Anonymity and Acrimony on an Internet Forum: The Amherst Confessional

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1 Introduction

During the Spring of 2008 an internet phenomenon transformed the social life of the Amherst College campus. In a few weeks the name "Amherst Confessional" became familiar to the ears of most students, the newly-opened website quickly becoming synonymous with a spate of contention over campus politics and slander directed at certain students. At its highest point, the controversy over the Confessional generated enough concerns on part of the college administration as to warrant a letter sent by the Amherst College President to the student body, which asked them specifically not to use this means of online expression. The website's existence did not remain without echo outside of Amherst either, the case making it to the pages of *Inside Higher Education.* (Guess, 2008)

The unprecedented level of attention generated by the website raises the question as to what caused such interest in the Confessional. This was not the first and certainly not the last website where college students could opine on whatever struck them as in need of comment. I contend that the Confessional's specific difference when compared to other forums available to the same campus is that on this particular website students could speak under the cloak of complete and guaranteed anonymity, without fear of retribution, be it from their peers or from disciplinary councils. The Confessional was not simply just another case of an anonymous environment, however – what makes this website particularly interesting is its closed-group nature, which adds a supplemental layer of complexity. Unlike in the case of Internet communities, the social structure of the Confessional (if we can speak of such a structure) is built on underpinnings based in the "real" world, which the website's content complements. It is thus doubly revealing to study websites like the Confessional, both for the insights such inquiry can generate into the workings of online anonymity, and for the knowledge we can gain about the specific unfolding of anonymity in a closed-group environment.

Starting from the afore-mentioned considerations, this essay will seek to answer several questions regarding the role of the Confessional website within the Amherst College community. The characteristics of the medium – anonymity and the closed-group environment – represent the starting point for my inquiry and will be examined from a theoretical perspective in Section 2. The study then builds on a representative survey of Amherst students,

whose methodology I discuss in Section 3. In section 4 I discuss my survey findings, proceed to remove – metaphorically speaking – the cloak of anonymity from the aggregate group of the website's users in subsection 4.1, while in subsection 4.2 I go on to discuss the motivations underlying different behaviors when it comes to using the website. After being contextualized in the previous chapters, the manifest content of the website is discussed in section 5, while section 6 is devoted to closing remarks regarding this study.

2 The medium makes the difference

The peculiar nature of the Confessional makes this website particularly hard to fit in the traditional classification of web content. It is easy enough to describe the technical characteristics of the Confessional: the website is structured as a bulletin board, the content of which is open only to users whose IP address[1] is on Amherst servers, or who have an Amherst e-mail adress. The closed-group structure means that only users on or tied to the Amherst campus can access the website. The site is hosted on servers outside the college community, its administration being in no way tied to Amherst College itself; the website is part of a family of similar "Confessionals," all of which have been created for various top U.S. higher-education institutions by Oberlin College alumnus Shibo Xu.(Guess, 2008) Once on the website, users have access to a list of time-ordered threads, consisting of "confessions" and com-

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[1]IP (Internet Provider) Address - a unique, place-specific identifier assigned by an Internet Provider to the end-user.

ments. Users can post "confessions" on virtually any subject, and they can also comment on other users' postings. True to its name, the website does not ask users for names or even pseudonims when they post; as a result, close to all the messages on the Confessional are anonymous. Finally, communication happens in an asynchronous fashion: users may post on older threads at any time after their creation, an action which "bumps" their content to the front page of the website.

The relationship between medium and content is different between the online and offline worlds. My reading of the Confessional is informed by the work of Judith Donath, according to whom, on the internet medium dominates content to a much higher extent than it does in the off-line world.

> The online world is a wholly built environment. The architects of a virtual space – from the software designers to the site administrators – shape the community in a more profound way than do their real-world counterparts. People eat, sleep, and work in buildings; the buildings affect how happily they do these things. But the buildings do not completely control their perception of the world. In the electronic domain, the design of the environment is everything. Whether or not you know that other people are present or privy to a conversation, whether you can connect an online identity to a real-world person, whether you have only a faint notion of the personalities of those around you – this is all determined by the desing of the environment.(Donath, 1999, 55)

We may thus conclude that the technical characteristics of this medium have tangible implications in defining the website's character. To sum up our previous discussion, three main attributes define the Confessional, which is a *closed-group*, *anonymous* and *asynchronous* bulletin board system. These

three technical attributes are crucial in that they have direct consequences on the behavior of Confessional users. Closed-group interaction facilitates the spread of gossip and rumors, while anonymity breaks down inhibitions and encourages not only self-disclosure but also performance and deception. Finally, asynchronicity gives the posters sufficient time to craft their messages' language to the maximum of the desired effect.

Of all the traits discussed above, the closed-group nature of the Confessional has perhaps the most significant effects on the characteristics of the website. For one thing, an observer can be confident that all the postings appearing on the site are the work of users connected to Amherst College, most of them Amherst students on campus. It seems that closed-group interaction in itself can lead to widely diverging consequences, depdending on the degree to which electronic communication is anonymized. This conclusion is particularly evident in the evolution of the several other platforms accessible from the Amherst campus that allow for student interaction, all of which provide lower degrees of anonymity than the Confessional does. On Amherst's own servers, the *New Athenian (NOTE* portal provides a forum structure similar to the one of the Confessional; the website however requires the user to both log in with an Amherst username and display that username in each posting's header. More anonymous is the commercial portal *The Daily Jolt*'s Amherst forum, which allows posters to avoid publicizing their user-name, but still requires users to log in with an Amherst e-mail address in order to post. The Amherst Confessional provides arguably the closest approxima-

tion of complete anonymity available to most internet users: the site does not require users on campus, the overwhelming majority of its target population, to submit any personal information in order to gain access to posting privileges, making postings, as it advertises, "completely anonymous."

