

Kurskod: SKDK11  
Termin: Vårterminen 2022  
Handledare: Maria Rosén  
Examinator: Ilkin Mehrabov

## @channel: Hey community! 🎉

A qualitative case study about the construction of a digital community in a co-working space

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**HANNA NÖRGÅRD & IDA ALFONSI**

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Lunds universitet  
Institutionen för strategisk kommunikation  
Examensarbete för kandidatexamen

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# Foreword

Thank you!

First and foremost, we would like to express our sincere gratitude towards Maria Rosén. You have given us great advice and support during the entire process of this thesis. Thank you also to the entirety of our supervision group for taking the time to read and reflect upon our thesis.

We would also like to thank Hetch for their trust, and the interviewees for taking their time to help us make this research come to life. We are tremendously grateful for your wise and valuable insight!

Naturally, we would also like to thank each other. Through this journey, we have been understanding and supportive of each other, making the final thesis something we both are proud of.

Lastly, we would like to emphasize that both researchers have contributed equally to this thesis.

Hanna Nörgård & Ida Alfonsi

Malmö, May 2022

# Abstract

This study aims to examine employees' perception at co-working space Hetch regarding their digital communication efforts on the computer-mediated communication platform Slack to foster a sense of community amongst the members. This topic is relevant to the field of strategic communication because understanding *how to* communicate on a computer-mediated platform is essential to further building a sense of community within an organization. There is a gap in the research regarding the use of professional digital communication tools such as Slack and the difference between digital versus physical community, which the study explores. Our research questions were *How do the employees at Hetch perceive their way of communicating digitally to create a sense of community?* and *How do the employees at Hetch perceive the relationship between their digital communication and face-to-face communication when fostering a sense of community?*. To answer these research questions, a qualitative case study was conducted using qualitative content analysis and interviews. The study takes the ontological standpoint of social constructivism as well as the epistemological belief of hermeneutics. This research indicates a discrepancy in the perception of the employee's communication based on the factors of creating a sense of community. However, the employees are aware of their limitations. The employees were conflicted regarding the relationship between digital communities and if they replace physical communities entirely. The relationship is complex due to them being communicatively dependent on one another. These findings are significant because they give insights into the real-life experiences of communicating on digital platforms to foster a sense of community.

*Keywords:* Sense of community, Slack, co-working space, Sense of Community Theory, digital communication, face-to-face communication, Social Information Processing Theory, strategic communication

*Numbers of characters including spaces:* 91 746

# Sammanfattning

Denna studie syftar till att undersöka de anställdas uppfattning på co-working space:et Hetch angående deras kommunikationsinsatser på den digitala kommunikationsplattformen Slack, för att främja en känsla av gemenskap bland sina hyresgäster. Det här ämnet är relevant för forskningsfältet inom strategisk kommunikation eftersom det är viktigt att förstå hur man kommunicerar på en digital plattform för att ytterligare bygga en känsla av gemenskap inom en organisation. Det finns en lucka i forskningen när det gäller användningen av digitala kommunikationsverktyg som Slack, samt skillnaden i en digital kontra en fysisk gemenskap, som denna studien utforskar. Våra forskningsfrågor är därför "*Hur uppfattar de anställda på Hetch sin kommunikation digitalt som medium för att skapa en känsla av gemenskap?*" och "*Hur upplever de anställda på Hetch att relationen mellan digital kommunikation och kommunikation ansikte mot ansikte fungerar för att främja en känsla av gemenskap?*". För att besvara dessa forskningsfrågor genomfördes en kvalitativ fallstudie med såväl kvalitativ innehållsanalys som intervjuer. Studien tar en ontologisk ståndpunkt i socialkonstruktivismen såväl som en epistemologisk hermeneutisk ansats. Resultaten av denna forskning indikerar en diskrepans i uppfattningen av den anställdes kommunikation baserat på faktorerna för att skapa en känsla av gemenskap. De anställda är dock medvetna om sina begränsningar. De anställda var motstridiga angående relationen mellan den digitala gemenskapen och den fysiska i dess förmåga att helt ersätta varandra. Relationen är komplex på grund av att de är kommunikativt beroende av varandra. Dessa fynd är betydelsefulla eftersom de ger insikter i de verkliga upplevelserna av att kommunicera på digitala plattformar för att främja en känsla av gemenskap.

*Nyckelord:* känsla av community, Slack, co-working space, Sense of Community Theory, digital kommunikation, ansikte-mot-ansikte-kommunikation, Social Information Processing Theory, strategisk kommunikation

*Antal tecken inklusive mellanslag:* 91 746

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# 1. Introduction

*In this chapter the research area will be introduced to give an overview of the overall research field.*

The technological advancements of the 21st century have impacted how we define a workspace. From being stagnant in offices, workers are becoming more flexible about when and where they choose to work (Garrett, Spreitzer & Bacevice, 2017). These changes lead to on-demand office environments becoming seemingly more popular, such as co-working spaces. The design of these environments is based on spatial openness, creating the possibility of personal interaction and the formation of social relationships (Orel & Bennis, 2021). The inhabitants of co-working spaces, such as start-ups, entrepreneurs, and people who want to change their workplace (Orel & Bennis, 2021), often seek like-minded individuals to share their ideas with (Garrett et al., 2017). The tenants are also intrigued by the selling points of the co-working space, such as the social characteristics: flexibility, social ties, and community (Garrett et al. 2017), as well as the benefits of a physical workspace, such as functioning wifi, workspaces (desks and tables) and other commodities (Johns & Gratton, 2013). In conclusion, and according to Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bacevice (2017), coworking spaces “provide both a stable, functional work atmosphere and membership in a social community” (p. 322). To be noted is how the word community is closely connected to the phenomenon of co-working spaces (co-, meaning; joint; mutual; common (Merriam-Webster, n.d.))

Co-working spaces are known for valuing and working towards a feeling of community among the groups and organizations working in the space. Palloff and Pratt (1999, as cited in Dawson, 2006) argue that communication with other community participants is most important for developing a sense of community. Shepherd (2000) agrees, claiming that in interpersonal communication, something is made communal, i.e., facilitates a community.

Due to the technological advancements made in the last few years, communicating has become more accessible. Workspaces are becoming less stagnant, enabling work across geographical borders, time zones, and offices. Interactions within a group are no longer bound to a physical or geographical location. Since the basis of co-working spaces is their flexible nature, having a forum in which the organizers (i.e., workers at the co-working space) have an open and direct line of communication is crucial to continue the build and maintenance of the communal feel. The co-working space users can now communicate with other members through

the use of computer-mediated communication, CMC (Dawson, 2006). However, one could question if digital communication, by itself, is sufficient for fostering a sense of community. The definition of a sense of community has, since it was coined by Sarason (1974), been confined to physical communities. Still, because of the change in both technological advancement and the way we view workspaces, there could be a need to update the definition to fit into the new circumstances.

To help uncover the sufficiency of digital versus physical communication, one can use the Social Information Processing Theory, SIPT. SIPT uncovers how well we can rely on digital communication to cover the full informational exchange of physical communication (Walther, 2008).

Since co-working spaces are turning to digital platforms, such as Slack, a computer-mediated communication service, there is a need better to understand the use of communication on this forum. Perkel (2017) refers to Slack as a popular platform that enhances communication and collaboration.

Palloff and Pratt (1999, as cited in Dawson, 2006) underline the importance of having facilitators (for example, creating opportunities for interaction) evoking communication to develop a sense of community in the workplace. In the case of co-working spaces, their target group is their tenants (paying customers) working in the space. Therefore, the organization has an additional interest in communicating a strong sense of community. Exploring how a co-working space can create a sense of community through digital communication can be valuable for other spaces wanting to have more content tenants (customers) who experience higher productivity (Kaplowitz, n. d.). Therefore, this thesis will have the employees' perspective working with computer-mediated communication. It is established that communication is needed to create a sense of community. However, as Dawson (2006) explains, communication itself is not enough. Therefore, understanding *how to* communicate on a computer-mediated platform is relevant to further understanding how to create a sense of community within an organization.

## **1.1 Purpose and research problem**

This qualitative study aims to contribute to knowledge about the phenomenon of communicating through digital media to create a sense of community in co-working spaces. Therefore, the aim is to explore employees at co-working spaces' perceptions of their ability to create and maintain a sense of community among their tenants through digital communication.



This thesis aims to contribute with insights into how co-working spaces can strategically use digital communication to strengthen the sense of community within the organization and the individuals working in its space. Furthermore, the thesis also aims to understand the relationship between digital and physical communities and how they co-exist in the co-working space.

### **1.1.1 Research questions**

Research question 1: How do the employees at Hetch perceive their way of communicating digitally to create a sense of community?

Research question 2: How do the employees at Hetch perceive the relationship between their digital communication and face-to-face communication when fostering a sense of community?

## **1.2 Relevance in the research field**

Investigating the importance of strategic communication in relation to the digital advancements made in the past years is central to understanding how and why employees should communicate a certain way on digital platforms. By understanding the use of digital media, such as the platform Slack, we can aim to understand how communication is advancing and taking on new forms and paths, giving us insights into the modern workspace and the future of digital communication. A focus on communication in digital environments is relevant in strategic communication because organizations looking to foster a sense of community should understand how to use digital communication in a beneficial way for the community feel.

