990s suggests the usability of the method. While many of the studies mentioned in this section of the literature review relate to Bormann's early work on small groups and persuasion (Jackson, 1999; Kendall, 1993), they prove to expand upon earlier work by showing how businesses use rhetoric to create shared fantasies amongst employees. Also in recent years, fantasy theme analysis scholars have analyzed Internet communities (Alemán, 2005; Duffy, 2000; Myers and Andrews, 2006; Perry and Roesch, 2004). This development allows for a new approach to fantasy theme analysis, in which the unit of analysis is a group of real individuals. The results of scholars such as Alemán and Perry and Roesch prove the effectiveness of studying Internet groups, as they find evidence of multiple fantasy themes occurring within forum communication. A great amount of the results published by fantasy theme analysis scholars who focus on the Internet relate to individuals attempting to reduce uncertainty about their surroundings.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory

This thesis focuses on the emergence of fantasy themes in the online communication of medical students who are unsure not only of the field that they are entering but also of the individuals with whom they are communicating. Therefore it is useful to look at scholarship on socialization within groups. A relevant body of research to study comes from uncertainty reduction theory, a theory concerned with the ways in which individuals reduce uncertainty in groups. Most of the research on this theory applies to organizational and group cultures, particularly focusing on small group communication. As forum communication takes place between individuals who possess

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uncertainty, and each forum has a unique culture, this research relates directly to the study at hand.

Scholars such as Berger (1979), Berger and Calabrese (1975), Clatterbuck (1979), and Gudykunst (1983, 1985) are responsible for the early development of uncertainty reduction theory. Berger and Calabrese develop the framework as an interpersonal communication theory. The scholars find that individuals who experience uncertainty will try to reduce that uncertainty by seeking information from others. As these individuals communicate more, levels of uncertainty decline.

Kramer (1999) explains that it is not just individuals who communicate more when experiencing uncertainty. Entire organizations and groups of all sizes communicate more when challenging and confusing conditions arise. Gudykunst (1983) notes that once an individual reduces uncertainty about another person, culture, or organization, his or her level of attraction for that person or group will increase.

Sometimes multiple individuals or groups converge in order to reduce feelings of uncertainty. Clatterbuck (1979) explains that individuals gather to share information so that they can make the most effective decisions possible. Sharing information also leads to higher levels of personal and career confidence. Clatterbuck states that, "For the individual, reducing uncertainty and increasing attributional confidence become synonymous" (p. 148). In order for this to happen, though, individuals must ask effective questions and disclose accurate and useful information about themselves to the individuals with whom they are communicating (Gudykunst, 1983). There are a few ways in which individuals reduce uncertainty. Berger expands uncertainty reduction theory by suggesting the presence of three strategies to increase certainty. The scholar

explains that individuals use passive strategies such as social comparison and reactivity searches, active strategies such as questioning and observing others' environments, and interactive strategies such as questioning and disclosing personal information. All of these strategies serve the purpose of uncovering potentially deceptive or misleading communication maneuvers.

The roles of high- and low-context communication in uncertainty reduction

Low- and high-context cultures are of great significance to uncertainty reduction theory (Gudykunst, 1983; Gudykunst & Nishida, 1984). Gudykunst explains that low-context cultures are characterized by communication in which central messages are stated more directly. In high-context cultures, the central message is less obvious and is more easily observed in the actual context of the conversation rather than in the conversation itself. Gudykunst also notes that high-context communicators tend to internalize the meanings of their messages and are "more cautious in what they talk about with strangers than people from low-context cultures" (1983, p. 51). Gundykunst observes the ways in which factors such as interrogative strategy, background similarity, nonverbal behavior, and personal similarity affect the amount of disclosure and attributional confidence in individuals. The scholar's findings suggest that individuals in high-context cultures are more judgmental of other individuals based on their first interaction and generally prefer not to disclose much about themselves. An individual's personal background is very important to high-context communicators.

The findings of Gudykunst and Nishida's (1984) and Gudykunst's (1985) study are similar. Gudykunst and Nishida find further support for the relevance of low- and high-context cultures in uncertainty reduction. They note that attitude similarity between

individuals proves to affect their levels of attraction but does not relate to the individuals'

use of uncertainty reduction strategies. However, the scholars explain that cultural

similarity does influence individuals' likelihood of using uncertainty reduction strategies.

Gudykunst's (1985) study asserts the validity of these findings, while adding to the body

of research. The scholar notes that the type of relationship between two individuals is

significant in predicting the strategies the communicators will use to reduce uncertainty

about the environment or task at hand.

Applications of uncertainty reduction studies

Scholars such as Berger (1979) and Gudykunst (1983, 1985) were vital to the

development of uncertainty reduction theory. However, these scholars tended to be

concerned with establishing the relevance of the method while expanding its usability

rather than applying it to social situations. In the mid-1980s other scholars became more

interested in the theory and began to apply it to group and organizational settings

(Booth-Butterfield, Booth-Butterfield & Koester, 1988; Douglas, 1990; Nowak & Rauh,

2006; Sheer & Cline, 1995). These studies serve as examples of the situations to which

uncertainty reduction theory can be applied. Several of these studies add new ideas and

concepts to the theory.

Booth-Butterfield et al. (1988) apply uncertainty reduction methods to small

groups that must complete a task. The scholars' analysis of these groups focuses on the

concept of primary tension. Bormann (1975), states that primary tension is "the social

unease and stiffness that accompanies getting acquainted" (p. 181-182).

Booth-Butterfield et al. find that primary tension plays a large role in the interaction of

individuals in a group setting. The scholars explain that instances in which primary

tension arises lead to increased use of uncertainty reduction strategies. Interestingly, Booth-Butterfield et al. assert that their respondents were not able to consistently identify moments of shared primary tension and instead relied upon descriptions of their individual feelings about the group. The scholars report that, although sometimes difficult to identify, levels of primary tension were typically lowered when respondents used uncertainty reduction methods. This study is significant not only because it finds evidence of the effectiveness of uncertainty reduction theory, but also because it adds a new construct to the method: primary tension.

Douglas' (1990) study of college students meeting for the first time produces two significant findings. The scholar finds that, different from the results of some studies, uncertainty reduction involves a decrease in the respondents' question-asking but an increase in the respondents' levels of self-disclosure. These findings suggest that methods of reducing uncertainty are different for some individuals and cultures. Finally, Douglas' work reinforces early studies of uncertainty reduction which assert that social attraction and uncertainty are inversely related.

Sheer and Cline (1995) and Nowak and Rauh (2006) expand upon uncertainty reduction theory with their looks at two unique groups. Sheer and Cline analyze the methods of uncertainty reduction used in physician-patient relationships. Some factors that become important in this discussion are relational uncertainty and medical setting uncertainty. Sheer and Cline note that relational uncertainty in a doctor-patient situation is different than in most uncertainty reduction studies because patients understand the purpose of the relationship with their doctors. Sheer and Cline (1995) state that, "In doctor-patient interaction, the patient's primary concern is seeking diagnosis and

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treatment to reduce illness uncertainty" (p. 48). In this setting, patients are unsure of how they should seek information from their doctors. In addition to identifying several new ways of studying uncertainty reduction, the scholars also examine their respondents' perceptions on the adequacy of the information in their doctor-patient relationships. Sheer and Cline explain that the level of perceived information adequacy serves as a strong predictor of the patient's "post-visit illness uncertainty" (p. 44). Ultimately, the scholars explain that their methods prove to be reliable and assert that they should be used in future uncertainty reduction studies.

Uncertainty reduction studies cover a wide array of topics. Many of the studies included in this section of the literature represent the foundations of this area of research. Scholars such as Berger (1979) and Gudykunst (1983) are especially important to the theory's development, as they explain how individuals reduce uncertainty. Gudykunst even discusses how individuals reduce uncertainty based on the context of their surrounding cultures. In more recent years, these scholars' foundations have led to studies on uncertainty in specific relationships, such as Sheer and Cline's (1995) look at doctor-patient relationships. The study of uncertainty reduction within specific groups lends itself to organizational scholarship, as it can be applied to the topic of organizational socialization.

Organizational Socialization and Uncertainty Reduction

Organizational socialization scholars have conducted many useful studies in areas such as higher education, nursing, and general commercial business.

Early Organizational Socialization Research

Evan's (1963) look at peer-group interaction in industries is one of the first studies conducted on organizational socialization. The scholar focuses on the relationship between the number of people in a training group for new organizational members and the drop-out rate for these trainees. Evan's research suggests many things that are still relevant to the socialization process. Evan states that, "As a special type of primary group – one which consists of individuals occupying statuses of equal rank – the peer group can uniquely perform the function of reducing strains and alleviating tensions" (1963, p. 439). This is important, as it asserts that individuals are not necessarily comfortable with having to constantly perform for individuals who hold a higher organizational rank than them. In explaining the significance of the peer group to organizational socialization, Evan notes that the size of the group is also a factor. The scholar finds that individuals who are part of a group with three or more members tend to stay in training programs longer than isolates, who tend to stay in training programs longer than members of dyads. Evan explains that the "buddy system" (one-on-one training) is problematic because the trainee has a fifty/fifty chance of finding his or her trainer to be uncongenial.

While Evan's (1963) study proves to be important in explaining how numbers in peer-group socialization, it did not spawn a great amount of organizational socialization studies in the 1960s. Organizational socialization became a more prevalent area of research in the late 1970s with influential articles from Wanous (1977) and Van Maanen and Schein (1979). Wanous' study looks at organizational entry from the position of an individual entering an organization. The scholar explains that the perceptions of the

individual entering an organization often are not realistic, as they tend not to match the expectations of the employer. Wanous goes on to discuss the problems with the then-new area of research. Wanous claims that too many factors explain why individuals choose organizations, but not enough of them are based in clear reasoning. For example, the scholar notes that most individuals do not have enough information before joining an organization; they certainly have not been socialized beforehand.

According to the article, the only accurate information that most individuals possess when looking at organizations is related to employee pay rates, tuition costs, or number of hours in an average work day. Wanous (1977) ends this piece by urging scholars to continue studying the relationship between insider and outsider expectations, as this dichotomy is one of the greatest sources of confusion for individuals when making an organizational choice. Wanous' scholarship serves as a useful introduction on questions of organizational entry and socialization. While Wanous ultimately concludes that individuals do not follow a set "path" when entering an organization, the scholar suggests that realistic job expectations need to be communicated to potential applicants. Open communication between employers and applicants will reduce organizational turnover and lead to better decisions by the applicants.

Van Maanen and Schein (1979) provide a useful explanation of the process of organizational socialization. The scholars assert that the process involves newcomers acquiring the necessary knowledge to become effective members of an organization. Some of the things that are relevant in organizational socialization include the organization's culture, customs, jargon, and things of importance and insignificance. While this article explains what organizational socialization is and why it is important for

both the organization and the job applicant, it does not account for communication's role in the process as much as other models (Bullis, 1993).

Jablin (1987) explains organizational socialization as a process with multiple stages that a newcomer must experience. The scholar lists these stages as anticipatory socialization, assimilation, and exit. The process is also cyclical, as newcomers use the knowledge that they obtain from previous periods of socialization when searching for new jobs and anticipating the socialization processes that new employers will present. The scholar explains anticipatory socialization as a process in which a newcomer considers the situation and culture that he or she will be entering upon joining an organization. The second part of this process, assimilation, notes that an individual is integrated into an organization's unique culture. Finally, the exit stage simply refers to an individual leaving an organization. Although scholars such as Clair (1996) find problems with the stage-model approach to organizational socialization, it has provided effective results for other scholars interested in the process of socialization.

Other scholars explain organizational socialization based on storytelling and memorable messages (Brown, 1985; Davis, 2005; Stohl, 1986). Brown asserts that stories play a meaningful role in the socialization of a new organizational member. The scholar notes that the themes that are present in stories told within an organization show the presence of shared values amongst workers. Brown states that stories and shared themes "can be used by organizational members to define situations. Defining situations, or sense-making, is particularly salient for members in the initial stages of the socialization process as they encounter a variety of unfamiliar circumstances and stimuli" (1985, p. 28). The scholar ultimately finds a relationship between story-telling and

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organizational socialization. Brown explains that as individuals in the study were socialized by the organization, the themes and values expressed in their stories reflected the themes and values of the organization. Story-telling also proved to be a way in which individuals expressed uncertainty about events or situations of significance to the organization.

Stohl's (1986) research, while not directly related to storytelling, is similar to the work of Brown (1985). Stohl's look at an organization reveals that all of the members of the organization included in the study were able to recall one particular message that influenced their work lives for the rest of their careers. The scholar explains that these memorable messages tended to contain information on the organization's values, expectations, and unique culture. In effect, these messages tell the employees how they should act and what behaviors and beliefs are valuable to the organization. Finally, Stohl notes that these messages prove to be significant for new members seeking to make sense of their new jobs. For these individuals, the stories provided examples of what is appropriate communication within the organization.

Davis (2005) analyzes the role that storytelling plays within organizational orientation programs. Davis states that stories and narratives have "an important role in all aspects of human interaction, including organizational communication where they offer a vehicle for imparting an organization's history, mission, goals, and values to organizational newcomers" (2005, p. 128). The scholar notes that storytelling is significant to the socialization of newcomers, it is an area of research that is ultimately underrepresented by organizational socialization scholars. Davis' piece expands the area of organizational socialization by comparing the stories used by organizations to the

rhetoric used in sermonic discourse. Davis explains that like sermons, organizational

orientations involve a rhetor asking the audience to act in certain ways. The rhetor is also

known to actively construct shared values and meanings, while educating the listeners on

the history and foundations of the organization (church or business) that he or she

represents. The scholar concludes by noting that organizational narratives and stories

help increase the likelihood that newcomers will understand the values and beliefs of

their new environments and will be less likely to quit during regular employment

circumstances.

<div align="center">**Recent Organizational Socialization Studies**</div>

Organizational socialization scholarship covers a large number of topics and

industries. Based on the foundations of research established by scholars such as Evan

(1963) and Van Maanen and Schein (1979), scholars have moved into areas such as

teams and groups, academia, and health organizations.

Organizational socialization and teams/groups

As health scholars such as Glen and Waddington (1998) and Taromina and Law

(2000) note, it is important for organizations to offer a group of employees with whom

new employees can interact and ask questions. Several organizational scholars (Cooper-

Thomas & Anderson, 2002; Fritz, 1997; Hartley, 1997; Lois, 1999) have written pieces

that apply to the notion of team-building within the socialization process. Hartley

explains that organizations should strive to build communicative teams that allow for

open communication and new ideas. The scholar also notes that it is difficult for this to

happen when members of the organization stick to a strict hierarchy and are not

accessible to share information. Lois' research reinforces Hartley's claims. Using

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ethnographic methods, Lois finds that for new members of a voluntary search and rescue group to reach "core" membership within the group, they must show interest in the collective goals of the group rather than on their own heroic goals. The scholar also finds support for a layered model of socialization, in which individuals excel at some aspects of an organization but do not have interest in other aspects. This type of group membership does not follow a linear path. Finally, Fritz's study also reinforces the need for strong group communication in organizational socialization. However, this scholar's work focuses more on the differences in work relationships shared by women and men. Fritz states that women's relationships tend to be stronger than men's, as women are often able to network more quickly and effectively. The scholar uses this as an example of why organizations must build strong group relationships and should perhaps institute peer-mentoring programs to facilitate the process.

Socialization and universities

Several scholars have conducted studies on colleges and universities with varying levels of success (Bach, 1990; Bullis, 1993; Cawyer & Friedrich, 1998; Clair, 1993; Trowler & Knight, 1999). These articles vary in approach, as some scholars focus on the sense-making techniques used by university faculty while others focus on the ways that college students understand role expectations when leaving college for the "real world" (Clair). While these pieces bear similarities to other organizational socialization articles, they tend to separate themselves by noting the negative aspects of socialization in the work place.

Cawyer and Friedrich (1998), and Trowler and Knight (1999) study issues associated with the socialization of new and existing university faculty. Cawyer and

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Friedrich focus on the socialization processes of several communication departments in American institutions. The scholars find that the amount of time the department spends orienting newcomers is directly related to the amount of satisfaction expressed by the new faculty members. The findings suggest that the job interview is an even better predictor of satisfaction; however, it is apparent that individuals experience less satisfaction upon entering the organization and realizing that the amount of time spent with colleagues is limited. Cawyer and Friedrich state that, "Apparently entry, unlike the job interview, is characterized by limited interactions between the newcomer and organizational members and by ambiguity concerning institutional expectations" (p. 242). Finally, the scholars suggest that institutions of higher education could provide a more satisfying environment for new faculty by presenting a realistic look at the new employee's day-to-day job roles and expectations.

Trowler and Knight (1999) depart from the approach used by Cawyer and Friedrich, as it still asserts the significance of a stage-model approach of socialization. Trowler and Knight suggest that university socialization is problematic in that it relies on approaches to socialization created by organizational scholars. According to Trowler and Knight, this leaves universities with a corporatist view of socialization that does not necessarily fit the nature of academic work. Instead, these scholars suggest that universities should break away from the formal business approach to socialization and instead allow more opportunities for newcomers to regularly discuss their questions and concerns with more experienced faculty. Trowler and Knight also note that it is important for the institution's culture to evolve with the new ideas and values expressed by new faculty members. The scholars explain that the university should not completely

change its vision based on the opinions of newcomers, but in many instances fresh

perspectives allow for positive institutional changes.