If rough numbers are any indication, the extra layer of anonimity does indeed make a difference. During the entire month of April 2008, for instance, the *Daily Jolt* registered 1683 individual postings, while the *Confessional* saw a whopping 9533.[2] As a generalization of this case, I argue that, *ceter paribus*, interactive media with higher degrees of anonymity will draw more interest in closed-group interaction than will less anonymous media. One argument supporting this theory is the fact that the likelihood of retribution becomes minimal in the context of a service like the Confessional. In addition, it is worth noticing that anonymity also facilitates two more behaviors that increase "entertainment value" and public interest – self-disclosure and performance.

Psychological research has long documented episodes of "increased self-disclosure under conditions of anonymity, reduced feelings of responsibility toward victims on the part of anonymous bystanders, and social loafing in

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[2]A careful on-campus observer will point out – and rightly so – that the Confessional elicited an extraordinary amount of interest at the time, caused by a series of malicious posts about specific students, at the same time being the target of an intensive spamming campaign intiated by users disgruntled with the website. True though this observation may be, the possibility of complete anonymity was arguably the enabling factor of the injurious postings, because without anonymity the identity of those making the injurious postings could be uncovered, and the slanderers, who were breaking Amherst College's internal *Statement of Respect for Persons*, would have been subject to disciplinary action (Interview with Dr. Benson Lieber, Amherst College Dean of Students).

small groups."(Anonymous, 385)(Watt et al., 2002, 66) The prevalence of anonymous or pseudonymous self-disclosure on the internet is easy enough to notice in the millions of blogs, *Twitter* feeds, chat rooms, and countless other applications available online. There is certainly a perception of the Confessional as an avenue for a kind of total, no-consequence self-disclosure, of which the following comment offered by one of our respondents is illustrative:

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Amherst Confessional is a vent for the bile which our
restricted, overly PC society produces. If students
were not so afraid to express themselves in person,
the Confessional would not exist in the same way.
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To this claim of genuine self-expression we oppose the competing interpretation of the Confessional as performance. Together with self-disclosure comes deception, in this context a somehow paradoxical result of anonymity in internet interaction. Deception has been documented already as a trend during the heyday of online bulletin board system USENET (Donath, 1999, 44–55). There are arguably two main strategies of deception avaialble on the internet: concealment and misrepresentation. Concealment, achieved using pseudonyms or by giving out false personal information, seeks to avoid detection of the communicator, a moot point in the case of the Confessional, where full anonymity is already ensured. Misrepresentation through the performance of new identities represents a far more interesting aspect of deception on the Internet, and one that we can reasonably expect to find on the website studied here.

Misrepresentation also falls under the definition of "trolling," defined generally as "any aversive behavior users feel it does not belong in a particular online environment"Davis (2002). On the internet, trolling takes different forms and is perceived as ubiquitousDavis (2002). In the context of discussion boards, trolling translates into the expression of particularly offensive or excessively nave opinions or behaviors solely for the purpose of getting other users to join the conversation, a course of action of which other discussion participants deem to be out-of-place. "Trolling," defined as malicious performance is also seen as ubiquitous on the Confessional. A preliminary finding of our study reveals that 26 Confessional posters out of 49 answering the question rated their postings as only "sometimes," "in a few cases" or "never" representing their real life problems and opinions. By comparison, the same figure goes up to 41 out 49 posters responding to the task of evaluating the veracity of other users' posts. Likewise, the optional comments received as part of the survey confirm the perception of trolling:

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"I think socially awkward people post shallow
things on the confessional to appear 'cool.' "
"I think some of the posts are purposely offensive
fakes; some people are just getting a laugh from it."
"It seems unlikely, it's more plausible that
its just a place for people to be as offensive
as possible to bait others into getting upset."
"Most of my comments are jokes, so they kind of
represent my opinions, but are kind of exaggerated."
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A unifying thread of social psychological scholarship on anonymity is the reduction of inhibitions which occurs under anonymous conditions, but there

is widespread debate as to the exact relationship between anonymity and identity. Deinviduation theory has it that anonymity reduces self-awareness and inhibitions at the same time.(Anonymous, 385) Conversely, A different strand of scholarship contends that, under the specific conditions created by the Internet, "reduced bandwith and anonymity in CMC [Computer Mediated Communication] can accentuate feelings of group belongingness and identification."(Watt et al., 2002, 62) The tension in the appraisal of anonymity seems congruent with a larger contrast visible in academic literature, between "distopian" and "utopian" readings of the Internet in the context of social interaction. Whereas the distopian understanding of the Internet sees this medium essentially as an alienating and amorphous space which impoverishes interaction, the utopian interpretation takes the diametrically opposite view according to which the Internet complements other forms of social interaction, facilitating a free and equalitarian flow of information, as well as the articulation of novel identities.(Katz and Rice, 2002, 203-26) I argue that both of these views are valid under certain circumstances, creating what Watt et. al call "cyberbole," the "exaggerated" nature of Internet behaviors under anonymous conditions. Following this line of argumentation, I will argue that rather than reduce inhibitions wholesale, anonymity will increase the magnitude of certain behaviors already present without the presence of this feature.

The conclusion appears as truism: shielded by anonymity, users will either tell the truth or lie about themselves. The truistic character disappears

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when we consider the absence of external incentives of any kind in this communication situation. Unlike in face-to-face interaction, the communicator has nothing to gain or to lose from self-presentation, if their postings cannot have any consequences beyond the self-contained online space of the Internet discussion board. The only incentives shaping behavior are linked to psychological and situational factors. The main effect of anonymity is amplification: the poster will lie or tell the truth, as in any other communication situation; unlike in other kinds of interactions, there will be no social norms moderating their speech. If a poster tells the truth about themselves, their candor will be at times brutal; if they lie, misrepresentation will merge into the performance of an entire assumed identity. In the closed-group environment of the college campus, marked by dense information networks and a high degree of social control, the sudden suspension of social incentives and deterrents will translate into an even greater difference between anonymous and identified interactions.