## **1.3 Co-working spaces**

Officially created back in 2005 by Brad Neuberg, co-working spaces open up the typically boxed-in offices to more inclusive and open collaborative spaces of work (Spinuzzi, 2012). Spinuzzi (2012) defines co-working spaces as independent professionals sharing a mutual community-building and sustainability platform built upon the concepts of collaboration, community, sustainability, openness, and accessibility. Co-working spaces facilitate free and open collaboration between individuals, teams, and organizations by fostering a sense of community, often managed by community managers (Orel & Bennis, 2021).

### **1.3.1 Hetch**

Hetch is a co-working space concentrating on tech and innovation start-ups in Helsingborg, Sweden. They provide tools, community, events, and physical facilities to help start-ups and companies achieve exponential growth. Founded in 2019, Hetch now has 492 active members in its Slack group, 82 individual start-ups, and scale-ups in its space (Hetch, n.d.). Hetch currently has nine employees managing the community, facilities, and partnerships (Hetch, n.d.). For the community members, the co-working space offers physical office spaces, open workspaces, lectures, mentorships, and events, as well as participation in their digital community through the use of Slack. There is a standing difficulty in defining the people working in the space of Hetch. In one way these people are customers, but their visitation within its space also comes with responsibilities towards the company, much like the responsibilities that tenants are obliged to follow. However, Hetch also has other stakeholders, such as other companies and institutions in the city of Helsingborg, which are also a part of the Hetch community. This complex relationship between Hetch and its stakeholders, customers, and suppliers can affect the way the employees communicate with the members of the Slack channel because there is both obligations, responsibility as well as a need to market Hetch through the use of this channel.

### **1.3.2 List of concepts**

Employee: refers to the people employed by Hetch, also referred to as moderator(s).

Customer: refers to the people inhabiting the co-working space, also referred to as tenants, members, community members, and users.

## **1.4 Slack**

Perkel (2017) refers to Slack as a popular forum that enhances communication and collaboration between colleagues. Slack is a digital communication tool that enables users to send and receive messages both through the use of open channels as well as private messages between users. Slack was developed by Slack Technologies and is now owned by Salesforce (Slack, 2022). In Slack, the users can either reply to a specific message, comment or react to it using emojis (Slack, 2022). First released in 2013, the CMC tool has gained popularity in the last few years and features the possibility to connect to other APIs, Application Programming Interfaces, which for many is the reason for its success. According to Menzies and Zarb (2020), "... the use of communication tools (Slack) can be beneficial to the formation of a professional

community, which, in turn, can have a positive impact on the sense of belonging...” (p. 2). Slack can, therefore, be seen as a useful tool in the pursuit of creating a sense of community among both the digital users and the community it exists in.

## 2. Previous research

*This chapter will introduce the previous research done in the field of co-working spaces, sense of community as well as digital communication.*

Co-working spaces are seen as collaborative work communities (Orel & Bennis, 2021). Since they emerged, these spaces have been viewed as places of co-constructing a sense of community (Orel & Bennis, 2021; Rafaeli, Ravid & Soroka, 2004; Dawson, 2004; Gode, Johansen, & Thomsen, 2020; Heide & Simonsson, 2018). Many researchers in the field of co-working spaces and how to foster a sense of community within them discuss the benefits, the process of creating a community, and how communication is vital in its creation (Orel & Bennis, 2021; Rafaeli, Ravid & Soroka, 2004; Dawson, 2004; Gode, Johansen, & Thomsen, 2020; Heide & Simonsson, 2018).

Research in the field of co-working space and community has been widely explored. Some examples are the works of Babb, Curtis, and McLeod (2018), Johns and Gratton (2013), Johns and Gratton (2013), and Garrett, Spreitzer, and Bacevice (2017). In the field of communication and how to communicate to create a sense of community from the employee's perspective, there is a gap in the literature, especially on how employees can use communication to create a stronger sense of community within a co-working space and the people existing in it.

Many authors see communication as a method when creating a sense of community (Dawson, 2006; Babb, Curtis, & McLeod, 2018, Johns & Gratton, 2013; Johns & Gratton, 2013; Garrett, Spreitzer & Bacevice, 2017; Orel & Bennis, 2021; Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004; Dawson, 2004; Gode, Johansen, & Thomsen, 2020). Coherent with that statement, Shepherd (2000) states that communication creates community; however, Shepherd (2000), and the other researchers, do not explore which communicative means one can engender a sense of community among a group of people. Merely that communication does. Numerous authors agree with Shepherd (2000) and enlighten that communication is crucial to creating a sense of community in digital and online environments (Brook & Oliver, 2003; Dawson, 2006; Palloff & Pratt, 1999; Rafaeli, Ravid, & Soroka, 2004). Because as Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, and David (2004) state, there is a difference between creating a sense of community in a digital community, versus a physical community. To bring value to the field of strategic communication, this study intends to explore the employee's perspective on the use of

communication and how the employees perceive their communicative work towards a stronger community.

Dawson (2006) investigates the use of digital communication to create a sense of community among students. Dawson's (2006) quantitative study uses the Sense of Community Index (SCI) to measure higher education students' perceptions of the sense of community on campus and the use of digital communication to convey it. The perception of a sense of community can be a complex phenomenon to measure due to its psychological dimension, as Dawson (2006) discusses. Dawson (2006), therefore, uses the SCI and the Classroom Community Scale (CCS) to fully cover the basis of the phenomenological aspect of a sense of community. Therefore, understanding the sense of community in a workspace from a qualitative perspective is more difficult since the Sense of Community Index can not be used to the same extent.

Orel and Bennis (2021) discuss how workspaces, in practice, lack the knowledge needed to lead groups of people into collaboration. The solution is to understand the dynamics of creating the foundation for creating a space for collaboration and community through communication. For people seeking to join a co-working space, it is essential for them to experience the selling point of many of these spaces. Suppose there is a lack of sense of community among the group. In that case, it could leave the individuals unable to connect themselves to expected social contacts and miss out on possible business opportunities (Orel & Bennis, 2021). These are consequences of co-working spaces that use community-washing in their space (Orel & Bennis, 2021). Community-washing refers to co-working spaces marketing themselves as a community as a selling point without having a strong sense of community among the people within the space (Orel & Bennis, 2021). Having insight into employees' techniques and their thoughts on creating a sense of community is one way to understand how organizations can both market and execute a co-working space that fosters a sense of community.

There has been a magnitude of conducted research in digital media, digital communication, and computer-mediated communication. The research field is becoming more and more relevant exponentially with technical advancements. However, there has been little research done regarding the use of professional digital communication tools, which Menzies and Zarb (2020) also agrees with. There is also a need to understand further the use of communication within a digital versus physical community and how that can affect the overall definition of a community, a phenomenon that this thesis will explore.

## **3. Theoretical framework**

*Following is the theoretical standpoint upon which the collected empirical material will be analyzed to answer the research questions.*

### **3.1 Sense of community**

The term *sense of community* was initially coined by Sarason (1974) with the definition “... [community] describes individuals’ feelings as part of a mutually supportive and dependable community structure.” (p. 1411). McMillan and Chavis (1986) then went on to define a community through the feeling that members have a sense of belonging, matter to others in the group and that they have faith that their needs will be fulfilled through their participation and commitment to the others in the group. Building from both Sarason (1974) and McMillan and Chavis (1986), Furuman's (1998) definition suggests that a community does not exist until members experience belonging, safety and trust. The definition of a community used in this thesis is the definition that delimits a community to a social phenomenon created in the interaction between people.

### **3.2 Sense of Community Theory**

In McMillan and Chavis’s (1986) quest to study the phenomenon of a sense of community within a group, they discovered four elements that contribute to building a strong community. These four elements are membership, influence, fulfillment, and shared emotional connection (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Each element has its separate definition and demarcation used to narrow down the terms further, making it possible to investigate them deeper in different circumstances. These elements, or determinators, all contribute to creating a strong sense of community within a group.

Membership has four attributes: boundaries, a feeling of emotional safety, personal investment, and a common symbol system. These attributes work together to help understand who is part of the community and who is not. Membership itself means belonging to a formal or informal group where there is a mutual understanding that you have the right to belong and therefore have obligations against the group (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). However, there are also boundaries included in the term. In a membership, there are those who belong and those who do not. This sectioning creates emotional safety for those included in the membership. Other boundaries include co-creative norms of how the members should act, say or dress

(McMillan & Chavis, 1986). Also included under the element of membership is the feeling of emotional safety, which rises in the group due to the feeling of security within the group, sense of belonging and identity, which include the feeling that a person fits in and has a place in the group, a sense of being accepted by the group, and sacrifice for the collective. Personal investment refers to a member's sense of belonging in a group depending on the energy and investment done by that member; if the person sacrifices time, effort, or money, they will value their membership more. Last but not least, included in the membership element is a common symbol system; being somewhat unique for the individual membership, the symbol can be anything from an actual item to a gesture done by the members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Influence goes in two directions; on the one hand, the group member must experience that they influence the course of actions of the group; on the other hand, the group itself must influence the group members (McMillan & Chavis, 1986). There are several forces at work when it comes to influencing. Members are more favorable to groups in which they have influence. In a group with a high level of conformity, there also exists a correlation with the group's closeness to each other (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Integration and fulfillment of needs, the membership for an involved person must be fulfilling and reinforce the choice of joining the community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) argue that members are attracted to others whose skill or competence can be beneficial for themselves. People, therefore, seem to join groups with others that seem beneficial or valuable to them. There are different determinations of these benefits, such as status, competence, and shared culture. These all aid in building a strong community that both contribute to fulfilling the needs of individual members and the group's overall need (McMillan & Chavis, 1986).