Bach (1990) and Clair (1996) are concerned with issues related to the

socialization of college students. Bach explains that socialization is important to

communication research, as it allows for a better understanding of "what is expected for

'appropriate' socialization" (p. 54). Through communication, newcomers demonstrate

their knowledge of the organization. In noting that aspect of newcomer socialization, the

scholar acknowledges the main goal of the study: to observe trends in the socialization of

university students through their communication patterns. Bach's research participants, a

group of sorority members provide excellent examples of this complicated process.

Findings show that these individuals are expected to change their behavior upon

committing to a "house." Before choosing a house, these individuals are expected to

express their unique personalities, but upon making a choice they are expected to

demonstrate that they understand the appropriate behavior and ideals of the sorority. The

scholar notes that after a four-month pledge period, the individuals tend to exhibit that

they have been socialized and are allowed the formal status of being members of the

sorority. Bach finds support for realistic job previews in stating that it is likely that an

individual will join the company or organization that "provides her with guidelines for

behavior within the organization prior to entry. Information about an organization made

available to a newcomer who is about to enter will make the transition process easier,

providing the information accurately reflects the organization's philosophy" (p. 61). The

scholar concludes by explaining that realistic socialization of individuals from the start

helps provide a positive public face for the organization, as it minimizes the level of

surprise experienced by newcomers. These individuals, in turn, are less likely to feel

disappointed by their experiences within the organization.

Clair's (1996) look at college students' communication about "real jobs" focuses

on Jablin's (1987) stage-model approach to socialization. The scholar notes that Jablin's

process, which includes anticipatory socialization, assimilation, and exit, has produced

useful findings in the area of organizational communication. Clair, however, chooses to

look past this stage model to instead concentrate on the ways in which individuals

communicate about work. The article looks at colloquialisms, which Clair defines as

"informal and familiar speech forms that have the status of cliché" (p. 252). It is possible

that through colloquialisms, employers can control the nature of work, as they control

what one considers to be work. Through questioning college students on their definitions

of terms such as "real work" and the "real world," the scholar finds that the anticipatory

stage of socialization devalues the work that students do before entering an organization.

While Clair acknowledges the benefits of the stage approach, this aspect proves to be

problematic to the scholar. Clair explains that the stage model unfairly supports

organizations, as it does not give much time to the individual's side of being socialized

into an organization.

Socialization and health organizations

Although it is not a large area of organizational socialization research, it is

relevant to look at a few studies on socialization in health organizations. Scholars such as

Glen and Waddington (1998), Settoon and Adkins (1997), and Taormina and Law (2000)

are influential in this area. These scholars' studies tend to focus on new hires in the

nursing department of various health-related organizations. While their settings are not

exactly the same, the results are similar. Settoon and Adkins look at new employees in a

mental health facility. These scholars observed the employees twice, once near the

beginning of their employment and then six months later. The scholars find the

sensemaking process to be especially interesting; they explain that the new employees

used their family and friends for guidance and advice heavily at the beginning of their

employment. However, six months later, they relied much more heavily on their

coworkers and bosses. Settoon and Adkins note that this shows evidence of the new

employees not feeling like insiders, so they did not feel comfortable talking about the

organization with organization members at first.

Like Settoon and Adkins (1997), Glen and Waddington (1998) suggest that

employees need strong support from their co-workers. Glen and Waddinton's analysis of

a group of nurses undergoing the role transition from staff nurse to clinical nurse

specialist shows evidence of a lack of information for these individuals as they undergo

the difficult change. Taromina and Law's (2000) research on burnout in Japanese nurses

also note the importance of coworkers support for individuals under a high amount of

stress. They also state that interpersonal skills need to be continually developed by

organizations, as these skills help to keep the nurses' confidence levels high.

While many topics are discussed in this literature review, they are all significant

to this thesis. The early and continued development of fantasy theme analysis by

Bormann and other scholars is of the greatest importance, but it lends itself to the

discussion of many other topics. In recent years, fantasy theme analysis has moved into

Internet forum communication with studies by scholars such as Alemán (2005) and Perry

and Roesch (2004). Because these Internet forums are organizations in themselves,

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members may encounter standard organizational procedures such as a lengthy

socialization processes. Also, some studies (Alemán) show evidence of Internet

communicators attempting to reduce uncertainty about the group by the statements that

they make.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

Recent fantasy theme analyses suggest that individuals sometimes turn to the Internet to ask questions and discuss issues that they are not comfortable discussing with their family and friends. However, it is unclear as to how individuals entering (or already in) a profession communicate and discuss issues on the Internet. This could provide more realistic results, as there is a higher comfort level associated with the relative anonymity of the Internet. There is potential for shared views and understandings, as Internet forum members discuss such a wide variety of topics together. While other fantasy theme analyses (Alemán, 2005; Perry & Roesch, 2004) of Internet groups look at only one topic, such as romance, this thesis is concerned more with themes and visions that community members share on all topics of conversations. Based on the results presented within the literature review, I will look for fantasy themes and an overarching rhetorical vision that might emerge in the forum discussions within the SDN community.

Research Questions

1. Do fantasy themes about becoming a doctor emerge within conversations on the SDN Forums? If so, what are these themes?

2. If themes emerge, how are heroes and villains defined, and are there common settings where their acts take place?

3. Are rhetorical visions present in the SDN Forums?

If yes,

A) What shared values do the members exhibit?

B) What shared goals are expressed?

C) What shared fears are identified?

IV. METHODOLOGY

Background on SDN as a research site

      The SDN Forums were a natural choice for this thesis for a number of reasons. As the SDN Forums focus on a particular type of organization (medical), they provide plenty of conversations related to organizational socialization and what individuals expect when entering an organization. Also, the SDN Forums serve as an organization in themselves, as each forum is moderated and the members hold different statuses. Finally, the SDN Forums are important to me on a personal level, as I began my undergraduate education as a Pre-Medical major. I found myself deeply engaged in the conversations held by the members of the forums.

      The SDN Forums provide a consistent population of individuals interested in communicating about medical school and everyday life. Because the SDN Forums are open to anyone interested in participating in the conversations, they are also available for anyone to read with or without joining the community. This openness is beneficial to the current fantasy theme analysis because it allows me to read and catalogue conversations from the same community members on a variety of topics. The open nature of this public Internet forum is also beneficial because the communicators are willing participants in a public media text that is catalogued not only by the forum itself but also by search engines such as Google.

The "Usage Policies" section of the SDN Forums ensures that members of the

SDN Forums understand the public nature of their conversations. This page states that,

"Once you've posted on the site, it's there forever. We do not delete posts except in

extreme cases. Even if we can remove a post that you regret posting, they are often

permanently cataloged in sites like Google or the Internet Archive" (vBulletin FAQ,

n.d.). To gain posting rights on the SDN Forums, individuals must agree to these usage

policies. The SDN Forums posters' comments are accessible by anyone and using them

does not require the approval of an Institutional Review Board.

The SDN Forums' "Usage Policies" further detail the open nature of posting on

the Internet. The policies state to "avoid using your real name as your screen name.

Remember, the SDN Forums are read by students, faculty, advisors and administrators

from around the world. Unless you want everyone to know who you are, keep your

identity protected" (vBulletin FAQ, n.d.). Because the SDN Forums management clearly

explains that these communicators' screen names are visible to the general public, I will

use the screen names provided by the posters when quoting posts. All names will be

italicized to distinguish them from regular text in this thesis.

Perry and Roesch (2004) conduct their fantasy theme analysis in a similar

manner, by documenting the names and ages (as this is relevant to their research) used by

individuals discussing Mister Rogers' death. Alemán (2005), however, uses pseudo

screen names for SeniorNet discussion board members because these individuals often

use their real names for their screen names, which presents ethical problems for the

researcher. While there is potential for SDN Forums users to provide their first and last

names as their screen names, this has not occurred in the hundreds of posts that I have

analyzed in my research. In the event of an SDN Forums poster uses his or her real name, I will change his or her screen name and note the change with an asterisk and brief explanation.

Method of analysis

In analyzing the SDN Forums, I will apply many of the terms used by Bormann and the other scholars mentioned in the literature review. Alemán's (2005) study on the Internet communication of a forum dedicated to senior citizens provides the framework for a large part of my study. Alemán's method is useful because it successfully analyzes a large number of posts from an Internet community. Through the analysis of hundreds of posts, the scholar is able to identify several fantasies shared by the group. Alemán leaves little doubt that the group shares these fantasies, as the scholar provides multiple excerpts from actual forum conversations for each fantasy. In addition to providing real posts and counter-posts from members of the forum, Alemán explains the significance of these conversations. The scholar identifies the most important aspects of fantasy theme analysis presented by Bormann, such as symbolic cues and fantasy chains.

Although most scholars do the same thing in their studies, they sometimes incorporate too many of Bormann's terms. As Mohrmann (1982) notes, some scholars use the terms "fantasy theme," "fantasy type," and "fantasy" interchangeably. Alemán's study minimizes its use of fantasy theme analysis terminology in a way that makes the results more focused and easy to follow. While Alemán's idea of focusing the majority of a fantasy theme analysis on identifying shared fantasies based on symbolic cues and fantasy chains is the most effective approach for this thesis, my research will sometimes require the use of terminology not used by Alemán.

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Other scholars have incorporated Internet discussions into their fantasy theme analyses, but their works were not solely focused on forum communication. However, Perry and Roesch's (2004) research prove to be relevant to this study of the SDN Forums. The scholars' analysis of Internet tributes to the late Mister Rogers shows the benefit in looking for the character traits that forum users attribute to individuals. This group of individuals loved Mister Rogers, and Perry and Roesch's study shows the ways in which the television star's personal traits influenced their understanding of reality. The recognition of heroic traits is especially important when studying pre-medical students who aspire to reach a higher level and attribute great merit to individuals who practice medicine. Another way that Perry and Roesch influence this thesis is their focus on individual posts from Internet users, rather than back-and-forth conversations. This approach can be useful in some instances. For example, situations occur in which one post from an individual takes place deep within a thread and is ignored within that conversation. However, other individuals might make this same point in different threads. Evidence suggests a shared fantasy theme within the forums; it just did not occur within the same conversation. While writing this thesis, the forums included over 130,000 members, with almost 37,000 of them being active members who post on a regular basis (Student Doctor Network Forums, n.d.) Because the SDN Forums boast a large community of individuals who post in multiple threads, it is likely that these individuals read a great number of posts to which they do not immediately reply. If they make the same points later, the community likely shares a rhetorical vision. This, like Perry and Roesch's study, suggests that posts do not have to appear in the same conversation to show evidence of shared fantasies.

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Ultimately Alemán (2005) provides a solid framework for this study. Although Alemán's methods of finding rhetorical visions and fantasy themes within an Internet forum are effective and influence the methods used in this thesis, a few areas of the scholar's work need to be expanded for a proper analysis of the SDN Forums. Alemán only analyzed the "discussion board" entitled "Meeting New People" on the SeniorNet forums. This "discussion board" consisted of 560 posts and lasted about thirty-one days. The scholar's explanation of the discussion board implies that the term is incorrect based on Internet terminology used today. Instead, the scholar is referring to a "thread," or one long conversation, not an actual "discussion board," in which individuals can post multiple topics for discussion.

This thesis will analyze multiple discussions, instead of one long discussion. These discussions might not have 500+ posts (most discussions on the SDN Forums do not last that long), but they will contain at least 20 posts from more than three individuals to be considered as examples of a shared fantasy. These numbers are not arbitrary; instead, they are a reflection of the examples provided by Alemán and my pre-test analysis of over forty separate discussions on the SDN Forums. A shared fantasy is marked by the use of similar symbolic cues and acknowledgment of past events by multiple individuals. If a discussion only lasts for eight to twelve posts from merely two individuals, its effect is too small to be considered as relevant. In this sense, the large post numbers in the thread used by Alemán are very useful. At the same time, examples of multiple discussions prove the prominence and penetration level of a group fantasy. Finally, the fantasy theme methodology creates the opportunity to return to previous threads if it is apparent that their results could help expand upon a more recent thread.

This is important, as it is possible that I will not fully understand the relevance of the first few threads that I read until I have finished reading all of my selected threads.

Definition of terms

As noted earlier, I use a few terms differently from the terminology used by Alemán (2005). For example, each unique discussion on the SDN Forums will be called a "thread." It is the term used by the SDN Forums management and by most other popular Internet forums. Separate conversations that occur within a thread will not be categorized as new threads but as new fantasy chains. A thread refers only to a conversation topic listed on the main page of the forum; it possesses a title decided upon by a member of the SDN Forums and implies a certain direction that the conversation should follow. The next significant term is "board." This term can be used synonymously with forum and describes a section of the SDN Forums. For example, members of the SDN Forums can have discussions in boards such as "Pre-Allopathic" (for future medical doctors) to "All-Students" (for any member of the SDN Forums to discuss any topic).

This study will follow Alemán's (2005) example in two other popular Internet forum terms, "post" and "poster." A post is a comment in a thread from a member of a forum. Posts are permanent but can be deleted by forum moderators. The poster is simply an individual who makes a post within a thread. The final term of relevance is "status." Alemán does not reference this term, but it is important to the SDN Forums because it displays the academic progress of a poster. Statuses range from "Medical Student" to "Pre-Medical" to "Resident," etc. Not only are these statuses useful for members of the SDN Forums who wish to network, but they also provide the posters'

backgrounds. The pre-test for this study shows evidence of SDN Forums members attributing extra credibility to posts made by individuals with statuses such as "Attendee" or "Resident," as these individuals have finished medical school and can provide more substantial advice. Although individuals could create false identities or statuses on the SDN Forums, the moderating staff generally makes sure that the flow of information includes correct, timely advice. For the purposes of Alemán's and Perry and Roesch's studies, the scholars accepted the ages and sexes provided by the individuals they researched. This method is the best way to handle the potential issue, as forum moderators tend to ban or delete the accounts of individuals who are proven to be intentionally deceptive.

Definitions of the fantasy theme analysis terms that I will be using in this study are also necessary. The first important concept to understand is "dramatizing message." A dramatizing message is marked by a pun, an analogy, a story, etc. (Bormann, 1985). Alemán notes that finding dramatizing messages is the first part of doing a fantasy theme analysis. The scholar states that, "If other members accept, extend, and collaborate in the continued dramatizing of that message, the critic can identify a fantasy chain" (p. 8). This criterion is significant because if a group member tells a joke or tries to start a discussion and no one accepts the joke, then the dramatizing message has failed and has no impact on group consciousness. Fantasy themes are not present in this situation.

Once again, dramatizing messages and their resulting fantasy chains must be separate from the here-and-now conditions of the world (Bormann, 1972b). They must refer to either a situation from the past or future. I will be looking primarily for fantasy themes in the conversations of these Internet users. I am working from Bormann's

original theoretical work and Alemán's (2005) more recent work, so both of their definitions of the term "fantasy theme" are relevant. Bormann (1982c) states that, "A fantasy theme consists of a dramatizing message in which characters enact an incident or a series of incidents in a setting somewhere other than the here-and-now of the people involved in the communication episode" (p. 52). Therefore, I will analyze the content of the dramatizing messages. Bormann also notes (1985) that the dramatizing messages included in fantasy themes are often about the individuals in the conversation. The characters do not have to be imaginary. Finally, Alemán's suggestions on how one should analyze fantasy themes are useful. Alemán states that, "Fantasy themes are analyzed by examining the narrative elements of the drama" (2005, p. 8). Some of these narrative elements that I will analyze in determining fantasy themes are the individuals identified as heroes and villains and the overarching plot and depicted actions that these individuals take. Alemán also notes the importance of looking for "sanctioning agents," which explain why characters do particular things. Alemán (2005) states that, "The sanctioning agent, which is often a value system, ideal, or emotion, provides the persuasive force for acceptance of the social reality constructed in the fantasy chains" (p. 9).

Another useful, but not vital, term is "fantasy type." A fantasy type is a "recurring script in the culture of a group" (Bormann, 1982c, p. 52). This recurring script is used to allude to a previously shared fantasy without recreating it in its entirety (Alemán, 2005). Fantasy types are marked by words that serve as symbolic cues for group members. Alemán provides the terms "prince" and "knight" as examples of fantasy types that allude to the fantasy theme of "knight in shining armor." The

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distinction between this concept and fantasy themes is not explained very well by

Bormann (Mohrmann, 1982), and some scholars use the two terms synonymously. I will

clearly distinguish between fantasies and fantasy types in this thesis. Situations that

appear frequently in larger fantasies will be labeled as fantasy types and included to

support the validity of the larger fantasies. Finally, I will look for an overarching

rhetorical vision within the SDN Forums. Bormann (1982c) states that a rhetorical vision

is a unified putting-together of various scripts which provides a broader view of a

culture's social reality" (p.52-3). It summarizes the group's views on the world and life.

Bormann notes that rhetorical visions are sometimes marked by a slogan or label of some

sort, used by a group of individuals.