It is important to ask, where does self-disclosure fit into the context of the Confessional, or of anonymous online interaction in general. The answer may appear to be surprising, but a credible hypothesis is that there is no paradox per se in the concurrent development of both self-disclosure and deception as modes of online behavior. Taking the earlier point about amplification further, it seems that there are cases where deeply-felt beliefs and anxieties will blend with imagined narratives to form a ludic discourse ranging from the perspective of the subject between what is felt as extremely true, and

what is pure invention. Take for instance an example of a more recent posting on the website:

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"A semester of torture. Looking at you while I
lectured & wondering. Trying not to stare as you
gave your presentation. You stopped half-way
through to laugh & say I was distracting you."
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The post represents an example of the extreme ambivalence of messages in an anonymous context. Are these someone's true thoughts, presumably a member of the faculty's, posted online? Or, rather, are they a student's invention? If this is misrepresentation, "trolling," did the poster choose this particular topic as a result of fantasy, or as a desire to stir up controversy? There is no clear interpretation here, and ambiguity rules over many other postings in the online, ostensibly "tell-all" medium. In a sense, the veracity of postings becomes by-and-large irrelevant in this kind of context, where both the "troll" and the "honest" posters ultimately aim at the same goal – the disclosure of things that are judged to be "post-worthy," either because they are the true feelings of an Amherst student (or professor as we have seen in this case), or because they are fiction meant to be presented as truth.

Thus a real paradox: an online "Confessional," meant as a vehicle for users to express those feelings and "secrets" which bear no expression without the mask of anonymity becomes a venue for entertainment. The confessional metaphor is twisted in a surreal way, where the poster is spilling out their heart (or seeming to), writing as if for themselves only, at the same time knowing that their words will be dissected and judged by a faceless and

unaccountable audience the moment they hit the webpage. Thus, communication is not uni-directional but a dynamic interaction between the users of the platform. For this reason, analyzing the language of the website in isolation from the context in which it is generated will be of only limited use in a quest to get to the meaning of the website. In order to understand the content we need to find out more about its originators and audience. To do so we will draw upon a survey of Confessional users, but before getting to the actual data a discussion of methodology is warranted.

3 Survey Methdology

During the third week of November 2008 I undertook an online survey of Amherst College students, using the surveymonkey.com platform. A random sample of one fourth was drawn from the Amherst student body, each student receiving an e-mail invitation to fill out the survey, which was explicitly referred to as concerning "online forums" at Amherst College. This minimal amount of deception was used in order to make less likely the possibility that students who had not heard of the Confessional previously would discard the survey. Two subsequent follow-up messages succeded the initial e-mail. Of the 432 students sampled, 318(74%) started answering the survey and 278(64%) completed it. The survey was designed to have substantive questions about Confessional usage in the beginning, and questions on socioeconomic data in the final part, which most of the students who did not fill

out the survey completely skipped.

Selection bias was a concern from the start of the project, and the survey sought to minimize this bias, through repeated follow-ups, and by ensuring complete anonymity. Loss analysis (Table 1) reveals little difference between early and late respondents, and comparable percentages for the survey sample and the Amherst student population. The one exception to this general finding is reprsented by gender: fewer males answered the survey, or chose to reveal their gender. If we assume that late respondents resemble non-respondents, the fact that the percentage of males does not differ between early and late respondents seems to suggest the latter possibility, however, and thus I have reason to believe that more males than females have chosen not to disclose their gender.

4 Survey Findings: Behavior on the Confessional

The survey began with a series of Yes/No serially contingent questions on whether the respondent had heard of the Confessional, if they posted on the website, if they read the website. Of 318 respondents, 247 (78%) had heard of the website, while 71 (22%) had not. Of the 247 who had heard of the website, 69 reported posting, but only 11 students reported posting more than once a month, while two students said they post several times a week or more often; 175 students did not report posting, and 3 refused to answer the

Category	No. in sample	% in sample	% in pop.	Early	Late
GENDER					
Females	170	53%	51%	54%	53%
Males	107	34%	49%	33%	34%
No Answer	41	13%		13%	13%
RACE					
White	185	58%	42%	58%	59%
Black	19	6%	9%	5%	7%
Latino	14	4%	9%	4%	5%
Asian	33	10%	10%	13%	8%
Mixed	19	6%		6%	6%
No Answer	48	15%	21%	14%	16%
CLASS YEAR					
Not a student	1	.3%		.7%	0%
09	69	22%		22%	22%
09E	0	0%		0%	0%
10	53	17%		18%	16%
10E	2	.7%		1%	0%
11	84	26%		24%	28%
11E	1	.3%		.7%	0%
12	68	21%		21%	21%
No Answer	40	13%		12%	13%
FINANCIAL AID					
Yes	136	43%		44%	42%
No	139	44%		43%	44%
No Answer	43	14%		13%	14%
FINANCIAL AID					
Yes	136	43%		44%	42%
No	139	44%		43%	44%
No Answer	43	14%		13%	14%

Table 1: Loss Analysis.Early responders and late responders do not differ significantly in their socio-economic characteristics; neither does the sample deviate from the population's characteristics. Population percentages from the Amherst College Registrar's Office. No "Mixed Race" category available in the population statistics.

question. Out of the 178 students who did not answer the posting question affirmatively, 99 reported reading the Confessional, 19 students of this group reported reading it at least monthly, and only 7 reported weekly visits to the website. Based on these findings we have identified 168 out of 318 respondents as infrequent users (both readers and posters) of the website, most of whom visit the Confessional once a month or less often. Only 30 respondents out of the 168 can be called occasional users of the website (visiting at least once a week), and only 9 students report daily visits either to read or to post on the Confessional.

