Fishing for Likes: Towards an Understanding of the Social Media Culture of Anglers.

A.W.F. Wedgbury

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This Thesis is dedicated to my dad, David Wedgbury. He could never really figure out why I was so passionate about studying and worried about my decision to give up what he saw as a 'good job' to work in social media and angling. Our last discussion was an argument about leaving my well-paid job to go and work in angling communications. We left on bad terms, and within 48hrs he was dead. Although he is not here, he has been with me throughout this journey as the self-critical voice in my head. I thank him for the stubbornness, self-determination and single-mindedness (all inherited from him) that has got me to this point. An achievement he could probably never have imagined for me. We may not have always got on, but he will always be missed. Thank you, Dad!

Abstract

With the advent of social media, participation in online groups has become an essential and enjoyable aspect of the recreational activities of many individuals. Anglers are no exception to this and have eagerly embraced the online world to discuss and supplement their physical world activities. Online, anglers often form large groups that are highly specialised, requiring a depth of knowledge and understanding of the activity to effectively participate in the community. Whilst many leisure activities have been explored considering their social media activity, angling remains under-researched in this respect.

Following a period of decline in angling participation, with official Environment Agency figures showing a drop in licence sales of more than 180000 since 2010 (Government, 2020), the recent COVID-19 pandemic saw an increase in participation following the national lockdown (Environment Agency, 2020) which seems to have been triggered by online angling communication through social media during the lockdown.

This thesis answers the question: "How does angling knowledge facilitate participation within social media groups that form around recreational angling, and to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in such groups?". The opportunity to ask this question was only made possible by the circumstances caused by the COVID-19 pandemic and the resultant national lockdown, which saw recreational fishing effectively banned for the first time in more than 400 years of history.

This temporary cessation of physical world angling saw an upturn in angling interaction in online space, which exposed the mechanics of recreational activity online and demonstrated a recreational career amongst anglers enacted through virtual space and facilitated through online groups. The research demonstrates a transformation in physical world activities, which is essential for online participation. It finds that online world activities act as avatars of their physical world counterparts, becoming distinct recreational modalities in their own right.

Acknowledgements

Completing this thesis has been a long and arduous journey, one which I often felt I was taking alone. However, my lack of ability to see the army of people supporting me was because they were all behind me, pushing me on to achieve a long-held ambition. While so many people have helped, it would be remiss of me to forget one man who could not be part of this journey but was vital in setting me on the path that led here. My father, David Wedgbury, encouraged me to fish from an early age and was a frequent companion on fishing trips. Dad passed away the day before I began my first paid job in angling. Our last conversation was an argument about giving up a good job for fishing. Not a day goes by that I do not remember him and our conversations.

My partner, Lisa, took his place as my supporter through the ups and downs of research and deep involvement in the strange world of online angling. She has supported my ambitions and been my main cheerleader throughout the almost four years that it has taken me to complete this work. Without her, I would not have taken the first step on this very long journey that, whilst culminating in the last four years, has taken more than twelve years of my and her life. Of course, my children, Madison, James & stepdaughter Kyra, have been a constant source of inspiration to me, sometimes bemused but always supportive of my work. It is a wonderful thing when a father can genuinely say that his children have become his heroes. None of this could have happened without my mother, Patricia, without whom I would not be here on this journey. It is always such a challenge to try to write acknowledgements because this thesis, like the thesis of so many Doctoral students before me, has emerged not only from my research but also from the support of literally countless other individuals, all of whom have played a part, big or small, in creating what I now present.

These are the people I have known much of my life, the people who call themselves relatives or partners and, as such, have little choice in the time and support they have given. Of course, the most critical individuals are those who did not even know me at the outset of this journey. These people have attentively read every formative chapter and paragraph that I have written, scratched their heads at wild ideas, and gently nudged or less gently pointed out mistakes that I have made. Of course, I

speak of my supervisory team. I am not sure there will ever be words to thank Professor Győző Molnár (director of studies) or Dr Geoff Kohe enough, both of whom took a chance on me at the outset and made this thesis possible. Thank you also to Dr Dave Harte, who has kindly offered his expert eye in social media matters.

If one were to take the time to thank every individual who has offered some portion of their time to help me during the research, I could fill another thesis simply by naming and thanking them for their input. Sadly, I do not have the luxury of such space. In closing, however, I have to thank the good people of *Fishamo* who have participated and given so freely of their time contributing to the group. These are truly the people who created this thesis; without them, this work would not have been possible.

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Chapter 1: Introduction

My experience with angling began before the internet was widely available, in the mid to late eighties, when there was little to do for children in a small town like mine. There are entire books on childhood in the 1980s (*e.g.,* Johnson, 2012). However, my memory of this time is of imagination and adventure in the absence of computer games that were still unaffordable for the average family. In my area, many families were struggling to make ends meet whilst claiming government benefits (Pettinger, 2017), which meant that we often prioritised food over toys. Times were not always so financially challenging, however. By the mid-80s, life in my family was improving. Toys that had once been a luxury were now within reach, as was the possibility to contemplate our leisure time. I recall a fad for collecting 'Garbage-Pail Kids' and other such trading cards (Pinto, 2016), and, for a time, my group of friends and I became deeply involved in Dungeons and Dragons (Gygax, 1974). However, even the unlimited world of our imaginations soon became too confining for us. All of that changed when a friend introduced us to fishing. He had been purchased a fishing rod in an attempt by his father to instil enthusiasm for fishing in his son. His father was a keen angler and an active participant in the local angling community. At the time, the angling community revolved around the local 'Sports & Social Club'. Sports and social clubs are the types of setting where the great and the good of the local angling fraternity have gathered since at least the industrial revolution to discuss angling and share stories about their fishing (Locker, 2014). Participation in this community, the latest fishing gear and even bait were out of reach for most of us, but things were beginning to change.

We were living in a burgeoning time for electronic and digital technology. We were not quite there yet, but the first green shoots of the computer technology we know today were all around us. For the first time, in the form of ZX Spectrum and Commodore computers, affordable computing was coming into domestic settings. We became more comfortable with the flashing lights and whirring sounds of software stored on audio cassette tapes. In the late 1980s, we could not have known it, but we were on the verge of a computing revolution that would change our lives and how we see and interact with everything around us.

The way we spent our leisure time too was on the verge of significant change. Not only in the form of the new games and hobbies that the technology itself was to bring but also in the form of the internet, which would allow us, for the first time in history, to access information from around the globe quickly and in great detail. No longer were our recreational activities strictly local. Angling had its magazines (such as the long-standing Angling Times (Founded in 1953) and the Anglers Mail (1964 – 2020)), and anglers were very aware of other anglers around the country. However, I cannot think of anyone who might have spared a moment to imagine how anglers in other parts of the world participated in the activity. The fish we pursued was the standard coarse fish[1], there were carp anglers in the 80s too, but ambitions of catching anything over 20lb were mere fantasy, the preserve of a select few anglers in what then felt like far-flung parts of the United Kingdom. There seemed to be quite a social divide in angling, even in the 80s. Midlanders' (The areas now collectively known as the West and East Midlands) mainly fished for coarse fish, whilst those in the more rural areas had the pleasure, due to better habitat and lower levels of pollution, of fishing for the game species of fish. It had been that way since the industrial revolution when men in industrial areas were encouraged to fish as a release valve for their aggression (Locker, 2014, p. 10). It had stayed that way in a world without the possibility of almost instantaneous worldwide communication, giving game anglers an appearance of 'Posh' in the Midlands. At the same time, coarse anglers maintained their traditional persona as cloth cap-wearing older men waiting in the rain for something to bite.

In the mid-90s, those computers which had almost entirely invaded our homes had developed further. Now they could download, via a cacophony of whirls and clicks, information from other parts of the world! In what felt like an instant then but would feel like a lifetime now, we could access the web pages of people and organisations we had never heard of. This new technology was the dawn of what was generally known as web 1.0 (Getting, 2007) when the web was 'read-only'. In these early days, communication was essentially between the website creator and the website reader. However, it was not long before the dawn of Web 2.0 technology (Getting, 2007), which made possible a two-way, free-flowing exchange of communication across the

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[1] Coarse fish can generally be seen as any freshwater fish other than those belonging to the salmon and trout families.

internet by the end of the 20th century (Etzioni and Etzioni.O., 1999; Brown, 2004)(Etzioni and Etzioni.O., 1999; Brown, 2004). This development truly revolutionised the internet and made the creation of a thesis, like the one before you now, possible and necessary.

For the first time in history, the world felt accessible to those of us for whom the technology was available and affordable, to communicate at high speeds, not simply on an individual basis, but in mass. Now, it was possible to instantly pick up, share, and implement knowledge from around the world. Gurshuny (2002, p. 65) notes that advances in mass media affected leisure both directly and indirectly. These effects became more apparent as social media platforms appeared in the first decade of the 21st century. Now everyone could connect and share posts about their daily lives with friends and family, both close to home and further afield. This newfound ability to share every aspect of one's life may have contributed in part to an increased need for information, for something to share, and it seems reasonable that individuals would turn to their physical world hobbies to fill such a need.

Amongst the recreationalists and newly established social media natives were anglers who, as participants in a sport that had long used visual imagery and the written word for sharing information about their activity, seem to have found the shift to social media easy. Anglers seemed to shift from the traditional pub or social club meeting environments described by Locker (2014). They were now increasingly using the internet by participating in User Networks (USENET)[2], online forums, and social media as a supplementary device to engage in conversation about their recreational activity (Stolk, 2010).

Amalgamating the physical and virtual worlds described above, this Thesis focuses on the experience of recreational anglers who engage in the social aspects of their activity through engagement with fellow anglers through social media, primarily Facebook. Observations were made over one year within a Facebook group (*Fishamo*) specifically established to engage in social discussion about angling activity. This group

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[2] Usenet is the earliest form of group communication implemented on the internet, it was first established in 1979 (predating the internet itself) and was created by two students of Duke University in North Carolina (Jim Ellis and Tom Truscott).

consisted of approximately 2500 anglers who discussed their interest in coarse angling and, on occasion, participation in other forms of recreational angling. The aim was to understand the methods outdoor recreationalists, particularly anglers, engage to maintain social participation within a changing contemporary society and how these changing modalities of participation impact the activity within a contemporary context. Brown (2019, p. 7) notes, 'There has been a decline in fishing licence sales since 2010' (Figure 1). Brown (2019, p. 7) further suggests that this decline may have been due to 'uncertain economic and political context; high levels of inactivity amongst some sections of the population; decline in club membership; and an ageing population.'. If the observable decline in angling participation continues unabated, the future is somewhat uncertain for the activity. It is worth noting here that the advent of the COVID-19 pandemic saw an upturn in angling participation (Environment Agency, 2020); however, at the time of writing, not enough time has passed to understand the long-term sustainability of this upturn.
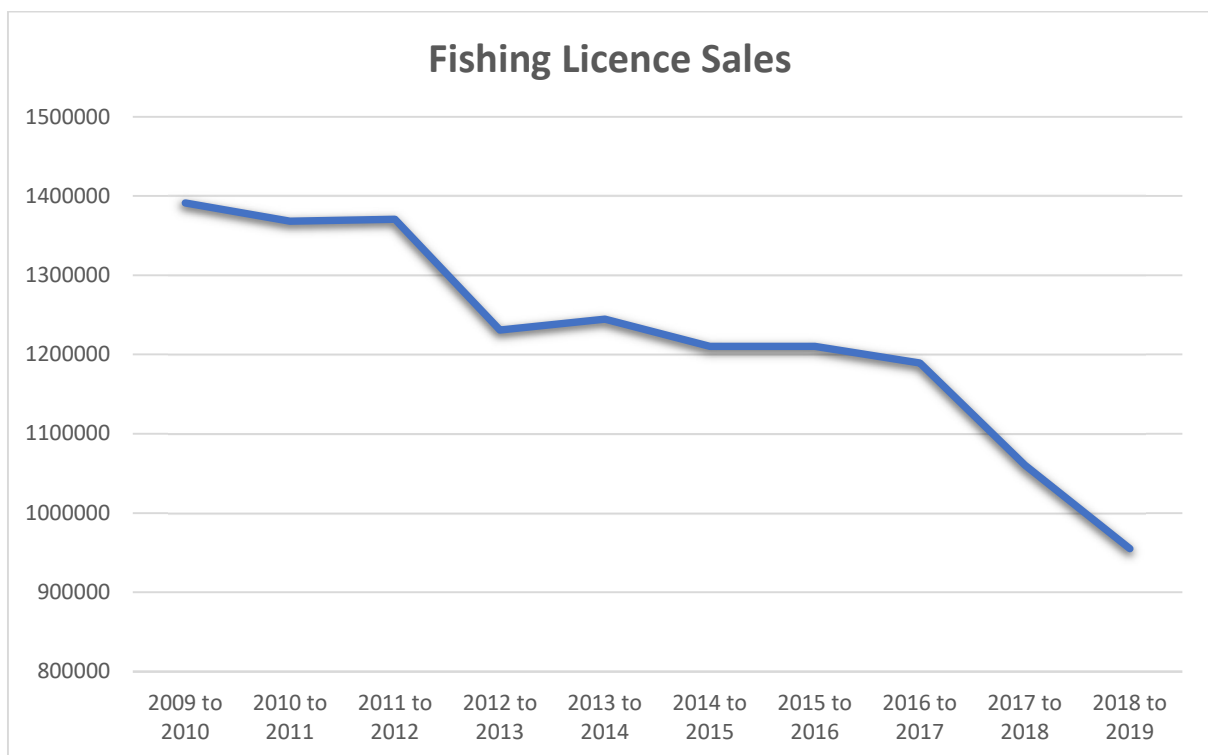
Figure 1 The decline in Fishing licence sales since 2009 (Government, 2020)

  I contend that the decline in angling participation results from early difficulties within angling governance (*i.e.,* The Angling Trust) to adapting to developing trends within social interaction modalities amongst anglers. I posit that social media may serve

as an additional meeting place for the angling community whose social gatherings once inhabited pubs and meeting halls and suggest that some anglers have simply moved onto the virtual space. To reach them, those charged with the responsibility for angling governance must adapt to meet participants where they are rather than hope that they will return to traditional social interaction. This research aimed to develop a deeper understanding of the online angling communities and understand how social interaction within a virtual environment can help facilitate and even protect physical world participation, which many anglers enjoy. It can do this through outreach and awareness activities aimed at new and existing groups of potential participants. My research has uncovered a social world that bears both similarities and striking differences to the physical world of recreational angling participation. The insight presented here adds to our understanding of some of the social aspects of angling, particularly within a contemporary context. The findings may enable future practitioners to devise effective methodologies to engage existing anglers and recruit new participants to the activity.