Sampling

The terminology and methodologies provided by Alemán (2005), Bormann

(1982c), and Perry and Roesch (2004) are highly influential to this study. Still, none of

these scholars provide an exact method for sampling from an Internet forum. Most

fantasy theme analysis scholars use the method to analyze published texts from a single

author. Sometimes the scholars analyze media texts such as films or television shows,

but the approach tends not to focus on individuals on the Internet. As noted earlier,

Alemán studies a little over one month's time in one "discussion board." This approach

amounts to over 560 posts for analysis on one general topic: dating. While this sample is

effective for Alemán's research, it is perhaps too narrow for this thesis. Perry and

Roesch look at more than 1200 individual tributes posted for Mister Rogers. This

number is more applicable to the present study, but it still is based on a community

discussing only one topic: the death of Mister Rogers.

For this thesis, it is more useful to provide a look at two of the most important sections on the SDN Forums: the Pre-Allopathic section and the All-Students Forum section. The Pre-Allopathic section is relevant because it garners the highest number of individuals at any given moment in the SDN Forums. Seventy-eight unique sections appear in the SDN Forums (some include sub-sections), and the Pre-Allopathic section consistently has more than 500 members posting or reading threads. This number is significant when compared to sections of the SDN Forums such as "Psychiatry" or "Military Medicine" which tend to only have 10 to 20 people viewing threads or posting. While many of the topics in the Pre-Allopathic section of the SDN Forums are directly related to medical procedures and school work, other conversations in this section cover areas such as applying for jobs and living as a doctor. The All-Students Forum is useful because it allows for conversation on any topic. While this section does not attract as large of a population as Pre-Allopathic, its contributors are willing to talk about anything, including topics such as music, death and dating. The majority of my analysis will come from these two sections of the SDN Forums, but in some instances it will be relevant to mention a thread from another area.

While Alemán (2005) and Perry and Roesch (2004) rely on looking at every message over a period of time, this approach is not applicable for this thesis. Alemán and Perry and Roesch did not need to look at multiple topics as their papers are on specific topics: senior dating and the death of Mister Rogers, respectively. As this thesis is concerned with overarching fantasy themes occurring in natural, everyday conversation within the SDN Forums, focusing on one long thread or a series of messages about one individual is inappropriate. For this reason, I will use systematic sampling to obtain my

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data set. Krippendorff (1980) states that, "Systematic sampling involves selecting every

kth unit of a list into the sample after determining the starting point of the sequence at

random" (p. 67). The scholar further notes that this method of sampling is used when

"data stem from regularly appearing publications, sequences of interpersonal interaction,

the stringlike order of writing, film, and music" (Krippendorff, 1980, p. 67). Thus,

systematic sampling translates well to this thesis, as the data provided by the SDN

Forums involves sequences of interpersonal interaction that take place in the same type of

media. I will begin with the first thread on the first page of the two sections of the SDN

Forums mentioned earlier (Pre-Allopathic and the All-Students Forums) and then select

every fifth thread until the last date posted is one month from the first thread selected.

Threads will be selected in reverse chronological order. For example, if the first thread

appears on July 1, 2007, then the last thread selected would appear on June 1, 2007. This

method should provide a sample that is not biased in relation to the topics or users

included within the thread.

<div align="center">**Background on the Student Doctor Network (SDN) Forums**</div>

SDN is a Web community established in the mid-1990s at the University of

Kansas. It has grown in popularity and is now operated by the Coastal Research Group, a

non-profit organization. The site features articles, medical school databases, and a forum

for discussion. The forum has over 130,000 members, including doctors, medical

students, potential medical students, and their families and friends. Although anyone is

welcome to use the forum, the majority of members are actually involved in medicine in

some way. I chose this forum because of the relatively high frequency of posts and

potential for shared consciousness amongst members. Both Alemán (2005) and Perry

<div align="center">48</div>

and Roesch (2004) highlight these factors as important in conducting a fantasy theme analysis on a forum. Alemán also notes that it is useful to look at forums that produce intelligent and understandable conversations. Most of the posters on the SDN Forums spell correctly and form coherent, thoughtful sentences. Alemán's study outlines other factors that can help a researcher decide on an online group to study. The scholar notes that the SeniorNet community proved to be useful because of the continuous flow of comments on each conversation topic, the recognizable nature of a few of the forum members, and the general "conversation-like" elements of the comments (2005, p. 10). A conversation-like element exists in the discussions at SDN. The members are not restricted to talking about medicine and tend to reply to most every topic posted by a member of the site.

Pre-test Results

As part of a term paper, I conducted a pre-test of this method on a reduced sample of communicators at the SDN Forums. While the version of the method used in the pre-test is not exactly the same as the one described in the methodology section (in the pre-test I did not use systematic sampling), it is quite similar and its results prove the effectiveness of the method. It is important to note that I will not look for the same fantasy themes in this thesis. It is possible that the fantasy themes found in the pre-test will re-emerge, but it is also possible that I will find new fantasy themes or expanded versions of the themes found in the pre-test. The results of the pre-test follow:

Analysis of twenty discussions with varying numbers of comments shows the presence of a few interesting fantasy themes at SDN. Most of these themes center around the ideas of uncertainty or doubt, as the conversation starter begins the discussion with a

concern or question about something in which he or she felt uncertainty. Many of the discussions serve as an attempt for the group of up-and-coming doctors to relieve their doubts and reinforce their decisions.

A few character types are present in the dramas expressed by the SDN posters. The heroic character is the stead-fast, confident, moral doctor who has time for his/her family and friends. Evidence suggests that the SDN posters want to become this hero, as they discuss ways to become more efficient at studying or other work-related tasks. Often times, senior members of the forum serve as heroes of sorts, as they provide advice and reassurance (or a dose of reality) for the younger, less-experienced students. Common villains are individuals who pose a threat to the SDN posters' success at their careers. These people range from lawyers to self-centered boy/girlfriends.

An overarching rhetorical vision of "it is difficult but possible (IIDBP)" is present in the fantasy themes of SDN. The originators of fantasy themes often express some confusion or uncertainty with a decision involving their careers or personal lives. Through conversations with other members (especially veteran members), they tend to be reaffirm that there is a reason to keep working. The following fantasy themes support this rhetorical vision.

"I Was Supposed to be Rich" (IWSTBR) Fantasy

A fantasy theme that quickly becomes apparent is IWSTBR. This fantasy is marked by the sobering reality fantasy type, featuring symbolic cues such as the "real world," "sobering" truth, and the "reality" of being a doctor. This fantasy theme arises when SDN posters seek reassurance from current doctors and others who have been in the field longer than them. The following posts from a discussion on the total cost of

becoming a doctor serve as an example. All of the posters' names have been changed,

and the numbers of their posts are noted. *Darryl*, the first poster in this conversation

(therefore, the dramatizer responsible for this fantasy chain), says "Congrats to class of

2012 but I have one question. How big of a role does tuition+housing+cost of living

factor in to deciding what [medical school] to attend? How much is too much? ☺ sorry to

dampen the mood." After a few replies about how much these individuals would be

willing to pay, *Nathan*, the seventh poster, replies with "We just had a debt management

seminar the other day and it was definitely sobering." *Nathan* goes on to discuss what he

learned during this session, but this is irrelevant to the current study. It is important to

note here that *Nathan* is listed as a medical student, while *Darryl* (the original poster) is

listed as a pre-medical student as this fantasy theme is marked by individuals seeking

reassurance from doctors or experienced medical students.

A similar discussion provides an interesting example of this fantasy theme. *Mark*,

a poster who lists himself as a pre-medical student, begins the conversation by linking to

a news article on the debt situations facing young doctors. The third poster in this

discussion, *Gumby*, listed as a resident, uses the symbolic cues of "reality" and

"sobering" in noting that the financial life of a doctor is not simple. *Gumby* says:

> I know, I know, the temptation is to imagine your future six figure salary, imagine
> your debt, insert them into a mental black box and *poof*... everything works
> itself out. The reality is quite different. You're going to be toting your loans
> around long after medical school is just a vague, bad memory. Talk to any
> resident about his/her debt and how it has impacted his/her life and plans. It will
> be sobering, I promise.

Gumby's post is followed by a lengthy conversation on the many misperceptions of

young people entering the field. When *Marilyn* (# 20) states that "I'm going to give

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pre-meds the benefit of the doubt that they realize the average doc doesn't have a

mansion/Porsche," she is quickly countered by posters who argue the opposite. These

posters reinforce the validity of the theme that there is a sobering reality of becoming a

doctor that many individuals do not understand. *Lauren* (#21), listed as a medical

student, responds to *Marilyn* with "I hope you are right. But you apparently haven't seen

some of the absurdity on threads I have seen. And the repeated posts on SDN about going

into medicine for the money."

This fantasy theme emerges often in conversations at SDN, as senior members of

the forum provide facts about the "sobering" financial reality of being a doctor.

Although it is present in other types of discussions, it is most commonly associated with

conversations on debt and money issues.

"Supporting Actor" Fantasy

While the SDN community members are concerned with issues directly related to

their work, many of their discussions center on the fear of not being able to make time for

dating as a result of the complicated work that they do. This theme is marked by a stock

scenario in which the main character (a doctor or medical student) does not have enough

time for the person whom he/she is dating and fears that the relationship will end. The

theme usually includes a resolution in which the doctor finds someone who is willing to

play the "support" role. A variation of this theme occurs when the SDN poster decides to

become a supporting character of sorts by not expecting as strong of a relationship due to

his/her career. Still, some members of SDN do not think that it is possible to date while

in medical school. However, they agree that the only way to successfully have a

relationship is to find someone who is willing to take a secondary role. A few symbolic

cues for this theme revolve around the "understanding" and "supporting" role of the spouse or boy/girlfriend. The SDN community members express the desirability of someone who is willing to take a secondary role and help make the doctor's life less complicated.

Rodney (#1) provides a good example of this fantasy with his question on the possibilities of dating while in medical school. *Rodney* notes that the most common piece of advice that he received when entering medical school was not to date. *Rhonda* (#3), listed as post-doctorate, begins to expand upon the fantasy of finding a supporting character by stating that, "A relationship can work in med school if you both are willing to put in the effort and time for each other and it will certainly help if your [girlfriend] knows the time constraints you'll have while in med school." Four posts later, *Orlando* (#7) validates *Rhonda*'s assertion that a relationship will work if the person the medical student is seeing does not expect to have a central role in the relationship. *Orlando* says, "But if you're involved and actually like/love the person you are dating, it will work out just fine (given the non-med school partner is understanding and not demanding of your time when you don't have any to spare)."

This fantasy proves that the members of the SDN Forums value the idea of relationships, as many posters say that they are looking to date someone. However, they often mention the need for that person to be useful in some way outside of an equal partnership. *Kendall* (#13), for example, explains that it is good to date while in medical school because a boy/girlfriend can help a medical student "de-stress." In a different discussion *Mildred* (#1) explains that she is concerned about when she and her husband (a doctor) will be able to have children. After two of the posters try to help her but do not

provide any significant advice, *Frank* (#5) lets *Mildred* know that she should focus on her

husband's needs instead of her own. *Frank* gives *Mildred* the following advice:

> At the beginning of his residency, kiss him, make him a nice dinner with candles
> and get him a Hallmark card. In the card, write, "Love you! We'll do this again in
> five years! Or seven if you get that spinal fellowship! xoxo"

A few posts after this, *Leonard* (#7), listed as a resident, reinforces that *Mildred* is doing

the right thing by playing the supporting role for her husband. *Leonard* states that, "Your

husband is blessed to have you in his life, willing to have his babies. There is not a

perfect time [to have children]."

This theme is present in almost every discussion on dating, but these two

examples prove to be the most relevant as they show an example of a medical student

(*Rodney*) and an outsider (*Mildred*) seeking reassurance on the role that a boy/girlfriend

should play in a relationship. The SDN community members constantly reinforce this

fantasy and use symbolic cues such as "support person" when they do not recreate the

fantasy.

"Real Doctors" Fantasy

As stated earlier, many of the posts on SDN show a general feeling of uncertainty

amongst the members. It is not surprising that many of the conversations have to do with

not changing ones personality. It is in this fantasy theme that members reinforce the

value of being a doctor to help people, not to make money. SDN posters discuss way to

stay focused and not lose sight of one's self when becoming a doctor. One of the most

important values expressed in this theme is that students should cherish their identity and

background when starting medical school, but that the job is ultimately more important.

Common symbolic cues are "commitment," "professional" and "helping."

A discussion on how medical students feel about students in their program who come from wealthy families provides an excellent example of this fantasy. Although some of the members expressed concerns that the conversation starter was trying to start a conflict amongst the members, some interesting values emerge from the discussion. *Corrine* (#47) summarizes the discussion by stating:

> You have to care about doing well in medicine. If you're in it just cause you're interested for the moment, and know you can leave any time if you get bored, that doesn't bode well for your commitment or motivation. Things aren't always peachy in medicine, and practice does and should become routine after a while. What are you gonna do then? Quit just cause you can?
> Most people in medicine aren't in it for the money.

Corrine and others explain that it is more important to be a great doctor, no matter what one's original background. They explain that they value individuality, but that in the end, everyone is judged the same for the work that they do. In another discussion on whether doctors should be allowed to wear blue jeans, most of the SDN community members claim that being a doctor is an important job and that doctors should dress the part. The posters routinely use the word "professional" in their explanations, noting that they feel more like real doctors when wearing nice clothing. This theme arises in many kinds of conversations at SDN, but it is most often present in discussions in which pre-medical student try to renegotiate the importance of long-held standards and traditions.

Results

While the pre-test provides an interesting and useful look at the SDN Forums community and its potential to provide fantasy themes, it is worth noting that I did not review a large sample of posts. It is also important to note that I only looked for fantasy themes and did not ask in depth research questions about the community before doing my

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preliminary research. I will see if the pre-test results still prove to be accurate or if they only scratch the surface of the SDN Forums community. Some aspects of the pre-test results might prove to no longer be relevant, while others might provide even more data after having analyzed a much larger sample. Using a systematic sample of threads from the forums, I will now look specifically for the presence of fantasy themes about becoming a doctor, heroes, villains, and common settings, and an overarching rhetorical vision.

V. ANALYSIS

This thesis uses Bormann's (1972b) fantasy theme analysis method to analyze

hundreds of threads in two sections of the SDN Forums. Using a systematic sample,

threads were selected and placed into categories based on similarities in both the thread's

overall message and the language used by the forums' members. This expanded analysis

of the SDN Forums is intended to explain the Internet communication in the SDN

Forums in a more thorough manner than the pre-test included earlier in this thesis. While

some of the fantasy themes are similar, the scope of this thesis allows for more extensive

examples of each theme. Another intention of this thesis' analysis is to test (and

hopefully expand) the utility of Bormann's fantasy theme analysis method. By analyzing

hundreds of threads for shared fantasies, heroes, villains, and symbolic cues, it is

apparent that shared fantasies and ideas are present in the SDN Forums.

Several fantasy themes exist in the SDN Forums community's discussions. As

noted in the methodology section of this thesis, a pre-test of my method proved to be

effective in finding fantasy themes in a small number of threads in the same forum.

Naturally, the expansion of the methodology proves to extend these results. While the

pre-test presents three significant fantasy themes, the expanded analysis of this thesis

finds the presence of five fantasy themes in the SDN Forums. It is important to note that

the three fantasy themes from the pre-test are still relevant in this thesis, but they are not

strong enough to stand as fantasy themes by themselves. Instead, two of the fantasy

themes from the pre-test serve as fantasy types in larger, better-developed fantasy themes, while one of them is ultimately refuted by this expanded study. Although the fantasy themes in this thesis vary in subject matter, they tend to share values, settings, and goals. This analysis section is immediately followed by conclusions, which discuss the rhetorical vision of the community and the significance of this study.

The five major themes in the SDN Forums include: "I NEED to Go Here" (INTGH), "Team SDN," "Oh Pre-Meds" (OPM), "What It Takes" (WIT), and "What Really Matters" (WRM). As noted earlier, all of these themes reflect the values and shared interests of the SDN community. INTGH is characterized by discussions on the SDN community's favorite medical schools. Members discuss what they value in a school and even compare some medical schools to lovers. The "Team SDN" fantasy is shared when posters try to reassure each other that they are not alone in their current situations. This fantasy also includes messages intended to build the reputation of the SDN Forums as a place for camaraderie and solid advice. The OPM fantasy differs from the positive nature of the "Team SDN" fantasy, as OPM instead focuses on the types of pre-medical students that the SDN community dislikes. Finally, the WIT and WRM fantasies are presented last because they symbolize what the SDN posters find most important in their lives. In these fantasy themes, members describe what an ideal doctor should be and also discuss the importance (and possibility) of having a life outside of medical school and work. The results follow.

"I NEED to Go Here" (INTGH) Fantasy

As this analysis focuses on a more specific population of pre-medical students, the results vary in some ways from those of my pre-test. For example, the INTGH

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fantasy theme presented itself repeatedly due to the nature of these individuals' conversations. Pre-medical students are obviously concerned with being accepted into medical schools, so many of the threads in the Pre-Allopathic section and the All-Students Forum section focus on issues related to the application and acceptance processes. Many sub-themes and fantasy types are relevant to the INTGH fantasy; issues range from how acceptances are actually decided to individuals asking one another to give up their acceptances so that a more deserving candidate may take it. Another reoccurring aspect of the INTGH fantasy is that SDN members are confused as to the nature of acceptances and hope to come to a common understanding of how medical school acceptances are actually decided.