Two conclusions emerge from the findings presented above. It is obvious that there is only a restricted number of "heavy-duty" users of the website who probably account for a good deal of the online content. If my numbers are representative of the Amherst population as a whole – and from the Loss Analysis I see little reason why they should not be – it seems sensible to say that around 3% of the Amherst student body – about 50 students – is active every day or every few days on the website. Likewise, we can expect somewhere around ten students to be frequent producers of content on the Confessional. Those to whom the Confessional appears dangerous to the social fabric of the Amherst community can rest assured: intense Confessional usage is restricted to only a few students. At the same time, it is worth pointing out that more than half of the sample was identified as being made up of infrequent users, giving us reason to expect a similar proportion of the student body to have taken part or witnessed Confessional

interaction at some point since the launching of the platform last spring. Thus, to most Amherst students, the Confessional appears to be of marginal but not negligible interest.

4.1 Determinants of Confessional involvement

Thus far I have only referred to Confessional users with the general description of "Amherst students." I will now try to establish the ways in which different socio-economic variables influence behavior on the Confessional if at all. Tables 2 and 3 plot behavior in connection to the Confessional over gender, race and class, and set the ground for our discussion of possible differences between Confessional users and those students who choose to ignore the website.

From the descriptive statistics it emerges that there are a few groups that seem more likely to be active or post on the Confessional. Proportionally speaking, male students are more inclined to read and post on the Confessional, while female students are likelier to ignore it conscientiously. This finding is consistent with previous studies dealing with "gender gaps" in internet access and usage. In his 2000 analysis, Bruce Bimber identified both socio-economic and gender-specific influences in accounting for women's lower propensity for internet usage. According to Bimber (2000),

> The reasons that women are less intensive Internet users may in-
> volve stereotyping, inherently "gendered" technology embodying

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Category	Sample	Heard of AC	Haven't heard of the site	Only read the AC	Post on the site	Heard of but ignore the site
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Total number						
Students	318	247	71	99	69	76
GENDER						
Male	100	79	21	36	27	16
Female	100	78	22	28	21	30
No Answer	100	73	27	34	12	27
RACE						
White	100	78	22	30	21	27
Black	100	84	16	42	11	32
Latino	100	86	14	36	29	21
Asian	100	76	24	27	33	15
Mixed	100	84	16	32	32	21
ON FINANCIAL AID						
Yes	100	78	22	27	29	21
No	100	78	22	35	17	27
No Answer	100	74	26	30	14	30
COLLEGE-EDUCATED PARENTS						
Neither	100	91	9	36	23	32
One	100	82	18	36	33	12
Both	100	77	23	30	21	26
No Answer	100	73	27	32	15	27
GPA						
Under 3.0	100	71	29	18	29	24
3.0-3.2	100	100	0	0	100	0
3.2-3.4	100	87	13	37	21	29
3.4-3.6	100	89	11	36	33	20
3.6-3.8	100	86	14	36	24	26
3.8-4.0	100	79	21	30	12	36
In a Fraternity						
No	100	77	23	30	22	25
Yes	100	81	19	43	14	24
Athlete						
Non-Athlete	100	79	21	31	24	23
Athlete	100	75	25	30	16	29
International Student						
No	100	78	22	31	21	26
Yes	100	79	21	33	29	17

Table 2: Socio-Economic Descriptive Statistics for Sample, percentage of (2)

Category	Sample	Heard of AC	Haven't heard of the site	Only read the AC	Post on the site	Heard of but ignore the site
(1)	(2)	(3)	(4)	(5)	(6)	(7)
Total number						
Students	318	247	71	99	69	76
GENDER						
Male	107	84	23	38	29	17
Female	170	133	37	47	35	51
No Answer	41	30	11	14	5	11
RACE						
White	185	144	41	56	38	50
Black	19	16	3	8	2	6
Latino	14	12	2	5	4	3
Asian	33	25	8	9	11	5
Mixed	19	16	3	6	6	4
ON FINANCIAL AID						
Yes	136	106	30	37	40	29
No	139	109	30	49	23	37
No Answer	43	32	11	13	6	13
COLLEGE-EDUCATED PARENTS						
Neither	22	20	2	8	5	7
One	33	27	6	12	11	4
Both	222	170	52	66	47	57
No Answer	41	30	11	13	6	11
GPA						
Under 3.0	17	12	5	3	5	4
3.0-3.2	2	2	0	0	2	0
3.2-3.4	38	33	5	14	8	11
3.4-3.6	61	54	7	22	20	12
3.6-3.8	58	50	8	21	14	15
3.8-4.0	33	26	7	10	4	12
In a Fraternity						
No	297	230	67	90	66	74
Yes	21	17	4	9	3	5
Athlete						
Non-Athlete	235	185	50	74	56	55
Athlete	83	62	21	25	13	24
International Student						
No	294	228	66	91	62	75
Yes	24	19	5	8	7	4

Table 3: Socio-Economic Descriptive Statistics for Sample, frequencies

Table 4: Estimation Results for Confessional awareness and behavior (probit). Legend: Statistically significant at 1%**5%*10%†levels.

Variable	HEARD (Std. Err.)	ACTIVE (Std. Err.)	POST (Std. Err.)	IGNORE (Std. Err.)
male	-0.124	0.534*	0.369†	-0.534*
	(0.220)	(0.208)	(0.202)	(0.208)
black	0.016	-0.385	-0.782†	0.385
	(0.401)	(0.349)	(0.402)	(0.349)
latino	-0.370	0.081	-0.023	-0.081
	(0.432)	(0.405)	(0.369)	(0.405)
asian	-0.117	0.349	0.462†	-0.349
	(0.310)	(0.299)	(0.267)	(0.299)
mixed	0.776	0.127	0.269	-0.127
	(0.523)	(0.394)	(0.374)	(0.394)
finaid	-0.336*	0.097	-0.190	-0.097
	(0.145)	(0.152)	(0.164)	(0.152)
pcol0	0.350	-0.087	-0.357	0.087
	(0.518)	(0.325)	(0.346)	(0.325)
pcol1	0.233	0.633†	0.344	-0.633†
	(0.345)	(0.349)	(0.295)	(0.349)
gpa_1c	0.525	-0.371	-0.819†	0.371
	(0.509)	(0.424)	(0.442)	(0.424)
frat	0.189	-0.236	-0.735†	0.236
	(0.459)	(0.381)	(0.440)	(0.381)
athl	-0.075	-0.294	-0.312	0.294
	(0.251)	(0.214)	(0.235)	(0.214)
intl	0.086	0.101	-0.007	-0.101
	(0.388)	(0.364)	(0.344)	(0.364)
c09	1.346**	-0.207	0.209	0.207
	(0.242)	(0.291)	(0.313)	(0.291)
c10	2.038**	0.104	0.686*	-0.104
	(0.367)	(0.294)	(0.297)	(0.294)
c11	1.960**	-0.156	0.525†	0.156
	(0.302)	(0.268)	(0.290)	(0.268)
Intercept	0.577	0.146	-1.515*	-0.146
	(0.639)	(0.579)	(0.615)	(0.579)