Shared Emotional Connection, and the shared history of community members, such as events or activities, can contribute to a sense of community. McMillan and Chavis (1986) list several factors that can contribute to the effectiveness of creating a sense of community. Among these are:

Contact hypothesis: The more individuals interact, the closer they will become.

Quality of interaction: If the exchange is positive for the involved participants, the greater they will bond.

Closure to events: If community tasks are resolved, group cohesiveness will be positively affected.

Shared valent event hypothesis: Shared events affect group closeness positively; the more influential the event, the more significant the impact.

Investment: The more investment of time, money, intimacy, or energy, the greater the

effect of the investment for the cause of the group.

Effect of honor and humiliation on community members: Rewarding or shaming in front of the community significantly impacts the community's attractiveness or the person in the community.

The image below summarizes the elements, determinators and their definition from the Sense of Community Theory produced by McMillan and Chavis (1986).

Sense of Community Theory		
Elements	Determinators	Definition
Membership	Boundaries	Criteria for joining said community
	The feeling of emotional safety	Sense of belonging and identification within the group
	Personal investment	The more personal investment the higher the person will value their membership
	Common symbol system	Symbols, gestures and signs that are limited to said community
Influence	Influential	Feeling of higher influence over the group or members of the group equals more invested members
	Conformity	The more conformity within a group correlated to feeling of closeness
Fulfillment	Reinforcement	If members find their involvement rewarding it creates stronger bonds
	Beneficial	If members view their membership to be of benefit to them they feel more attracted to said community
Shared emotional connection	Contact hypothesis	The more individuals interact the closer they will become.
	Quality of interaction	If the interaction is positive for the involved participants the greater they will bond.
	Closure to events	If community tasks are resolved the group cohesiveness will be positively affected.
	Shared valent event hypothesis	Shared events affect group closeness positively, the more important the event the greater the impact.
	Investment	The more investment of time, money, intimacy or energy the greater the effect of the investment for the cause of the group.
	Effect of honor and humiliation on community members	Rewarding or shaming in front of the community has a major impact on attractiveness of the community or the person in the community.

*Image produced by the authors of this thesis, information taken from McMillan and Chavis (1986)*

### 3.2 Computer-mediated communication

Since the basis of co-working spaces is their flexible nature, having a forum in which the employees have an open and direct line of communication is crucial to continue building and maintaining the communal feel.

Computer-mediated communication, CMC, is an umbrella term explaining how digital technologies, such as computers, are used to communicate with other people (Tuhkala & Kärkkäinen, 2018). Dawson (2006) states that CMC creates opportunities for groups of people to communicate despite spatial, temporal, or geographical differences. Therefore, CMC tools such as Slack can be used for many aspects of modern work-life, such as task management, social interaction, planning, and group communication (Tuhkala & Kärkkäinen, 2018).



### **3.3 Social Information Processing Theory**

Social Information Processing Theory, SIPT, helps us understand how computer-mediated communication creates interpersonal relationships (Walther, 2008). When communicating online, users can not use social cues and impressions to interpret the communication to the same extent as face-to-face interaction (Walther, 2008). Based on the limited information gathered through digital exchanges, some initial issues can emerge, such as how reliable the person is or what they emphasize in a conversation (Walther, 2008). According to SIPT, this issue is a genuine concern; however, even online-based relationships will develop in time. When we initially meet someone online, we often cannot make assumptions about the person we are conversing with; when we do not have this ability, we strain on categorizing the person using the known information we have on them or the groups we think they belong to (Walther, 2008).

SIPT stands on two assumptions; the first refers to the translation from offline mediated communication to online mediated communication. More specifically, we communicate “impression-bearing, emotional, and relation-managing information” (Walther, 2008, p. 420) online using textual and verbal symbols. The second assumption is that this translation creates an exchange of less efficient information than face-to-face communication. Therefore computer-mediated communication is slower than physical interactions (Walther, 2008). However, according to Walther (2008), with time digital communication can reach a level comparable to face-to-face communication.

In contrast to other CMC theories, SIPT believes that users are motivated to form and develop relationships through the medium in which communication is made. Therefore, the users of the CMC tool need to be aware of the limitations and functions of the chosen media. SIPT was selected for this study because of its focal point in the interaction both in digital and physical communication, as well as it problematizes the use of digital over physical communication. According to Walther (2008), digital cues are interchangeable with non-digital ones if the tool allows for signals to be visible and available to the users.

In this thesis, SIPT will be used to complement the Sense of Community Theory and a way of studying the effect of computer-mediated communication. More specifically, SIPT will be used to understand how efficiently the employees at Hetch translate their view of creating community in a digital context, as well as if they experience that their digital communication is sufficient to create a sense of community among the people using the coworking space.

### **3.3.1 Digital versus physical community**

Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, and David (2004) reflect on the differences between digital and physical communities. The term digital communities can be explained as a group of individuals linked together digitally through electronic communication technologies, with the ability to share information and other mental resources. Another difference worth mentioning, which is brought up by Rafaeli, Ravid, and Soroka (2004), is that the efficacy of a digital community lies in its technology, design, and engaged participants. In any community, which Rafaeli, Ravid, and Soroka (2004) strengthen, the members are its most crucial factor for success.

According to Katz et al. (2004), there is a difference between physical and digital communities, primarily because digital communities are based on shared social practices and interests whereas physical communities “are based on shared social and physical boundaries” (p. 313). Therefore, both the distinctive constructions or places have the opportunity to create a community. However, there is a difference in creating and maintaining a *strong* sense of community in a group. Katz et al. (2004) emphasized the importance of thinking beyond a community's physical location; instead, the focus should lay on social presence and recurring meetings.

## 4. Method

*In this part of the thesis, the methodological structure of the research will be described.*

### 4.1 Scientific approach

This thesis takes a qualitative approach, which means that it aims to learn about a social reality as well as to "explore, describe, or explain social phenomena; unpack the meanings people ascribe to activities, situations, events, or artifacts; build a depth of understanding about some aspect of social life" (Leavy, 2020, p. 2). For the purposes of this thesis, we want to study the Hetch employees' efforts to emit a sense of community toward their tenants, which makes a qualitative approach valid for us to take.

The ontological approach of this study is based on social constructivism, meaning that individuals create meaning through social interactions, and, therefore, knowledge is constructed within the subjective worldview (Ernest, 1999). Regarding the epistemological stance, the research takes a hermeneutic approach. The word hermeneutic stems from the Greek word *hermene'vain*, which means interpret. It is less important to explain a phenomenon, but rather the understanding of the phenomenon is essential within this particular scientific tradition (Sohlberg & Sohlberg, 2009). This approach is relevant for studies aiming to access the own lived experiences of the interviewees and learn about their understanding of the phenomenon in question (Westlund, 2009).

### 4.2 Case study

In case studies, interviews are usually conducted since the case study methodology focuses on one or a few instances or institutions (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). For this case in particular, the chosen case study object will be Hetch.

In this case study, we are taking an intensive approach, as Swanborn (2010) described as using only one, or a handful, of instances to further study a phenomenon. The instance in our case study is Hetch, which is examined closely in its specific context to explore the community phenomenon in their communication. Therefore, we have had a meso-level approach with only one actor involved, meaning that we have studied a specific organization instead of, for example, one person or multiple organizations (Swanborn, 2010). As Swanborn (2010) does as well, important to note is that we as investigators are, in fact, interested in the phenomenon itself and not necessarily so much in the organization in which the phenomenon manifests itself.

A case study should aim to generalize a phenomenon that could be applied to other instances in other cases (Swanborn, 2010). To gain the ability to generalize this study, we need to take a specific approach to our case study. Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state that there are different distinctions between case studies, and the one our study is closest related to is the instrumental case study. They define this as the one you do to "gain insight into more general issues" (p. 281). Therefore, we aim to gain insights into how Hetch employees use communication to foster a sense of community and achieve a general understanding and generalization that other companies and co-working spaces could draw valuable conclusions from.

## **4.3 Analysis methods and data collection**

The following section will describe the method used when conducting the collection of data as well as how the material will be analyzed.

### **4.3.1 Qualitative interviews**

In order to answer our research questions, we have conducted interviews with employees of Hetch. In-depth interviews allow us to understand the employees who work internally with communication, how they perceive the sense of community, and how they aim to maintain the sense of community with their customers, i.e., their tenants. Interviews have been conducted to answer questions such as how and why, which allows us to understand the interviewees' beliefs, motivations, and expectations (Guest, Namey & Mitchell, 2013). According to Stake (2010), there are three primary purposes for interviews in qualitative research, and two are relevant for this thesis. The first one is: "obtaining unique information or interpretation held by the person being interviewed" (p. 95). The second is: "by finding out about "a thing" that the researchers were unable to observe themselves" (Stake, 2010, p. 95).

Since this thesis takes a hermeneutic scientific approach, it has also influenced the interviewing process, rooting in the concept of meaning and collective interpretation of said meaning (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). The hermeneutic approach to qualitative interviews means that the knowledge of what others say or do always stems from a certain context of other meanings, assumptions, notions, or values. Essentially, this approach allows us as researchers to look at the interview as a text and interpret it in the larger context in which it exists (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We decided to conduct semi-structured life-world interviews, which Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) define as interviews with the goal of understanding themes and interpreting descriptions from the interviewees' lived experiences. Semi-structured means that

it is neither an everyday conversation nor a closed questionnaire, but rather conducted through an interview guide (see appendix 1 and 2) we produced containing certain themes from which we then derived questions. Among the themes we prepared for the interview guide, we also produced two demographic questions, such as how long Hetch has employed them and their role within the company. This is so that we can spot potential differences in how they work with their communication, perhaps based on those demographic predispositions. We decided not to ask questions about age or gender since it lacked relevance to answer the research questions.