The INTGH fantasy theme usually arises when SDN posters discuss their ideal medical schools. A common fantasy type centers around the idea of falling in love with a school either before or after a visit. This fantasy type is marked by symbolic cues such as "I am in love with _____ (school name)," "fell in love" or "like falling in love." This particular aspect of INTGH occurs when SDN posters either attempt to gauge the community's feelings towards a medical school or hope to learn how long it will take to be accepted by a school. Many members display this fantasy type in a discussion on Stanford. The fantasy chain begins with *A Wall* noting that he/she is "obsessed with the school" and wanting to know when the university will make its decisions. Other users then join into the discussion and expand upon the symbolic cues listed above. *sanchopanza* states that, "Stanford is the bomb. It was like falling in love with a woman when I interviewed there." The fantasy type is shared by multiple users in this thread who state that "it would be a dream" to attend Stanford and repeatedly use the word

"love" when talking about the school. A final significant example comes from *mcchicken1985* who warns SDN users to "prepare to fall in love with the school on interview day."

The love fantasy type for the INTGH theme is prevalent in the SDN Forums. Many individuals post about the schools they wish to attend in a similar manner, suggesting that to the pre-medical students in the SDN Forums, being accepted by a medical school means more than simply learning when they will have to move. For some of these individuals, being accepted to another medical school than they one they love is similar to settling for a bad relationship. In discussing their love for different medical schools, some of the SDN Forums users provide examples of another fantasy type: the prestigious school. This aspect of INTGH exhibits the posters' love for a prestigious school because it makes them more prestigious by association. This fantasy type includes symbolic cues such as "prestige," "prestigious," "impress," and "name recognition." In an advice thread in which an SDN user asks which school he or she should attend, several posters reply by noting the prestige and name recognition of the schools. *nu2004* states that, " if you want to do MD/MBA, they all have great business schools, but UChicago probably has the best name recognition." Other advice threads follow similar patterns, with members citing a school's prestige and name as being a good reason to attend. Some posters allude to how impressive it is to attend certain schools; *CatsandCradles* explains how nice it would be to "impress" one's child with where he or she went to medical school. In the discussion on Stanford used earlier in this analysis, a poster states that he or she was "shocked" to have even interviewed with the school. This post came after 55

other posts discussing the prestige of the school; thus, the poster shared the opinion of other SDN posters.

Another area that presents itself in the discussion of a school's name and recognition is the charming location. This fantasy type occurs when individuals look past the prestige and rankings of a school and note the environment in which the medical students reside. Its symbolic cues include "atmosphere," "see the sun," and "depressing." In a discussion on whether an individual should attend Yale or Michigan, *Orthodoc40* (a medical student) skips past the talk of each schools' medical programs and states that, "I'd get as far away from the state of MI as possible. The sun does not live here, and it is one depressing place." This sentiment is echoed by other posters such as *hoquuep*, who suggests the following: "I've lived in Michigan for the past eight years, and the weather here is wholly unpredictable and depressing." In the end, it is unclear whether the original poster listened to this advice, but the atmosphere at a school is important to the posters at SDN.

With the idea of an intense love for a school established, another aspect of the INTGH fantasy theme is relevant. This fantasy type is used by individuals when describing the desperation that they feel in waiting for news on an acceptance. The fantasy type of desperation or uncertainty is present when individuals use symbolic cues such as "desperate" "killing me" "praying" "would kill for" or "antsy." Several conversations provide examples of this fantasy type. In a discussion on Duke, *Tropicana* describes the letter that he or she wrote to the university. Tropicana states that, "In retrospect, however, I did sound a bit desperate." Other posters in the thread share the sentiment, and then discuss how not to sound "desperate" when talking to a school.

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While the discussion on Duke was positive in nature, most individuals call one another desperate as an insult. For example, in a thread on why an SDN Forums member was passed over while his or her less-qualified friend was accepted to medical school, *jk1123* states, "i cannot believe you guys spend that long writing a paragraph response. desperate!" *jk1123*'s post is immediately followed by another SDN poster using the image of a sad face and making the sarcastic post of "Waahhh, I know someone who got into medical school and they shoudn't have. I should have and they shouldn't have. I know this because I have more expertise than the people *already* in the profession who are admitting people. Waaahhh." Other posts in this thread show a negative tone, suggesting that members of the SDN Forums do not like to read about other members feeling desperate or afraid. For example, in the thread on attending Duke, most of the insults focused on individuals attempting to do too much to impress medical schools. However, almost all of the members in the thread list themselves as pre-medical students, so they share the situation of trying to gain acceptance to their medical schools of choice.

SDN members who feel desperate to hear something from a medical school exhibit another interesting element in the INTGH fantasy. Many individuals use the symbolic cue of "give someone else your spot" in advice threads for individuals with more than one acceptance to a medical school. SDN members who express this fantasy type feel jealous of more successful pre-medical students and want to make the accepted individuals know that they are lucky and should not take their positions for granted. These individuals are sometimes confused as to why they were not accepted while other "less-deserving" members were accepted.

While the fantasy type of giving someone your spot was realized in five different

threads, it is most evident in a thread in which the original poster declares that he or she

has "cold feet" and is not sure that he or she wants to attend medical school (even after

being accepted). This call for advice is met with actual advice from senior members with

"medical student" listed as their statuses, but more often than that, it is met with

pre-medical students expressing their desperation and frustration. *nehcmij86* starts this

fantasy chain by asking, "can we trade positions?". *nehcmij86*'s dramatizing message is

shared by other members who state that, "I know 2 people that would love to have the

freedom of attending a med school right now, any med school" and the immediate reply

of " you can make that 3."

 While the aforementioned statements provide clear examples of the symbolic cue

"give someone else your spot," perhaps the most interesting examples come from

individuals who explain the desperation they feel while asking for the original poster to

give up his or her spot. *Doublecortin* gives the member the following advice: "please

give up your acceptance and let someone who is truly passionate about medicine and

eager to attend medical school." This clearly explains that *Doublecortin* is jealous and

feels desperate in his or her search for a medical school. *Doublecortin*'s post actually

suggests that the original poster is not passionate enough about practicing medicine. A

final example of desperation and a desire to "take someone's spot" in the INTGH fantasy

comes from *frikarika*, who states that, "It's really frustrating to hear about people getting

into med school who haven't really thought it out. I on the other hand haven't gotten in

anywhere, and would kill to be in your position. Consider yourself lucky." The poster

show's evidence of desperation and a feeling of "needing to go" to any available medical

school in stating that he or she would "kill" to be in the same position as the original poster. As noted earlier, intense symbolic cues such as "would kill to" or "dying to get in" are signs of the shared fantasy of desperately needing to be accepted by a medical school. Posters on the SDN Forums such as *frikarika* and *Doublecortin* who recognize the shared drama of INTGH cannot empathize with other SDN members in need of serious advice on where to go to medical school.

As the INTGH fantasy largely applies to the way SDN members make sense of the admissions and acceptance processes at different medical schools, a sub-theme of "It's a Gamble" (IAG) is relevant to the discussion. The IAG fantasy stands as a sub-theme within the discussion of INTGH because it is predominately present in threads in which the INTGH fantasy is shared by SDN posters. It is a recurring theme that posters share in an attempt to explain why they were not accepted to their medical schools of choice, downplay the accomplishments of others, or simply express confusion with medical school admissions processes. Common symbolic cues in this sub-theme include, "gamble," "luck," "random" and other gambling terms such as "flip a coin" or "roll the dice."

In an advice thread on why some people are accepted to medical schools and others are not, *cottenr* states that, "a lot of stuff in this selection process is random. Whether they interview you, accept you, or reject you, a substantial portion of that decision could be up [sic] total chance." Other members share this vision and express similar sentiments, but it is a post by a seasoned member of the forum, who lists himself or herself as a medical student that truly reinforces the IAG fantasy. This poster, *ScutMonkey08* explains the following: "As a member of the admissions committee [sic]

at a top 40 med school, I must say that though there is a lot of 'randomness' in the decisions process". This advice seemed to quiet the counter-argument from other members, as the fantasy was being shared by someone with a higher status than "pre-medical." *ScutMonkey08* also establishes the validity of his or her claim by noting that he or she has served on an admissions committee and seems to have insider information.

A thread in which a member of the SDN Forums considers questioning a committee's decision to reject him or her also provides interesting examples of both the IAG sub-theme and the INTGH fantasy theme. *Law2Doc*, a senior member of the SDN Forums who is listed as a medical student and an assistant moderator, gives the original poster the following advice: "Once you let the school get to a decision, you've rolled the dice, and it's over. Move on." By using the symbolic cue "rolled the dice," *Law2Doc* has referenced the repeatedly shared IAG fantasy type. This example shows the previously mentioned criteria of this fantasy type, in which members refer to the admissions process as a game of chance in which they have little power or say over the results.

Calling the medical school admissions process a gamble shows the confusion and desperation that some pre-medical students feel in the INTGH fantasy. Sharing the IAG fantasy type suggests that members do not fully understand how their acceptances are decided, as many of them express that complete randomness can sometimes be the deciding factor. The confusion and desperation expressed by these individuals (as well as the love for the schools that reject them) leave the IAG sub-theme and INTGH fantasy theme somewhat dependent upon one another. As noted earlier, it is apparent that individuals who express aspects of INTGH such as "give me your spot" or question why some individuals are accepted are perhaps jealous of other members of the SDN Forums

and do not wish to have accountability for not being accepted by a medical school. The IAG fantasy type provides a way to blame the acceptance process (which apparently truly does confuse the posters) rather than MCAT scores or individual characteristics of the applicant. A thread on how many schools a borderline student should apply to provides one final example that encompasses the desperation of the INTGH fantasy theme and the randomness of the IAG sub-theme. In this thread, *Frohse* gives the fellow borderline poster the following advice: "You MUST play the law of averages. The more schools to which you apply, the better chance you have of getting in to medical school."

Thus, the INTGH fantasy theme consists of the following fantasy types: love, importance of location, "give someone else your spot," desperation, and the IAG sub-theme. The love fantasy type occurs in conversations about visiting medical schools and "falling in love" with them. In this fantasy type, SDN Forum members routinely use language that usually refers to dating to describe their potential medical schools. The location fantasy type is characterized by posters declaring the need to attend a school with a charming campus. The next two aspects of the INTGH fantasy theme deal with individuals who fear that they will not be accepted into medical school. These two fantasy types include messages of desperation in which posters sometimes ask other posters to give up their acceptances to individuals who "want it" more. Finally, an interesting sub-theme is present in the INTGH fantasy. This sub-theme, IAG, asserts that the SDN community does not understand how the medical school admissions process works. In this sub-theme, members compare the process of applying to medical schools as a gamble with little rationality.

The "Team SDN" Fantasy

  While some of the fantasy themes in the SDN Forums suggest that the members are jealous of each other and are predominately interested in their own acceptances to medical school, the "Team SDN" fantasy theme is just the opposite. Members in both the Pre-Allopathic section and the All-Students Forum of the SDN Forums frequently express this fantasy theme. These individuals tend to recall the fantasy of being a part of "Team SDN" when other posters (usually pre-medical or new members) express concern over situations such as medical school acceptances, failing relationships, and apartment hunting. This fantasy is usually expressed through phrases such as "I'm in the same boat as you" or "stay positive." While the expression "I'm in the same boat as you" is somewhat common in nature, it builds camaraderie within the SDN community. Often in lieu of advice, senior members will simply offer the fact that they have been in a similar situation and wish the original poster good luck as a means of reassuring him or her.

  Significant symbolic cues in the "Team SDN" fantasy theme include phrases such as "same boat," "you're not alone," "not the only one," "right there with you," and "same situation." Examples are provided consistently for this theme and tend to be similar no matter what the subject of discussion might be. A thread on the problems associated with trying to coordinate one's future with a boyfriend or girlfriend is especially useful. As noted earlier, the "Team SDN" fantasy tends to be expressed when individuals see that the original poster is hurting or is in need of advice from some one who understands. While many of the posters in the thread on conflicting futures provide advice for the upset original poster, *Booyah85* attempts to make the advice more personal by stating that:

I was in the same boat, I am attending med school in August and my ex-gf was planning on getting a Masters in social work. Well, last weekend she decided that we were too "incompatible" and decided to break off our 3 year relationship.

By beginning with the phrase "I was in the same boat," *Booyah85* asserts that he or she perhaps understands the original poster's point better than other individuals. After describing what happened to his or her relationship, *Booyah85* ends by showing how his or her advice might benefit the original poster. *Booyah85* adds, "I hope that my mistakes can help you with your future decisions." In the same thread *dtepper* explains the details of his or her dating situation before stating, "I can't really give advice, but I can reassure you that you're not alone." This post comes just two posts after *Booyah85*'s comment, and it also reinforces the fantasy theme of SDN members being in the "same boat." *dtepper* alludes to the idea that while, he or she cannot solve the problem for the original poster, strength exists in knowing that he or she is not the only one going through a trying situation related to being a pre-medical student.

Perhaps a more poignant example of the "Team SDN" fantasy being expressed through members showing each other that they are not alone comes from a thread about race. In this thread, *supa* looks for hope that other black pre-medical students post on the SDN Forums (and at other schools) by pondering the following: "The one interview was at Maryland and there were NO brothas, so just checking to make sure I'm not out here alone." By using the symbolic cue, "out here alone," *supa* calls on the "Team SDN" fantasy theme, as he or she is looking for reassurance. *supa* is met with a great deal of support, in which several of the members use similar symbolic cues to share the fantasy of "Team SDN." *wowowowow101* responds with, "You are not alone. I interviewed with another blk guy at one of my schools. I also go to school with 4 or 5 applying (all

accepted) this year." One other poster uses the fantasy type "not alone" in stating, "It is nice to know that I'm not the only young black male pre-med." By using symbolic cues such as "not alone" and "not the only," these members reassure each other about their current situations and taken a step towards building further camaraderie within the SDN Forums. For example, towards the end of the thread, *wuironl* calls for black members of the SDN Forums to continue to support each other in stating, "Good luck all with upcoming interviews. Let's keep this thread going!". Other members realized this sentiment of camaraderie as the thread had reached multiple pages (each page has fifty posts, and most threads do not leave the first page) at the time of my analysis, a sign that it will continue to be supported.

The "Team SDN" fantasy appears repeatedly in conversations on the SDN Forums. While there are several examples of other threads in which posters use the symbolic cue "same boat," it is important to look at some of the other ways that the fantasy is used and reinforced through other symbolic cues and stock scenarios. The examples in the preceding paragraphs show how the "Team SDN" fantasy theme reassures a poster that he or she has someone who understands his or her situation. Conversations such as the one shared by *Booyah85* and the thread's original poster are certainly useful in building a close forum community, but the stock scenario that specifically uses the symbolic cue "same boat" ultimately only serves the purpose of making the original poster feel better. Generally no specific advice is given to the original poster, and the posters who provide advice do so to commiserate; an overall negative tone exists in the conversation.

When SDN members use symbolic cues such as "support" and "don't give up," they reinforce a different fantasy type used in the "Team SDN" fantasy theme. This fantasy type is similar to the "same boat" fantasy type in that it revolves around stock scenarios in which members express concern for each other and share stories about similar situations that they experienced. However, a much more positive tone is present in the conversations that use the "support" fantasy type. Examples come from multiple threads in the Pre-Allopathic section of the SDN Forums, and almost all of them suggest that the SDN Forums are a positive place, where the members genuinely care about helping each other. In a thread on why the members of SDN want to be doctors, several members make fun of the original poster because his or her comment is somewhat idealistic in nature. However, as the thread progresses, *Humidbeing* reminds the posters of what the SDN Forums are supposed to be about: helping each other. *Humidbeing* stands up for the original poster before stating, "We're a support group." This turns the focus of the conversation back to showing the original poster that he or she is not alone and reinforces the "Team SDN" fantasy, which had been breached prior to *Humidbeing*'s post. Immediately following *Humidbeing*'s comment, the replies are optimistic in nature and provide the original poster with actual advice on what to include in his or her personal statement to potential medical schools.

Finally, members who refer to the "Team SDN" fantasy theme often express another fantasy type, in which the quality of the community bond in the SDN Forums is reinforced. In almost every thread in which members share the "Team SDN" fantasy through reassuring each other that they are not alone or to stay positive, there is talk of SDN being a great place for pre-medical students to bond and share advice. Symbolic

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cues for this fantasy type revolve around SDN being a "great," "popular," "useful," or "infamous" site that provides an outlet for individuals to receive good advice.

This fantasy type is shared widely within the thread in which black pre-medical students reassure one another that they are not alone. In this thread, *supa* (the original poster), states, "Damn I wish I had found this site a while ago. It would've made my entire process a lot smoother. Good advice on here." The dramatizing statement about members sharing good advice catches on, and other members share the sentiment while expressing the "Team SDN" fantasy. For example, other users state that the SDN Forums are a "resource" that should be used by everyone. *infiniti* continues this fantasy chain by using several symbolic cues at once to suggest that the SDN Forums are a great site of camaraderie for pre-medical students. *infiniti* states, "I hope more black male [sic] will start utilizing the vast resource made available by the infamous SDN."