I approach this Thesis broadly through Netnography (Kozinets, 2006, 2015, 2019). However, some more recently evolved Netnographic concepts such as Autonetnography (Mkono, Ruhanen and Markwell, 2015; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018; Villegas, 2018) are also employed and have enabled me, as the researcher, to account for my deep involvement within the subject of this research. However, Netnography and Autonetnography in isolation would not suffice to conduct and analyse the data within this research project. A broader image of the online social world was only made possible through the consideration of the complementary theories of Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 1982, 2001, 2007) and Recreational Specialisation (Bryan, [1979] 2000, 2008). These constructs are the lenses that have enabled me to situate social media interaction within the ongoing recreational career of anglers. Furthermore, the battles for status I have observed within the virtual space offered by social media (see Chapters 4 & 5) have enabled a revisiting and consideration of Veblen's ([1899] 1994) 'Theory of the Leisure Class' when considering angler's wish to advance their online angling reputation and social standing. At the intersection of these three ideas, facilitated by the application of Netnography, I have found an increased understanding of the enactment of leisure activities online, which is a unique contribution of this Thesis.

What follows will serve as a foundation for this work. After first defining the research question, I discuss significant literature to contextualise the landscape of this study before finally outlining each subsequent chapter of the work.

The research questions.

This research sets out to answer "How does angling knowledge facilitate participation within social media groups that form around recreational angling, and to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in such groups?".

The research initially set out to understand how recreational activity participants, particularly anglers, use social media as a tool to facilitate their social interaction with their chosen activity. However, during the early stages of this research, the COVID-19 pandemic struck. The crisis fundamentally changed many people's modalities of participating in leisure and recreational activities (*e.g.,* Comerford, 2020; Mowatt, 2020; van Leeuwen *et al.*, 2020) and allowed me to reconsider my questions regarding the unique situation the pandemic caused.

Thanks, in part, to the tight restrictions imposed during the COVID-19 pandemic. I have explored more than anglers' involvement in online groups to supplement their physical world angling. The restrictions imposed by the pandemic allowed for consideration of how individuals have come to enact their leisure activities online and how, for some, the online activity becomes as or more important than physical world participation. This exploration was possible because the research took place during tight restrictions, tantamount to a ban on participation. The sudden absence of physical world angling allowed for a clearer observance of the disconnect between physical world activity and online activity.

Angling Demographics

Angling within the UK is dominated by middle-aged, white men. Indeed, the national angling survey conducted in 2012 (Brown, 2012b) found that 97% of anglers were male with an average age of 51 and 95% of participants were white. These statistics demonstrate the imbalance in terms of age and gender and suggest that angling has not reached a diverse and balanced demographic with its marketing efforts. The

gender imbalance present in angling has been considered by other researchers including Burkett & Carter (2022, p. 1013) who note that women in angling are 'poorly understood and often portrayed by contemporary fishing media as secondary to, or in competition with, the dominant male experience'. This male-dominant tendency is further investigated by Bull (2009) who notes the prominence of men within angling, specifically in the south-west of England. However, this male dominance within the angling world is not exclusively associated with UK angling. The Australian government note that the general demographic of angling is still male but estimate that the female angling community may amount to 20%-30% (Change Our Game, 2022). When we compare angling's current demographic to the demographic of Facebook (napoleoncat.com, 2022), we can safely argue that there are ample opportunities for angling to reach a younger and more diverse clientele than those who might be attracted through traditional angling media such as the specialised angling press.
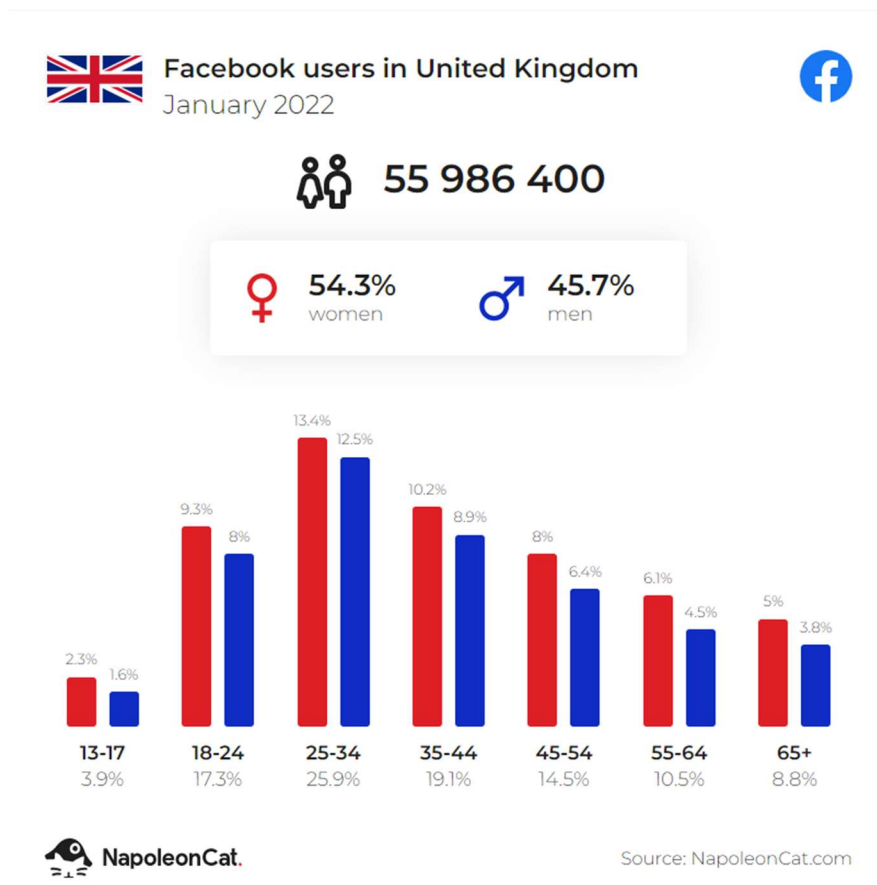
To reach a wider audience through social media is of importance to angling if it is to survive as a leisure activity. The data shows that in 2020, approximately 7.5 million people in the UK participated in angling. This represents a decrease from the previous year, where the number of anglers was around 8.2 million (Statista, 2022). This decrease in angling participation might be attributed to the COVID-19 pandemic related restrictions, which led to the closure of many fishing venues. However, there was a small increase in 2021 lending strength to the Environment Agencies (2020) claims that more people were being attracted to angling after the pandemic, this may have been due to many people being keen to return to outdoor activity immediately after the lockdown. However, this eagerness to return to outdoor activity seems to be short lived as there is more decline in 2022.

Angling as a Gendered Activity

The link between gender and recreational angling has been studied and most of the research finds links between media representation and angling participation. Carini &Weber (2017) found that traditional gender roles and stereotypes can impact how individuals view and participate in angling. This type of gender representation might be at the root of the general lack of participation within angling of females.

A recent study, published by Recreational Boating & Fishing Foundation (Takemefishing.org., 2019) found that men and women have different motivations for fishing and that these differences are important for understanding and addressing barriers to participation. For example, the study found that women are more likely to see fishing as a way to spend time with family and friends, while men are more likely to see it as a way to catch fish. In spite of these observations that women often have their own ways of engaging with the act of fishing which, in themselves does not make angling innately masculine, the sport is still often viewed from a masculine viewpoint.

Studies have shown that the construction of masculinity in recreational angling is influenced by various cultural, social, and historical factors. For instance, researchers have argued that the ideals of masculinity in recreational angling are shaped by the historical association between fishing and work (Young *et. el*. 2016). Historically, fishing has been considered a form of manual labour and has been associated with working-class masculinity (Locker, 2014). However, with the increasing

commodification of fishing and its transformation into a leisure activity, fishing has become associated with middle-class masculinity (Mordue, 2016).

The discourse of masculinity in recreational angling is also influenced by the media representation of fishing (Carini and Weber, 2017). Popular media, including fishing magazines, TV shows, and advertisements, often depict fishing as a solitary, male-dominated activity. This representation reinforces the idea that fishing is a symbol of independence, strength, and masculinity. Moreover, fishing gear and accessories are marketed specifically to men and often feature masculine imagery and language. This further perpetuates the association between fishing and masculinity.

Despite the dominant discourse of masculinity in recreational angling, some scholars have argued that fishing can also challenge and subvert traditional notions of masculinity (Burkett & Carter, 2022). For instance, some forms of fishing that are traditionally seen as more suitable for the feminine, such as fly-fishing (Fennell & Birbeck, 2019). Moreover, fishing can be seen as a form of emotional labour that involves the development of emotional connections with the environment, other people, and the fish themselves (Snyder, 2007). This emotional labour can challenge the traditional association between masculinity and emotional stoicism.

In conclusion, recreational angling is a complex and multifaceted activity that is shaped by various cultural, social, and historical factors. The construction of masculinity in recreational angling is influenced by the historical association between fishing and work, media representation, and the marketing of fishing gear. Although fishing is traditionally associated with masculinity, it can also challenge and subvert traditional notions of masculinity through emotional labour and the engagement in forms of fishing that are traditionally seen as feminine.

Franklin (1999) also links media and gender to angling and argues that traditional societal constructions of masculinity are often intertwined with an attitude of dominance and control over the nonhuman. He examines how this attitude is reinforced through cultural representations of the nonhuman, such as in advertising and media, and how it impacts individual and societal attitudes towards the natural world. Franklin

(1999) also analyses how these societal constructions of masculinity are challenged and transformed by environmental and animal rights movements.

Franklin (1999) also examines the relationship between masculinity and fishing. He argues that traditional societal constructions of masculinity often include an attitude of dominance and control over the nonhuman, and this attitude is reinforced through cultural representations of fishing, such as in media and advertising. Franklin (1999) examines how fishing is often portrayed as a masculine activity, with images of rugged men with big catches, and how this reinforces societal expectations of men to be strong, powerful, and in control. He also explores how this attitude is challenged by the environmental and animal rights movements, which promote sustainable and ethical fishing practices.

Aims & Objectives

The primary aim of this research is to understand how anglers, as leisure participants, enact their leisure activity online. Therefore, the main objective is the observance of interactions within an online angling community. This has been achieved through self-reflection (Chapter 4) and the observation of a group of recreational anglers in a researcher-generated social media group on the Facebook platform (Chapter 5). An additional angle was revealed when considering the method of gamification used in the *Fishamo* Facebook group to maintain engagement during the COVID-19 pandemic (Chapter 6).

A secondary aim of this research is to understand the ways in which those charged with the governance and promotion of angling as a recreational activity have adapted to, and exploited, opportunities offered by social media. It is posited that the main governing body within the UK has effectively deployed social media by adopting a peacetime propaganda style approach to successfully bolster their own position as the premier governing body for recreational activity in the UK (see Chapter 7).

The centrality of Veblen, Bryan and Stebbins.

Central to the theoretical framework of this thesis is the work of Veblen ([1899] 1994), Bryan ([1979] 2008) and Stebbins (1982). By combining the work of these scholars, I map out a mechanism through which online leisure groups, in the case of this

thesis, particularly recreational angling groups enable anglers to enact their recreational activity in the liminal space provided by social media. To this end, each thinker provides a distinct component within the overall mechanism.

Stebbins (1982), although he never referred to online communities, offers a mechanism through which to identify key components of recreational activities and the communities which grow around them online. Specifically, the career-like nature of these activities which Stebbins (1982) defines as 'Serious Leisure' meaning a distinctive career associated with the activity, through which, the individual participant can find themselves engaged in a lifelong recreational career.

Bryan's ([1979] 2008) work enables us to understand the motivation for online participation and provides a recreational specialisation continuum, essentially, a career path which can be mapped onto many recreational types. This continuum was originally developed to enable understanding participation in outdoor activities and referred to a progression within the recreational group due to changing equipment and setting preferences which changed as recreational careers advanced. However, changing preferences were driven by developing skills and the increasing level of commitment to an activity in line with recreational career advancement. This motivation seemed absent in the online worlds inhabited by anglers and required a mechanism through which to explain the recreational progression within online environments.

Such a mechanism was found in the work of Veblen ([1899], 1994) who observed how the wealthy used their ability to engage in leisure activities that were denied to the lower classes to define their identity and status through the power to own and consume luxury goods. A similar form of status display was observed in anglers who participated in the online groups that form around the activity on the Facebook platform.

Whilst all of these theorists were central to my work, it is Bryan ([1979] 2008) who has had the greatest influence on this framework and thesis as it is the 'Recreational Specialisation Continuum' which efficiently models the career stages through which a recreationist may progress within an online space, although it is important to note that the online space was never in the mind of Bryan at the time of creating the recreational specialisation continuum.

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Chapter 2: Literature Review

Robert Stebbins first presented his theory of Serious Leisure to analyse the motivations behind recreationalists involvement in recreational leisure activities in his conceptual statement (1982, p. 251). In this statement, Stebbins draws attention to an unavoidable facet of modern life. As technology supersedes the skills and speeds of humans, we find ourselves with a void where once we found our own identities. Increasingly, this void is filled by participating in leisure activities that restore meaning to our lives. Here, however, Stebbins is speaking about a particular type of leisure activity. 'Serious Leisure' activity distinguishes itself from other types of activity because, as Stebbins (2007, p. xii) notes, it is 'substantial, interesting and fulfilling [enough] in nature for the participant to find a career [in participating][3].'

This very nature of Serious leisure makes the concept important to this research. Stebbins contrasts serious leisure sharply with his counter concept of Casual Leisure (Stebbins, 1997), which Stebbins (2007, p. xii) describes as 'Immediately [and] intrinsically rewarding. Relatively short-lived pleasurable core activity, requiring little or no special training to enjoy it.'. Her, a dichotomy is encountered within this research. While angling fits comfortably into the concept of Serious Leisure, engagement in social media seems to fit more comfortably into casual leisure. Therefore, from Stebbins's perspective, social media activity around specific leisure activities such as angling seems to fit into a grey zone where conflicting modalities of leisure engagement seem to merge.

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[3] Added for clarity.
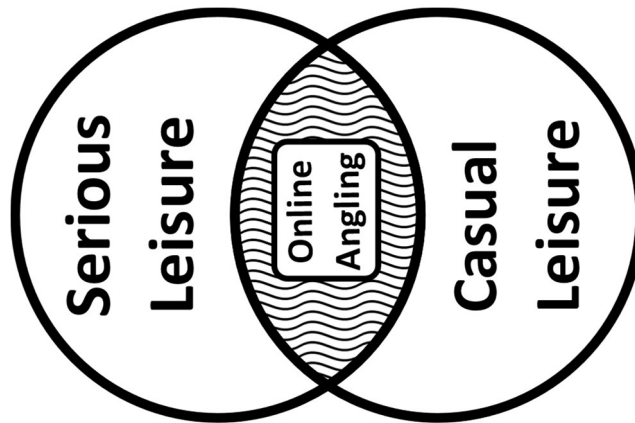
Figure 2 The Merging of Serious & Casual Leisure Modalities.

However, Stebbins's work remains relevant to this Thesis as it establishes the premise that there is a leisure 'career' that recreationalists pursue whilst maintaining amateur involvement, similar to a professional career which we are more accustomed to considering.