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> male values, content that favors men, sex differences in cognition
>
> or communication, or other factors,

in addition to the lower socio-economic position that women typically enjoy in society. The case of Amherst College provides a particularly interesting setting for testing the influence of gender-specific factors, as opposed to structural ones. As the population we are dealing with is made up of students we hypothesize that there would be little difference between the socio-economic position of young men and women, particularly at this elite institution that has consistently pursued policies meant to increase equality of chances for all its students.

Table 3 reveals several other differences. White and Asian students seem more likely to post on the Confessional, while black students appear less likely to do so. Students on Financial Aid and with one college-educated parent seem more inclined to post, as do students with mid-range GPAs. Finally, international students seem marginally more likely to post while athletes and members of the unofficial fraternities present on Amherst's campus appear less likely to post on the Confessional.

These relationships seem intriguing; in order to ascertain their statistical significance we employ a set of exploratory probit regressions, in which we regress the categorical dependent variables $HEARD$, $ACTIVE$ (reads and/or posts), $POST$ and $IGNORE$ (has heard of it but chooses not to read or post) on a set of dummy variables accounting for gender, race, parental education. In order to get a more precise test of the effect of GPA on our

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variables, we use the first central sample moment, $GPA_i - \bar{GPA}$ as a regressor; we set the deviation from the sample mean at 0 for those students who refused to answer the question. Finally, we add class-year dummies to our specification, in order to account for any differential impact based on this factor. The estimation results are plotted in Table 4

Unsuprisingly, being an sophomore, junior or senior does make Amherst students significantly likelier to have heard of the Confessional than the first-year class taken as a baseline. Interestingly enough, the effect of being a senior is lower than that of being either a junior or a sophomore. This could be explained by the fact that many Amherst students go study abroad during the spring semester of their junior year; for the current senior class ('09), this was precisely the time when the Confessional made its stormy debut at the College. By contrast, the classes of '10 and '11 were on campus during the period mentioned before, and this fact seems to explain their higher propensity to have heard of the website. In addition to hearing about the website, being a sophomore or a junior also reliably predicts a higher likelihood to post, presumably also a result of the exposure to the original events surrounding the Confessional.

Supporting our earlier hypothesis, being male appears to be a reliable predictor of higher Confessional activity, and the statistical significance holds when we consider only posting behavior. This further advances our reading of the Confessional as a primarily andro-centric space, a feature which will prove useful in our analysis of the website's content.

Race is relevant only in regards to posting behavior: black students are less significantly less likely to post compared to white students, whose posting propensity is surpassed by students who identify as Asian. It is important to point out that this relationship is only significant at the 10% level and that not much should be read into it without further information. This being said, it does seem reasonable to advance the suspicion, however, of certain internalized social expectations at work that make students with different racial identities likelier to act in specific ways. Inasmuch as the Confessional is a controversial subject on the Amherst campus, the decision to use it or not is going to be governed not just by personal affects and idiosyncrasies, but also by perceptions of group position, made particularly salient by the context of identity politics on a small campus. In a context where they are a visible minority whose name becomes intertwined with so many debates in American life and on the Amherst campus – it seems reasonable for African American students to be less likely to be involved with a forum generally viewed as hostile to minority groups.

Class, as reflected in the variables quantifying financial aid status and parental education seems to have inconsistent effects on Confessional awareness and involvement. It is noteworthy that our variables give a poor account of the class variable, which is notoriously hard to quantify. In spite of our best attempts, we were unable to obtain a better measure of each respondent's class, as many of them proved unwilling or unable to answer questions regarding their parents' household income. For this reason, we find it likely

that the parameters associated with the variables $finaid$, $pcol0$ and $pcol1$ do not capture the effects of class adequatly and propose to disregard the effects for the time being.

There are two variables related to academic life that seem to make a big difference in students' likelihood to post on the Confessional. GPA is inversely correlated with posting behavior, it seems. the variable $gpa2_1c$ captures the deviation from the mean of each student's grade-point average, and its coefficient tells us that a high negative deviation will translate into a high propensity of posting. Indeed, if we look at Table 2, we will notice that only 12% of students whose GPAs are in the 3.8-4.0 range post on the Confessional, while 33% of students in the 3.4-3.6 GPA range do so. Causal inference appears different here, as we can imagine three scenarios: either (1) students who have low GPAs take their academic frustration online, (2) posting on the Confessional regularly makes a student less academically competitive, or (3), and most likely, there is a third factor, perhaps personality, perhaps something else, that correlates with both lower GPA and higher likelihood to post on the website. It is worth noting that while the coefficient of fraternity or sorority membership is significant at the 10% level for the $HEARD$ variable, only 3 members of such an organization actually reported posting on the website, making our estimate highly unreliable.

4.2   Finding nuance in Confessional Behaviors

The initial analysis of Confessional behavior set out in the previous section has only limited use without necessary distinctions. The technical terms "reader", "poster" or "active user" in themselves have very little meaning outside the website's own narrow universe. It becomes imperious not just to inquire about the frequency of different behaviors, and the socio-economic characteristics of those who engage in one set of actions or another, but also to explore in further detail each behavior's contents. I thus find it important to ask, what kind of content do most users post and read. Most importantly, in order to give meaning to the Confessional as a social institution of the campus community, we need to understand the motivations users and non-users have in their different actions on the Confessional. Thus, this section comes to fulfill a dual purpose – to explain both why the website is popular with active users, as well as to detail the motivations of those who constientiously choose not to engage with the Amherst Confessional.