During the interview, we encouraged the interviewee to show the messages on the Hetch Community Slack channel as they reflected upon their strategies and efforts to emit a sense of community in their communication. The interview was then transcribed and analyzed using McMillan and Chavis (1986) Sense of Community Theory as well as Walther (2008) Social Information Processing Theory. Since this study aims to understand the Hetch employees' communicative efforts to foster a sense of community, we deemed this interview format to be useful to use for collecting our empirical data.

#### **4.3.2 Selection and sampling**

Sampling is defined as selecting units from a population to be used in a study (Guest et al., 2013). The number of participants required for collecting a sufficient amount of data depends on the subject being studied and the time and resources available (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). For the purpose of this study, we have deemed four employees to be of enough quantity. Since the goal of this study is not to gain a statistical generalization therefore the sampling does not need to represent the population. For in-depth interviews, Guest et al. (2013) state that the size of the sample should be determined by theoretical saturation, which is defined as "the point at which no or little new information is being extracted from the data is reached" (p. 59). Given the aim of our study, we have taken a purposive sampling approach. Purposive sampling is based on the premise that you already know what information you want from your sampling unit when you approach the people who hold that information (Guest et al., 2013). When we operationalized this premise, we stated that we aimed to conduct interviews with people who work with communication at Hetch for the purpose of this study. Regarding the sampling process on Slack we retrieved all of the data between March 1st and April 11th 2022. We chose this period of time due to the fact that we deemed it a sufficient amount of messages between these dates in order for us to make an in-depth analysis in order to answer our research

questions. The participants of the interviews as well as their posts in the Slack Hetch community channel are referred to as H1, H2, H3 and H4 to ensure complete anonymity.

### **4.3.3 Empirical data collection**

The interviews were conducted through both physical and digital meetings which were scheduled in advance. Collectively, we held four interviews with four of the employees at Hetch. Initially, they were connected through the use of Slack by sending private messages containing information about the study and regarding their privacy. All the contacted employees accepted the interview requests. Two of the four interviews were held the same day consecutively. Interview number three was conducted completely digitally, and the fourth was held partially digitally. Initially, during the interview, the participants were given information about their privacy rights, how the data was going to be used, and the structure of the interviews. The physical interviews took place at Hetch. Overall, each of the interviews took around an hour.

### **4.3.4 Qualitative content analysis**

A qualitative content analysis is defined as studying documents and texts without involving statistical methods. This form of content analysis is based on analyzing texts and documents to outline and explore themes and core ideas in said textual data (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). Drisko and Maschi (2015) state that a qualitative content analysis allows researchers to explore the complexity of communication, which is something that not all qualitative research methods do. It aims to look further and expand the data that is being researched. The qualitative content analysis enables researchers to find and describe meaning within and of textual data (Drisko & Maschi, 2015), aligning with our overall purpose.

The first step for researchers aiming to conduct a qualitative content analysis is to break down the textual data into categories; this process is called coding (Drisko & Maschi, 2015). These categories are then divided into subcategories to further narrow down the data before being analyzed. In our analysis, we decided to divide our coding and categories based on the points brought up by the interviewees to further nuance our interview analysis. Our analysis is presented in chapter 5, using quotations from the Hetch Community Slack channel. These quotations then served as the basis for building our analysis. The data was collected using the following criteria: had to be posted on Slack, had to be posts made by the employees at Hetch, and posted messages over the selected period.

## **4.4 Ethical aspects**

Kvale and Brinkmann (2009) state several ethical questions that one needs to consider before, during, and after the interview process. Firstly, while planning the interview, we as researchers have to inform the interviewees about consent and ensure the confidentiality and anonymity of the subjects. In the interview, the interviewee's situation, stress, or change of heart has to be considered and taken into account. Afterward, while transcribing and analyzing the empirical data, the researcher's role is to present accurate and verifiable data to the best ability (Kvale & Brinkmann, 2009). We also have to consider the General Data Protection Regulation act (GDPR), which contains privacy principles when it comes to personal data. Since we analyzed messages in a digital forum that is closed to the public and aimed at a specific audience, we as researchers did not have access to it unless the authors of said messages permitted us to do so. Therefore, when conducting our qualitative content analysis, we had to keep the anonymity and leave out any names, screen nicknames, and such to ensure that the authors are kept anonymous. When directly citing messages from the Slack channel, we removed any information that could be linked back to the message's author to ensure anonymity further. We do have a connection with Hetch based on professional work-related instances. However, we remain entirely separate from the chosen case study object of Hetch; the research is not affected by any biases either from the researcher's side or from Hetch's side.

## **4.5 Methodological reflection**

Criticism regarding qualitative research is that a generalization cannot be accomplished if researchers do not use probability sampling. Using a non-probability sampling makes it impossible to generalize the results to other cases (Thornberg & Fejes, 2009). However, according to Thornberg and Fejes (2009), social phenomena are constantly fluctuating and too contextual, which means that a true generalization that stands the test of time can never be achieved. Flykberg (2013) also addresses one of the common misconceptions of generalization in case studies: "One cannot generalize on the basis of an individual case; therefore, the case study cannot contribute to scientific development" (p. 3). He contradicts this statement by saying that it depends solely on the chosen case and why, not that it is a case alone, and that a formal generalization is only one way of conducting research within social sciences (Flykberg, 2013). Hence, it is not the only way of gaining new knowledge within the field, but only one of many. Therefore, we deem it valuable to conduct a case study for the purpose of this research.

Regarding interviews, there are also some methodological reflections worth making. Alvesson (2011) states that common criticism toward interviewing as an empirical data collection method is that the interviewer is in complete control while the interviewee has a questionable, more passive role in the interview situation. However, as we have taken a hermeneutic standpoint, making sure the interviewee leads the conversation and has the space to reflect. Therefore, we are actively looking for the interview subjects' point of view and reflections on lived experiences, giving the appropriate space for the interviewee to speak freely on the chosen themes. Aside from the relationship between interviewer and interviewee, the interview situation can also be problematic if not considered and reflected upon enough. The interview situation is a socially complex setting where the interviewer has to ask questions, take answers, and be mindful of the interviewee's behavior to make sure they feel safe and open to share consistently throughout the interview. Alvesson (2011) points to a potential solution in that two interviewers are conducting the interview - one to ask questions and one to observe the surrounding environment and keep an eye on the interviewees' behavior (p. 33). Since we are two people conducting the study, this is a fitting solution to avoid interviewers' bias and subjectivity, and what Alvesson (2011) stated about insecurities surrounding the interviewee.

The interviews were conducted in Swedish since it is the native language of both the researchers and the interviewees. They were also transcribed in Swedish. However, since this research is presented in English, the transcripts were translated to have consistency in the thesis. Some of the textual data derived from the Slack channel were also translated from Swedish to English. We as researchers, did this translation meticulously to the best of our ability to avoid losing the original context and meaning of the messages in the interviews and textual data.



# 5. Analysis

*In this chapter the empirical material will be analyzed using the previously presented theories.*

At Hetch, the digital communication platform Slack is used daily by both the employees at the co-working space and their tenants. For Hetch, Slack is seen as a universal communication tool that allows them to reach people across physiological barriers. The basic premise of Slack is that you send messages in specific channels, which are used to organize conversations related to a particular team, topic, or purpose (Slack, 2022). The Slack channel referred to in the interviews, and all the data that was retrieved for the content analysis is called Hetch Community, which as of today (2022-05-02), has 492 members.

In Slack, it is possible to either reply to a specific message, comment or react to it using emojis (Slack, 2022). Reacting to a message using emojis is referred to as a "*reaction*" or "*reactions*" in the interviews. In some of the used quotes, words are added to explain the context of what is being said; the use of parentheses will distinguish added words.

## 5.1 Key concepts of analysis

In the following section of the thesis, the employees at Hetch have been interviewed regarding their perception of their communication on the digital platform Slack and how they perceive the community, and their role in contributing to creating a sense of community. To broaden the key points made in the interview analysis, findings in the Hetch Community Slack channel will also be discussed. The following chapters were distinguished by the main themes described in the Sense of Community theory and frequently recurring topics brought up by the interviewees. Consequently, the italicized words in the following section refer back to the Sense of Community theories determinators; the words are italicized for the reader's ability to understand the analysis connection to the theory.

The posts used in the analysis were posted in the Hetch Community Slack channel and were created by the Hetch employees during the period March 1st, 2022, to April 11th, 2022.

### 5.1.1 Boundaries and membership

Since the Hetch Community Slack channel is a closed group, meaning not just anyone has access to it, one has to be invited by one of the employees or an already active member to see and write messages in the channel. According to the employees at Hetch, the overall criteria for

joining the Hetch Community Slack channel is that the user must be admitted to the group based on whether they have a connection with Hetch or that they are members of the co-working space. In the following quotation, the basis of the membership is explained by one of the employees in their interview:

“It is that you in some way have a connection to Hetch. You apply to Hetch, either our startup programs, or join the house and have a studio here. (..) Then we have our partners, so everyone that in some way is connected to Hetch is in the group. Anyone with a tag to the building, who has physical access to Hetch also has access to our community.” (H1)

“I would say that there are more people joining the group than we are inviting, because they all invite each other as well. Sometimes I think "where did all these people come from?!"" (H2)

In some cases, admissions to the Hetch Community Slack channel fall outside the control of the employees, which further complicates the structure and connection between Hetch and its members, as previously discussed.