The SDN Forums community sees the site as a place for individuals to do much more than just talk to one another. The "Team SDN" fantasy theme suggests that the members maintain a great deal of respect for each other and the site itself. As noted in the example in which an individual posted his or her somewhat idealistic personal statement, individuals sometimes share this fantasy theme when they feel that other posters have lost interest in helping each other. While some of the fantasy themes present in the SDN Forums contain negative aspects, the routinely expressed "Team SDN" fantasy attempts to keep the members positive and appreciative of the forum and its potential to reassure confused or disheartened pre-medical students.

To summarize, the "Team SDN" fantasy theme is reinforced through the aforementioned "same boat," support, and "infamous SDN" fantasy types. The "same

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boat" fantasy type is used when individuals express uncertainty and a need to know that they are not alone in their current situations. SDN members routinely use the symbolic cue "same boat" in letting distressed members know that other people understand their situations. Members recall the support fantasy type when they let other members know that the SDN Forums exist so that student doctors can help each other. The last significant fantasy type, "infamous SDN," asserts the posters' love for the SDN Forums. In this fantasy type, members talk about the quality of the advice on the SDN Forums and note that the SDN Forums are a respected place for Internet communication.

"Oh Pre-Meds" (OPM) Fantasy

The OPM fantasy theme provides the most humor of the themes in the SDN Forums. It appears mainly in conversations on why medical students act in certain ways or what makes an extracurricular activity worthwhile that the OPM theme presents itself. SDN members share this fantasy when they are frustrated with each other or when they simply want to share a joke about the career choices that they have made. As Bormann (1972b) notes, inside jokes are a sign of shared fantasies and group identification. The self-deprecating OPM fantasy theme is the closest thing to an inside joke on the SDN Forums and makes this particular fantasy quite different than other more serious fantasies such as "Team SDN" and INTGH. OPM is also significant because it introduces the discussion of the controversial "gunner" medical student.

The OPM fantasy theme covers a variety of subjects; therefore, the symbolic cues are not as rigid as they are in other fantasies. However, some routinely mentioned symbolic phrases and ideas are "cure cancer," "pre-meds" and "gunner." The fantasy type that discusses what pre-meds do is immediately relevant and is used in the majority

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of the threads with OPM as the main fantasy theme. In a thread on whether a male

should remove his earring before interviewing with a medical school, several of the

posters who list themselves as pre-medical students respond by reinforcing what a doctor

traditionally should look like. These posts seem to upset some of the pre-medical

students in the thread who then share the fantasy of OPM. One poster states the

following as a response to the criticism from more traditional pre-medical students:

> you people are squares...
> …which is why I've never mixed with most of the pre-med crowd. Anyway,
> I've had my ears gauged for some time now. Nothing crazy big (2 guage). Took
> them out for interviews. Got into every school I interviewed at (2 top 15 schools).

This reply demonstrates two things. First, it is self-deprecating "OPM" style humor, as

the poster is most likely a pre-medical student. Second, it shows that posters who give

personal examples receive better responses. This particular post starts a new fantasy

chain, in which members suggest that the "pre-med" mentality is somewhat flawed and is

not the only way to be successful. Evidence of this comes from multiple posts, but the

following post is particularly useful because the individual directly mentions pre-medical

students in his or her chaining of the OPM fantasy. This poster, *Haro4130Frame*, states:

> Ingnore half these people without piercings. I have my lip pierced. I did take it out
> but you could still tell there is a whole [sic] there. I also have no plans on getting
> rid of it anytime soon. (I got into my top choice school by the way) Most pre-
> meds are way too into thinking they are better than others...do what you want. If
> you want to leave it in, do so.

These individuals are tired of being around the pre-medical "type," a sentiment that is

common in the OPM fantasy theme.

Another example of SDN members insulting pre-medical students and reinforcing

the OPM fantasy theme comes from a thread in which the original poster asks why many

pre-medical students do not apply to a larger number of medical schools. While some of the posters suggest reasons such as money and time, *seraph524* (listed as a medical/PhD student) makes a joke about the typical pre-medical student. *seraph524* states that pre-medical students do not apply more broadly "Because pre-meds have a tremendous sense of self-entitlement." The fact that this post comes from another thread shows that the theme of insulting pre-medical students takes place in other threads in the forum, making it well-established and more likely to be expressed by other members.

Two final humorous examples show the reach of the OPM fantasy theme. The first example comes from a thread on Caribbean medical schools, in which members discuss why pre-medical students should not attend schools outside of America. Several members mention pre-medical students in the thread, but *Maxprime* (also listed as a medical/PhD student) actually established the presence of the self-deprecating OPM fantasy. *Maxprime* states that, "Nutjob pre-medville (aka SDN) isn't the best source for reassurance, carefully worded statements, or information about caribbean [sic] schools." This post suggests that even the pre-medical students on the SDN Forums are not credible in the OPM fantasy. Posters who share the OPM fantasy theme do not want to identify themselves as "pre-meds," even though they technically are members of the group. The second example reinforces that the members of the SDN community see pre-medical students as somewhat "nutty." In a thread on grades, *TexanGirl* defends a Muslim poster who drew the ire of some SDN poster for his or her use of religious terms in a thread about academics. *TexanGirl* describes the poster as a typical pre-medical student in stating, "Remove all the Servant of Allah, God is Beneficent, Merciful...stuff and you get

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your ordinary, run-of-the-mill neurotic pre-med." While *TexanGirl* supports the poster,

he or she still reinforces the idea of pre-medical students being neurotic and different.

The second fantasy type in the OPM fantasy theme does not assume that all pre-

medical students are "square" or "nuts" as suggested by previously mentioned posts. In

this fantasy type, SDN members make fun of pre-medical students who try too hard to

strengthen their résumés. A commonly used symbolic cue in this fantasy type is "cure

cancer." The "cure cancer" symbolic cue involves a stock scenario, in which a poster

suggests that his or her résumé is not strong enough and other posters reply by suggesting

that "cured cancer" is an effective way to bolster anyone's résumé. Often other cures are

suggested as well. For example, in a thread on the importance of extracurricular

activities to one's application, *Moshe Rabbenu* suggests that his or her résumé is lacking

in relevant activities by stating what he or she has actually done followed by the "cured

cancer" joke. *Moshe Rabbenu* states the following:

> *I'm an avid musician whose band has had a few songs on the radio. I'm also a*
> *black belt in Brazilian jiu jitsu with a few medals under my belt (no pun intended).*
> *I'm president of the Jewish Student Union at my school. Also, I've cured cancer.*
> *Twice.*

Moshe Rabbenu's use of the "cured cancer" joke calls on members of the SDN Forums to

share the OPM fantasy, in which they insult the applications of some pre-medical

students whom the community finds to be over-ambitious.

The following posts in the résumé thread appear immediately following each

other (no posts between them) and further display the OPM fantasy. *husky10501* states

the following in response to *Moshe Rabbenu*'s post on curing cancer: "Cancer...wow i'm

highly impressed!!!! hahaha. I'm almost done with my AIDs vaccine.. [sic] just a couple

more days!". *Moshe Rabbenu* then replies with, "I patented an AIDs vaccine last week. pwnd." This reply is used to make fun of the competitive nature of many pre-medical students. The word "pwnd" is used to note that an individual "owned" someone else by doing something better than that individual. *Wylde* replies with a deceptively poignant post that is instrumental in understanding the OPM fantasy theme. *Wylde* states that, "meh, AIDs is child's play! I've cured cancer (who hasn't, honestly how do you people expect to get into medical school!), but 2 times is pretty impressive!".

The side note "how do you people expect to get into medical school" assures that the SDN members are using these jokes as a way of making fun of pre-medical students who are somewhat over-zealous in their attempts to be accepted into medical school. Further evidence of the "cured cancer" symbolic cue being used to re-establish the OPM fantasy comes from a thread on recommended activities for individuals who are applying to medical school. In this thread, *metalgearHMN* replies to the original poster by stating that, "You don't have to cure cancer, just don't watch Sanford and Son re-runs all day. All good things in moderation." This post shows evidence of the OPM fantasy theme appearing in other areas in the SDN Forums.

Finally, the OPM fantasy theme introduces the discussion of the SDN community's most controversial type of pre-medical student: the gunner. According to several threads in the Pre-Allopathic section of the SDN Forums, the term "gunner" is used to describe over-zealous pre-medical students who spend more time studying than other students (and apparently intentionally limit other students' opportunities to do well) and tend to demonstrate their knowledge to professors at every possible chance. This term reinforces the OPM fantasy theme, as members use it when discussing how they

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dislike most pre-medical students and do not want to live like them. It is also a relevant fantasy type for the OPM fantasy because members use humor when sharing their stories about gunners. In one of the many threads about gunners, *littlealex* replies to another member's post with the following statement of what a gunner might say to another student: "A true gunner: don't worry about those shadowing appointments. I canceled them all for you. Oooh!" The gunner character is further parodied in another thread on gunners. In this thread, the gunner fantasy type begins with a dramatizing statement from *Uegis*, a college freshman who wants to know if he or she is a gunner. *Psycho Doctor* replies to *Uegis* by stating that, "anyone who even knows what a gunner is and is posting on this board their first semester of freshman year **IS** a gunner."

rcd, another poster in the thread on whether *Uegis* is a gunner, notes that he or she is also worried about being a typical pre-medical student gunner. *rcd* calls upon the OPM fantasy with the following statement: "More concerned about whether I'm becomming [sic] a 'pre-med leper.' I'm afraid of both burning out and being the type of dork that pissing [sic] people off." This statement is an example of the OPM fantasy because it demonstrates that the SDN community sees itself as separate from typical pre-medical students and does not want to associate with them. It is apparent that *rcd* is concerned with losing credibility on the forum (and in real life) by embodying the negative "pre-med" persona that is parodied through the OPM fantasy.

To conclude, the major fantasy types in the OPM fantasy theme include insulting pre-medical students, the "cured cancer" résumé boosters, and gunners. The insulting pre-medical students fantasy type is characterized by posts about how pre-medical students are "lame" or "square." Individuals who express this fantasy type do not like

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sharing the term "pre-med" with the individuals whom they despise. The résumé booster fantasy type is similar to the insulting pre-medical student fantasy type in that it is used to mock SDN members. However, the résumé booster fantasy type is light-hearted in nature and sometimes even leads to credible advice on how posters can make their résumés more impressive. The gunner fantasy type includes messages about the type of medical student that most of the SDN community does not want to be. In this fantasy type, members share stories about individuals who work perhaps too hard on completing medical school.

The three fantasy types in the OPM fantasy all relate to a common theme: the members of the SDN Forums generally do not like the label "pre-med" because of the way that they perceive their classmates and peers. Whether in a conversation about résumés and curing cancer or a fantasy chain on "pre-meds" and gunners, a large portion of the forum community sees the term "pre-med" as an insult used to describe neurotic individuals who do not know how to interact with their peers. SDN Forums members also tend to use humor as their way of approaching these issues. The posters may use humor to conceal different emotions, such as animosity, resentment, or even jealousy, as the OPM fantasy theme is routinely shared in threads where posters talk about their troubles in being accepted to medical school.

"What It Takes" (WIT) Fantasy

The WIT fantasy theme contains the widest variety of fantasy types of all the fantasy themes in the SDN Forums. Conversations about what it takes to be a doctor do not always follow the same patterns, such as conversations in the INTGH and "Team SDN" fantasies. The WIT fantasy theme leads to discussions about valid reasons for

being a doctor, the sacrifice involved in practicing medicine, the financial side of being a doctor, and the importance of self-fortitude in medical school. While many different fantasy types exist in the WIT fantasy, they all relate to the central topic of what it takes to be an effective doctor or to complete medical school.

The majority of the discussions in the WIT fantasy relate to the SDN community's idea of what a real doctor is. The pre-test discussed earlier in this thesis identified "Real Doctors" as a fantasy theme on its own. The pre-test results suggest that doctors should be committed to their position and value helping others. The idea of a "real doctor" (or the doctor that the SDN community hopes to be) who is committed to helping others is important to the SDN Forums community, as it re-appears in this extended analysis as well. However, an analysis of hundreds of threads (as opposed to less than fifty in the pre-test), reveals that discussions on what makes a "real doctor" should not stand on their own as a fantasy theme. They mostly reinforce the larger and better-developed WIT fantasy theme. Instead, the discussion of what makes a real doctor works well alongside discussions of sacrifice and what goes on in the "real world." All three of these fantasy types contain common symbolic cues such as "commitment," "inspire," and "reality."

Several examples of the "real doctors" fantasy type occur within the WIT fantasy theme. In a thread on what most excites the SDN community about becoming a doctor, several members post about inspiring other people to follow their dreams. These individuals explain that the doctors who have "what it takes" are driven not only to help themselves but also to help others. The symbolic cue "inspire" is used repeatedly in these threads. Many of the posters on the SDN Forums see real doctors as individuals who are interested in social change and helping others. *flaahless* states the following as a reason

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that he or she is excited about the future: "Being in a position to redefine what 'cool' is to urban youth, and hopefully inspiring kids to follow their dreams". This statement changes the focus of the conversation from the joke posts of being able to impress women to a serious discussion on the opportunity that doctors have to change the world. The posters seem to take this opportunity seriously; one poster in particular turns the discussion to what it takes for doctors or medical students to inspire others. This poster, *decafplease*, states:

> I want to prove to my little bro that there is life beyond the street. I want him to want to be just a little like me so he can pick himself up by the bootstraps and realize his potential. I want my messed up friends from childhood to see that if I can do it, they can, too.

Posters such as *decafplease* note that "real" doctors show a desire to serve others and inspire the community to reach greater heights. The "real doctors help others" fantasy type also takes place in a discussion on black pre-medical students. *DoctaJay* (a medical student) states that "you are more likely to see a black female at a interview than a black male. That just means that we have to make it so it will inspire more black males that they can make it also." Others posters share this sentiment. *Newton Bohr MD* replies with the following post: "Sup Jay, I have seen you [sic] diary and, I think you are doing a great job … Keep up the good work."

The notion of real doctors needing to value servitude in order to be successful is further expressed in a thread on individuals who are losing interest in their pre-medical or medical school programs. In this thread, the SDN Forums community is quick to establish the WIT fantasy theme through the use of the "real doctors" fantasy type. The symbolic cue "help" is used repeatedly, showing evidence of a shared fantasy type.

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DeadCactus states the following: "Basically, I want to be a physician because it gives me the freedom to help people and society on multiple levels as well as satisfy my own." Immediately following this statement (which starts a different fantasy chain than that of the original poster), SDN members reply with similar posts. Showing several of these posts is necessary in order to prove the depth of this fantasy type's acceptance. Following *DeadCactus'* comment, three posts in a row use the symbolic cue "help" to discuss what a real doctor should value. *RapplixGmed* states that, "Helping sick people gets my endorphins going." *gatorsbball* replies with the following: "I like science and want to help people." While these posts are useful for their demonstration of a symbolic cue related to the WIT fantasy theme, a better-developed reply on what real doctors should do comes from the following poster. *Lawliet2008* states the following:

> I want to be a doctor so that I can be able to help sick people who have no one else to turn to in the way that I think is best. There are some really bad docs where I live. One of them came into the room shaking his head and *told* my mother "I'm sorry, but all of these tests indicate that you are deaf" which she is not and had only come in complaining about her knee. Another perscribed [sic] me some acute arthritis medication for my minor tennis elbow.

Lawliet2008's post not only uses the symbolic cue "help" to continue the fantasy chain on real doctors valuing servitude, it also gives a personal example of what a real doctor is not. As noted in the "Team SDN" fantasy theme and the OPM fantasy theme, the SDN Forums community is more willing to accept a personal story as proof of which values they should share, so *Lawliet2008*'s post contains more credibility than other posts in the thread.

The discussion of what real doctors should value continues with the SDN Forums' fantasy type of medicine not being about making money. This fantasy type is marked by

symbolic cues such involving money such as "in it for the money" or "not about the money," or "won't be rich." Posters commonly share the WIT fantasy when other posters express that they are concerned with the financial aspect of being a doctor. The posters who share the WIT fantasy theme suggest that being a doctor is no longer about making money and that if that is the only motivating factor for an individual, then he or she will not have what it takes to succeed. In a thread on "getting rich" in medicine, several posters argue about whether doctors actually make what they should make. This argument is ended when *Law2Doc*, a medical student, expresses the financial aspect of the WIT fantasy. *Law2Doc* states that, "This path is simply not about the money. You can expect to be comfortable, but not necessarilly [sic] rich." This post starts a new fantasy chain in which members express that the desire to be a doctor helps a medical student do well, not a desire for a paycheck. A post from *JaggerPlate* summarizes this sentiment:

> I feel that these types of threads always miss out on the biggest core of the monetary issue ....
> If you want to go into medicine, nothing else is going to cut it. I personally think I could go into business, make great money, but look back at my life at 40 and be unhappy with the fact that I really didn't push to do what I love. I think that if you truly want to go into medicine, then there isn't a choice.

The posts from *Law2Doc* and *JaggerPlate* both express the fantasy type of medicine not being about the money, while arguing for what it takes to stay focused in medical school.