Given that this Thesis argues that recreational anglers who participate in the social elements of their activities through social media develop a career therein, a further question presented itself. How is this career enacted online? How do anglers demonstrate their superiority and greater skill over their peers within a non-physical world? I turned to Veblen's ([1899] 1994) work to answer this question. In considering and developing his Theory of the Leisure Class, Veblen held that individuals publicly demonstrated their superiority over others through the display or ownership of certain goods (Conspicuous Consumption) or the expression of certain freedoms (Conspicuous Leisure) that were not available to classes below them. For example, the purchase of fine jewels, whilst useless from the perspective of providing the essentials of life (*i.e.,* food, water and shelter), demonstrates superiority over others by being out of the financial grasp of many classes. Equally, the consumption of time through time spent on leisure demonstrates superiority over other individuals constrained in their leisure time due to the necessities of work.

In the contemporary world, the mechanisation of production and changing modalities of work and leisure have meant that all classes can aspire to engage in many leisure activities which were previously inaccessible to them. Currid-Halkett, (2018) argues that this has led to the emergence of an Aspirational class. The Aspirational class

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do not express their social position by frivolous spending but by the conspicuity of their social choices. I have observed this form of conspicuity within the online angling community. The angling community often writes thousands of words online, debating the intricacies of fish welfare whilst participating in an activity, the sole goal of which is to forcibly remove a living creature from its natural environment in the name of sport.

Given that there may be a driver in the form of the development of a recreational career that exists amongst the online angling community, and there is a potential mechanism by which anglers can display success within this career, a final question emerged during this research. What is the mechanism by which they enact their career in the online space? In a world of social media, devoid of a physical agency, what ranks exist within online angling culture, and how do individuals progress or aspire to progress within their chosen activity. To answer this, I turned to Hobson Bryan ([1979] 2008), who developed his concept of recreational specialisation contemporaneously with Stebbins's development of serious leisure but whose concept provides a clear progression that outdoor recreationalists take through their recreational career.

In this work, I synergise Serious Leisure, Recreational Specialisation, and The Leisure Class Theory. In developing the model presented within this Thesis, it is possible to map the links between the online leisure time of individuals and their physical world recreational activities. I have observed how they influence and shape each other and the lives of both the individual participant and the broader community of both online and physical world participants.

Chapter 3: Methodology.

A cursory search of the Facebook platform will show many groups that form around angling and virtually every other recreational activity. However, the literature regarding the use of Facebook groups to facilitate specific leisure activities is lacking. This lack of research is surprising, as Facebook has made several announcements recognising the importance of groups and has publicly stated its desire to focus more heavily on them in 2019 (Griffin, 2019).

The lack of research may result from the widely varying nature of recreational groups on Facebook. Of course, some recreational activities are more complex than

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others. Some groups, for example, might have a short history and find their focus on a single aspect which may make them less attractive to would-be researchers, or they may simply choose not to have a social media presence at all. However, other recreational activities are more diverse, have a long history and sometimes encompass many subdisciplines. Such activities can be important both recreationally and culturally. Angling is such an activity. Due to its long social history and deep roots in the culture of the United Kingdom and other countries around the world, angling has become an incredibly diverse activity making its study both particularly complex and valuable. Before introducing the other sections of this Thesis, it is, therefore, useful to consider the methodological approach I took in the research, particularly the primary methodological approach of Netnography, which is an approach to the study of the communities that form online.

Early netnographic studies took place in email user groups. For example, Kozinets (1997) focused on X-Files fan culture amongst Usenet fan communities. However, as the internet grew in sophistication, studies encompassed the other ways that individuals interact through digital media, including social media. These studies required specialised methodologies that were flexible and adaptable enough to keep pace with the advancement in technology. Netnography proved its potential in this regard.

My fieldwork took place in a medium-sized online angling group called *Fishamo*. I created the group, and, as such, I am both an intrinsic participant and researcher within this space. My creation of the group raises some ethical and methodological issues that will be explored (See Chapter 3). However, selecting a group of which I am the founder and one of the administrators also has benefits that have been largely unexplored in previous research efforts. One of the primary advantages was the ability to minimise what has been termed by Wallace, Costello and Devine (2018) as the 'Netnographic Slog', that is, the hard work involved in encouraging participants to engage in a newly formed site for netnographic research. This ability to avoid 'Netnographic slog' meant that I could expedite the data collection process making this study more capable of responding quickly to changes in the wider world. For example, this enabled the capture of nuances that occurred during the COVID-19 pandemic, which may not have come to light had there been a need to set up separate interviews

and gather data 'after the fact'. Other advantages included the common issue of access. In 'closed' Facebook groups, the founder has ultimate control over the group's direction. This enhanced access allowed me to record conversations taking place in the group and gave access to supplementary helpful data such as engagement and growth rates which helped me understand the effects that lockdown had on the uptake of membership to the group. The combined advantages allowed for a level of flexibility in the research project, which would have been challenging to pre-plan or, otherwise, build into a more rigid structure. I would argue that the advantage of such flexibility is observable throughout the development of the Thesis and, particularly, the question that it seeks to answer.

Chapter 4: Banter, Rivalry, and Concept Bridges

In this chapter, I consider the links or 'Bridges' that seem to form between our physical recreational worlds and our online recreational worlds and how these links inform how we engage with our activity peer group in virtual spaces.

In developing a semi-auto-netnographic account of my own angling career, I observe some of the many faces of angling and, particularly, the angling activity as it seems to manifest itself in online space. I observe that *Fishamo* has been a continuation of my efforts at self-promotion. Further links are made with how other individuals engage with angling online by drawing upon an incident that occurred early in the formation of *Fishamo* and resulted in an individual's banning from the site for sharing inappropriate material. This banning led to attacks on *Fishamo* and accusations of racism from members of another group where the individual was a member. Ironically, the site the individual turned to to orchestrate these attacks was vehemently racist in the ways they engaged with him, using nicknames and offensive and inaccurate stereotypes in their humour. Observations of the individual's acceptance of clearly racially targeted and motivated nicknames echo the observations of other researchers (*e.g.,* Plester and Sayers, 2007; Collinson, 2016) who argue that such 'banter' and name-calling acts to form tighter bonds within groups. This observation begins to shed light on the dynamics of angling online.

Chapter 6: Nostalgia games and dangerous times.

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In this chapter, I tackle what many anglers claim is a fundamental truth about angling, the spiritual aspect of the activity. Indeed, I observe that, for some, it is an almost religious experience, and, for most, there is an undeniable spiritual aspect to the activity which draws one back to the waterside (Snyder, 2007; Bull, 2009). I observe that there seems to be a desire, conscious or unconscious, for a recreational career enacted online and that this collective recreational career seems to impact the online group.

In this way, it seems that online, both Facebook groups and participants are engaged in a recreational specialisation continuum similar to that initially observed in physical world activities by Bryan ([1979] 2008). Therefore, I posit the existence of what I term a 'Valhalla group'. Highly experienced anglers populate Valhalla groups which other anglers aspire to join. It would seem that this interplay between both groups and individual users enables an angling career progression through online interaction and, ultimately, results in the formation of such Valhalla groups.

Chapter 6: Darkest Hour.

Fishamo had, over its lifetime, become a reasonably successful group enjoying a period of rapid growth even in its darkest days. However, in 2020, the UK was hit by a pandemic of unprecedented ramifications. The need to slow the spread of COVID-19 resulted in the restriction or cancellation of many local, national, or worldwide events. This restriction of physical world angling might have tolled the death knell for angling which had already suffered long term decline. Instead, recreationalists seemed to move online to discuss their past activities nostalgically. For *Fishamo*, this drove a need to engage the spike in angler interaction online; *Fishamo* approached this need through gamification of online activity. By observing a marked increase in activity during the COVID-19 lockdowns, this chapter seems to strengthen the argument for the existence of bridges between the physical world and online activity. In particular, I demonstrate how, in a time of abstinence, angling online still served as a unifying power for anglers who found ways to remain involved in their activity in the face of adversity.

Chapter 7: A 'New Normal': Propaganda and Angling Online in the Post-Pandemic world

Since its formation, the result of the amalgamation of several governing bodies, the Angling Trust has suffered poor support and criticism from the angling community. Some of this criticism comes from the Angling Trusts' funding streams. The trust relies heavily on funding from the Environment Agency, which is the government organisation responsible for rivers. As a result, many critics question their ability to act in the interest of the sport when funding comes from a source (the Environment Agency) that some anglers feel the Angling Trust should be taking the lead in holding to task.

However, during the COVID-19 lockdowns, the Angling Trust seems to have succeeded in employing a propaganda-like approach to dealing with the angling public and the public more widely. In this chapter, I consider this approach in light of a post-pandemic society.

Conclusion.

The title of this Thesis draws attention to its goals. 'Fishing for likes: towards an understanding of the Social Media Cultures of Anglers' was conceived during what feels like simpler times. Angling, whilst in decline, seemed to be the driving force of my work. As a society, we were yet to have experienced the devastating effects of COVID-19, a global pandemic the likes of which few experts or non-experts could have predicted. However, this Thesis evolved with time and gradually developed my understanding of the subject matter into what I present here. Angling has become not the reason for this research but the community through which I have observed and strove to understand the complex interactions within recreationally focused groups, specifically on the Facebook platform. In effect, angling has provided context to the complex world of social media interaction, particularly interaction within groups that revolve around our leisure activities. The content, however, has remained the same for all of us. Like all other research conducted during this time, this research was set against a backdrop of uncertainty, fear, and unprecedented social change, which this research has captured through the angling community's gaze. The opportunity to consider the

intricacies of online life during this time is something that future research may struggle to capture, and research already conducted does not seem to tackle.

The original goal of this Thesis was to gather data from an under-researched group of recreationalists and contribute to the knowledge of a field (the study of online groups) still in its infancy. Theoretically and methodologically, the research sought to advance understanding of how leisure groups interact with digital media and then apply the concepts of 'serious leisure' and 'recreational specialisation' to the field of computer-mediated communication (CMC) for the first time. I intended that outputs would include both academic, practitioner and participant-based presentations and publications. The work aimed to develop a deeper understanding of anglers' online activity, which it was assumed would enable improved communication with the group. The COVID-19 pandemic allowed the consideration of a question regarding a hitherto unconsidered aspect of online interaction surrounding recreational activities: ' What would happen if that activity were taken away from the participants?'. The answers seemed surprising to me. Far from dye off, during the national COVID-19 lockdowns, angling seemed to increase in popularity. We experienced a recreational activity that, when anyone should have felt free to enjoy it, had suffered a long-term decline in participation, amounting to the loss of participants similar in number to the population of a medium-sized city leaving. But then, the sport suddenly flourished in its absence, with the Environment Agency (2020) reporting an upturn in fishing licence sales during and after the lockdown restrictions imposed on outdoor activity. This shift in interest highlighted the possibility that angling online is somehow separate from the activity of angling in the physical world whilst still being strongly connected.

Indeed, an interest in fish and the methods of their capture are the only similarities between the two activities. In the physical world, the catching of the fish serves its own purpose in being gratifying for the individual angler, but, as I found, in the online world of social media angling, the capture of the fish offers another utility, that of giving the individual something of value to share in the online space in which they interact. This difference indicated that I was dealing with two different activities linked only by a singular concept. This link became known to me as the concept bridge, a device that has more utility than merely allowing anglers to share their activity online. The concept bridge facilitates the formation of friendships in the online space by

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providing 'safe' subjects for conversation with strangers outside one's personal life. This realisation enabled me to employ some of the ideas of Veblen ([1899] 1994) to understand the ways that anglers enact their angling in online space to build a career with a straightforward method of progression within their online recreational activity.

This same progression within a career in online recreational activity engagement also illustrated the more significant potential for exploring online recreational worlds. If a recreational career does, indeed, exist for those who engage in discussion about their recreational activity online. In line with Bryan's ([1979] 2008) recreational specialisation continuum, we can assume there must be higher levels of interaction which, in the case of social media, would likely be typified by private groups to which only the elite are permitted to participate. These 'Valhalla Groups' have been constantly just out of reach of this project to explore, but their hypothetical exploration offers ample scope for future research into this field.

Ultimately, the presented Thesis represents a good snapshot during which unprecedented changes within wider society exposed some of the mechanics and nature of online engagement around recreational activities. It allows a brief glimpse into a parallel recreational world linked to the real world by concept bridges that offer those who wish to engage in conversation around angling online to do so regardless of their ability to engage in the actual activity. The findings of this Thesis should allow those charged with the management and promotion of leisure activities to more deeply understand both the links and differences between online and offline audiences and adequately compensate when developing methodologies for interacting with target audiences.

In this introduction, I have given an overview of the Thesis. I have also touched upon the basic structure and work that follows. Next, I will consider the current status of the literature surrounding the Angling activity and social media activity which forms around recreational pursuits online.

Chapter 2: Literature Review

There is an increasing reliance on social and digital media within contemporary societies (Garcia *et al.*, 2009). However, there is very little work outside Stolk's (2010) cursory considerations specifically addressing these technological advancements' role in the angling world. At the same time, similar leisure activities have enjoyed some level of interest within this context (*e.g.,* Olive, 2016; Dumont, 2017). This lack of research has led some within the angling community to speculate on the effects and roles of social media within angling without adequate empirical evidence (*e.g.,* see Knight and Collett, 2012; Knight, 2016). This speculation would seem to represent an under prioritisation in the currently available literature on the role of angling on all aspects of society, including the digital elements.

Angling is an activity with various participation types and levels (Brown *et al.*, 2016). Many anglers consider fishing a 'sport' and participate in angling as a competitive activity. Other anglers see the activity purely as a leisure activity; for both types of anglers, socialisation and sharing of fishing stories play a part in their fishing enjoyment (Stolk, 2010). However, the advent of social media has meant that many anglers have migrated from the traditional meeting places where the social interaction between anglers traditionally took place (Stolk, 2010; Locker, 2014). Instead, these anglers turn to social media for many of the social aspects of their recreation. In keeping with the aims of this research, I am interested in anglers who would see themselves as recreational anglers and supplement their interest by discussing angling in the environment offered by social media. For this reason, I conceptualise angling in this research as a leisure activity. However, I also question the degree to which 'choice' is a factor in the individual's selection of leisure activity.

Leisure has often been considered an activity at the opposite end of the spectrum to work (Stebbins, 2017). Many researchers have considered leisure entirely within the context of this divide (*e.g.,* Haworth and Veal, 2004; Veal, 2019). However, my current research seeks to understand how participation in social media facilitates engagement in the social world of angling and how this influences anglers' views of the activity and their unique place within it. Therefore, it is helpful to consider leisure together with its

relationship to work. Considering leisure and work in this way is particularly relevant in the context of contemporary society, where the lines between amateur and professional participants are often blurred due to the digital engagement opportunities offered by modern social media and the internet. A prevalent and familiar environment where this blurring between leisure and work has taken place has been in the world of food blogging (see Cox and Blake, 2011), where some make a modest living from their online activities. Or, for certain outdoor activities like rock climbing, social media often becomes an intrinsic part of the 'work' of making a living from the activity (Dumont, 2017). This blurring of the lines means that, for some, leisure in the form of social media engagement and work have become inextricably linked, making their division problematic in a contemporary context and blurring the lines when it comes to researching leisure communities online.