Something that became apparent from the interviews is that there are not that strict criteria regarding who gets to join the Slack community. The moderators do not remove users that are no longer active members.

“We also decided that people can stay (in the group) even after they have quit, since they are still an asset to the community in some way. Most get to stay because we don't want to remove anyone” (H2)

Regarding the guidelines of who gets invited and gets to be a part of the community on Slack, the employees all agreed that there are no strict rules to follow. Rather, they see users and potential users as assets who can bring value to the community. One conclusion that could be drawn based on this premise is that the employees rather want to create a space that brings value to members than to have set rules which limit participation. On the other hand, this open environment might create a discrepancy among the members based on its lack of criteria for joining and staying in the Slack channel. However, not all of the information communicated by the moderators is relevant for members who are no longer affiliated with Hetch but are still in the Slack channel. For example, information about upcoming internal events is meant for members who still have physical access to Hetch. Likewise, the active members might no longer perceive the inactive members as part of the community. On the other hand, messages about job openings, for example, could bring value to both existing members and former members of

the community. Here is an example of a post made in the Hetch Community Slack channel regarding a job opportunity:

“I HAVE A TIP FOR A DEVELOPER, that is searching for an internship! I’ll send CV if you are interested, write PM ” (H1).

The post above is short and informative. If the users in the Slack channel are interested, they can get more information regarding the person applying for a job. The compressed post can be explained by H1 wanting to keep the amount of text to a minimum while still conveying the message. The employees’ reasoning for doing so could be because they do not want to write more than the necessary information to “block” the channel with information overload (which will be further explained later in the chapter).

According to McMillan and Chavis (1986), a community must have boundaries regarding who may join. The sectioning between members and non-members, in turn, creates *emotional safety* among the members. Comparing McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory regarding membership and the employees at Hetch criteria for joining the community, the limitations are perhaps not clear enough regarding who gets to join the community at Hetch, especially when it comes to not removing inactive members from the Slack community.

Another issue regarding the membership is that when users are not a part of the physical space of Hetch, the members can have trouble categorizing the other users. Based on the Social Information Processing Theory (SIPT), when we initially interact with someone, especially online, we aim to categorize them according to the known information we have on them or the groups we think they are in (Walther, 2008). This becomes problematic since the members are both attending the physical location of Hetch as well as being loosely affiliated with its community. It can become hard for members to categorize their fellow community members (Walther, 2008) and therefore establish emotional safety (McMillan and Chavis, 1986).

There could be a discrepancy between a digital and physical community regarding membership since a digital membership often requires less energy, time, and personal investment due to it being online. Hence there could be a lessening of engagement from members due to its digital nature as well as the lack of criteria for joining the community. As McMillan and Chavis (1986) state: “if the person sacrifices time, effort or money, they will value their membership more” (p. 14). In conclusion, the members could value their

membership less because the criteria for joining the Slack channel do not require any particular personal investment.

### 5.1.2 Defining a community

When asked to define the word community and its digital format on Slack, the interviewees mainly had a shared view on what it means to them. The definitions could be summarized that a [community] is a powerful group inside a niche, collective space of like-minded people, who share resources, and a common goal.

One quote that stood out from the interviews was:

“A community for me is a group of people. A least for now it's people, there will probably be a hybrid, but as of right now a community is a group of people that breathe, live and have vision and philosophy to reach a common goal or have a common philosophy.” (H3)

H3 makes several interesting distinctions. Firstly, they speak about a community as a hybrid, not explicitly bound to a physical or digital space. Secondly, they talk about a community based on common philosophy. The word philosophy was mentioned several times during the interview further emphasizing the interviewee's relation to the community. For H3 a community is not only a group of people participating in reaching a common goal but something you physically live to be a part of, as they emphasized with the words *breathe* and *live*. The first point speaking of a hybrid, could be a way for H3 to problematize the space in which a community is operating, it is not only restricted to a physical group but expands over technical borders. This might be an effort for them to understand the impact of the Hetch Community Slack channel because they themselves are starting to grasp the full impact the digital community has over the physical. Communities that only has one space that they are existing within, i.e. a physical or digital community, has a less complex relationship regarding their communicative efforts since they have one space to communicate in and their way of communicating can only affect the space in which it exists. These communities can therefore be called independent communities since they are only dependent on themselves. On the other side, dependent communities or hybrid versions, i.e., communities that have multiple communities existing within each other on a digital and physical level, have a more complex communicative reality, since communicating in the separate spaces affects each other and the relationship between them, and therefore the community as a whole.

The border between physical and digital communities becomes even more apparent when the employees make posts in the Hetch Community Slack channel regarding physical events, such as this one:

“People! More happy news!! AW now on Thursday 3/3 at 4 PM on ground floor! Note it and please remind each other! We offer plenty of good drinks (alcoholic and non-alcoholic) + alot of snacks!! See you! @channel” (H1).

This post from Slack is meant to inform people about an upcoming after-work event. Informing about different options of drinks results in the moderators making everyone feel invited. In the posts talking about an internal event, they are using positive words such as *happy* and *good*. This tone can be a catalyst for getting people excited and having positive thoughts about the moderators and the community at large. Other words used to describe upcoming events in the Hetch Community Slack channel are *superduper*, *good*, and *warm*. These positive words emit a feeling of inclusiveness, which should be seen as a critical factor in creating a strong sense of community. It was also greatly emphasized by H1 in the interviews that they always aim to be inclusive in their language while messaging to the community as a whole.

In the post above, the employee also encourages the people who read the post to spread the word to others and encourages others to communicate outside the digital border of Slack. Another connection that can be made between McMillan and Chavis's (1986) Sense of Community Theory and the Hetch employees' way of communicating about internal events is the *shared emotional connection* in the community. Shared emotional connection explains how members feel closer if they share events or activities. By communicating about an event, the employees are opening up a path for the possibility of shared emotional connection during the physical event. However, again the communication of the event itself is not enough to foster shared emotional connection among the community members. It could be an event or activity in the Slack group, but looking at the interaction with those mentioned above, that was not the case. They were simply posting to communicate about an upcoming event.

“@channel Last reminder for seminar with (name) at (place) on Thursday 17th at 12 in (place). There will be lunchwraps offered for you. Let me know if you want to join and I will send you a calendar invite. It will be possible to join through a link as well.” (H4).

Another upcoming event that is posted on the Hetch Community Slack channel is the one above. Here H4 informs about the possibility of joining physically, but there is also an opportunity to join digitally through a link. This can be related to what H3 stated in their interview in the quote on the previous page. Communicating digitally to inform about a physical event means that the digital platform and the meeting platform that H4 refers to enables the community to gather for events even though they are not present physically. The digital community and the physical community are merging and becoming a sort of hybrid, blurring the lines between what a physical community is defined as and what a digital community is. Previous distinctions have been made as to the two communities being separate and not dependent on each other, but in the case of Hetch maybe it's the premise of their existence.

A previous definition of a community, stated by McMillan and Chavis (1986), is a sense of belonging within a group and that the members bring to each other and a strong belief that their personal needs will be met through participation. This definition dates back to before technology played such a prominent role in our everyday lives and our work lives, which means that it is based on a physical community alone. The concept of co-working spaces emerged 2005 which also redefined the concept of a workplace and how we view flexibility, collaboration, and the concept of working together. The term co-working space was not present when McMillan and Chavis (1986) stated their definition.

In conclusion, the definition of the community should be redefined based on the words of H3 and the proof in the Hetch Community Slack channel as to be neither bound to a physical or digital space but a hybrid between the two.

The definition from McMillan and Chavis (1986) can be applied accordingly to the Hetch employees because having their personal needs met translates to having a helpful and knowledge-sharing community. Therefore, the employees at Hetch could believe that the community members can have their personal needs met through them being a part of the community. Based on the definitions made by the employees, they perceive that the members of the Slack community should have an open flow of communications that enables them to ask for help or share knowledge openly. In relation to the Sense of Community Theory (McMillan and Chavis, 1986) and the *quality of interaction* determinant, members feel a greater bond with the community if the interactions within the group are positive for themselves, creating an environment where this communication is encouraged is beneficial for the sense of community.

### 5.1.3 Fostering a sense of community

The interviewees were also asked to try and outline what factors, or ingredients, that are or have been crucial for them to foster a sense of community within Hetch.

“A very inviting, open language and being inclusive. Apart from that it is having regular activities, that there is a **consistency** in the physical gatherings, that is a key ingredient! Then also being available and being active yourself on the digital platforms. For example, with our breakfast on Fridays, every Friday at 9 AM, maybe no one showed up the first few times, but it is crucial to keep hosting them, keep inviting people, keep building hype around them. So physical gatherings, **availability**, an **inclusive** language on the digital platforms and us (moderators) being active.” (H1)

Regarding the factors that played a role in fostering a sense of community within the Slack community at Hetch, the employees mentioned consistency, availability, and inclusivity as core elements, marked in the quote above. This is also strengthened by Katz et al. (2004) belief that no matter the place of the community, consistency, and availability are key factors in fostering a sense of community. When comparing these factors with McMillan and Chavis's (1986) theory determinators, multiple similarities can be found. Consistency can be connected to the *contact hypothesis* since people will interact more often and create a stronger bond with consistency. But as previously stated, the quotes above from the previous research regarding consistency are referred to as physical consistency. However, consistency does also exist in the employee's digital communication within the Slack community.