Further evidence of the "not about the money" aspect of the WIT fantasy theme comes from a thread in which a student explains that he or she is "burned out" on trying to be a doctor. This thread almost mirrors the thread referenced in the previous paragraph, even though the two threads took place days apart from each other and

included different posters. The first example from the thread on giving up on becoming a

doctor comes from *james1988*. *james1988*'s post, like *JaggerPlate*'s post on

compensation for doctors, explains what it takes to stay focused on becoming a doctor.

james1988 suggests the following:

> there are many professions out there that are far more lucrative than medicine, so
> if lucre is your prime motivation, i would strongly discourage you from pursuing
> medicine. if however, you have a passion to pursue medicine, then go for it,
> because in the end of the day, passion will be the only thing that will get you
> through the arduous path of attrition to becoming a doctor.

james1988's statement on what a medical student should desire is echoed by other

posters. For example, *mc4435* tells the original poster to "(s)top thinking about all the

years and *definitely* stop thinking about money."

The WIT fantasy theme suggests that individuals should be motivated by a

passion for helping others, not by money. The self-fortitude fantasy type is directly

related to the idea of practicing medicine is not about the money and helps reinforce the

WIT fantasy theme. In the self-fortitude fantasy type, a stock scenario develops in which

original posters explain that they are unsure of some of the decisions that they have made

and how these decisions will affect their grades or their relationships with their parents.

This scenario ends with SDN Forums members explaining that these individuals will

have to be more confident in themselves and their decisions in order to be successful.

The SDN Forums community expresses that an individual must be self-motivated in

order to have what it takes to become a doctor. Among several examples, one particular

example from a thread on an individual who has second thoughts on attending medical

school stands out as being the most relevant to the WIT fantasy. In this thread, several

posters use the symbolic cues "commit" or "commitment" to explain their shared

understanding of how the best medical students accomplish their goals. *AdeadLois* (listed as a medical student and a member of more than two years) states that, "Everyone makes their own career decisions differently. But given the bottleneck associated with med school admissions, you have to be 100% committed when you're applying, for better or worse." This sentiment of self-fortitude being important is shared by *lsumedgirl* (also listed as a medical student), who explains, "So, yes, it is scary... lots of new things to learn (and I'm not just talking about the material), totally different routines, and a major commitment [sic]." Both posters use a variation of the symbolic cue "commit" to share the WIT fantasy.

One final example of the self-fortitude fantasy type as a means of expressing the WIT fantasy comes from a thread in which the original poster explains that he or she is trying to persuade his or her parents on the issue of deferring admission to a medical school for a year. Several posters note that an individual who has what it takes to be a doctor should not be concerned or motivated by other people's opinions and should instead be confident in his or her choices. *Jolie South*, an assistant moderator on the SDN Forums, expresses regret for losing focus on his or her goals in the past. *Jolie South* states that, "i [sic] let my parents bully me in a few situations like this in the past and i wish i had listened to myself and done what i [sic] wanted." While *Jolie South*'s post lays the foundation for the self-fortitude fantasy type by suggesting that medical students should only listen to themselves, a post from *Begaster* effectively summarizes how self-fortitude relates to the WIT fantasy. *Begaster* states that, "It's kind of terrifying that people who are afraid of disapproval from their parents are going to be responsible for the well-being of others." *Begaster*'s post uses the symbolic cue "responsible" to show

what should really matter to a doctor or medical student: helping the patient. Doctors are required to make stressful, high-stakes decisions, and many members of the SDN Forums note that doctors must rely solely on themselves to make the best possible decision. Thus, the self-fortitude fantasy type is important in the WIT fantasy theme.

The final aspect or fantasy type in the WIT fantasy theme relates to the sacrifices that pre-medical students, medical students, and doctors must make. This aspect of the WIT fantasy theme occurs when posters share stories (or participate in dramas) about not having time for a social life. Aside from the word "sacrifice," no specific symbolic cues exist for this fantasy type because the sacrifices that the SDN Forums community describes vary. Still, a central theme of posters not being able to do something that most people their ages are doing is the greatest sign of the "school is life" fantasy type. A simple example comes from a thread on music recommendations. *psipsina* (listed as a medical student) replies to a music recommendation with the following comment: "Hey thanks for the headsup [sic], unfortunately I'll be studying for shelfs but my Husband and friends are gonna go." *psipsina*'s post, which mentions the idea of sacrifice, sets the tone for more detailed examples of another thread.

A thread for SDN members who believe that their relationships might not work due to medical school provides several clear examples of the "school is life" aspect of the WIT fantasy theme. In this thread, *kedrin* creates a fantasy chain focusing on the idea of the sacrifices of a medical student. *kedrin* states the following: "I feel like i am placing a speed bump in the way of her career. I would do anything for her, including pass on medical school although i dont [sic] think it would ever come to that." The use of the term "speed bump" makes *kedrin*'s post an example of the WIT fantasy theme. Terms

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and phrases such as "speed bump" and "holding him/her back" are commonly used in threads with stock scenarios involving sacrifice.

Although *kedrin* expresses an interest in potentially giving up his or her career, some posters reinforce the idea that sacrifice is what it takes to succeed in medicine. In this case, some posters even feel that it might be necessary to sacrifice having a relationship. For example, *pride4jc727* states that, "The moral of the story is not to get involved in serious relationships that can interfere with your ability to achieved the best possible career that you can obtain. It might be old-fashioned, but I believe in it." *pride4jc727* makes this post more credible by using a personal story (not present in the section included in this thesis) and claiming that he or she "believes" in the sentiment expressed in the post. *fireflygirl* also asserts that relationships should not be a medical student's top priority. *fireflygirl* makes the following statement:

> He has never stopped me from following my dream and I haven't given up mine either. I didn't chose [sic] a school I got into near him because I felt like the school that was near me in Philadelphia was a better fit for me. We both think that now is the time to work on our education and when we are ready, and if it still works out, we plan to stick it out and one of us will follow the other one. But for now, nothing is worth our future and education and we plan to focus on that now and be committed to each other as well. Our relationship takes a lot of work but we make sacrifices for each other and so far it has worked out really well.

Like *pride4jc727*, *fireflygirl* makes his or her post more credible by using a personal example. It is also worth noting that *fireflygirl* actually uses the symbolic cue "sacrifice" when discussing how his or her relationship works. The "school is life" fantasy type is used by individuals who believe in medical school being the most important thing in a student's life.

Thus, the WIT fantasy theme consists of the following fantasy types: real doctors, "not about the money," self-fortitude, and personal sacrifice. The real doctors fantasy type appeared as a fantasy theme in the pre-test, but further analysis in this expanded study shows that it is better-suited as an aspect of the greater WIT fantasy theme. The real doctors fantasy type still describes what the SDN Forums' ideal doctor does that sets him or her apart from other doctors or medical students. The notion of medical students not entering their careers for the money is also prevalent in the WIT fantasy theme; in this fantasy type, individuals talk about the financial realities of becoming a doctor. The remaining fantasy types, self-fortitude and personal sacrifice, describe the personal qualities that ideal medical students should possess. The self-fortitude fantasy type, for example, asserts that individuals should make their own decisions and not be forced into career moves based on their parents' decisions. Finally, some posters express the personal sacrifice fantasy type in discussions on why they are missing opportunities to do "normal" activities such as attending concerts or taking vacations.

As noted in the WIT introductory paragraph, the WIT fantasy theme includes the most fantasy types of all the fantasy themes in the SDN Forums. This fantasy theme is prevalent in the communication of SDN members, as members express it in many different contexts. The WIT fantasy theme is also important because it provides evidence of individuals turning to the SDN Forums for serious advice. Many of the threads that use the WIT theme are related to important decisions such as quitting a pre-medical program or deciding on the future of a serious relationship, making it one of the more significant fantasies in the SDN Forums.

What Really Matters (WRM) Fantasy

The final fantasy present in the SDN Forums displays an unexpected side of the community. This fantasy is especially surprising considering that the WIT fantasy (detailed in the previous section) suggests that being a good student and doctor are the only things that matter. This final fantasy theme, the WRM fantasy, explains how the SDN Forums community feels about life outside of medicine. In this fantasy theme, members discuss issues such as relationships, time usage, the human experience, and shared fears.

One of most prevalent aspects of the WRM fantasy is time usage. Common symbolic cues include "time," "waste of time," and "worth." Most conversations related to the "time" fantasy type share a stock scenario in which a poster seeks advice from the SDN community on what he or she should do in a situation involving dating or school. This stock scenario ends with multiple posters telling the original poster that his or her time is more valuable than to go through that situation. This advice is interesting because it appears in so many threads in the SDN Forums, suggesting that the busy schedules of these pre-medical and medical students makes them value the use of their time perhaps more than other college students.

An example of the "time" fantasy type comes from a discussion about dating in the All-Students Forum. In this thread, the original poster (listed as a medical student) explains that his or her fiancée does not want to move to a new place because she loves her current place of work. The poster explains that if his fiancée chooses to stay for her job, it will lead to a long distance relationship, and that the fiancée feels that moving is not worth only seeing each other briefly each day. The poster states that, "She feels that

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it is not worth giving up a job she loves to see me for just a few hours a day." The

original poster's use of the symbolic cues "worth" and "just a few hours a day" effectively

start a fantasy chain built around time usage. *Kubed* (also listed as a medical student)

suggests that perhaps the limited amount of time with a loved one might make the

original poster use his or her time more efficiently. *Kubed* states that, "When you only

have a limited time to see each other, you end up spending it having fun rather than doing

stuff that annoys each other." Other posters continue the chain by suggesting that the

original poster should always be able to "make time" for his or her fiancée.

Two more examples of the "time" fantasy type in the WRM fantasy come from

discussions on plans related to medical school. In a thread on the SDN community's

plans for the upcoming summer, *SBBunny* ponders taking a lengthy trip. However,

SBBunny questions if the relaxing trip would actually be a good use of time in noting

that, "I wonder if my time would be better spent earning some money instead of spending

all my savings." *Drogba* replies to this post by using the "time" fantasy type. *Drogba*

states that, "Your time is worth more than whatever miniscule wage you can command at

this point in your life unless you really need the money to survive." In using the

symbolic cue "worth" in association with "Time," *Drogba* is attempting to reinforce the

commonly shared value that a medical student's free time is too valuable to waste on

work-related plans. *Drogba*'s sentiment is echoed throughout the rest of the multiple

page thread, as several members talk about maximizing every second of their summer

vacations before starting another challenging year of school.

The "time" fantasy type is also expressed in a thread mentioned earlier on

Caribbean schools. The majority of the SDN community does not believe that Caribbean

schools are as good as American schools, as they go as far as to call Caribbean schools a "waste of time." *Atahaulpa11* describes the situation as being a waste of time because graduates sometimes are not able to gain admission into residency programs after leaving Caribbean medical schools. *Atahaulpa11* states that individuals who go to an American school "do not have to deal with this frustration or spend more time trying to get into a residency program." This post begins the fantasy chain of wasting time in a medical program, while the following post solidifies it. *Rotinaj* uses the symbolic cue "time waste" in stating the following: "I agree with Atahualpa11. It is not a guarantee, and there are a lot of IMGs working in labs that just can't get it as a doctor. Don't waste four years of your life like that...". While the first examples from the "time" fantasy type in the WRM fantasy were about short-term situations, the Caribbean school example shows that the WRM fantasy can also describe the proper use of time for a full four years. Being accepted into a residency program is "what really matters" in this case.

Similar to the "time" fantasy type, the "final hurrah" fantasy type is also relevant to the development of the WRM fantasy theme. This fantasy type focuses on the idea of pre-medical students effectively using their time before they become medical students or doctors. It also commonly involves discussions in which pre-medical students express how they hope to keep certain sides of themselves in tact while in medical school. For example, one student suggests that he wants to continue playing music while in medical school. Symbolic cues in the "final hurrah" fantasy type include phrases such as "my last _____ before medical school," and "free time," and "time off."

An example of how the "final hurrah" fantasy type reinforces the WRM fantasy theme also comes from a thread on the SDN community's summer plans. In this thread,

several posters discuss the trips that they want to take before they start medical school (often using the "time" fantasy type discussed in the preceding paragraphs). *Lindinite* clearly refers to the idea of a "final hurrah" before medical school in stating "I'm going to India for a short trip and shooting my last film before med school!". *Maxprime*, takes part in the same fantasy as *Lindinite* in describing his or her summer plans. The poster explains that he or she will have one last opportunity to be himself or herself before starting medical school. *Maxprime* makes the following post:

> I think I may do the one thing I won't be able to do for a long time. I want to get up every day and work out, then spend the day at the pool, then go home to drink beer and play Xbox with my friends before we never see each other again.

Maxprime and *Lindinite* are aware, as are many other posters, that medical school will completely change their lives, so they choose to focus on what really matters to them in this stage of their lives while there is still time. A post from another thread on medical school summarizes this section well. *Orthodoc40* (listed as a medical student) gives the SDN community the following advice: "the people who say they are most excited about the time between now & when they start? You got it right - enjoy it now!!!"

Other threads include similar sentiments of doing something for the last few times before losing one's free time in medical school. As noted earlier, SDN members are concerned with being themselves while in medical school. A particularly long WRM fantasy chain exists in a thread for music majors who plan to attend medical school. In this fantasy chain, multiple members discuss how they hope to still play music while in medical school. *The Doctor* states, "I'm hoping I can keep up my piano in medical school, maybe find a teacher and do a lesson once a month." This dramatizing message begins the fantasy chain. *darkraven* replies with, "I'ld [sic] probably like to keep up with

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music ... might be a little hard during clinicals and residency but we'll see what happens."

darkraven's post reinforces that medical school will not afford the posters with many

opportunities for music. The next reply comes from *GuitarHero1*, who seems somewhat

more optimistic in his or her post before ending it with the symbolic cue "if there's time."

GuitarHero1's full post reads as "if anyone plays any instruments and will or is attending

SLU, I'd be willing to jam (you know, if there is any free time)." A final example comes

from *Luxian*, who explains how he or she will miss playing music. *Luxian* states "I'm

going to miss it a lot! I know I won't be able to do as much, but I hope I can do some."

Many individuals who express the "final hurrah" aspect of the WRM fantasy theme

believe that they will be losing a part of themselves and their identities upon starting

medical school.

The next relevant aspect of the WRM fantasy theme relates to the SDN Forums

community's views on relationships and family. Symbolic cues in this fantasy theme

include as "normal," "love," and "worth it." The pre-test discussed earlier in this thesis

noted the presence of a "Supporting Actor" fantasy theme, in which the SDN community

values relationships but expects their dating partners to be willing to play the "support"

role in the relationship. The more in depth analysis of the SDN Forums for this thesis

reveals that relationships are still important to the SDN Forums community, as they often

discuss dating issues. The analysis of many more threads reveals that the SDN

community values relationships even when dating partners are too far away to support

them in traditional ways such as cooking and cleaning. These individuals simply want to

be with the people that they care about. For example, in a thread on finding a way to

make relationships work while in medical school, one poster states the following:

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> Hopefully we can work somethin out where we can be physically together, but if not, we'll work out something so we can see each other as much as possible. I'm sure that neither of us is going to let this separate us, but it is still frustrating.

Love is "what really matters" to this poster. *Dookter* also expresses that he or she finds it absolutely necessary to see his or her wife as often as possible. *Dookter* states that, "It's great to have someone there all the time to just live life with. It is easy as a medical student to get caught up in things and forget to just be a normal person." This post continues the argument that relationships are worth pursing while in medical school. Finally, *kedrin* summarizes this argument in a different thread by stating that, "It has always been my assumption that if someone truly loves you that they will do anything to be with them."

The WRM fantasy theme renegotiates the values of the SDN community. The WRM fantasy theme does this by establishing that individuals can and should date while in medical school and that relationships are worth more than just cooking and cleaning services (as discussed in the preceding paragraph). In the WIT fantasy theme, many posters suggest that for an individual to be successful in medical school, he or she must put school first. Some posters take this argument further in suggesting that one should not date at all while in medical school. The WRM fantasy theme argues against placing medical school on a higher level than one's relationship. In the same dating thread discussed in the preceding paragraph, a poster states "i did not expect so many people to say put your careers first and relationship second." He or she adds the following:

> I do not think a life or a career should be such a one sided view. I do not think having a life beyond work neglects your patients. In most ways i see it supporting it, i do not know about most people here but i honestly can say i need some emotional backing and time to relax from work/school. I could not see my self practicing medicine without having those two sides to my life, performing a

balancing act. I guess im just trying to say that i need both a great career and a relationship in order to be successful in both.

Other posters respond favorably to this renegotiation of values. *Concubine* replies with a criticism of the SDN members who feel that dating is not possible in medical school. *Concubine* continues the WRM fantasy chain by using the symbolic cue "human." In a direct response to a poster who advises the community not to start serious relationships, *Concubine* states "I would rather be human."

The thread continues with other posters renegotiating what really matters to them by expressing how important it is to date and have an active social life outside of medical school. *Instatewaiter* (listed as a medical student), takes one last jab at the small minority of posters who suggest that dating is impossible during medical school. *Instatewaiter* states that, "Nothing says awesome like being single for 10 years straight during your prime. I swear you wont regret it." While this post is humorous and effective in establishing the group's shared values, one last comment truly embodies the love aspect of the WRM fantasy. *foster033* explains why the WRM fantasy is important to the SDN community in claiming the following: "Having a career and following your dreams is important, but so are the people you love. Some people would rather give up a job than a person." The "love" fantasy type is expressed more often than the idea of work being more important than life.