The considerations of leisure as a realm of human activity are often the subject of work by scholars with specializations in other fields. As I consider the work/leisure divide and the consumptive nature of leisure, I will not review leisure studies alone. Instead, I will refer to work outside my core focus as appropriate. Of particular importance to this Thesis is the work of Veblen ([1899] 1994), whose 'Theory of the Leisure Class' highlights how individuals signal their social status through leisure. Furthermore, the work of Marx, whose concepts of the 'realm of freedom' and 'realm of necessity' (Veal, 2019), gives a contextual understanding of the Work/Leisure divide and is valuable for establishing a base for this Thesis.

Marx & the Work/Leisure Dichotomy

McDonough (2013) suggests that leisure has been studied as an aspect of human behaviour since Thorstein Veblen's 'The Theory of the Leisure Class' in 1899. However, Veal (2019) demonstrates that the consideration and division of the human experience of life between work and leisure began with the work of Karl Marx and the publication, in 1867, of 'Capital'. The consideration of the work of Marx is relevant to this thesis because Marx was working in a time of great social upheaval and his work helps to provide contextual critique to the industrial revolution, from which contemporary angling practice emerged. Marx divided time into two categories. The first category, the 'realm of necessity', encompasses time dedicated to paid work

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required for maintaining life by providing income to pay for its necessities and non-paid work, which is devoted to the reproduction of labour-power. This 'reproduction of labour-power' (*i.e.,* eating, sleeping, biological reproduction and socialisation of the future labour force) (Heitlinger, 1979) and, whilst unpaid, is seen as essential to the maintenance of society and outside the 'realm of freedom'. The second category that Marx identifies, the 'realm of freedom', includes additional non-paid work which the actor can dedicate to: "education, for intellectual development, for the fulfilment of social functions, for friendly intercourse, for the free play of physical and mental forces" (Marx 1867, quoted in Veal, 2019, p. 2) what we might call 'leisure'. It is helpful to note that the realm of freedom does not imply that leisure activities are selectable at the free will of the actor. Indeed, Kelly (2009) questions the idea of the 'chosenness' of leisure and points out that 'chosenness' within leisure may be illusionary in an industrial and post-industrial society and that free time is dictated to the actor in relation to work. As an illustration, Marx (1932, p. 12) notes:

> '…as soon as the distribution of labour comes into being, each man has a
> particular, exclusive sphere of activity, which is forced upon him and
> from which he cannot escape. He is a hunter, a fisherman, a herdsman, or
> a critical critic, and must remain so if he does not want to lose his means
> of livelihood.'

Marx's words suggest that leisure time is the time that we are not required to work and, at the discretion of our employers, is time away from that which paid work requires of us. However, the choice of leisure, particularly in reference to recreational angling, is not always a choice that the participant can freely make. The notion of leisure being determined, in a historical context, as a tool of control is of relevance to the history of recreational angling. Locker (2014) noted this use of angling as a tool for social control and observed that factory owners of the industrial revolution became concerned about the violent nature of their employee's leisure activities and, therefore, encouraged angling in the growing numbers of urban canals and ponds as an alternative. Locker (2014, p. 102) further notes that it is, for this reason, that early angling has been interpreted 'as a form of social control'. In contemporary society, access to resources might also impact the 'chosenness' of an individual's choice to participate in angling (see Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012). Factors like the constraints of work, social class,

location and family traditions might impact the type of angling participated in or even the inspiration to participate in the first place (Stolk, 2010).

The work/leisure dichotomy remains a theme in the study of leisure. It has inspired and informed the work of many subsequent theorists in the emerging field of leisure studies during the 20th and into the 21st century (*e.g.,* Nash, 1932; Neumeyer and Neumeyer, 1936, 1949; Riesman, 1964, 1954; Friedmann, 1955, 1961; Dubin, 1963; Orzack, 1963; Kaplan, 1987; Moorehouse, 1989; Roberts, 2007). Its influence is also seen in many empirical studies of working life (*e.g.,* Beynon, 1973; Ackroyd and Crowdy, 1990). However, if Karl Marx is considered the critical classical social theorist concerned with work and production, Thorstein Veblen is considered the critical classical social theorist concerned with leisure and consumption. These theories provide valuable insights into the ways in which people engage with their leisure activities, such as the use of social media by modern anglers to display the trappings of their success. On the other hand, Raymond Williams' cultural materialism approach, which focuses on the conditions of cultural practices, has a complex relationship with Marxist theory. He incorporates the evaluation of the conditions of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption of cultural forms, but resists the idea of an economic base determining the content of cultural superstructure.

Raymond Williams Cultural Materialism

In his framework of cultural materialism, Raymond Williams moves beyond the traditional analysis of culture that looks at the components of a product and instead focuses on the conditions of cultural practices. His methodology incorporates the evaluation of the conditions of production, distribution, circulation, and consumption of cultural forms. Williams' cultural materialism has a complex relationship with Marxist theory, as he develops a notion of determination defined in terms of setting limits and exerting pressures from economic forces but resists the idea of an economic base determining the content of cultural superstructure (Williams, 1980).

Williams' framework of cultural materialism, as presented in his works Marxism and Literature (1977), Problems in Materialism and Culture (1980), and Culture ([1981] 1995), analyses the conditions of production, circulation, and reception of cultural forms, which are mediated by technological forms, institutional relations, and the

division of labour. He presents a sociology of culture, which views cultural production and reproduction as analogous to the circuit of industrial production and reproduction in Marxist political economy. Cultural production cannot be understood independently of the conditions of reception and identification, which are shaped by economic, political, technological, social, and cultural forces.

The central idea of Williams' cultural materialism is the interlocking relationship between cultural production and the conditions under which it takes place, which he refers to as the circuit of cultural production. This circuit involves the combination of human and non-human elements under specific forms of the division of labour and institutional conditions of production, most notably defined by the mode of financing cultural activities. Cultural reproduction is thus a complex and shifting process of cultural production and reception, governed by the manner in which cultural activities or texts are financed, produced, circulated, and received, and mediated by economic, political, technological, social, and cultural forces.

Veblen's perspective on social class differentiation can be linked to Williams' cultural materialism through the concept of cultural production and reception. Veblen was concerned with how social classes are differentiated based on consumption, while Williams viewed cultural reproduction as a complex and shifting process governed by economic, political, technological, social, and cultural forces. Veblen believed that conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure were tools used by the leisure class to demonstrate their wealth and social status, which is in line with Williams' view that cultural production and reception are influenced by the manner in which cultural activities or texts are financed and produced. Thus, both Veblen and Williams examine the intersection of cultural practices and economic conditions, highlighting the ways in which cultural production is intertwined with and shaped by broader societal forces.

Veblen & 'The Leisure Class'

Veblen was concerned with how social classes are differentiated based on consumption. He demonstrates that conspicuous consumption: the phenomena of wealthy individuals consuming highly conspicuous goods and services to show their wealth and, therefore, achieve higher social status (Bagwell and Bernheim, 1996), and conspicuous leisure: the phenomenon of an 'upper-class display of sufficient resources

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to not engage in productive work' (Eräsaari, 2017) are tools used by the 'Leisure Class' to demonstrate their position in society. Veblen ([1899] 1994, p. 24) wrote, 'To gain and to hold the esteem of men it is not sufficient merely to possess wealth or power. The wealth or power must be put in evidence, for esteem is awarded only on evidence.' Veblen saw the evidence for Conspicuous Leisure all around him, noting that 'The upper classes are by custom exempt or excluded from industrial occupations' (Veblen, [1899] 1994, p. 1). However, Veblen worked in a time of more defined class division than we do today. Frijters and Leigh (2008) noted that Veblen's 'idle courts' have vanished in contemporary economically developed countries, particularly the western world. Still, conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption remain prevalent due to increased opportunities for leisure amongst wider sections of society. Veblen's ideas were both revolutionary and straightforward as they underlined the tendency of elite members of society to demonstrate their "superiority not by their capacity to lead, administer or create, but by their conspicuous wastefulness: by an expenditure of effort, time, and money which is intrinsically reputable in a class-conscious world" (Levi, 1959, p. 239).

Moreover, Veblen's views still seem relevant today, demonstrating the concept of 'waste' associated with leisure. Veblen saw a waste of two types; conspicuous leisure represented wasted time, whilst conspicuous consumption showed wasted goods. Bothe methods, Veblen ([1899] 1994, p. 53) observes, 'are methods of demonstrating the possession of wealth, and the two are conventionally accepted as equivalents.'. In the world of online angling interaction, we often see examples of these two types of waste, where anglers conspicuously invest in the time to further advance their reputation and online career as anglers.

However, despite their seemingly evident influence, even amongst his contemporary peers, Veblen's views have not gone without criticism. (Cummings, 1899, p. 427) acknowledges Veblen's concept of 'waste', noting: 'The theory thus formulates itself upon a philosophic conception of economic waste which takes the form of a conspicuous devotion of both time and goods to the creation of invidious distinction.', before highlighting Veblen's failure to precisely define his conceptualisation of the 'leisure class' by noting: 'the "generically human" upon which the author would rely, is an imaginary and fictitious phantom which has no existence at

all apart from the individual conceiving it' (Cummings, 1899, p. 428). Veblen responded to the criticism by suggesting: 'It is because men's notions of the generically human, of what is the legitimate end of life, does not differ incalculably from man to man that men are able to live in communities and to hold common interests.' (Veblen, 1899, p. 108). Here, Veblen seems to justify his generalisation because all people are fundamentally the same and expected to behave similarly. If such an assumption was considered accurate, it might be reasonable to suggest that an individual's class is defined by their ability to consume conspicuously. However, his failure to explicitly define the leisure class, which is the subject of his work, has remained a strong criticism of his work. C. Wright Mills, for example, in his introduction to The Leisure Class (Veblen, [1899]/ [1953] 2017, p. xiv), observed that Veblen had only succeeded in developing 'a theory of a particular element of the upper classes in one period of the history of one nation'. Despite this criticism, Veblen's work holds value in understanding some aspects of contemporary society. Contemporary applications of Veblen's ideas are found in the field of travel and tourism MacCannell (2013). For example, in the studies of the contributions of backpackers in Australia (Hillman, 2009). Moreover, as noted by Trigg (2001, p. 102): 'Historians have also used conspicuous consumption to explain the consumer revolution which coincided with the industrial revolution in the 18th century'.

Scott (2010) proffers his opinion that Veblen's ideas still retain theoretical value, particularly when considering outdoor leisure activities. Scott (2010) considers Veblen's ideas in relation to the specific outdoor leisure activity of bird watching. He examines how conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are relevant to a specialised leisure activity world. Scott (2010) reiterates Veblen's belief that status is not automatically bestowed upon those individuals who accrue wealth. Instead, standing within the bird-watching community has to be earned through outward expressions of individual wealth in conspicuous leisure or consumption. Scott (2010) further notes that the current norm amongst North Americans is to attempt to display their status through engagement with conspicuous consumption. This tendency to indicate their status through engagement with conspicuous consumption is primarily due to the need for most individuals, even at higher statuses (defined primarily by wealth), to work and, therefore, have limited time to commit to the practice of specific conspicuous leisure.

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Scott (2010) suggests that Veblen had recognised that, as society becomes increasingly fast-paced, conspicuous consumption would ultimately supersede conspicuous leisure as the primary device by which individuals would represent their social position.

Scott's (2010) arguments are compelling and demonstrate the relevance of conspicuous consumption to leisure. Still, some theorists would question the relevance of conspicuous consumption to postmodern society suggesting that lifestyle has superseded conspicuous consumption as an indicator of social class. For example, Trigg (2001) suggests that one of the arguments against Veblen's theories is that they lack generality as they rely too heavily upon luxury goods. In repost to this criticism, it should be noted that Wheaton (2000) demonstrates that consumption is, itself, important in defining some sporting and leisure lifestyles, again suggesting the relevance of Veblen's thoughts to contemporary leisure activities and their participants. Furthermore, in a modern angling context, Crowder (2002, p. 163) draws attention to the ideas of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption being alive and well in the angling community when she notes:

> Fly fishers see themselves at the top of the fishing hierarchy. We see ourselves as thoughtful people, intelligent and sensitive. Fishers who do not have these qualities are often referred to as "hardware fishermen" or "bait-chuckers."

Here, Crowder (2002) makes explicit the perceived considerations of class within angling by pointing out derogatory terms by which lure, and bait anglers are referred to, particularly in a North American context. Crowder (2002, p. 162) further obliges by demonstrating the place of Conspicuous Leisure within a recreational angling context, noting: 'What I share with my more famous sister anglers as well as brother anglers is a certain class privilege that results from having leisure time.'. Demonstrating that some anglers, at least, still think similarly to those described by Veblen ([1899] 1994) when referring to the 'Leisure Class'.

There is some overlap between the ideas of Marx and the ideas of Veblen. Marx seems to have concentrated, in the main, upon the challenges of the working class in his work. Whilst Veblen, although his work is a scathing indictment of the elite classes (Veblen, [1899] 1994, p. iii), drew attention, perhaps unintentionally, to their unique struggle, being that of a constant need to reaffirm social position. I observe this same

struggle amongst anglers within the online angling context to reaffirm their position within the online angling community (see Chapter 5).

Bourdieu on conspicuous consumption

Pierre Bourdieu, a French sociologist, contributed to the concept of "conspicuous consumption" in his book "Distinction: A Social Critique of the Judgement of Taste." (Bourdieu, [1979] 1984). In common with Veblen, Bourdieu argued that individuals use their tastes and preferences as a way to distinguish themselves from others and to signal their social position (Han, Nunes, and Drèze, 2010). For example, a wealthy person may purchase designer clothing or luxury cars to display their wealth and status to others. However, for Bourdieu, luxury goods took on a symbolic value (Patsiaouras and Fitchett, 2012). For example, the purchase of a luxury car or designer clothing can be seen to take on a dual significance, both as a practical item but also as a form of symbolic indicator of status. These goods are not just functional, but also serve as a way to signal one's wealth and status to others. In a similar way, the choice of a certain type of vacation or the type of school one's children attend are also forms of symbolic consumption. In the case of angling, the ability to access a particular venue or purchase a particular brand of fishing tackle may also offer a symbolic status advantage to the angler. An example of this form of selecting one item over another based, purely, on their symbolic value can be seen by some companies manufacturing under different names and pricing items with a more prestigious name at a higher level. For example, the fishing tackle brand 'Greys' is made in the same factory as the prestigious 'Hardy' range and it was commonly known that the fishing rods were the same. Yet, Hardy fishing tackle is routinely priced at 3-5 times that of Greys.

A relationship between the work of Bourdieu and Veblen is that both understand the concept of conspicuous consumption as a means to express one's social class and status, but their perspectives on the subject differ. Bourdieu's cultural and symbolic capital theory predominantly focused on 'taste' states that individuals use their cultural knowledge and taste to signal their social class and status and achieve gains in distinction, which is related to conspicuous consumption. Veblen, on the other hand, is more focused on 'money' and focuses on the concept of conspicuous consumption as an

integral part of the capitalist system, where the wealthy use their purchasing power to signal their social status and wealth.