“(…) I myself know that every Monday I have to invite people to the breakfast, every Wednesday I remind them of the breakfast, and in preparation for the Friday workout I have to write on Thursday…” (H2)

Therefore, the *contact hypothesis* can be applied to both the consistency in the physical gatherings within the community and the communication from the Hetch employees on Slack.

When asked about the sense of community at Hetch and whether or not it has been achieved, the employees at Hetch were conflicted. Although some of the employees had a strong belief that they helped foster a strong sense of community through their communication, others experienced it differently. Either they had a long way to go to achieve this or the feeling has decreased over time.

“I think that we achieved it, but then I experience that it has taken a few steps back. And I do not really know why that is. Or it goes a bit in waves, what people want out of the community. (...) But now people have lost their interest a bit, and maybe it will come back, like breathing, **you breathe community**. And that is natural. (...) Maybe it's a bit like it's fun when it's new, if you have been in the community for a long time and found your tribe, then you don't need to go to the after work anymore.” (H2)

In the quote above, the community feel again was referred to as breathing. Giving the impression that the community is something so natural to us, like breathing and taking from the context of the quote, it exists around us without us having to create it. But fostering a strong sense of community takes effort, as also stated by previous research, and it will be received, like breaths, inhaling, and exhaling community for the employees and the tenants.

When asked whether the employees perceive the Hetch Community Slack channel alone can create a sense of community, they had very different opinions. One of the employees said that they view the Slack channel as a complement to the physical community. According to this employee, one can create a community online, but it needs to be physical for it to become a strong community.

“No, it works as a complement. I don't believe you can create a community if you don't have a digital platform to communicate information on. I definitely think you can create a fellowship through the digital world and show people that we are in this together. But for that type of community to be strong you have to have the physical part as well.” (H1)

The employee referred to as H2 agrees with this digital versus physical community view. Contrary to this, the remaining two employees believed that Slack itself is enough to create a strong sense of community.

“I definitely think that Slack itself is enough (...) I think it's about how you choose to construct the communication, and spirit and energy that is important in a community and not the tools from a technical perspective that determines it.” (H3)

The employee referred to as H4 had similar arguments and compared a strong digital community to the gaming community, which sufficiently creates a similar sense of belonging without the need of physical interaction. Katz et al. (2004), when explaining the difference between a physical and digital community, states that they differ between the structures of the placement of the community but that both have the opportunity to build a strong communal feel. Instead of focusing on where the community takes place, the members should concentrate



on the presence and recurring meetings (Katz et al., 2004). As previously stated, a lot of focus is drawn on consistency and regular events and messages from the Hetch employees, strengthening the communal feel, according to Katz et al. (2004). However, the employees question the presence of the community members as they do not feel that the members interact with their messages to the extent that employees wish for. As Walther (2008) states, users of digital communication tools need to acknowledge said tools' limitations, which Hetch employees seem to be aware of. Because of their awareness, the employees can oppose and work against these limitations in their communication to further spread information in a way that is arbitrary for them. Furthermore, as previously concluded, the general definition of a community needs to be applied to encompass the hybrid dependent relation between a physical and digital community, existing and flourishing only in the symbiosis of each other.

#### **5.1.4 The employee's communicative role**

As the Hetch employees have different roles and responsibilities within the company, they use Slack differently and with individual frequency. Some of the interviewees stated that they post in the Hetch Community channel almost daily, while others only a few times a month. However, they all claim to use Slack as a digital communication platform daily, the difference in their use is limited to the Hetch Community channel. The difference in how they choose to communicate on Slack can also be traced back to the fact that the company Hetch does not have a communication plan when it comes to communicating on Slack. On the contrary, their supervisor encourages individual differences in their communication, allowing their communication to be separate. The employees disclaim that there is a need for them to be in sync with the overall philosophy of Hetch and let that be a guiding factor in their communication. Further, the interviewees were asked how they perceive their communication within the Hetch Community Slack channel regarding their individualistic approach to communication.

“I'm very easygoing, straight to the point but with a charming tone around it. I use a lot of slang when I write, it's supposed to be down to earth and inviting in every sense. I usually don't use a serious tone, I keep it light, and definitely use emojis.” (H1)

“Since I have the slightly more boring information. (...) Of course (name) who has more fun events, obviously they will get more fun comments and thumbs up.” (H2)

When reflecting on the individualistic approach to communication that the Hetch employees have, one could argue that that separates them further and does not contribute to fostering a sense of community. On the other hand, since the employees claim that all of their individualistic communication stems from the same philosophy and way of thinking, it could contribute to the community feeling no matter the non-conformity. One explanation for the lack of conformity, as Orel and Bennis (2021) have stated, is that workspaces often lack the knowledge that is needed to help and lead people into collaboration. One solution to this problem could be to implement a clear communication plan for the employees to adopt when communicating digitally with the community through Slack.

### **5.1.5 Slack as a communication platform**

The value of Slack differs among groups and organizations. Still, for the employees at Hetch, Slack is seen as:

“(…) our digital community platform that we use to communicate” (H1).’

As previously mentioned, the focal point of this analysis is the Hetch Community Slack channel, where all community members are free to post, while the employees, apart from posting themselves, also act as moderators and are primarily responsible for the channel. In Hetch's case, the Slack channel is seen as a communication tool for building a community.

“This is our Slack and in this community there are posts made about what happens in the community. It is our channel to communicate based on what is needed, if someone needs help, if there is an event or if something is going on.” (H3)

Slack is also used for private messaging between members of the community as well as between the employees at Hetch. The employees' perception regarding the way they chose to convey themselves in their private communication did not differ much from their perception of their communication in the Hetch Community Slack channel. Some of the employees mentioned that they write more formally in the communal Slack channel than to individual community members. In contrast, others stated that they communicate basically the same way regardless. The overall view of the use of Slack as a digital communication tool is positive among the interviewed employees.

To conclude, the way the employees described Slack, they used words such as *digital workspace, structured, trendy out on the market, efficient, and very easy to understand and comprehend*. Dawson (2006) states that computer-mediated communication, such as Slack, creates opportunities for groups of people to communicate despite spatial or geographical differences. The base premise for co-working spaces is their flexible nature, and therefore many of these spaces are in need of a communication tool that allows for spontaneous and easy sharing of messages. For Hetch, it is clear that Slack is a crucial part of their communicative efforts when aiming to foster a sense of community since, as previously stated, they have members that are not geographically or physically bound to the actual location of their co-working space.

Regarding the negative aspects of using Slack as the primary digital platform for communication, the interviewees had similar experiences and thoughts on what they viewed as problematic. The two most discussed topics will be separately discussed in chapters 5.1.6 and 5.1.7.

### **5.1.6 Physical versus digital communication**

In the following quote, H3 raises a negative aspect regarding the use of Slack as a digital communication platform.

“Every communication platform that doesn't include talking or vocal conversations, there's always a risk of misunderstanding or the message not being understood. You can't communicate energy through text.”  
(H3)

This quote relates to what Walther (2008) points out in the Social Information Processing Theory regarding the use of digital communication and its limitation of the social cues and impressions one would usually give and take in face-to-face interactions. In digital communication, they are a lot less limited, and figuring out how reliable a person is and what they emphasize in their message could be problematic in digital communication (Walther, 2008). When the employees of Hetch interact with the community through Slack, there is, therefore, a risk of the messages being misinterpreted when communicated digitally. If the new definition of a community stands, then these points need to be taken into consideration since they pose a risk of damaging the overall sense of community. Since physical and digital communication exists in an dependent relation, they are at risk of affecting one another. If there is a risk of misunderstandings disrupting digital communication and, therefore, the community,

these misunderstandings may also change the dynamics of the physical community. As mentioned in the quote above, “*You can't communicate energy through text,*” which is true compared to face-to-face communication. Previous research notes the need for communication in order to create a sense of community. However, communication by itself is not sufficient, maybe because digital communication can not emit energy that could be expressed in physical interactions.

Yet another issue when communicating with the community digitally versus physically is that it is easier to hide in the digital group, whereas in physical space, when being interacted with, one is more or less inclined to respond. One example of this is this post made on the Hetch Community Slack Channel:

“Hello you lovely people, @channel. I am reaching out to you all in HETCH-community after a lot of complaining about our common areas at HETCH and I am begging you for help. There are a lot of you who are doing a fantastic job by emptying the dishwashers and helping out in every possible way, but it is far from all of us. Remember that we are building this community together. Clean up after yourself in the meeting rooms, please leave the kitchen in that way you want to find it (this also goes for the toilets!?! Please!), wipe the table and the sink after you've eaten and please take care of your food in the refrigerator. Starting from next week, every Monday, I will throw away lunch boxes that has not been taken care of. I still have a a whole moving box in my post room behind the reception with empty lunch boxes that no one seems miss. I will soon throw them away to. Thank you. I wish you a pleasant evening. Over and out.” (H2).

There are both positive and negative remarks regarding the community in this post. This post accumulates a lot of information and requests from the employees. Even though it has a more negative tone like the sentence “Clean up after yourself in the meeting rooms, please leave the kitchen in that way you want to find it (this also goes for the toilets!?! Please!”, the moderator who posted the information mentions the community, “Remember that we are building this community together”. While still referring to “lovely people”, the overall post has a more correcting tone than posts made regarding the after-work exemplified earlier in the analysis.