As in the pre-test discussed earlier in this thesis, some examples of the WRM fantasy theme are exposed through observing the shared fears of the SDN community. This reasoning proved itself in the pre-test, as individuals who feared not having time to date obviously saw dating as very important. In two separate threads on the things that

the SDN community fears most, posters ultimately reinforced the ideas discussed in the WRM fantasy theme. The fact that these individuals' fears reinforce the WRM fantasy makes the fear fantasy type a relevant sub-theme within the WRM discussion. SDN posters are most afraid of people or things that can take away what really matters to them. One of the most commonly expressed fears is the loss of humanity as a result of a career in medicine. The following two examples show how this fear reinforces the need for humanity and freedom that is expressed in the previous paragraphs on dating in medical school. *scrubsaresexy* claims the following: "I think my biggest fear is not being able to have a family, or if I do have a family, being a bad mother because I'm always work." *TexasMD2B* shares this fear of not being human in posing the following question "is "losing my sense of humanity" a viable answer?". These posts further demonstrate the depth of the WRM fantasy theme, as they use symbolic cues such as "human" to note how important a social life is for medical students.

The fear of having wasted time in medical school is also shared by many of the SDN Forums members. An individual who is being reassigned the name *Marty* due to using his name in his post states the following as his greatest fear:

> Brain Tumor (Dr. Greene style), or schizophrenia, or anything that ruins my mind [sic] The thought of all my hard work, sacrifices of my time and family, not to mention thousands of dollars of debt and at the end of it all, I lose my one most valuable asset.

While this fear is technically about losing one's mental capacities, it ultimately refers to having wasted valuable years of ones youth for nothing. As noted earlier, the members of the SDN Forums believe that using ones time well is very important, so *Marty*'s post effectively addresses that issue. Another post that talks about the fear of wasting time

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comes from *Chaser08*. *Chaser08* gives the following example of wasting time as a fear in the WRM fantasy theme:

> Picking the wrong specialty. I know you can change, but I'd rather not spend years in one specialty, deciding I hate it, and then having to pick another one. I've met people who've done residency and 2 or 3 fellowships before getting it right. Crazy thing was, the guy finally decided he wanted to do surgery, which is not easy to get to from other specialties. So he's like 40 and still in training.

Chaser08's post is effective not only because it reinforces a shared fantasy but also because it uses a personal story to demonstrate the fantasy.

One final WRM fantasy theme is the fear of litigation. Many posters on the SDN Forums discuss how they are afraid of making a mistake for moral and legal reasons. Lawyers are the only people that the SDN community can agree upon as "the enemy," as they are mentioned in threads with topics such as finances, dating, and shared fears. This fear of litigation is relevant to the discussion of the WRM fantasy theme because the SDN community realizes that lawyers can take away what matters to them most. For example, in the same thread referenced earlier on shared fears, *etf* simply posts "lawyers." This post starts a social drama, in which *Law2Doc* suggests that a fear of lawyers is actually a fear of making a mistake. *Law2Doc* states that saying an individual's greatest fear is litigation is "just another way of saying your biggest fear is screwing up, except that you are more concerned with the impact on you than the patients." Other members of the forum do not accept this breach in the fantasy, however. *macgyver22* places reinforces that lawyers are enemies in stating that

> *Actually its not the same. Many lawsuits have nothing to do with 'screwing up'. Negligence need not occur for a lawsuit* [sic] *to be filed. You only need an angry patient. You don't need malpractice to win a lawsuit, you only need to convince a a uneducated ignorant (as in no knowledge of the subject and no experience working in the field) jury there was malpractice. If all lawsuits were truly the*

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> *result of physican negligence, there would be far fewer lawsuits and much less lawyer loathing.*

macgyver22's statement that many lawsuits occur for corrupt reasons is accepted by other members of the forum, and the shared fantasy of lawyers being evil is once again established within the community. Although several more examples of SDN members discussing the serious sides of litigation exist, most discussions on lawyers being evil occur in a somewhat friendly, joking manner. For example, in a thread referenced earlier in this thesis on saving a potentially long distance relationship with a lawyer, one poster replies with the following statement: "All of the risks, none of the benefits. Especially if you're married to a lawyer." Other members share this sentiment as well as the thread progresses.

To summarize, the following four fantasy types are significant in the WRM fantasy theme: time, "final hurrah," the value of relationships, and fear of losing one's career. The concept of time is important to the SDN Forums community, as members express it in the time fantasy type and the fear of losing one's career fantasy type. Members often note that they are concerned about maximizing their time use and fear that they might waste their precious free time. Alternatively, the fear of losing one's career fantasy type also reinforces the importance of time, as many members note that their greatest fear is losing their career due to an accident or a lawsuit. Members note that years of their lives would have been wasted in medical school if they lost their jobs. Finally, posters express the value that they place on family, friends, and lovers in the "final hurrah" and relationship fantasy types. These fantasy types are marked by posters stating that love is more important than medical school.

The majority of the SDN Forums community is interested in living a healthy, normal life outside of their careers. This desire to live like other twenty-somethings is discussed through examples of maximizing free time and insisting on having a dating presence while in medical school. As these things are important to the members of the SDN Forums community, they also are present in the discussions of what the community most fears in becoming a doctor.

Summary of Analysis

The version of Bormann's (1972b) fantasy theme analysis used in this thesis provides five fantasy themes that effectively describe the SDN Forums community. These themes, "I NEED to Go Here" (INTGH), "Team SDN," "Oh Pre-Meds" (OPM), "What It Takes" (WIT), and "What Really Matters" (WRM), cover a wide variety of subjects but all give examples of what the community values and dislikes. INTGH looks at the qualities that the SDN community thinks a good medical school should have. Similarly, the WIT fantasy includes discussion on what makes a good doctor as well as how one succeeds at medical school. The "Team SDN" fantasy is shared when members advise each other during trying times. One of the main purposes of members sharing this fantasy is to assure each other that they are "not alone."

The next fantasy is not as positive in nature but tells a great deal about the personal traits that SDN members admire and dislike. This fantasy, the OPM fantasy, is used when posters want to differentiate themselves from typical pre-medical students. Many members of the SDN Forums feel that pre-medical students are "lame" and do not know how to enjoy themselves. Finally, the WRM fantasy is perhaps the most interesting of all the fantasies in the SDN Forums. In this fantasy, members explain that while their

medical school and career responsibilities are important, enjoying life and having friends and loved ones is more important. This theme is usually expressed when some posters assert that dating and socializing are bad ideas while in medical school. As a final note to this analysis, each of the fantasy themes includes several fantasy types that help reinforce the values of the community. Two of the fantasy types were actually fantasy themes in the pre-test discussed earlier in this thesis. These two fantasy types, "real doctors," and "the importance of relationships" appear in the WIT and WRM themes, respectively. It is important to note that these fantasy types were discussed as fantasy types and not themes because the larger scope of this thesis showed that they actually had a smaller role than originally expected.

In conclusion, through careful analysis of hundreds of threads in the SDN Forums, five fantasy themes describe a great deal of these pre-medical and medical students' communication. The conclusions section includes an explanation of the overarching rhetorical vision that ties these five themes together.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

This thesis successfully uses Bormann's (1972b) fantasy theme analysis to find five fantasy themes in the SDN Forums, a group of Internet forums for every kind of medical student and doctor. After reviewing the literature on relevant topics such as fantasy theme analysis, symbolic convergence theory, and uncertainty reduction theory, the thesis moves into a description of the methodology with a pre-test for reinforcement. The methodology uses a systematic sample to select hundreds of threads from the "Pre-Allopathic" (for future medical doctors) and "All-Students" (for any member of the SDN Forums to discuss any topic) sections of the SDN Forums. After reviewing these threads, categories emerged based on similar belief and value sets of the posters. These categories were further narrowed to five fantasy themes with varying fantasy types to support them.

The five fantasy themes are "I NEED to Go Here" (INTGH), "Team SDN," "Oh Pre-Meds" (OPM), "What It Takes" (WIT), and "What Really Matters" (WRM). The INTGH fantasy occurs when members discuss the schools that they most want to attend. Topics range from what makes a school perfect to the specific admissions requirements for different schools. This fantasy also allows for posters to show desperation by asking other posters to "give up their spots" in medical school to more deserving people. The "Team SDN" fantasy serves two main purposes: to build camaraderie within the SDN community and to reinforce the utility of the SDN Forums. In this fantasy, posters who

feel uncertainty about medical school receive reassurance from other posters who have been "in the same boat." The next fantasy, OPM, is not as positive in nature as "Team SDN," but it does create shared consciousness in the forums. In the OPM fantasy, individuals trade stories about the stereotypical "pre-meds" whom they have encountered during their careers. Posters establish what behaviors are acceptable from pre-medical students in this fantasy. Finally, the WIT and WRM fantasies tell a great deal about the SDN community. The WIT fantasy establishes the heroic doctor whom most of the SDN community hopes to be. In addition to establishing the qualities that ideal doctors should have, the WIT fantasy also features advice from medical students and residents who want younger pre-medical students to understand "what it takes" to succeed in medicine. The WRM fantasy coincides with the WIT fantasy because it establishes the community's shared villain: lawyers and anyone else who might take away a doctor's career. This revelation comes from threads in which SDN members post about their family and loved ones who matter more to them than their careers. Because the community values its time with loved ones so much, members greatly fear losing their career because it would mean that they had wasted valuable time in their twenties that they could have spent with their friends and family. As noted in the research questions, shared fears are telling of what is important to a group, making this finding significant.

The results of this thesis suggest two things: Bormann's (1972b) fantasy theme analysis is effective for large-scale studies on Internet communities, and communication in Internet communities can serve as a substitute to interpersonal communication with advisers or other individuals (parents, friends) who usually give advice. This section of the thesis will further discuss these two key developments of the analysis of the SDN

Forums. However, first it looks at the rhetorical vision present in the SDN Forums as instrumental to understanding the results of the fantasy theme analysis. The conclusions section will also look at the potential problems in this study and suggest some areas for future research.

As Bormann (1985) notes, a rhetorical vision is "a unified putting-together of the various scripts which gives the participants a broader view of things" (p. 8). Evidence of a rhetorical vision is proof of shared values and goals within a community. Rhetorical visions link all of the fantasy themes and types in a way that makes sense of concepts that sometimes do not seem to work together. This thesis is no exception, as the rhetorical vision present in the SDN Forums shows shared consciousness in the members' communication of complicated fantasy themes such as INTGH and OPM. It effectively relates all five of the fantasy themes and explains why some of the SDN members go to each other for major advice.

It's Still Worth It (ISWI) Rhetorical Vision - A Look at the Values of the SDN Forums

The ISWI rhetorical vision explains that while many problems are associated with going to medical school and becoming a doctor, it is still a worthwhile pursut. ISWI is ultimately quite similar to the rhetorical vision found in the pre-test on the SDN Forums. The pre-test rhetorical vision "It Is Difficult But Possible" (IIDBP) asserts that the SDN community understands that becoming a doctor is difficult but is concerned with motivating one another to continue working. Like the IIDBP vision, the ISWI vision is marked by members telling each other to "stay positive" and "keep trying." However, the ISWI vision is better developed, as it consistently appeared in the three hundred threads analyzed in this thesis.

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The ISWI rhetorical vision effectively summarizes the values shared by the SDN Forums community. Members who stress over being admitted to medical school and describe the process as a gamble ultimately go through that stress because they feel that it is still worth it. Members who express the WIT fantasy theme by talking about missing concerts and other fun events to study also explain that the work is ultimately worth it in the end, as they will have the opportunity to help others. The reach of the ISWI vision is also reinforced by the fears expressed in the WRM fantasy theme. Most of the members in the SDN Forums fear things such as health problems or lawyers who can take the profession away from them, making the work of medical school not worth it. Still, none of the members in the threads used in this thesis report having gone through litigation or debilitating health situations; they simply shared thoughts on what it would be like to lose everything.

The ISWI rhetorical vision is reinforced predominately by senior members of the forums who list themselves as medical students or moderators. These individuals have a frame of reference for the experiences of a medical student and often encourage younger members not to lose sight of the end goal of becoming a doctor. While some individuals complain about issues such as unpleasant medical students or rising malpractice insurance prices in the OPM and WIT fantasy themes, senior members tend to argue that the salaries and peer relationships are still good enough to make medical school worth attending. The "Team SDN" fantasy theme especially represents the shared values of the ISWI vision, as members congratulate each other on being accepted and talk about how exciting it is to move closer to a career in medicine (even with the sacrifices).

One of the most important aspects of the ISWI rhetorical vision is that it details the shared values and goals in the SDN Forums. By studying the examples in each of the five fantasy themes explained in the analysis section of this thesis, one can conclude that the members of the SDN Forums feel a great amount of pride in their medical accomplishments. This pride is also evident in threads described in the INTGH fantasy, in which individuals congratulate other members who have been accepted into medical school but note that they are jealous. The jealousy that some members feel comes from the fact that personal accomplishments are valued so highly on the SDN Forums. Personal accomplishments are routinely idealized in the WIT fantasy, where members sometimes brag while complaining about the amount of work that they have to do in medical school. Accomplishing things on one's own is a rite of passage for members of the SDN Forums, as some senior members tend to discuss how pre-medical students do not understand what actual medial students have to do. The desire to achieve great things is a large part of every fantasy except OPM, where the members of the SDN Forums reflect on "pre-meds" and even parody the group to which they belong.

The heroes and villains identified in the ISWI rhetorical vision also help explain the SDN Forums community. The main hero type is the "real doctor" described in the WIT fantasy. This ideal doctor often is not someone that the SDN members know in person; he or she is simply who they hope to be. For the SDN community, this superhero doctor is someone who values servitude more than money and is genunitely interested in learning more about his or her profession. As noted earlier, members use the symbolic cue "help others" repeatedly when discussing why they want to be doctors or what they admire in the medical profession. A key example of this hero type comes from both the

"Team SDN" fantasy and the WIT fantasy, in a thread about the racial dynamics of medical school. After a poster notes that he or she wants to inspire others to follow in his or her footsteps, many other posters note that the desire to help others is admirable and express a similar interest in inspiring others. The "real doctor" hero type is further expressed in other threads where some individuals suggest that they are not sure they want to attend medical school. This stock scenario ends with members of the SDN Forums building up their "real doctor" hero type in explaining that individuals who succeed are completely committed to being a doctor. The "real doctor" hero is always committed to his or her work and is not lured away from the profession by lucrative options in other careers.

On the subject of money, the greatest villains described in the SDN Forums are lawyers. While it is also notable that "gunner" medical students are hated by many SDN members, some posters consider themselves "gunners," so it is difficult to label these individuals as enemies. As noted in the WRM section of the thesis, lawyers are almost always discussed as being evil in the SDN Forums because the SDN community fears what they can do. The SDN Forums community mentions lawyers in a thread on the things they fear the most, where the consensus is that lawyers have the ability to take away what doctors work so hard to accomplish. Also mentioned in the WRM section of the thesis is a thread on making a long distance relationship work. In this thread, the original poster reveals that his or her fiancée is a lawyer. After this revelation, a few of the posters tell the original poster that it is not worth trying to make a relationship work with a lawyer. Although the derogatory lawyer posts were made in a light-hearted, jesting manner, several members of the SDN Forums found it necessary to attack the

original poster's fiancée's career choice to prove a point. This point is that lawyers and SDN members are not to mix. The only instance of a poster defending a lawyer came from the aptly-named (but respected senior member) *Law2Doc*, who tried to defend the profession in a thread on what the community fears the most.

Significance and Application of Findings

Effectiveness of Fantasy Theme Analysis in Internet Communication

Although the fantasy theme analysis method has proven to be useful in connecting shared values and thoughts in written communication for over thirty years, not many studies use the method on Internet communication. The relevant fantasy theme analyses of Internet groups are included in the literature review of this thesis and some of them are even used in this thesis' applied methodology. While Internet studies by scholars such as Alemán (2005) and Perry and Roesch (2004) were useful in developing the methodology for this thesis, they appeared in journals and therefore did not cover the large number (and variety) of threads needed for this thesis. Alemán and Perry and Roesch's studies focused on specific types of threads or posts, making them not require as many examples as this thesis needed in order to make a convincing argument.

As this thesis uses fantasy theme analysis to study the communication of several thousands of people (there were 137,000 members as of March, 2008) on any topic that they discussed for thirty days, it was interesting to see that the method worked as concisely and convincingly as it did. While the thesis was limited to two sections of the SDN Forums, I still feared that the members' conversations might vary too much to find convincing fantasy themes. Not only did the method provide fantasy themes, but it provided enough examples that I had to decide which ideas were prevalent enough to be

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called fantasy themes and which would have to be developed further or labeled as fantasy types. Also, the systematic sample described by Krippendorff (1980) is effective in fantasy theme analyses, as systematic samples give Internet scholars a great amount of text to analyze without fear of researcher bias. This study's sample yielded conversations ranging from medical school applications to musical tastes and provided me with a fair look at a normal day's communication in the SDN Forums.