In summary, while both Bourdieu and Veblen share an interest in the concept of conspicuous consumption, they differ in their approach, focus and perspective on the subject. Veblen focused on the economic and technological changes of industrialization and the impact it had on society, while Bourdieu primarily focused on the social, cultural, and symbolic dimensions of society.

Linking Williams, Bourdieu & Veblen.

The works of Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thorstein Veblen provide a comprehensive framework for understanding recreational angling from a Marxist perspective. Raymond Williams' cultural materialism, for example, focuses on the ways in which cultural practices and activities, including leisure, are shaped by economic and social conditions. This perspective informs Marxist theory by highlighting the ways in which cultural practices are shaped by the dominant economic structures and social relations of a society.

Similarly, Pierre Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital provides a way to understand the cultural and economic dimensions of leisure activities, including recreational angling. Bourdieu argues that cultural capital, or the accumulation of cultural knowledge and cultural tastes, can be used to distinguish individuals and social groups and to reproduce existing social hierarchies. In the context of recreational angling, Bourdieu's concept of cultural capital can be used to analyse the ways in which angling is used to signal social status and cultural sophistication.

Finally, Thorstein Veblen's theory of the leisure class provides a Marxist perspective on the consumption patterns and leisure activities of the wealthy, including recreational angling. Veblen argues that leisure activities, such as angling, serve as a means of displaying wealth and status, and as a way to differentiate oneself from the lower classes. This perspective informs Marxist theory by highlighting the ways in which leisure activities serve to reinforce existing social and economic hierarchies.

In conclusion, the works of Raymond Williams, Pierre Bourdieu, and Thorstein Veblen offer a comprehensive framework for understanding recreational angling from a

Marxist perspective. By examining the ways in which the sport is shaped by economic and social conditions and how it serves to reinforce existing social hierarchies, these theories provide a comprehensive understanding of the cultural and economic dimensions of recreational angling. Ultimately, this framework provides a way to understand recreational angling as a cultural practice that is closely linked to Veblen's theory of the leisure class.

Changing Focuses and Post-War Leisure

Veal (2019) notes that the typical mid-nineteenth century working week was approximately 70 hours long, leaving some 98 hours a week for other activities. As Veal (2019) observes, employers and governments of the time must have considered this adequate. However, by the end of the nineteenth and beginning of the twentieth centuries, workers in Britain were beginning to campaign for reduced working hours based on the arguments of worker fatigue and inadequate time for a full recovery. As a result, by the post-World War two (WWII) period, countries of the economically developed world had seen average working weeks fall to around 40 hours despite enduring a period of depression and war. Furthermore, the introduction of paid holidays and increases in workers' incomes facilitated more leisure time and opportunities for the working classes.

This increase in leisure time triggered increased public demand for outdoor recreational opportunities and saw rapid growth in demand for access to outdoor recreational resources. As a result, demand for access to outdoor resources and parks increased rapidly. For example, in the United States of America (USA), public park use growth rates often exceeded 10% annually, starting in the early post-war years and continuing into the 1960s (Flather and Cordell, 1995, p. 4). This influx of recreationalists into the natural environment, as noted by Flather and Cordell (1995), also triggered an increased level of environmental awareness and demonstrated a need for a deeper understanding of the sociological aspects of outdoor recreation. For example, in England and Wales, the increase in interest in the outdoors and environment triggered the creation of 'The Country Code' in 1951 (Merriman, 2005). In addition, there was a changing focus on how leisure studies approached the challenging new questions posed by this societal shift.

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McDonough (2013) notes that leisure studies had, for many years, focused on the individual actor and that the literature had been dominated by questions about the meaning of leisure as a form of individual expression, personal satisfaction, intrinsic motivation and as leisure as a form of self-determination. However, as McDonough (2013) explains, the 1970s saw shifts away from this individualistic form of thinking towards considerations of outdoor recreation as a social behaviour that could not be understood in terms of solely individual behaviours and desired outcomes. From this realisation emerged a sociology of outdoor recreation and leisure, which applied many sociological concepts to the study of outdoor recreation and leisure activities and allowed for the consideration of sporting subcultures to be considered in an outdoor context.

Outdoor Sporting Subcultures

Subcultures have been defined by Haenfler (2013) as groups who share a sense of identity, as well as values, practices, and cultural objects. Angling, including angling in the online space, in common with many sporting activities, can be seen as a subculture.

One perspective on the construction of identity in sport subcultures is the Symbolic Interactionist perspective (Blumer, 1986), which argues that individuals construct their identities through their interactions with others within the subculture. In this way, individuals adopt the norms, values, and beliefs of the subculture and use these to define their own identities.

Another perspective is the Social Identity perspective (Turner, 1981), which argues that individuals derive their identities from the groups to which they belong. In the context of sport subcultures, individuals identify with the subculture and adopt its values, beliefs, and behaviours as a way of defining themselves and their place within the group. Again, these connections can be facilitated through online interaction within social media groups.

Confirmation of identity within sport subcultures can also occur through rituals, traditions and symbols that are specific to the subculture and that serve to reinforce the

shared identity among members (Guttmann 1978) and these rituals can be seen being enacted through social media throughout this work.

Donnelly and Young (1988) discuss the process by which individuals within a sport subculture develop and confirm their identities through their participation in the subculture and the importance of factors such as shared values, beliefs, behaviours, and social interactions with other members of the subculture which may also be facilitated by social media such as Facebook. For Donnelly and Young, identity in sport refers to the idea that an individual's self-concept, or sense of self, is shaped by their involvement in sports. Thomas *et. el.* (2017) tackle three elements of identity in relation to sports subcultures: personal identity, social identity, and collective identity.

Here, personal identity refers to the unique and inherent qualities that define an individual and differentiate them from others. It encompasses their individual traits, values, beliefs, and experiences that shape their personality and sense of self. Personal identity is not influenced by external factors such as one's involvement in sports or other social activities.

Social identity, on the other hand, focuses on the impact that an individual's membership in a specific group or team has on their self-concept and self-image. In the context of sports, social identity encompasses the ways in which participating in a sport affects how an individual sees themselves, their values, and their beliefs. This can involve an individual's sense of belonging to a team, the expectations and norms of the group, and their perceived status among their peers.

Collective identity is a shared sense of identity among members of a team or group, and it refers to the ways in which this shared identity contributes to an individual's self-concept. In sports, collective identity is often developed through shared experiences, goals, and values. When individuals see themselves as part of a larger entity and align their personal identity with the identity of the group, it can create a stronger sense of belonging and camaraderie. Collective identity also provides a sense of purpose, direction, and meaning for individuals, as well as a platform for them to express themselves in a way that extends beyond their personal identity.

Whilst Thomas *et. el.* (2017) gives a model through which identity within sporting subcultures are formed, the structure and progression of sporting or recreational careers are not adequately defined in their work. However, we can see through the work of Stebbins (1982) that progression within sporting or recreational careers plays an important role in forming identity within sporting or recreational contexts. However, to specifically understand the mechanics of progression within the development of recreational identities, Bryan (1979 [2008]) and the concept of the recreational specialisation continuum offer relevant explanation regarding recreational anglers' recreational career specific identity formation.

Recreational Specialisation:

Hobson Bryan's construct of 'recreational specialization' (Bryan, [1979] 2008) seeks to shed light on the motivations which drive recreationalists through a recreational career, and Robert Stebbins's (1982, 1992, 1997, 2007, 2017) construct of 'serious leisure' helps in the classification of recreational activities which become central to the participant's life. Therefore, I will discuss each of their constructs individually to set them into the context of this work.

Bryan ([1979] 2008, p. 29) defines his concept of 'Recreational Specialization' as ''A continuum of behaviour from general to particular… [which is reflected by] equipment and skills used in the activity [and] setting preference'. However, Bryan (2000, p. 18) seems to acknowledge a degree of obscurity associated with his original conceptualisations and makes attempts at clarity by, again, defining the construct in his opening paragraphs:

> '…outdoor recreation participants can be placed on a continuum from general interest and low involvement to specialized interest and high involvement. Each level of specialization carries distinctive behaviours and orientations. These include equipment preference, type of experience sought, desired setting for the activity, attitudes toward resource management, preferred social context,'

Here, links can be made between Bryan's (2000, [1979] 2008) ideas and Veblen's notions of the 'Leisure Class' (Kuentzel, 2001). Bryan (2000) refers to leisure activity participants' level of specialisation being defined by, amongst other things, 'equipment preference', and this bears parallels to the concept of conspicuous consumption. The

ability to make/invest in affording such higher financial commitments may mark individuals at higher levels of the specialisation continuum as more skilled and more able to afford the equipment associated with participation at this level.

Notably for this research, Bryan also explicitly suggests that a factor in Recreational Specialisation is a preference toward a particular 'social context'. At the time of Bryan's original writing and even the revised edition, in the early 2000s, access to the internet was in its infancy, and the highly interactive social media platforms familiar today were underdeveloped (see Chapter 4). In considering 'Social Context', Bryan (2000) might have conceptualised real-world gatherings of leisure activity participants in family units, cafes, or clubhouses such as those traditionally used by recreational anglers as meeting places (Stolk, 2010; Locker, 2014). However, the social context in which many recreational participants and anglers now operate and may be drawn to might be expanded to include the worlds of digital and social media (Knight, 2016).

Despite Bryan's (2000) attempts at clarifying the position of Recreational Specialisation, some ambiguity seems to have remained as to the constructs' practical application to research. Scott and Shafer (2001) note that the construct has traditionally been used to measure the intensity of involvement by participants and applied to differentiate between participants based on their preferences and motivations. However, Scott and Shafer (2001) suggest that a closer reading of Bryan's original work confirms their belief that Recreational Specialisation is a developmental process and a measure of progression within a given activity. Scott and Shafer (2001) state that the process of Recreational Specialisation suggests that an activity has a natural start and end point, and that recreationalist can be positioned between these two points. This stance is further supported by Bryan's ([1979] 2008, pp. 59–86) work, where Bryan lays out, in graph form, such progressions as examples of applied applications of Recreational Specialisation (Figure 3).
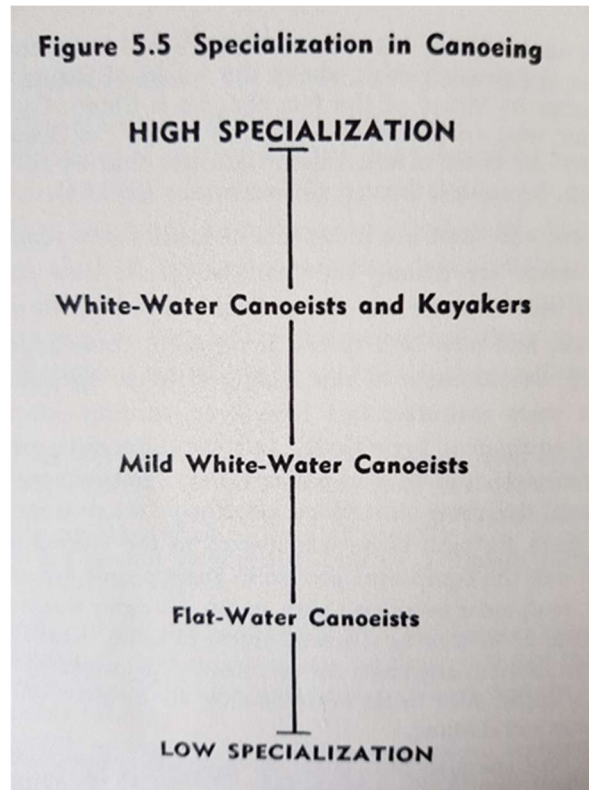
Figure 3 Specialization in Canoeing (Bryan, [1979] 2008, p. 76)

Furthermore, as Scott and Shafer (2001) noted, Bryan believes that Recreational Specialisation is a developmental process. Bryan states: 'A contention guiding this research is that "fly fishing" for trout represents an end-product of a progression of angling experience leading to a more and more "mature" or specialised state' (Bryan, [1979] 2008, p. 31).

Casual & Serious Leisure:

Also influential in this research is the work of Robert Stebbins. Stebbins (1982) lays out the concept of Serious Leisure in his conceptual statement. However, not until 1992 does he define the term as:

> The systematic pursuit of an amateur, a hobbyist, or a volunteer activity
> that participants find so substantial and interesting that, in the typical case,
> they launch themselves on a career cantered on acquiring and expressing its
> special skills, knowledge, and experience.

(Stebbing 1992, cited in Sheng-Hshiung and Ying-Wen, 2008, p. 325).

This definition seems to fit the experience of many anglers, yet there are few examples of the application of serious leisure to recreational angling. The most notable

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example of serious leisure being applied to angling is found in the work of Yoder (1997).

Yoder (1997) used the Serious Leisure paradigm to study commodity-intensive serious leisure activities focusing on tournament bass fishing. The research concluded that 'Tournament bass fishing is an ideal background against which to investigate serious leisure, social worlds and the commodification of leisure issues with vital consequences for contemporary Western societies'.

As a counterpoint to Serious Leisure and essential for a complete understanding of how Serious leisure differentiates itself from other forms of leisure activity, Stebbins concept of Casual Leisure defines more passive forms of leisure activity. These forms of leisure, which could include passive television watching, reading or idle conversation, map well into the areas of human activity that Marx may have considered the 'realm of freedom'. Moreover, whilst engagement in them can be seen as a positive activity when used for recuperation, Stebbins (2001) warns against over engagement in a way that seems to echo Veblen's ([1899] 1994) criticism of the conspicuous leisure activities of the leisure class. Of course, social media usage maps well into the concept of casual leisure, creating a dichotomy. On the one hand, we have a serious leisure activity in the form of angling in the physical world, but, on the other hand, we have casual leisure in the form of online angling. This dichotomy raises the question; can we consider online angling beneficial or damaging to the participant?

Casual Leisure:

Stebbins (1997, p. 18) defines Casual Leisure as 'immediately, intrinsically rewarding, relatively short-lived pleasurable activity requiring little or no special training to enjoy it ' for example, casual television watching, reading, conversations over the garden fence or, indeed, social media interaction could all fall under the umbrella of casual leisure. Stebbins draws attention to the possibility that non-active or passive forms of leisure can become a serious interest whilst remaining casual by underlining the need for a level of skill, knowledge and/or experience being required for leisure activity to become more serious. Stebbins contends that when these factors (skill, knowledge and/or experience) are in place, the activity in question is better described as a hobby or amateur activity. Recreational angling takes a degree of practice

and teaching to become proficient and enjoy the practice (Stolk, 2010). Therefore, it would seem appropriate to consider angling as a hobby or amateur activity for this research. However, this definition of angling remains problematic. Many anglers participate in angling passively, using only the minimum required skill and knowledge. Brown et al. (2016, p. 7) found that 7.4% of the UK angling participants who responded to their research engaged in angling as a 'holiday activity' and a slight majority of 56% of respondents fished less than 30 days per year. Others participate in angling as a serious high-level competitive sport that is complete with its own world championships and opportunities for professionalism for a very few elite participants. Therefore, it is helpful to consider the concept of 'casual leisure' type activity further.