The fact that the message from H2 is, at its core, a negative post about community members needing to clean up, and uses strong emphasizing symbols such as question marks and exclamation points, points to the fact that it is indeed humiliating in a way. However, it is not aimed at a single person but rather at the community. At the same time, the message also raises a few community members by saying that they are doing a fantastic job, so it is also honoring those selected few without singling them out and naming them. One core point that

ought to be made is that the community members who feel affected by the post above are probably less inclined to respond to it and take responsibility for the mentioned “problems.” This is probably due to the fact that one can hide more in the masses of the group online contradictory to a physical group. If this information was said in a physical setting, the response and overall feeling in the community would probably be affected. Maybe the impact the post has on the community has more negligible effect when said online. However, the overall sense of community probably benefits from it being posted online because then people can sift which negative information reaches them.

### **5.1.7 Interactions within the digital community**

The shared perception among the employees regarding the reactions and interactions with the posted messages on Slack is that there is a lack of response from the rest of the community. One issue that the employees collectively mentioned during the interview was that since there was a lack of response, the employees never knew how many members were reached and if the posted information was truly understood. Further, one employee stated in their interview that the community members are far more likely to respond to a message sent privately to them on Slack than respond to a message sent by one of the employees in the Hetch Community Slack channel.

Relating this to the Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008), social cues which can be found in physical communication, makes us respond when someone is talking to us face-to-face, but these social cues disappear when communicating digitally, leading us to be less likely to respond to messages there. It could be seen as more arbitrary to avoid responding to messages online than face-to-face due to these social cues mentioned by Walther (2008). This could, again, be a threat to the sense of community feel due to discrepancies between the digital and the physical communication and the lack of consistency in the interaction between community members. This lack of engagement and interaction is further explored in the quote below:

“I have noticed that we need to increase the energy in the digital community alot, but we wish for more response.” (H1).

The lack of engagement with the posts made on the Hetch Community Slack channel, which the employees mention, could be why they see the need to supplement with communication through e-mail.

“(…) I usually want to get information out there, then I will just e-mail to everyone” (H3)

“E-mail, is some sort of standard that everyone checks from time to time. So I will send out an e-mail and then always post in the Hetch community, a week later I will send out an reminder. Just to be sure everyone gets it, I send out an e-mail.” (H4)

As the Social Information Processing Theory (Walther, 2008) states, the exchange of information can be slower online than in face-to-face communication, but over time digital communication can reach the efficacy of physical interaction. This assumption can be the explanation for why the employees choose to send out both in Slack and e-mail because they experience a lack of engagement. Furthermore, the lack of engagement leads to the members in the Slack channel not processing the information the way it is intended and, therefore, slower since the employees must send out the information through multiple channels and multiple times, further contributing to creating information overload. As mentioned by H2:

“I tend to say to new people that I know that it is a lot of information, but please do not close it down (the Slack) because then you miss a lot. So I pre-communicate it!” (H2)

An issue that arises because of information overload is that users cannot see if their message is read or by whom it has been read in Slack. Therefore, it is not possible for the employees to see how many of the members on Slack actually read their message, only how many members have actively reacted or commented on their posts. The employees working with other groups within Hetch have as a standard to initially send out an e-mail and then post the information in the Hetch Community Slack channel to ensure that it is read. Further contributing to the informational overload, adding to the different channels from which the users get information. As previously mentioned, the Hetch Community Slack channel has 492 users (2022-05-02), however, when the employees were asked how many of them were actively responding or reacting to the messages they send, they perceived it to be far less than that.

“It differs depending on the message. Then there are always a few that are super active, usually those who actually spend all their time on their computers, I imagine developers or those kinds of people who are constantly online. The ones who have their notifications on all the time.” (H1)

This is conflicting with the contact hypothesis formed by McMillan and Chavis (1986), where they state that the more the members of the community interact, the closer they will become

and the greater they will bond. Only a few percent of the total number of members who interact with the messages they post could lead to a lesser sense of closeness and bond with the community. Since the Hetch community is built partly around physical elements and partly around digital ones, the hybrid community that we defined earlier needs to be fully interlaced in order for the sense of community to be strong. This lack of particularly digital engagement within the community and not aligning with the contact hypothesis could therefore be seen as a threat to the sense of community. Contrary to physical communication, when communicating online, especially on Slack, the moderators can not control who is reading and processing the information posted on the digital community. When we communicate digitally, we do not have the same possibility to use and interpret the social cues we use in our communication.

Due to the lack of social cues on digital platforms, users who read the posts might not feel the obligation to respond. This is unlike physical communication, where, as previously mentioned, we expect the person we interact with to respond, and they feel obligated to reciprocate. This lack of digital engagement could also be explained by the total amount of members in the Slack community compared to still active members since the employees do not remove non-active members as previously stated. Therefore, the ratio between the actual amount, 492 members, to the ones interacting can be misinterpreted.

Further analyzing the lack of engagement in the Slack channel, the Sense of Community Theory determinant of *personal investment* states that the more personal investment, the higher the members will value their membership (McMillan and Chavis, 1986). This determinant can be reversed, and instead of stating that if the members value their membership, they will invest more time, energy, and effort. Therefore, if the Slack community members at Hetch truly and highly valued their membership, they would invest more time, energy, and effort with the group. However, cross-checking this statement with the *beneficial* determinant of the same theory, if the members do not see the benefits of interaction, they will not put in that energy, time, or effort, not because they do not value their membership but due to it not being beneficial to them. An example of a post on Slack where the beneficial determinant is relevant is this one:

“Hello everyone! (Company) is looking for an NFT designer for an upcoming NFT project. If you're the one I'm looking for or you know someone please write to (e-mail) or DM me. This is a project/collection you don't want to miss out on!” (H3).

Here, H3 opens up about a job opportunity, presumably exclusively to the community. It becomes evident that it is beneficial to be part of the community and actively participate in it

in order to take advantage of opportunities like this one, opportunities that one might not be able to take part of if they had not been active within the community. However, if this opportunity is not relevant for a specific community member, and they do not see it as beneficial for them, then it is just another post which they choose not to interact with. As with all the communication in the Hetch Community Slack channel, the posts are interpreted by the community members, however, they choose to interpret it, not always necessarily the way the moderators intend for it to be interpreted. With posts such as this one, it could either be a great benefit for the community members or just another post in the channel that adds up to the information overload that was brought up earlier in an interview quote.

### **5.1.8 Digital atmosphere**

In this part of the analysis, the perception of the digital atmosphere based on the employee's opinions will be discussed. The employee's perception of the digital atmosphere in the Hetch Community Slack channel is generally seen as positive. However, there are instances where the employees notice a more negative attitude towards specific posts.

“It (the atmosphere) is very light, but it always gets a little extra tense when me or my colleagues or someone else within the community posts that someone left their dishes in the kitchen for example, but maybe that's just my perception. It's difficult to sense those things digitally.” (H1)

“I would say it's mixed actually. I think there's some irony in it sometimes, but it depends on the messages. We generally send positive or informative messages, but in the Community channel there's also messages about cars that are parked wrong and irritation around those kinds of things.” (H4)

The perception of the digital atmosphere should be taken with face value due to the previously mentioned lack of reaction and engagement from the actual members of the Slack community channel. It can therefore be hard for the employees to get a complete and truthful perception of the actual atmosphere of the digital community. In some instances, the communication could be seen as a one-way communication because of the fact that such a small percentage of the actual community interacts with the posts made by the employees. Again, this could also be because many inactive members are still in the Hetch Community Slack channel since the moderators are hesitant to remove members from the channel, even after they have ended their affiliation with Hetch.



Regarding some of the more negative or scolding posts reflected upon in the quotes above, one could compare them to the effect on *honor and humiliation*, a determinator coined by McMillan and Chavis (1986). This determinator states that when community members are openly shamed, it has a significant impact on the attractiveness of the community as a whole and the community member in question.

“I know we had an incident where a community member posted a picture of a coffee machine that had broken, and instead of sending it to the person responsible (for fixing it), they posted it openly in the community and wrote "shouldn't this be fixed?" or something like that” (H1)

This interview quote above shows that it has occurred times when community members openly shame or question each other, which has a significant impact on the community as a whole. Honoring messages have the same impact on the other end of the spectrum. However, when asked about how the employees’ reason regarding loving and appreciating messages where they raise up to either single community members or companies of community members, they all stated that that is an area of improvement.

“I think we can improve a lot on that part. We are better at doing that in other social channels, such as Instagram and LinkedIn. (...) there we have a person sitting and doing it. So time is a factor there I think.” (H2)

A shortcoming that needs to be taken into consideration before being too harsh on the behavior on Slack is that some reactions on post are made offline, with physical response to messages. These physical reactions, such as smiles, irritation or confusion, cannot be measured without observing the users physically reacting to posts made in the Slack channel. Therefore, the full effect of the posts and interactions on Slack cannot be measured by *only* observing the digital reactions. To conclude the chapter regarding the perception of the digital atmosphere, the employees state that the community has instances of open group negativity, which can impact the overall feeling of closeness. They collectively need to be better at highlighting success both on an individual and group level, further strengthening the sense of community in the group. However, the employees show awareness regarding their shortcomings, which is crucial to becoming better at communicating on digital platforms and, further, better at fostering a sense of community.

## 6. Discussion and conclusion

*In the following chapter the findings from the analysis will be presented and discussed, as well as recommendations for future research.*

### 6.1 Discussion

As previously stated, having insight into employees' perception on creating a sense of community is one way to understand how organizations can execute a co-working space that fosters a sense of community. To conclude how the employees at the co-working space Hetch perceive their digital communication as a tool for creating a sense of community, we defined two research questions. Fostering a sense of community is important for co-working spaces, according to both the employees at Hetch as well as stated in previous research.