As previously mentioned, based on their answer to a initial series of questions regarding the nature of their involvement with the Confessional, or lack thereof, respondents were separated into several categories – readers and posters (together, "active users"), as well as respondents who constientiously chose to ignore the website, and respondents unaware of its existence. Based on their determined category, each group of users received a different set of subsequent questions, inquiring about the content and motivations of their activities on the Confessional, or their reasons for ignoring the website,

Answer choice	Average rating
	(1-not at all/5-completely)
"I don't have the time."	3.67
"The level of discussion is too low."	3.61
"I don't like how the website can hurt people."	4.14
"It's a waste of time."	4.53
"I don't like the kind of people who post on the website."	3.61

Table 5: Reasons given for not reading the Amherst Confessional.

in the case of those respondents who chose to do so. We will begin our examination from the latter group, whose case will serve to illuminate some crucial aspects regarding the website's place within the campus community.

A set of ethical and practical motivations determine the decision to ignore the Amherst Confessional. As Table 5 reveals, when asked why they did not access the website, respondents gave highest ratings to the answer choice "It's a waste of time." The evaluation of an activity as "wasteage" is naturally a subjective one, and with this consideration in mind we can interpret the result as suggesting that the primary factor determining use or non-use of the Confessional has to do with the psychological make-up of every student, rather than with any external factors tied to social or academic location. In addition to the practical concerns visible in Table 5, there is another set of ethical reasons for conscientious non-use of the Confessional. Three statements ask the respondent to rate the Confessional from a moral point of view: "The level of discussion is too low," "I don't like the kind of people who post on the website," and "I don't like how the website can hurt people." All three of these statements receive high ratings, with the third sentence

Answer choice	Average rating (1-not at all /5-completely)
"It provides me juicy gossip."	2.50
"It's interesting to see what other Amherst students think."	3.15
"It's a good place to discuss your opinions.	1.48
"The Confessional helps me find out what's going on on campus."	1.86
"It's funny and entertaining."	3.15
"It gives me something to do."	3.21
"Friends suggested that I look at something."	3.25

Table 6: Reasons given for reading the Amherst Confessional. Answers collected only from users who read but do not post on the website.

being found particularly true by the relevant group of respondents. There is an important distinction to be made between the previously-mentioned three sentences regarding ethical motivations for ignoring the website – while the first two ask for an evaluation that is arguably immediately accessible to any student browsing the website, the latter statement presents a highly-infrequent occurrence. As the Confessional is moderated, very few libelous posts persist online for more than a few hours, and for this reason it is unlikely that most students perusing the Confessional would ever witness such an incident themselves. A more cogent explanation for this motivation seems to be that it is based on a social understanding of the website present on campus, rather than on individual evaluations of the Confessional. It seems that students who choose to ignore the Confessional use not only their own experiences, but also draw on those of their friends' and acquaintances' in their decision.

Table 6 confirms the role of social networks in determining Confessional usage. Respondents who reported only reading, but not posting on, the Amherst Confessional rated their friends' suggestion higher than any other answer choice describing their motivations for reading the website. Beyond purely psychological motivations, it becomes clear that a student's likelihood to read the Confessional is also a function of friends' attitudes toward the website. Nonetheless, individual psychology does determine engagement with the website: readers also seem to acknowledge the fact that the Confessional generates no utility to them in particular, giving high ratings to the statement according to which the website gives them "something to do." This result fits well with the low ratings received by possible "practical" reasons for reading the Confessional, which students find to be neither a "good place to discuss your opinions," nor useful in "finding out what's going on on campus," nor even a good source of "juicy gossip." Rather, readers appear drawn to the website because of its entertainment value, as their rating of the Confessional as "funny and entertaining" demonstrates. It is in this light, I argue, that the high interest in other Amherst students' thoughts emerging from 6 should be seen. At a higher-education institution that promotes the exchange of ideas through numerous channels, an internet forum will not serve its audience primarily as a means of either information or intellectual discussion, or of information. Instead, an anonymous website like the Confessional will generate, I argue, interest in the discussion of socially taboo subjects, whose approach in a public, academic setting would not be

Answer choice	Average rating (1-not at all /5-completely)
"The discussions are not engaging enough."	3.66
"It's not a good forum for discussion."	4.49
"The Confessional brings out the worst in Amherst students."	4.29
"I don't like the kind of people who post."	3.77
"I would like to post but do not have the time."	1.42
"I can't think of any reason in particular."	2.21

Table 7: Reasons given for not posting on the Amherst Confessional. Answers collected from users who read but do not post on the website.

possible.

Table 7 suggests a strong separation between those respondents who only read the Confessional, and those who also post content on the website. The statement "I would like to post but do not have the time." rates only 1.42 on a scale of 1 to 5, only 7 respondents out of 97 giving it a rating of 3 ("undecided") or higher. This result suggests a deeper fracture between the motivations of readers and posters in using the Confessional, a hypothesis also confirmed by the low rating received by the statement "I can't think of any reason in particular." Once again, the statements whose evaluation is likely to be a result of direct experience ("The discussions are not engaging enough," "I don't like the kind of people who post."), receive high ratings, which are nonetheless lower than the ratings received by statements which are likely to be social evaluations of the website: "The Confessional brings out the worst in Amherst students," and "It's not a good forum for discussion." The same pattern persists here – as was the case with those users choosing

Answer choice	Average rating (1-not at all /5-completely)
"It's a way for me to spill out problems and express my opinions."	2.50
"I post in response to offensive statements."	3.15
"I just want to make fun of other posters."	2.46
"The Confessional allows me to say things that are true but not socially acceptable at Amherst."	2.51

Table 8: Reasons given for posting on the Amherst Confessional.

to ignore the website – of engagement being contingent on each user's social location in the campus community.