Guttmann (1978) defines 'play' as 'any nonutilitarian physical or intellectual activity pursued for its own sake'. This definition of play bears striking similarity with what Stebbins (1997) would later label Casual Leisure. Guttmann (1978) falls short of explicitly using the words 'Leisure activity' in his writing. Still, from the similarities between definitions, it would seem that both authors are speaking about similar concepts. This similarity can be further evidenced by Stebbins's (2014, p. ix) acknowledgement of play as a form of casual leisure. Furthermore, Guttman (1978, pp. 3-4) makes explicit the idea that sporting activities, dependent upon context, can also be seen as leisure activities (or play activities) by sharing his own experience: 'I play tennis with my wife because I love tennis and my wife, because I feel better after exercise because I like to think of myself as an active person.'. This link between 'Sports' activities and play seems to echo the link between anglers who consider what they do a 'sport' and those who consider it recreational and mirrors my own angling experience (see Chapter 4).

Serious Leisure

Stebbins's (1982) construct of Serious Leisure has been used to differentiate Serious Leisure from Casual Leisure. Stebbins (1982) saw Serious Leisure as being defined by six distinguishing qualities, which are further examined in his later work. The first of these qualities Stebbins (2007) describes as the occasional need to persevere; such perseverance is evident in Serious Leisure when one has to support a team who is losing, overcome fear or face the potential of failure. This perseverance is central to anglers' need to maintain enthusiasm for the activity despite failing to catch

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any fish (*e.g.,* Bull, 2009). The second quality is the ability to forge a leisure activity career within the field of endeavour. To this end, Stebbins (2007, p. 11) notes that a leisure activity career, similar to a professional career, is 'shaped by its own special contingencies, turning points and stages of achievement or involvement'. For an angler, this might represent the fairly simplistic angling endeavours of a young or new angler and their gradual evolution towards more profound and more complex levels of involvement (Bryan, [1979] 2008; Stolk, 2010; Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012). Stebbins links the second quality to the third by suggesting that Serious Leisure pursuits require a level of effort on the participant's part by applying their specially acquired skills, training and knowledge. For anglers, the requirement to face adverse weather or find ways to pursue their leisure activity in the face of outside commitments such as family and work requires considerable personal effort (*e.g.,* see Bull, 2009; Bear and Eden, 2011). Fourthly, Serious Leisure activities have what Stebbins calls durable benefits for the individuals who participate. Stebbins (2007, p. 11) notes that eight such benefits have been identified through research with amateur participants. He lists these as self-actualisation, self-enrichment, self-expression, regeneration or renewal of self, feelings of accomplishment, self-image enhancement, social interaction, and belongingness.

These durable benefits are present in recreational angling to catch larger or more difficult fish species, alternatively, through acceptance from the online community or wider angling community which may come from demonstrating a level of ability and expertise (Bull, 2009; Stolk, 2010; Eden and Bear, 2011; Locker, 2014). The fifth quality of Serious Leisure identified by Stebbins is the unique ethos that builds up around an activity which can be defined as Serious Leisure. This, Stebbins (2007, p. 12) identifies as 'the spirit of the community of Serious Leisure participants as manifested in shared attitudes, practices, values, beliefs [and] goals.'. Angling's culture has developed over more than 500 years in the UK and Europe, which has resulted in it creating a 'Unique ethos' based on, in the UK and much of the western world at least, a principle of conservation and, often, of 'Catch & Release'. This ethos has been explicitly codified and stated (*e.g.,* Fly Fishers International, 2021). It has also been indicated in law (*e.g.,* Government, 2021). However, it remains an ethos above the need for being overtly stated for most. It was forged by authors such as Isaak Walton and

later refined during the later 18th and 19th centuries (see Locker, 2014). Stebbins (2007) suggests that the final quality unifies the preceding five. Participants in Serious Leisure strongly identify with their activity. Stebbins (2007) underlines the importance of this final quality by suggesting that Casual Leisure is often too fleeting or mundane for participants to identify with it strongly.

The Serious Leisure construct has been used to broaden our understanding of a variety of activities that can fall under the broad definition of Serious Leisure, including dancing (*e.g.,* Brown, 2007), Fandom (*e.g.,* Jones, 2000; Gibson, Willming and Holdnak, 2002) and chess (*e.g.,* Gould *et al.*, 2011). However, a little work has also been carried out which investigates the Serious Leisure construct within fishing (*e.g.,* Yoder, 1997) and digital media (*e.g.,* Cox and Blake, 2011). In these latter studies, Yoder (1997) found that angling was an excellent lens to examine the construct of Serious Leisure. However, the professional nature of the form of angling studied by Yoder (1997) (Tournament Bass Angling) meant that Yoder found shortcomings in the Serious Leisure model. Notably, Yoder (1997) found that many amateur anglers (20% of those involved in Yoder's (1997) study) were also employed in the manufacture or sale of fishing equipment which blurred the lines between amateurism and professionalism.

Similarly, Cox and Blake (2011), who studied the activities of food bloggers, found that there are certainly those who make their living from food blogging, again somewhat blurring the line between amateurism (an implied requirement of Serious Leisure) and professionalism. The divide between true amateur and true professional may seem to be a somewhat old-fashioned dichotomy. However, the divide between professionalism (those who gain most of their income from involvement) and amateur (those who earn no income from professionalism) is relevant to online communities where individuals from both sides of the divide vie for recognition and find themselves equally perceived as 'experts' amongst their peers.

This divide is particularly relevant in angling in the United Kingdom (UK), where most anglers who do derive some assistance from angling manufacturers still require outside employment due to the nature of agreements. These agreements, in most cases, extend only to the provision of reduced cost equipment or bait. This type of

support produces a system that might not be entirely compatible with Stebbins's concept of Serious Leisure[4] since these few anglers are required to expound the virtues of the 'sponsors' products, usually through social media (Knight and Collett, 2012). This form of 'work' can be seen as a characteristic of professionalism whilst maintaining an amateur involvement in the activity.

Furthermore, some who identify as purely amateur find themselves with a professional involvement with the angling industry through employment, making the strict application of Serious Leisure problematic. However, Stebbins (2009, 2014) clarifies his conceptualisation of the divide between work and leisure with his construct of 'Occupational Devotion'. Stebbins (2009, p. 768) defines this as:

> 'a strong, positive attachment to a form of self-enhancing work, where the sense of achievement is high, and the core activity (set of basic tasks) is endowed with such intense appeal that the line between this work and leisure is virtually erased.'.

With this additional conceptualisation by Stebbins (2009), serious leisure embraces all levels of involvement amongst leisure activity participants.

Stebbins (2007) attempts to bring together the concepts of Casual Leisure (see the previous section) and Serious Leisure in a single resource. This resource seems to illustrate different aspects of leisure life. Like Marx's division of life into the realms of necessity and freedom, Stebbins appears to have demonstrated a fractal pattern emerging by observing further subdivisions of what Marx might have considered as realms of freedom. Whilst we can be sure that this observation was neither intentionally considered (Stebbins, 2019) nor explicitly stated. It is possible, from Stebbins's (2007) work, to see how the realm of freedom critiqued by Marx might be used in constructive (serious leisure) ways and recuperative (casual leisure) ways. This duality demonstrates that both serious and casual leisure can coexist and merge under appropriate circumstances, such as online recreational activity. Moreover, Stebbins's later conceptualisation of 'Occupational Devotion' (Stebbins, 2009) seems further to

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[4] However, Sebbins (Stebbins, 2009) has also considered work that becomes central to life in his later works.

embrace Marx's concept of the realm of necessity, further helping to facilitate an understanding of complex contemporary leisure activity worlds.

Because of the previously acknowledged widely spread range of levels of involvement associated with recreational angling (Brown et al., 2016), the concepts of Bryan ([1979] 2008) and Stebbins (1982) are influential to this research as both authors have sought to develop constructs which seek to understand leisure activities (like angling) that hold the potential of becoming central to the life of the participant. However, both constructs demonstrate some weaknesses if used independently to understand leisure activities central to life. Later researchers (Yoder, 1997; Scott and Shafer, 2001; Cox and Blake, 2011; Scott, 2012) have also highlighted these weaknesses. Furthermore, the constructs do not seem to adequately locate the concept of leisure activity within the context of a more general, overall, social world view. They describe the characteristics and progressive levels of involvement with leisure activities that become central to life but fail to understand the intrinsic value of the activities or the social motivations for a desire to progress. The classical interpretations of Marx and Veblen, conversely, do facilitate consideration of both the relationship to life that can be involved in serious leisure participation. They also illustrate some of the motivational factors which might drive participants to progress within the recreational specialisation framework or, indeed, participate in certain activities in the first place (see Chapter 5).

The seeming disconnect between the ideas of Stebbins and Bryan and the more classical theorists is, perhaps, because both constructs inductively evolved based on qualitative research (Scott, 2012; Stebbins, 2019) and did not seek to build upon an established base of knowledge. The disconnect is a possible historical failing within the field of leisure studies noted by Stebbins (2011). who points out that leisure studies have been criticised widely for lack of theory and, as a result, is often seen as being methodologically deficient. Furthermore, Stebbins (2011) and others (*i.e.,* Coalter, 1997; Henderson, 2010; Parr and Schmalz, 2019) have noted that leisure studies can often be criticised for failing to fully engage with subjects outside of its discipline. This tendency may have led to missed opportunities to link theories and ideas such as deeper links to the more classical sociological theorists such as Marx and Veblen. However, upon examination, interesting links and parallels can be drawn between the early works of both Marx and Veblen and Stebbins and Bryan. These links can best be illustrated in

the form of a progression of virtually independent thinking from Marx's time to Stebbins and Bryan's time (Figure 4) (see Appendix 2).
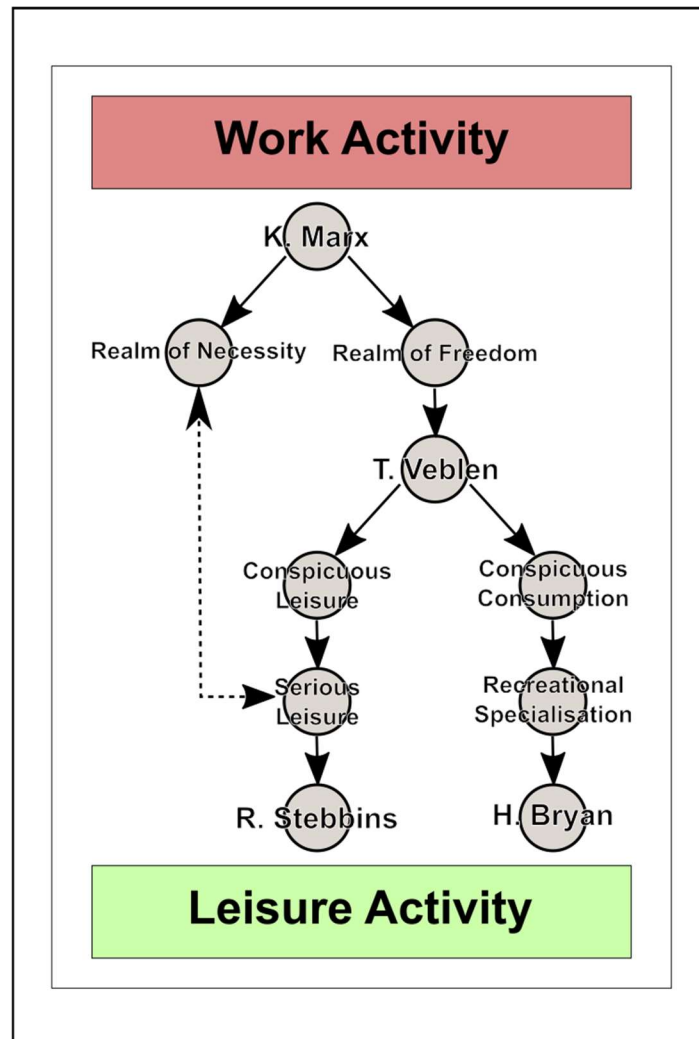
Figure 4 From Work to Leisure

Marx formulated a conceptualisation of a realm of necessity and a realm of freedom, defining that human beings do not live within a one-dimensional social context but, rather, that a desire for free time motivates our willingness to work. From this view, we can build a rather simplistic but practical model and see that life becomes a balance, where the individual seeks to invest as little time into the realm of necessity to gain the maximum time out in the realm of freedom. Time can be seen as wealth (*e.g.,* see Eräsaari, 2017), wealth, which, as Veblen observed, is only of value if expressed outwardly.

Veblen theorised that the leisure class would demonstrate their status through engaging in acts of conspicuous leisure or conspicuous consumption. Both conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption are separate ways to engage in an increased realm of freedom. Still, neither seems to have been considered regarding their influence on leisure choices and how actors express their involvement in their leisure activities. It would seem that Stebbins, with his focus on the types of activity defined as serious leisure, inadvertently showed the contemporary form that conspicuous leisure has taken. His emphasis on the amateurism of many serious leisure activities reflects a need for independent financial means. Therefore, participating in some leisure activities outwardly demonstrates social class. Bryan ([1979] 2008) demonstrated that progression within an individual leisure activity is often dependent on equipment preference, showing again, perhaps inadvertently, that his is a valuable construct for considering conspicuous consumption within a leisure activity.

These two dichotomies, leisure and consumption, freedom and necessity, combine to produce a potentially more profound understanding of the workings of leisure communities such as those of angling. However, as observed by Scott (2010), the increasingly changing and almost ephemeral nature of society means that as opportunities for spending on our interests increase, opportunities for conspicuity decrease because there is a 'levelling off' of wealth and the ability to buy the latest or most precious thing becomes less important. Here, social media may have stepped in, replacing the 'idle court' referred to by Veblen as the environment in which actors must now prove their social standing through conspicuously consuming and outwardly demonstrating their capacity for conspicuous waste. For this reason, social media may be vital in offering new opportunities to communicate, present and legitimise our leisure status.

It is widely acknowledged that anglers use social media to engage their interest (Stolk, 2010; Knight, 2016). However, how they use social media is little understood and under-researched. Anglers who choose to engage in social media discussion about their hobby would seem to exist within a complicated social world. This social world exerts some pressure to conspicuously demonstrate success through public displays of fishing achievements and the use of the latest fishing tackle, often whilst balancing

work and life commitments. For this reason, the thoughts of Marx, Veblen, Bryan and Stebbins offer the potential for more significant insights into the social world of anglers.

Angling & Angling Research in the UK.