To answer the first research question, *How do the employees at Hetch perceive their way of communicating digitally to create a sense of community?*, it is clear that they have a somewhat ambiguous view of their efforts to communicate in order to foster a sense of community. On the one hand, they consistently mentioned the importance of consistency, availability, and inclusivity to help foster a strong sense of community. Which they, according to themselves, also succeeded in doing and is also portrayed in parts of the content in the Hetch Community Slack channel. The previous research brought up in the thesis persistently underline similar factors that are seen as vital components in creating a strong community. Bringing these theoretical assumptions into reality is an indicator that these factors are essential in making a strong community since they are seen in the employee's perception as well. On the other hand, they showed awareness of the limitations in their efforts when it comes to criteria in boundaries, engagement with the community, and creating a functioning platform for two-way communication.

The general conclusion that can be drawn from these insights is that co-working spaces must be aware of the dependent communicative relationship between a digital and physical community, creating communicative strategies to ensure that both existing communities either can stand independent from one another or thrive together. The independent communities are less complex due to their less complex communication, and employees working to create a strong sense of community can therefore do so with the use of McMillan and Chavis (1986) determinators. The dependent communities, i.e. communities that have multiple communities existing within each other on a digital and physical level, must explore

the hybrid definition of a community in order to fully understand the complexity of its existence. We believe that the general definition of a community, as previously defined by McMillan and Chavis (1986), needs to be redefined to fit in with the advancements in technology and the impact that it has on our work lives. In order to better understand how to foster a sense of community within a co-working space, the definition of a community needs to be up to date with the current communication channels and tools that are being used, especially in the digital arena. This new definition and insights regarding the hybrid relationship between physical and digital communication could therefore be of great value to other co-working spaces as well.

Another difficulty highlighted in the thesis regarding the relationship between a digital and a physical community was that the boundaries regarding membership within the community became harder to define.

To answer the second research question, *How do the employees at Hetch perceive the relationship between their digital communication and face-to-face communication when fostering a sense of community?*, it is clear from the interviews that the employees have different perceptions of whether or not digital communication is sufficient when comparing it to face-to-face communication. Digital communication creates a greater risk of misunderstandings which, as previously discussed, could affect the physical community as well due to the fact that the digital and physical communication exist in a dependent relation to one another. Social cues are also difficult to interpret digitally, as Walther (2008) has stated, and further contributed to the difficulties regarding communication within the digital community. The lack of social cues also contributes to the fact that the community members might not respond or interact to the messages posted in Slack, since one is a lot more expected to respond in a physical conversation than a digital one, and it might be seen as arbitrary to ignore messages one cannot relate to. It is essential to fully understand the complete range of Slack's digital platform and how one can use it to communicate a strong sense of community. If this is achieved, the community on Slack can stand independently and, therefore, be more than a complement to a physical community. However, this is dependent on the actual purpose of the Slack channel in general. If its purpose is to act as a complement, the Slack channel fulfills its need for the employees, but if there is a desire to go beyond this fulfillment, then the employees need to make a more significant effort. To do so, there is a need to expand their knowledge of the platform and the users' wishes to create total engagement.

## **6.2 Conclusion**

To conclude, the employee's own perception of their communication on Slack is that there are limitations regarding their digital communication efforts. Knowing these limitations is key in order to progress in their ability to communicate in such a way that creates a strong sense of community. Since there is a difference between creating a digital community versus creating a physical one, there is much to gain in knowing the full capabilities of digital communication and how it can impact both the digital and physical community. Being aware of the dependent communicative relationship between a digital and physical community is crucial in ensuring that both existing communities either can stand independently from one another or flourish together. In conclusion, these findings can be considered important for the field of strategic communication since they discuss the dependent communicative relationships between physical and digital communities which has not been explored in the field to the same extent before. Overall, co-working spaces who aim to foster a sense of community in both the digital and physical sphere could also draw valuable insights from these findings when navigating how to strategically communicate with the community.

## **6.3 Suggestions for future research**

To further nuance this study, we suggest that one extracts messages dating further back on Slack. Something that came up in this study was that one employee experienced highs and lows in the community, and how many reactions and comments they received on their messages which they experienced varying over time. Retrieving a more extensive set of textual data from Slack and looking at a broader period of time could potentially allow the researcher to find patterns in community engagement.

Another point of suggestion is to include the community member's perspectives on the communicative efforts and their perception of the sense of community within the group. This could be done either through more interviews or through a quantitative survey study, which might yield interesting results when comparing them to the results of this study in seeing whether or not the community member's perception varies from the employees.

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# Appendix 1

## Intervju guide

### Demografiska frågor:

Hur länge har du jobbat på Hetch?

Vilken är din officiella arbetstitel på Hetch?

### (Kommunikation på) Forum

Vilka forum använder du för kommunikation med intressenter/kunder på din arbetsplats?

- Motivera gärna varför du använder detta forum, vilka fördelar du upplever exempelvis.

Anser du att det finns några nackdelar med att kommunicera på Slack?

Varför anser du att detta är en nackdel?

Har ni en kommunikationsplan upprättad som ni utgår från när ni kommunicerar?

- Om inte - finns det någon strategisk eller muntlig överenskommelse hur ni ska kommunicera?

### Community

Vad är ett community för dig?

Varför upplever du det så?

### Medlemskap

Hur motiverar ni era kunder/intressenter till att gå med i Slack-gruppen?

Vilka får vara med i Slack-gruppen?

Anser du att det finns användare som är mer aktiva än andra?

- Hur visar dem engagemang? Kommenterar mer frekvent exempelvis.

### Deras roll som kommunikatör

Anser du att din kommunikation påverkar eller influerar communityt?

- Om ja, vad anser du att din kommunikation bidrar till?

Hur anser du att kommunikationen de senaste tre månaderna har utvecklats?

- Peka gärna ut specifika likheter eller skillnader.



Anser du att din roll som moderator i communityt har varit fördelaktigt för dig?

- Har den varit fördelaktigt för communityt i stort?

Hur ofta anser du att du skriver på Slack?

- Hur mycket tid lägger du generellt ner på att kommunicera i communityt?
- Hur mycket tid har du avsatt i din arbetsroll för att kommunicera i communityt?
- Vad får dig att vilja skriva på Slack? Är det enklare att skriva på Slack?
- Hur mycket tid lägger du ner på att lära i Slack-grupperna
- Anser du att kommunikation på Slack är godtycklig / tillräcklig för syftet (det ni försöker upplå)
  - Varför / varför inte

Finns det skillnader och likheter i hur du skriver till communityt och hur du skriver till specifika individer?

Finns det något specifikt gruppens jargong, användning av symboler, emojis, gif:ar eller liknande som du anser är specifikt för dig när du kommunicerar inom communityt?

- Finns det något du anser är specifikt för Hetch?

### Stämning

Vad är din övergripande upplevelse kring hur stämningen i communityt är?

- Övervägande positiv/negativ?
- Enligt dig, hur hanterar ni kommentarer och inlägg som har en negativ karaktär?
- Hur hanterar ni positiva kommentarer och inlägg?

Enligt dig, hur kommunicerar ni communityts framgång(ar)?

Lyfter ni upp communitymedlemmars framgång i kommunikationen?

Hur kommunicerar ni kring kommande event som rör communityt?

- Hur upplever du responsen?

# Appendix 2

## Interview guide

### Demographic questions:

For how long have you worked at Hetch?

What is your official work title at Hetch?

### (Communication on) Forum

Which forums do you use for communication with stakeholders/customers/interested parties at your workplace?

- Please motivate your choice of this forum, for example what advantages you experience.

Do you consider there to be any negative aspects of communicating on Slack?

- Why do you consider this a negative aspect?

Do you have a communication plan in place that you base your communication on?

- If not - is there a strategic or verbal agreement regarding how you should communicate?

### Community

What is a community to you?

Why do you feel that way?

### Membership

How do you motivate your customers/partners/interested parties to join the Slack group?

Who gets to join the Slack group?

Do you consider there to be specific users that are more active than others?

- How to they show engagement? Comment more frequently for example.

### Their role as communicators

Do you consider your communication to affect or influence the community?

- If yes, what do you think your communication contributes to?

In what ways do you think the communication has evolved over the past three months?

- Please point out specific examples of similarities and differences.

Do you consider your role as a moderator in the community has been beneficial for you?

- Has it been beneficial to the community as a whole?

How often do you consider yourself writing on Slack?

- How much time do you generally spend communicating in the community?
- How much time do you have allocated within your work role to communicate in the community?
- What makes you want to write on Slack? Is it easier to write on Slack?
- How much time do you spend reading in the Slack groups?
- Do you consider communication on Slack being "good enough", or arbitrary, in the sense of what you are trying to achieve?
  - Why / why not?

Are there differences and similarities in how you communicate to the community versus how you communicate to specific people?

Is there something regarding jargon, lingo, use of symbols, emojis or gifs that is specific to you when you communicate within the community?

- Is there something you think is specific for Hetch?

### Atmosphere

What is your overall impression regarding the atmosphere within the community?

- More positive/negative?
- According to you, how do you handle comments and posts that have a negative character?
- How do you handle positive comments and posts?

In your opinion, how do you communicate successes within the community?

Do you lift up community members' success in your communication?

How do you communicate regarding upcoming events that are relevant to the community?

- How do you feel the response is?