In Table 8 we come to self-reported reasons for posting content on the website. A particularly interesting finding is the fact that the highest rating was received by the statement "I post in response to offensive statements," which suggests the salience of "trolling" – heightened by anonymity – as an explanation for the high level of activity on the website, as compared to other online discussion platforms. As Watt et. al argue, "normative behaviour in anonymous CMC is increased under conditions of group salience."(Watt et al., 2002, 71) Our findings are consistent with this thesis, according to which a well-constituted group such as that of the Amherst student body should display a high degree of reactivity against postings deemed to be offensive and contrary to the spirit of the institution. The three other reasons offered to our posters each receive moderate ratings, hinting at the multiple, complex motivations individual users have for posting on the website. With these findings on the dynamics of Confessional usage in mind, we will proceed

to examine the content of the Amherst Confessional.

5   Analyzing the Discourse of the Confessional

Online environments present a particularly exciting opportunity to the social researcher, as they provide her or him with unmediated access to a nearly-comprehensive record of all communication. Such is the case of the Amherst Confessional, a website which offers a detailed listing of most previous messages posted on the website. The current version of the Confessional does not entirely an exact image of the genuine, meaningful communication conducted through the website however. As previously mentioned, injurious postings can be reported by individual readers and are typically censored by the website's administrator. Moreover, the website is strewn with a great quantity of "spam" messages which make a direct analysis difficult in the very least. The anonymous nature of the website presents one supplemental challenge – connecting the content with its originators in order to provide necessary context for a pertinent analysis. Although we can never know who the individual users posting the content actually were, we use our survey of Confessional users as a way of overcoming this defficiency in subsection 5.1, while in section 5.2 we proceed to an exploratory content-analysis of the Confessional's manifest content.

Answer choice	Percentage
Personal and Family Problems	22%
Love, Sex and Relationship Issues	80%
Race, Class and Sexuality	53%
Campus Events and Parties	49%
Individual Students and Faculty	61%
Other Colleges and their Students	22%

Table 9: Reader interest. Percentages represent readers (non-posters) answering Yes to the question "Do you regularly read threads about...?"

5.1 Survey Findings

Our survey confirms the importance of anonymity in shaping the function of the Amherst Confessional. The survey asked those respondents who reported reading but not posting on the Confessional, what kind of content they typically read on the website (Table 9). As the findings demonstrate, the category "Love, Sex and Relationship Issues" elicits the highest level of interest among Confessional readers, a result hardly surprising given the young-adult population that undoubtedly makes up the bulk of Confessional users. While the fact that college students would be interested in issues tied to love and sex is not exactly a ground-breaking finding, it is relevant to our discussion to highlight the role anonymity plays in facilitating exchanges on a subject fraught with anxieties and taboos even in what is considered a sexually progressive environment, the college campus. The discussion of the second-most popular subject – "Individual Students and Faculty" – is also directly contingent on complete anonymity; as previously mentioned,

Answer choice	Percentage
Personal and Family Problems	37%
Love, Sex and Relationship Issues	70%
Race, Class and Sexuality	30%
Campus Events and Parties	22%
Individual Students and Faculty	33%
Other Colleges and their Students	8%

Table 10: Poster interest. Percentages represent posters of new content (as opposed to those who only write in reply to other students' "confessions") answering Yes to the question "Have you started threads about...?"

discussions of individuals in the campus community could become subject of academic prosecution under the Amherst College *Statement of Respect for Persons.* Two other sets of subjects figure prominently in the interests of Confessional readers: the social issues tied to race, class and sexuality, as well as discussions of parties and other events happening on the Amherst campus. The presence of these two subjects is not surprising given the interest they normally elicit on the Amherst campus – what is significant for the effect of anonymity is the fact that they draw less attention than the "Love, Sex and Relationship Issues" and "Individual Students and Faculty" categories.

Table 10 confirms a similar hierarchy of interest regarding Confessional content. Most respondents who acknowledged starting threads (posting new "confessions") on the website reported "Love, Sex and Relationship Issues" as a frequent subject of their postings. An interesting disparity emerges between tables 9 and 10 regarding the topic of "Individual Students and

Faculty," on which only a third of posters of new content reported starting threads as compared to a double percentage in the case of readers interested in the subject. This imbalance suggests that while the Confessional does not typically draw a wide audience, postings about individual students or faculty have the potential of attracting more interest than other typical content, amplifying the noxious effect the website can have on the reputations of victims of online defamation. A similar imbalance between reader and poster interest appears in the case of three other categories – "Race, Class and Sexuality;" "Campus Events and Parties," and "Other Colleges and their Students," suggesting once more the creation of an audience around subjects that could – at least when attacked from some angles – negatively affect the reputation or academic career of posters or their friends' if discussed without the advantage of anonymity. Finally, we notice an inverse imbalance regarding the subject of "Personal and Family Problems," on which 37% of the relevant group of posters start threads, to which only 22% of Confessional readers regularly devote their attention. Somehow ironically, the website seems to draw less interest from its reading audience precisely in the area where of personal issues, which the idea of a "Confessional" suggests as being the primary topic of discussion.

5.2   Exploratory Content Analysis

We have now established that a small group of Amherst students make up the Confessional's core group of users. When compared to the overall Amherst

population, readers and posters alike tend to be male; when taken separately as a group, posters tend to be made up of a higher proportion of whites and Asians than is the case with the aggregate student body; they also reliably tend to be part of the Classes of '10 and '11, and to have lower-than-average Grade-Point Averages. All Confessional users are primarily interested in discussions of love, sex and relationship issues, with often-defamatory discussions of individual students taking second place in the hierarchy of reader interest. With these considerations in mind we can set out to analyze the content of the Amherst Confessional, or in the very least that portion of website postings to which a user has immediate access. One final, necessary step before we proceed in this direction is a discussion of methodology, however.