In this section, I consider angling as a form of recreation practised within the UK. Here, I illustrate angling as a long-established leisure activity with a substantial history within the culture of the United Kingdom. To do this, I first provide some general background to angling in the UK before critically examining some of the limited available contemporary literature that concerns itself with the social aspects of angling. Finally, I consider some of the wider academic work on angling in the UK and demonstrate that to gain a deeper understanding of angling, it is often necessary to reach beyond a single discipline to appreciate the meaning of the activity for its participants. In this review of the literature currently available that pertains to angling, I aim to critique and highlight the lack of research that focuses on the societal aspects of the activity. Although concentrating on literature specifically on angling in the UK, I also draw on the more substantial literature referring to angling and leisure activity in the USA.

Historical overview:

Angling has a rich heritage of more than 500 years in the field of outdoor leisure writing. This heritage begins, in England, with the publication most cited as the earliest work in the English language known to deal specifically with angling as a subject matter. 'The Treatyse of Fysshynge with an Angle', reputedly written by a 15th-century abbess, Dame Juliana Berners, was an addition to the second edition of the 'Booke of St Albans' and published by Wynken de Worde in 1496 (Locker, 2014). Angling has also been the subject of numerous other publications since its early beginnings and listed amongst its many tomes 'The Complete Angler' written by Sir Izaak Walton, which first appeared in 1653. Walton's book is a testament to the enduring appeal of the pastoral tradition, still expressed through love and aesthetic appreciation of open spaces and the countryside echoed in modern angling magazines' photographic styles, particularly those that focus on fly fishing. Although it was written entirely in a 17th-century dialect, His work is still drawn on as inspiration by many anglers today. Standing out amongst angling books, 'The Complete Angler' remains one of the most

reprinted books in the English language after the Bible and the Works of Shakespeare (Eschner, 2017). However, despite its rich heritage, the UK's contemporary social aspects of angling remain under-researched and little understood.

The basic organisational structure of Angling in the UK revolves around clubs, with more than 400,000 members of clubs affiliated to the Angling Trust (Angling Trust, 2017) and, increasingly, commercial fisheries where anglers pay a membership or daily fee to fish for stocked fish, often, in purpose-built pools. Despite this organisational structure, which encompasses many individual anglers, many non-anglers see angling as a solitary pursuit (Stolk, 2010). Angling clubs exist to secure fishing rights or organise competitive events but often offer only limited opportunities for informal social interaction. Where social interaction does occur, this tends to be political rather than participatory. Anglers will gather at formal occasions organised by clubs or governing bodies to participate in discussion and decision making about the clubs or organisation's activities, for example, through national and regional meetings organised by organisations such as the Angling Trust (Angling Trust, 2021). Or through advisory bodies such as the Canal & Rivers Trust Fisheries and Angling Advisory Group (Canal & River Trust, 2021) or, on a club level, through the organisation of annual general meetings (AGM) (Stolk, 2009). Despite the seemingly solitary nature of the physical act of angling, participation in angling does allow for active socialisation, which sometimes becomes a compulsory condition of club membership (*e.g.,* see Kings Langley Angling Society, 2018). Here, members' participation is characterised by the formation of working parties to maintain fisheries or through fish-ins where groups of anglers attend a venue. However, the informal bonds within angling often revolve around existing social relationships such as friendship or family (Stolk, 2010). For some, club membership becomes more like what Putnam (1995) referred to as 'Tertiary Association'.

Putnam (1995) identified 'Tertiary Association' as associations where members' only act of membership is the payment of membership fees. Whilst angling clubs do not strictly fall within this definition, similarities are seen in the desire of some members. For example, the encouragement of members to participate in club activities is a constant problem for angling clubs, and anglers seem to prefer to pay more for membership and avoid active participation. Indeed, to counter this, some angling clubs

have offered extra benefits to those who actively choose to participate in working parties that are essential to the upkeep of the fishery (*e.g.,* see Prince Albert Angling Society, 2021). This behaviour illustrates that angling clubs are often, by their angling members, seen as a source of angling opportunities, and the work required with the upkeep of the club is often unpalatable enough to members for them to avoid participation. This 'Tertiary Association' exhibited by some anglers seems to illustrate further the outward appearance of angling as a solitary practice Stolk (2010) and may motivate anglers to seek alternative ways to engage with the broader angling community, for example, by participating in online discussion.

Today, in England, the sport of angling is governed by the Angling Trust[5], a predominantly tertiary association funded through membership, both individual and club, to campaign on behalf of anglers, promote the sport of angling, and organise competitive angling events in the UK (Angling Trust, 2021). However, as a former trust employee, I am aware that the trust's mission to promote the activity has not been easy, and angling has suffered a prolonged period of decline since the trust was formed. This decline has caused some concern within the angling world (Anglers' Mail, 2018) and has been the driver of research commissioned by the Angling Trust and the Environment Agency (Brown, 2012b, 2019b; Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012b).

Angling Research in the UK

Of the work that considers the social aspects of angling specifically within the UK, 'The Social and Community Benefits of Angling: A 3-Year Research Project by Substance, funded by the Big Lottery Fund' (Substance, 2012a), offers the most substantial insight so far available. The project's goal was to develop a deeper understanding of angling and its role within society. On the 'about page of the website set up as part of the research project, Substance (2012) identify several claims that they say have been made about angling. These claims state that angling has benefits for participants, which include benefits to health and volunteering. Furthermore, Substance (2012) claims that 'it can help young people in terms of education and social inclusion; and that it can help develop rural communities and local environments.'. Although

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[5] The sport of angling, in this context is not to be confused with the legal enforcement of recreational angling rules which is the responsibility of the Environment Agency and the Police.

Substance (2012) fails to define the individuals or bodies who have made these claims on their research web page, they acknowledge that the evidence base for these assumptions is underdeveloped and does not consider the social media aspects of angling. This failure to consider social media suggests that this research may have missed a large portion of the angling community's activity.

Substance (2012) further notes that: 'Those representing angling needed such information to help 'make the case' for public and government support'. In this way, Substance (2012) demonstrates an in-built bias in their work, leading to an overstating of angling's benefits without considering the other sociological aspects of angling. Substance (2012) further underline this bias when they later define their research goals. Substance (2012) stated that they sought to '...provide evidence of angling's role to help influence changes in policy'—demonstrating that the research focused tightly on the benefits of angling (as defined in the research projects title) but neglected consideration of any possible causes for the decline in the activity. Whilst this observation does not serve to devalue the work of Substance (2012), it does highlight the possibility that the best research currently available concerning the state of recreational angling within the United Kingdom should be subject to further scrutiny.

The Social and Community Benefits of Angling project used a hybrid approach to conducting the research project. The approach included a large-scale survey of more than 2400 individual anglers, a selection of more focused surveys, semi-structured interviews, and claims to have made full use of bespoke online tools (Substance, 2012). As a result, the output of the research project was substantial. However, in this research, only cursory consideration is given to the contemporary ways in which anglers interact with their activity. Indeed, social media is only mentioned briefly, having been given cursory consideration by Stolk (2010), who notes that activities like reading blogs and contributing to internet discussion boards are significant parts of participation without further discussion.

Below, I will review the work of Substance during the research project in light of the overarching theoretical conceptualisations of leisure. Where necessary, I will reach outside these tightly defined research areas to evidence or question some assumptions made by Substance during this research project.

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Participation

One of the critical aspects of the social aspects of angling within the UK that Substance (2012) identified as significant was participation. Substance (2012) notes that angling comprises a wide variety of participation types and levels and identifies the development of a better understanding of angling participation within the UK as one of the key aims of their research (Substance, 2012b). By investigating the levels and types of participation amongst UK anglers, Substance's (2012b) stated aims were 'to know why people go fishing, what their participation involves, how their participation delivers personal and community benefits, and the key issues likely to affect future participation.'. Preliminary reports were published before the 2012 final report to achieve these goals covering this aspect of angling (Stolk, 2010).

Stolk's (2010) work is the most comprehensive of these reports. It acknowledges that, to the casual observer, angling requires the participation of only an angler and a fish. Angling activity is not commonly associated with team play, as is the case with some sports. However, Stolk (2010) argues that angling encompasses a wide range of activities outside of the physical act of going fishing. These include activities traditionally associated with angling since its earliest inceptions. Including the craft of fly-tying (creating artificial lures made of feathers used primarily in trout and salmon fishing), writing about angling, socialising with family and friends and interacting with fellow club members through organizational participation. Significantly for this research, Stolk (2010) further acknowledges interaction with digital media as a critical element in contemporary angling and lists blogging and interaction through social media as the forms that this digital activity takes. However, Stolk (2010) also suggests that an essential function of angling clubs serves as a valuable opportunity for organisational involvement within the UK. It offers participants the opportunity to participate in the administrative and managerial duties associated with managing a fishing club should they so wish. Stolk (2010) suggests that this is important within the UK as participation in voluntary activity is high within the United Kingdom. To support this, Stolk (2010) suggests that the decline in the membership of civic organisations observed in the USA since the 1950s has not been a feature of the UK and that civic participation has remained relatively steady, implying that the UK requires the provision of such outlets to individuals. As this is a crucial argument in Stolk's (2010)

work, he argues for the importance of angling's role within communities, and the claim deserves some further consideration.

The work referred to by Stolk (2010) to indicate a decline in membership of civic organisations in the USA is Putnam's (1995) observations about bowling in America. Putnam (1995) observed that participation in organised leagues decreased whilst bowling's popularity increased. Putnam's work, and the use of bowling as a specific empirical example and metaphor, drew attention to the gradual decline of civic engagement in the modern world, defined as involvement with groups and organisations. Conversely, the work that Stolk (2010) references to support his claim that civic engagement in the UK has remained relatively stable is that of Anderson, Curtis and Grabb (2006). The paper, 'Trends in Civic Association Activity in Four Democracies: The Special Case of Women in the United States', examines the levels of civic engagement specifically amongst women. Given Solk's (2010) latter assertion that environment agency research had identified 'a number of barriers that constrain female participation in angling', this would suggest that Stolk's (2010) argument finds its foundation in the incorrect demographic. Moreover, under both methods used by Anderson et al. (2006) to measure civic engagement, the UK came fourth out of those countries considered (USA, Netherlands, Canada, United Kingdom). Again, this would point towards flaws in Stolk's (2010) reasoning, possibly resulting from the aforementioned stated aims of demonstrating the value of angling within the UK.

Despite Stolk's (2010) questionable findings regarding the relative stability of involvement in civic organisations, Stolk's (2010) research did demonstrate some interesting trends amongst anglers and how they may choose to exercise and demonstrate their participation in the activity. Stolk (2010) notes that a key aspect of contemporary involvement is its reach beyond the physical activity of angling and includes digital engagement, including the production of blogs and participation in forums and social media. Some scholars (*e.g.,* Skoric et al., 2009; Loader et al., 2014) have questioned whether the move away from civic engagement observed by Putnam (1995)[6]is symptomatic of a society that is losing interest in civic engagement or a

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[6] It should be noted here that Putnam's (1995) work is quite intimately focused on the American context and its wider applicability to social conditions elsewhere remain contested

predictable process toward deeper virtual engagement made possible by technological advancement, a television in the time of Putnam's writing, but increasingly in the online realms. Hochheiser and Shneiderman (2010) observe that many studies have suggested that the rapid growth of social media seems to be reversing the decline in civic participation observed by Putnam (1995). The authors note that 'new social and civic-participation tools allow people to work together to address mutual concerns, solve problems, and build consensus' (Hochheiser and Shneiderman, 2010, p. 64).

Furthermore, Skoric, Ying and Ng (2009) demonstrate that engagement online can translate into political participation both within cyberspace and beyond. Preece and Shneiderman (2009) further analysed this move towards greater online civic engagement. They theorised a 'Reader to Leader' framework by which individuals become involved in civic engagement through social media (Figure 5), demonstrating natural progression taken by some towards greater community involvement. This trend towards computer-mediated involvement may demonstrate that the angling community's increased use of social media (see Knight, 2016) is merely a move away from the traditional meeting places of angling's early emergence (see Locker, 2014) toward a more virtual engagement with the activity (see chapter 5 & 6).
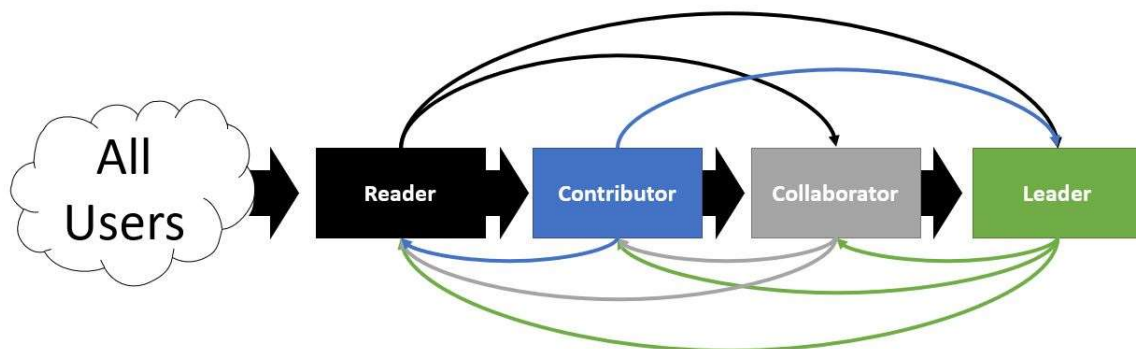
Figure 5 'Reader to Leader' framework (Preece and Shneiderman, 2009)

Rural communities:

Angling Research also highlighted the role that angling plays within rural communities. To this end, Substance was primarily interested in the economic value of visiting anglers to rural areas and how the benefits obtained from angling might be increased sustainably. The report produced by Substance focuses on one area in Scotland (Assynt) chosen for its remoteness and ample angling opportunities for visiting anglers. Given the focus on the economic value of visitors to the area (estimated at £887,000 to $1,109,000 annually (Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012b, p. 65)), the research does not address the benefits for local anglers. Furthermore, again, Substance does not explicitly address the issues of social media use amongst anglers. Substance's (2012a) report draws attention to the use of online questionnaires to gather data during their investigation of the recreational fishing activity. However, these questionnaires were distributed via the Assynt web page and not via social media directly, meaning that the opinions of any potential social media audience, who may not have been familiar with the Assynt web page, were not expressed within the data.

It could be argued that an opportunity was missed to investigate the importance of angling to rural communities as a leisure activity and the part that social media might play in rural anglers' participation. Research conducted by Statista.com (2018) demonstrates that social media penetration is almost as high in rural areas as it is in urban areas, with a difference of only 5% for users of Facebook (see Figure 6)

Figure 6 Penetration of social media in rural areas (Statista, 2018)

This 2018 data would seem to represent further growth in social media usage amongst rural inhabitants since 2015 when Perrin (2015) noted that more than fifty per cent (58%) of social media users came from a rural background. These numbers suggest that social media may play an essential part in the lives of rural communities, which, by extension, may also include those members of the community who participate in angling. Destination image is an essential motivating factor in tourism, one component of which might be seen as the perceived friendliness of locals (see Greaves and Skinner, 2009). Therefore, understanding how local anglers represent the activity of fishing in the Assynt region online might have been helpful. This consideration would have enabled a deeper understanding of the motivation for anglers to visit from further afield.