Thus, this thesis proves the utility of Bormann's (1972b) method. Fantasy theme analysis can be applied to a group as diverse as the SDN Forums' community and still produce convincing fantasy themes; thus, the method should continue to be used. While some scholars might be inclined to choose a method created more recently for a study on technologically mediated communication, Bormann's method can be applied to find the significance in most kinds of communication. Also, this thesis is significant to the fantasy theme analysis methodology because it shows that the method can be used to find themes on a grander scale than most studies use. This thesis, for example, included hundreds of threads.

Forum Communities as Advice Communities

The second significant finding of this thesis applies more to the actual results of the study than the method itself. The results of this thesis suggest that the members of the SDN Forums do not exclusively seek advice from their college advisers. This finding is instrumental in understanding how pre-medical students reduce uncertainty about being accepted into medical school or surviving internship programs. In addition to perhaps to their advisers, the individuals on the SDN Forums talk to other medical students online. Members consult one another for advice that one might expect forum members to give:

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thoughts on bands, television shows, and travel destinations. However, the SDN Forums community also asks for advice on long distance relationships, extracurricular activities, and which universities they should attend. The fact that SDN Forums members seek each other's advice on which schools they should attend (and which classes they should take) is one of the most important findings in this thesis. This finding suggests that college advising does not completely address topics that are relevant to the SDN community, meaning that college advisers could learn a great deal from the results of this analysis.

The findings of this thesis suggest that universities might need to change their requirements for advising and require all pre-medical majors to speak with advisers more regularly. If this is already the case, perhaps some universities could benefit from creating an Internet forum for their pre-medical students to discuss potential schools to attend and classes to take. This resource could be even more useful if students from outside universities were allowed to read different universities' forums and ask the students questions. By requiring each student to register through his or her university, the anonymity of the SDN Forums would not be present in this new advising system and would allow students to receive accurate advice. College advisers would still have a prominent role in this system by moderating the forums and providing advice when necessary.

A large part of the preceding paragraph is speculation on what might help college advising in the future. Still, the reason for this speculation rests on the results of this fantasy theme analysis of thousands of pre-medical and medical students. The findings in fantasy themes such as INTGH and "Team SDN" show evidence of SDN members not understanding the admissions process and relying on the advice of anonymous Internet

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posters. The following paragraphs further analyze how advising fits into the communication in the SDN Forums.

One of the most important findings of this thesis is that many individuals use the SDN Forums for making major life decisions. Almost every thread (in the Pre-Allopathic and All-Students Forum sections) is an advice thread. As most of the threads in the SDN Forums exist for individuals to help one another, the most respected posters on the SDN Forums are those with advanced statuses. These individuals have a status that appears under their screen names in every post that they make. As noted earlier, statuses range from "Pre-Medical" to "Medical Doctor." A sign of individuals sharing values or goals is for one individual to quote the post of another before replying to it. The individuals who are most commonly supported or accepted are those with a status of "Medical Student" or higher. Although these individuals sometimes make fun of younger members, they tend to dispense relevant advice when necessary. Although senior members could potentially lie when giving advice, their advice is not questioned by members of inferior status.

The SDN Forums community's interest in status reflects the values of the community. Because the members of the forum idealize doctors and individuals who have "what it takes," they are more likely to listen to the advice of the individuals who are the closest to becoming doctors. Individuals with a high SDN Forums status also tend to start fantasy chains of "Team SDN," as they remind younger members to stay positive and focus on the task of completing their pre-medical work. Not only that, senior members tend to start the fantasy chains of WRM and WIT, as they discuss not worrying about the financial aspects of becoming a doctor and instead spending more time with family and friends.

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As so many of the threads on the SDN Forums are advice threads, it is worth asking why this community is not asking their college advisers some of these questions. Obviously it is not the responsibility of an adviser to give a college student advice on making a long-distance relationship work, but that type of question is actually in the minority of the questions asked in the SDN Forums. Most of the threads in the SDN Forums ask about extracurricular activities to put on a résumé and admissions processes and managing money while in school. The members of the SDN Forums either do not mention their visits to talk with their advisers, or they do not talk to their advisers at all. Many of the threads in the SDN Forums (particularly in the INTGH fantasy) suggest that some of the members of the forum do not understand how to write a letter of introduction, how to interview, what to include in a résumé, or how to decide upon a medical school. While senior members of the forums answer most of these confused individuals' questions, it is an interesting trend that perhaps some pre-medical students do not go to their college advisers for major decisions involving medical school.

As suggested in the preceding paragraphs it is not clear how the members of the SDN Forums feel about traditional advice from college advisers, as I did not encounter any posts that specifically mentioned them in my research. However, one of the things that attracts a great number of individuals to the SDN community is its reputation for giving excellent advice about medical school. In an example from the "Team SDN" fantasy, one poster states the following about the SDN Forums: "I wish I had found this site a while ago. It would've made my entire process a lot smoother. Good advice on here." Similar messages of support for the SDN Forums and the multiple threads asking

the community for serious advice show that the thousands of SDN posters feel that the community is one of the best sources of intelligent advice.

While thousands of individuals ask for advice on the SDN Forums, this advice is typically informal in nature. The examples in fantasy themes such as INTGH and "Team SDN" show that SDN posters often do not reinforce their claims with research or articles. However, SDN members still seem to appreciate the different perspectives offered by the wide variety of advice in each thread. Most of the advice in the SDN Forums suggests that the community desires an "insider" look at life as a medical student or resident. While traditional formal college advising most likely still helps the SDN community make decisions, it cannot offer pre-medical students the same perspective that students at other schools can offer.

Scholars such as Brown (1985) and Davis (2005) express the significance of storytelling in the process of organizational socialization. One way that individuals reduce uncertainty about an organization or community is through listening to stories from individuals who are members of that organization or community. Organizational socialization scholarship from Cawyer and Friedrich (1998) and Miller and Jablin (1991) further explain the need for uncertainty reduction for new members of an organization. The scholars explain that organizations should offer new or potential members the opportunity to talk with current members of an organization about their experiences.

Based on the research of the aforementioned scholars and the results of this fantasy theme analysis, further implications exist for college advising. As the SDN Forums members rely on the informal advice given through stories and examples in threads, perhaps college advisers can add an informal aspect to the formal aspect of their

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work. For example, many members of the SDN Forums discuss their visits to different schools in the INTGH fantasy theme. These visits to different schools ultimately are similar to recruiting visits and perhaps do not always offer the most realistic view of what it is like to be a student at these schools. Also, many posters mention that they cannot afford to visit more than one school, which severely limits their opportunities to meet other students. It might be useful to have summertime visits from medical students and residents with ties to the university. In these sessions, pre-medical students could ask the medical students questions about the daily experience of being a medical student. Professors should encourage the students to ask any question that interests them and most likely should not be present during the sessions to increase the pre-medical students' comfort levels. While individuals who speak to pre-medical students might not represent every university that interests the pre-medical students, the opportunity to learn about being a medical student would still be useful.

Uncertainty Reduction Theory and Organizational Socialization

Scholars such as Berger (1979), Berger and Calabrese (1975), Clatterbuck (1979), Gudykunst (1983, 1985), and Kramer (1999) explain the ways that individuals reduce uncertainty. The scholars suggest methods such as asking questions, seeking information, and self-disclosure. As noted in the previous section, most of the threads in the SDN Forums are advice threads. This need for advice suggests that the original posters in most threads experience uncertainty about topics such as choosing medical schools and managing long distance relationships. The SDN posters' need for advice relates to the ISWI rhetorical vision. When posters ask how the SDN community feels about debt or the loss of free time due to becoming a doctor, they are trying to decide if it

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is still "worth it" to become a doctor. These individuals most likely hope to have their uncertainty reduced through reassuring comments from senior members.

This thesis expands uncertainty reduction theory by showing that fantasy theme analysis can provide evidence of individuals attempting to reduce uncertainty. Future research could use fantasy theme analysis to study uncertainty in groups ranging from Internet communities to real-life communities. As fantasy theme analysis can lead to the discovery of shared values, goals, and fears, it can potentially help explain the uncertainty that scholars find in their respondents. Understanding a group's goals could also help scholars understand what their respondents want to hear when they seek advice or reassurance.

In addition to discussing uncertainty reduction theory, the literature review also discusses organizational socialization research. Jablin (1987) takes a stage-model approach to organizational socialization. The scholar explains that anticipatory socialization is the first step to this process; it takes place when individuals seek information about organizations' cultures and values. Members of the SDN Forums engage in anticipatory socialization by asking individuals from different schools about the unique cultures in their medical school departments. For example, in the INTGH fantasy, posters who hope to decide on a medical school routinely discuss the personalities and climates at different schools. As these individuals typically have not entered the organization (medical school) yet, they are trying to decide if they will easily merge into the organization's culture or if they will have to change their personalities accordingly. The findings of this thesis suggest that the SDN Forums community (and

possibly other forum communities) use the Internet as an informal way of socializing themselves into an organization's culture before actually entering the organization.

Finally, this thesis suggests that the implementation of fantasy theme analysis in Internet communities could be useful for organizational socialization research. While fantasy theme analysis generally is not used in organizational socialization research, it could be useful in analyzing not only how individuals decide to enter an organization, but also what values they find to be important before entering. These values could be found through the repeated sharing of fantasy types about entering different kinds of organizations. Fantasy theme analysis would also help organizational socialization scholars decide what role Internet groups play in anticipatory socialization. In the SDN Forums, the group's shared values play a large role in helping pre-medical students decide which ideas are accepted or disliked in medical schools. For example, playing the role of a "gunner" is not acceptable according to medical students in the OPM fantasy. Medical students help socialize pre-medical students in the SDN Forums by explaining which roles and character traits are better-suited for a new student.

Thus, this thesis adds to uncertainty reduction theory and organizational socialization research in several ways. The fantasies shared in the SDN Forums provide new data about the Internet's role in both uncertainty reduction and organizational socialization. Members seek advice in almost every thread, with most of the topics focusing on medical school and its unique culture. Finally, fantasy theme analysis can be applied to uncertainty reduction and organizational socialization research to explain how community values and goals affect both areas of research. Fantasy theme analysis could

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allow researchers the opportunity to better understand the motivating factors and fears that individuals have when joining new organizations.

Potential Problems

Although the applied fantasy theme analysis methodology worked in this study, there are a few potentially problematic aspects of this thesis to discuss. One area that causes problems in this thesis is the terminology. As Mohrmann (1982) explains, some scholars use the terms "fantasy theme" and "fantasy type interchangeably. For this thesis, I took Mohrmann's complaint into account by using the term "fantasy theme" to describe a set of shared values displayed through shared stories about a situation that occurred either in the past or that could occur in the future. Rather than using the term "fantasy type" in the same way, I used that particular term to demonstrate the presence of different types of stock scenarios within a larger fantasy theme. For example, in the WIT fantasy theme, the "real doctors" fantasy theme from the pre-test revealed itself as being a fantasy type: a stock scenario with repeating symbolic cues and settings that serves to reinforce the larger WIT fantasy theme in this thesis. While I feel that this distinction between "fantasy theme" and "fantasy type" is clear, it might still need further clarification in the future. Perhaps re-naming the term "fantasy type" could prove to be useful in future studies.

As noted in the previous paragraph, the "real doctors" fantasy type in this thesis was a fantasy theme in the pre-test. However, that difference does not affect the results of this thesis (the "real doctors" concept arose in both the thesis and the pre-test, just differing in importance). Similarly, the expanded thesis analysis found a

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better-developed version of love's role for pre-medical students. The expanded analysis

still shows that many SDN posters value having a partner who is useful and makes their

lives easier. However, it adds to that notion with examples of how the SDN community

appreciates their partners for the camaraderie and happiness that they bring as well.

There were not enough examples of the human side of relationships to include it in the

pre-test. Some might argue that the two differences between the pre-test and the thesis

analysis ("real doctors" and relationships) hurt the validity of the pre-test. Instead, the

differences between the two studies lie in the scope of the studies. As the pre-test

included a much smaller number of threads, some concepts appeared to be more

important than they actually were due to the subject matter of the randomly selected

threads. However, this thesis includes a much larger sample of threads, leaving little

doubt that the examples provide an accurate portrayal of the actual conversations in the

SDN Forums.

Another potentially problematic aspect of this thesis is that many of the posts

come from a period of time when pre-medical students are desperate to learn about their

medical school acceptance statuses. However, most of the threads on medical school

acceptances sampled in this thesis actually started months before my sample time and

were simply still going during the months of February and March. While some might

argue that too many of the threads in this thesis are about medical school acceptances, it

captures the essence of why pre-medical school students work hard in school and post on

the SDN Forums: they want to be accepted to medical schools. These threads also

provided a wide variety of sub-topics such as living arrangements, long distance

relationships, and what it takes to succeed in medical school.

One final problematic area in this thesis is that some individuals might fabricate their statuses, as there is no background check for individuals who join the SDN Forums. Therefore, an individual who labels himself or herself as a "Resident" or a "PhD Student" might actually be a pre-medical student or someone without any history of studying medicine. While fabrication of one's identity is a legitimate concern with any study of an Internet community, many of the conversations in the SDN Forums seem to suggest that these individuals actually hold the status that they use online. Most advice threads include specific advice on medical school campuses and every type of course, including knowledge of necessary prerequisite courses and funding options. Also, individuals with high status ranks such as "Resident" are in the minority in the SDN Forums; this observation suggests that most members of the forum are interested in labeling themselves appropriately so that they may receive the best advice possible.

Suggestions for Future Research

This thesis adds to the growing body of research on Internet communication. More importantly, it adds to the small body of research on fantasy themes in Internet communication. Studies such as those by Alemán (2005) and Perry and Roesch (2004) are forward-thinking in applying Bormann's (1972b) method to this still-developing area of communication. As noted earlier, however, this thesis is the first study (at the time of publication) to use the fantasy theme analysis methodology to analyze entire sections of an Internet forum on such a large scale. This thesis shows that by using the fantasy theme analysis methodology, a scholar can find examples of shared values, beliefs, and visions within an entire community. This finding is important, because it is possible to learn more about specific groups of people while they communicate in an unrestrained,

natural setting. Other studies look at fantasy themes in Internet communities as they

pertain to one subject matter, such as love or death. However, it is noteworthy that one

can learn a community's complete outlook on a wide array of topics by not limiting one's

study to particular subjects and instead sampling a wide number of threads from the same

community.

In future studies, scholars should apply a similar methodology to other interesting

Internet communities, whether work-related or social-related. For example, before

choosing the SDN Forums, I considered hobbyist and fan forums for topics ranging from

video games to the Walt Disney Company. These communities are interesting not only

for the degree of love that their members communicate for video games or Disney but

also for the ways that their members communicate about topics not unrelated to video

games or Disney. Using a systematic sample of threads from an off-topic section from

any forum, a researcher can find evidence of how medical school, video games, Disney,

or any other interest changes the shared values and beliefs of the forum's members.

In addition to researching different kinds of Internet forums, this thesis' method

could be expanded by comparing two kinds of forums. Political forums might produce

interesting results in this case. For example, an especially large fantasy theme analysis

could compare and contrast the fantasy themes in a Republican and Democrat forum. It

is worth noting, however, that a fantasy theme analysis of two Internet forums would

require much more work from a scholar and might be better-suited for book publication,

rather than traditional journal publication. Finally, non-traditional forum settings such as

YouTube might provide interesting results for fantasy theme analysis scholars. YouTube

allows users to reply to each other's videos with video responses, which help remove the

doubts that plague Internet stories. For example, analyzing video responses lets the scholar more accurately estimate the age and sex of the person in question. Video responses also allow the researcher to assess the poster's mood and decide if he or she is serious or is simply being sarcastic.

Finally, coding is perhaps more important in a study of an entire Internet community than a normal fantasy theme analysis of a particular aspect of a forum or blog. Although most fantasy theme analyses do not discuss how posts are placed into fantasy themes, categorization of posts is significant to the development of the method in Internet studies. For this thesis, I read each thread and then decided upon key themes and ideas expressed in the threads. After labeling each thread's key ideas and expressed values, I placed similar threads in categories and returned to them to further evaluate their significance. During this return-step, in which I reread the threads and made sure that they belonged together, that I saw the fantasy themes that existed (and sometimes did not exist) in the SDN Forums' communication. The WIT fantasy theme, for example, did not appear upon my first labeling of similarities in the SDN Forums. However, after studying the threads in relation to other similar threads, a consistent theme in the pre-medical students' conversations discussed who has what it takes to succeed in medicine. Before the rereading step, I only noticed the "Real Doctors" fantasy from my pre-test; however, the "Real Doctors" fantasy was actually only relevant as a fantasy type in the larger WIT fantasy theme.

The fantasy theme analysis methodology can be applied in numerous ways to any kind of Internet forum to analyze the shared values, beliefs, and goals of its members. This thesis serves as an expansion of Bormann's (1972b) original ideas but takes the

entire body of research on fantasy theme analysis into account. Bormann's fantasy theme

analysis method has evolved over thirty years to analyze messages from books, speeches,

television, film, and now the Internet. As long as a group of individuals communicate, no

matter what the medium might be, it is relevant to analyze their shared beliefs to see what

they say about major life events, jobs, changes, and politics. With the popularity of

forum communication only increasing, this is an exciting area for researchers to pursue,

as this thesis suggests that some individuals turn to their Internet forum friends for advice

before their immediate friends and family.

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