5.2.1 Data Collection and Methodology

Though it may not seem obvious to an outside observer, building a dataset represents a challenge in performing content analysis on a website like the Amherst Confessional. All the confessions are freely available on the website, with the exception of those deemed particularly offensive and censored by the webmaster. They are however available only in HTML format, which I had to convert into plain text using the HTML2TXT utility before further processing, a relatively easy step compared to the task of data extraction. From over 10,000 text files generated, each containing one confession and the attached comments, I proceeded to extract the meaningful text, with the use of several VBA (Visual Basic for Applications) which wrote the relevant

content into a master MS Excel workbook.

The more delicate task of semantic pre-processing follows data collection. Similarly to other discussion boards, the Confessional suffers from spam. The kind of spam found on the Confessional is of a different nature, however. Thankfully, because the website is accessible only from Campus IP addresses, no commercial spam has made its way to the Confessional. Two other kinds of irrelevant content can be found on the discussion board, however. Postings of the first type, inside jokes represent multiple repetitions of the same terms in different instances. To filter out the disproportional effect such repetitions could have on my analysis, I have gone to eliminating the duplicate postings (either confessions or comments) across the dataset. By this procedure I managed to cut down my dataset from approximately 45,000 individual postings to well under 30,000. The second type of spam, originating on open-content websites such as Wikipedia or Project Gutenberg presents a challenge of a less-than-trivial nature, and filtering has been imperfect. Even with open-content spam present on the website, content analysis findings will maintain their reliability. The text copied-and-pasted by disgruntled users from elsewhere on the internet appears to be drawn from a wide variety of source, and while the presence of this type of content may increase the "noise" found in the analysis' results, these results may still be regarded as reliable, because of the random nature of the "spam." Thus processed, the text present on the Confessional can be treated as a corpus of text, on which we will perform an exploratory but revealing set of analyses.

5.2.2 Findings

Although the frequency list represent perhaps the simplest tool of corpus analysis, using this technique yields some useful results regarding the general themes present in the corpus. From Table 11 we can once again see that sex, romantic love and gender represent the most important topics of discussion on the Confessional, a finding congruent with earlier survey findings. The presence of a great number of expletives also once again suggests the effect of anonymity, this characteristic of the website allowing not just for the discussion of socially unacceptable subjects, but also for the use of socially unacceptable language. Race seems to be the second dominant topic, focused particularly on the situation of African Americans at the College and beyond. A case by-case reading of the occurrences of the keyword black confirms the words racial significance. Sexuality appears to be another controversial issue, denoted by the popularity of a pejorative term. This finding confirms our results regarding reader interest (Table 9) and our hypothesis on the subject having a comparatively higher audience than other topics. Finally, and rather unsurprisingly, Confessional posters do seem to like talking a lot about Amherst as an institution, and possibly as a town.

Naturally, counting words represents only a crude starting point for an analytical effort of Confessional content, which in this exploratory stage has inherent flaws in its design. For one, we see little information about individual students or faculty, even though this subject was identified as drawing the interest of a large proportion of both Confessional readers and posters. This

Rank		Frequency	Word
with	without		
"grammatical" words			
1	24	2328	people
2	84	829	girls
3	86	783	f**k
4	90	735	love
5	91	732	f***ing
6	93	724	guys
7	97	717	guy
8	100	694	feel
9	105	669	girl
10	106	656	someone
11	108	631	say
12	114	583	black
13	118	552	life
14	120	545	amherst
15	123	534	right
16	126	526	Amherst
17	128	525	see
18	129	524	s**t
19	131	519	better
20	132	516	person
21	133	512	into
22	134	511	does
23	135	506	sex
24	143	480	mean
25	149	455	friends
26	153	449	f*g
27	154	447	pretty
28	158	427	school
29	159	425	white
30	163	414	man
31	164	413	hot
32	167	407	hate
33	197	328	work
34	199	326	campus
35	204	313	world

Table 11: Frequency list for words appearing on the Amherst Confessional.

failure can be explained both on the account of such discussions lacking any clear lexical markers, as the topics of race or sexuality posess, and as a result of the website administrators' moderation of posts injurious towards individual Amherst students, faculty or staff. If anything, this exploratory analysis reveals the need for a more in-depth investigation of the website's content, which could potentially yield more revealing results.

6   Conclusions

This study has confirmed, by-and-large, the hypotheses suggested by specialty literature regarding the role of anonymity on the Amherst Confessional. As we have seen, the technical characteristics of the Confessional – an anonymous, closed-group and asycnhronous environment – exert capital influence on the content and the audience of the website. Anonymity, in particular, proves to be crucial to this thesis, as this characteristic allows for the discussion of sensitive topics – such as sexuality, gossip or issues related to race, class or sexuality – without the posters' fear of retribution. As the previous chapter has shown, even when few users post on one particular topic – such as gossip about individual students – the content can attract wide readership if its nature is particularly suited for discussion only in the anonymous context of the Confessional.

"Cyberbole" or – in our case – the amplification of offline behaviors is another theme present in our findings. For one, the closed-group environment of

the website results in a high degree of reactivity among individual users, who post against content that is deemed to be contrary to the institutional values of the College. And while there is a clearly-indentifiable tendency towards normative behavior on the website, a countervailing trend is the breaking of taboos associated with anonymity, reflected, for instance, in the use of sexual expletives or racial epithets. The characteristic contentious nature of the website results from the clash of these two trends, each subsumed to the technical characteristics of the website.

Heightening the ambiguous nature of the website are the issues of deception and performance, which further cloud meaning on the Confessional. In this paper I have put forward the reading according to which no decoding is necessary (or even possible) when it comes to the issue of whether individual postings represent genuine opinions or not. Rather, I contend – based on survey findings – that the ambiguous nature of online content makes its audience highly skeptical about the veracity of any postings, even those that are sincere. Entertainment, rather than discussion, appears the main function of the Confessional, and for this reason we should treat Confessional content as a function of the website's technical characteristics, instead of taking it as a reading of the thoughts of Amherst students.

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