Young People:

Whilst the experiences of young people are outside the remit of this research, substance (2012) identified the participation of young people as being key to their research. As a result, a series of reports appeared in 2011 which considered the lived experience of young people who participate in angling (Djohari, 2011a, 2011b, 2011c).

Djohari's (2011a) report does not explicitly mention the role of social media in young people's participation in angling. However, Djohari identifies the importance that close friendships play in young people's well-being and the roles that angling has in forging these close friendships. In support of these views, Subrahmanyam, Erich and Espinoza (2008) found that young people and emerging adults often used social networks to connect and maintain friendships with family and friends. This tendency amongst young people would suggest a level of leisure interest connection might be created through anglers whose friend networks, as acknowledged by Djohari (2011a), are often varied and dispersed.

Whilst Djohari (2011a, 2011d, 2011c) did not directly consider the influence of social media on the participation of young people, a result of the project was the creation of plings.net, a website designed to inform young people of events and activities which may be of interest to them. Plings.net gathered information on activities from across the country through multiple websites, social networking sites such as Facebook, mobile phone tools, and local authority portals, which were then accessible to young people (Djohari, 2011b, p. 12). Multiple researchers have shown the potential benefits of digital engagement on youth participation (*e.g.,* Valenzuela, Park and Kee, 2009; Loader, Vromen and Xenos, 2014). However, this would seem to demonstrate a missed opportunity as the platform seems to have fallen into disuse and no longer exists. In examining the interaction around fishing on the popular Facebook platform, this research helps to highlight the benefits of social media use to physical world participation, albeit with a different segment of the population than that examined by Djohari (2011a).

National Angling Survey (2012b):

As part of the Angling Research project, a national survey of anglers was conducted in 2012. The survey canvased the opinions of more than 29000 individual anglers and remains one of the most extensive surveys of the angling community ever undertaken (Brown, 2012b). The survey demonstrates some parallels between the works of the theorists mentioned in this literature review and anglers' thoughts during the 2012 survey, particularly concerning the link between work and angling. For this reason, whilst I will not conduct a detailed analysis here, it is helpful to consider some of the responses of anglers to some of the questions posed to them.

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Brown (2012b) notes that most anglers (94.2%, n=27'234) expressed an interest in spending more time fishing. However, of interest to this research are the obstacles cited by anglers for not being able to do this. Of those obstacles, the most mentioned reason for anglers' participation limitations was 'Not enough free time - work/family commitments'. Lack of free time was the main barrier to increased participation for 59% (n=17'305) of anglers who completed the survey. This lack of free time demonstrates the struggles observed by Marx (Veal, 2019) between the realms of freedom and necessity. Whilst this struggle for increased free time might, at first, seem obvious to the casual observer, it is of particular relevance here as it demonstrates that this struggle still plays a crucial role in angling participation. Moreover, the struggle might motivate anglers to seek alternative opportunities (*i.e.,* social media) to achieve some level of involvement in their interest.

The second reason given by anglers for their inability to participate more often was the cost associated with participation. Here, as well as another example of Marx's realm of freedom/realm of necessity dichotomy, we can see the potential emergence of a Veblenesque social hierarchy amongst anglers built on the availability of resources. Because aspects of angling can be associated with high expenditure, which might require more time away from paid employment, angling provides an environment in which conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure can potentially be exercised. For example, long-distance travel and prolonged stays in exotic locations in the pursuit of exotic fish species are beyond the financial means of many and could be seen as a form of conspicuous leisure. Or the expensive equipment required to participate in certain forms of fishing, such as big game fishing, might mark these pursuits out as a form of conspicuous consumption.

Indicators can also be seen in support of Stebbins (1982) and Bryan's ([1979] 2008) constructs. In the case of Bryan's construct of recreational specialisation, there is no analysis of the average age of anglers by specialism or the average length of time involved in the activity measured against the type of angling specialism. However, most anglers (86%) reported starting angling at a young age (between 4 and 16). The average age of respondents to the survey was 51 years; this suggests that participation in angling tends to be a long-term involvement. However, of those anglers surveyed, only 10.7% gave still water game fishing as their primary activity, and only 8% gave river game

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angling as their primary activity. This low participation level would suggest that only a tiny percentage of respondents participate in this aspect of the activity. Bryan ([1979] 2008) sees fly fishing (read Game fishing) as the pinnacle of the angling specialization continuum, and the time involved by many anglers surveyed would seem relatively long. It would seem reasonable to assume that many anglers should have progressed to the game fishing end of the spectrum during their careers. However, whilst this evidence does bring Bryan's ([1979] 2008) belief that progression is an almost inevitable component of recreational specialization into question, recreational specialisation, in common with all constructs, is an evolving paradigm, shifting as researchers develop a deeper understanding of its intricacies. It has been shown that whilst progression is a part of recreational specialisation, it is not an inevitable part. Some participants may not progress beyond a certain point, whilst others may decrease their levels of specialisation over time (*e.g.,* see Scott and Godbey, 1992).

To understand why progression is not always an inevitable consequence of participation, Scott and Shafer (2001, pp. 334–335) examine some of the ways that researchers have sought to understand this dichotomy. In doing so, Scott and Shafer (2001) highlight the concept of reinforcement theory. Interestingly, for this research, Scott and Shafer (2001) explicitly point out that the rewards received by the participant can be extrinsic (*e.g.,* coming from an outside source in the form of praise or admiration) or intrinsic (*e.g.,* coming from an internal reference in the form of feelings of self-achievement). It is possible to see how social media might feed both of these reinforcing factors for the angler and drive anglers towards engagement with their activity in virtual space and communities such as those offered by the Facebook platform. As observed in this research, these factors may also be a driver behind forming an online angling culture.

Stebbins's (1979, 1982, 2001, 2007, 2009) work on serious leisure is further evident in the survey. Central to Stebbins's ideas is that serious leisure is an activity that becomes central to the participant's life. More than 23% of respondents indicated that they took part in some form of volunteering related to their leisure activity participation, with a further 26% (n=7'576) indicating that they were interested in volunteering. Furthermore, anglers expressed interest, most strongly, in becoming involved in environmental improvement work through volunteering, pointing towards Bryans

([1979] 2008) observations about setting preferences at higher levels of angling participation. Finally, in support of Stolks's (2010) observations, and pointing towards Stebbins 'Unique ethos', is the observation that many anglers (38%) of those surveyed were taught to fish by their parent. This family link demonstrates that angling can be serious leisure enforced and followed through an individual's lifetime and is generationally inherited.

The above review of the National Angling Survey held in 2012 supports many of the ideas highlighted in this review. Considering the more classical theories, angling in contemporary society demonstrates a link to Marx's original works on the realms of necessity and freedom due to the conflicts experienced by anglers in their constant struggle to find more time to fish. Also, we can see Veblen's ([1899] 1994) ideas evident in how anglers use conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure as tools for social media interaction. However, we can also see strong links with the more contemporary Serious Leisure and Recreational Specialisation theories in the angling 'careers' that anglers seem to build for themselves through social media engagement and interaction.

Further Academic Considerations of Angling:

While further research outside of the above-discussed targeted and specifically commissioned research project is limited within the UK, some broader academic works have sought to understand some of the sociological aspects of angling in the United Kingdom. The limited nature of research in the field of Angling in the UK seems to have been balanced by attracting researchers from various academic specialities. The most significant body of work focuses on the biological and environmental aspects of angling and its effects on the environment and the fish. However, the social sciences have not ignored angling. There has been interest shown from the academic fields of human geography, history, socio-economics, and theology (Snyder, 2007; Bull, 2009; Coopey, 2010; Bear, 2011; Eden and Bear, 2011; Locker, 2014) which has sought to understand the role that angling plays in the lived experience of some individuals.

A key theme amongst many papers dealing with social aspects of angling is the meaning that angling has in the lives of the participants and how anglers engage with their activity to make sense of the world around them, including, in some cases, their

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spiritual world. Snyder (2007) goes as far as to suggest that angling (specifically fly fishing) should be considered a form of 'nature religion'. Snyder (2007) bases his argument on the habit of anglers referring to their activity in terms of religious experience or, to further their religious terminology, will refer to the environment in which they fish in religious terms. Anglers often refer to the river as their 'church' to nature as sacred. Through this terminology, Snyder (2007) demonstrates a deep connection between the environment and some anglers, illustrating an extreme end of Bryan's ([1979] 2008) recreational specialisation continuum. Whilst Snyder (2007) focuses on fly-fishing as a single aspect of angling, similar connections with the environment and the activity have been observed by other researchers. Bear & Eaden (2011) observed how anglers from various branches of the activity engage with fish behaviour over time and space. Illustrating that, through the engagement of the imagination, anglers strive to 'become fish' to understand the fish's world and behaviour and, therefore, increase their probability of a successful fishing trip. Furthermore, Eaden & Bear (2011) examined the ways that anglers equally engage with the environment through 'watercraft' and Bull (2009, p. 461) teased out some of the links between masculinity and angling, noting that:

> 'The waterscapes of angling can be considered liminal as they induce change and create scenarios which challenge the internal coherence of the individual masculinity and encourage the crossing of thresholds between different attitudes to nature.'

In this way, whilst dealing with the ideas of masculinity in angling, Bull (2009) seems to draw the reader, again, towards an opinion that there is something more spiritual to angling than meets the casual observer's eye.

Of relevance to this research is the concept that spiritual practices or beliefs, in some way, reduce the tendency towards conspicuous consumption (see Stillman *et al.*, 2012). However, as a practice involving high levels of conspicuous consumption, angling can be seen as a spiritual practice that contradicts these assumptions. Angling, particularly fly-angling, which is the area focused upon by most who have considered the spirituality of the activity, has a high financial barrier to entry, demonstrating that angling might be a form of 'consumer spirituality' (see Kale, 2006). Moreover, Campbell (2005) discusses the phenomena of the internet as a sacred space, highlighting

a growing trend for religious individuals to use the internet to share their beliefs. In this, Campbell (2005) suggests that the internet and social media have the potential to become a space to which individuals might turn for meaning-making in a way that echoes Bryan's ([1979] 2008) belief that leisure activities are a form of meaning-making for their participants.

Angling as a little understood activity:

As I have shown, angling in the United Kingdom is a little researched aspect of many people's leisure time despite having been the most popular participation activity in the country at various points in its history. The lack of attention given to angling might stem from its lack of visibility. Angling, despite its popularity, has never enjoyed the television and widespread media attention afforded to other activities with similar levels of recreational participation (*i.e.,* tennis, football, rugby, cricket), which may be due to the lack of spectator appeal within angling. However, we can see that angling has a special significance to its participants and may offer real community benefits to society on a larger scale. Furthermore, we can see that angling facilitates engagement and participation from those who enjoy the activity, extending far beyond physical involvement in fishing.

Currently, however, the research available for those interested in understanding angling as a participation activity seems to be underdeveloped and driven, in the main, by pre-conceived objectives such as the drive for more anglers and, therefore, more revenue for governmental departments and governing bodies of the sport, or the environmental concerns of anglers, or the youth sports participation agenda (Brown, 2019a). For this reason, subjectivity would seem to have occasionally suffered due to a need to demonstrate the positive social effects of angling rather than subjectively understand the role that angling plays within society and, significantly, the lives of those who participate in the activity. This lack of subjectivity may have resulted from the need of Angling organisations to prove their worth in the competitive world of seeking funding for their activities, and, in seeking to establish this worth, some opportunities may have been missed by the Angling Research Project. Other research (*e.g.,* Snyder, 2007; Bull, 2009; Coopey, 2010; Locker, 2014) has successfully demonstrated that angling plays an integral part in the lives of its participants, both spiritually and culturally. It has been shown that anglers experience a close connection to the

environment they rely upon for their activity and the creatures they pursue for their recreation. To this end, research not linked to the Angling Research Project seems to have given more compelling evidence for the actual benefits of angling. In an increasingly environmentally aware culture, anglers find themselves acutely and passionately involved in an environment that casual observers could easily ignore, many of whom have environmental concerns and participate in social media. An example of this might be the concerns that anglers have expressed for the wild trout and salmon populations and the work that they have done to conserve these species (Salmon & Trout Conservation, 2022).

By understanding the digital aspects of angling engagement, it might be possible to understand better the motivations and incentives of anglers who participate in their recreational activity online. In this way, my work offers the potential to build upon the existing knowledge available about the social significance of angling within a UK context. It provides an opportunity to more fully understand how angling is enacted in multiple ways beyond the limitations of physical participation.

Social Media

Outsider observation would suggest that anglers use social media to share and discuss their participation in their leisure activity and often form groups designed for the open discussion of angling. However, as I discuss in chapter 4, this interaction is not always as positive or inclusive as it might seem. The wider angling community has long acknowledged that the social media interaction between anglers has positive and negative aspects (*e.g.,* see Knight, 2016). However, social media is becoming a deeply entrenched part of many aspects of contemporary society. It is not easy to conduct balanced research into any social group without considering their computer-mediated communication channels (CMC).

This section will consider the intersection between leisure activities and social media engagement. As a large and rapidly expanding field of enquiry that covers diverse aspects of CMC, from blogging to email to the use of mobile devices, this section will, by necessity, be limited in its scope. It will concentrate primarily on the defined areas of study relevant to this research being interaction through social media platforms. Finally, as this research project requires an element of covert investigation, I

will examine some of the challenges associated with this form of social media research and discuss how other researchers have considered it.

Murthy (2008, p. 837) observed that 'the rise of digital technologies has the potential to open new directions in ethnography.' To this end, ethnographical research conducted in virtual spaces offers opportunities for a deeper understanding of leisure communities like those formed by anglers. However, with these unique opportunities comes unique challenges for researchers. Many of the considerations online, such as the significant geographical, racial and socioeconomic variance in subjects, whilst not impossible, are less likely to be encountered by the 'traditional' ethnographer.

Social Media and Leisure Activity.

How social media and leisure fit within the fabric of day-to-day life is a reoccurring theme within the fields of social media research. How we choose to use our social media time can be interpreted in multiple ways. Dependent on the context, the use of social media in connection with leisure has been interpreted as both a way to avoid contact with the unfamiliar (Sharaievska and Stodolska, 2015) and a way to facilitate leisure (Sintas, de Francisco and Álvarez, 2015) activity in the wider 'real' world. The ways that social media has been interpreted in a leisure context are of interest to this work as I seek to understand the interaction between social media and the interaction around angling facilitated by this form of CMC.

Of relevance to this research is the often transient nature of the divisions between an individual's work and leisure time in the social media context. Social media often becomes an environment to socialise and participate in outside interests whilst, at the same time, potentially becoming a lens through which would-be employers and professional colleagues can scrutinise one's life. Moreover, for some, social media itself has become a professional realm where their efforts are engaged in self-promotion or direct marketing for financial purposes. Other contexts also exist that blur the lines between work and leisure activity. For example, some individuals might participate in social media use as a leisure activity (*i.e.,* sharing and conversing with friends or liking or reading posts) during their working day, whilst others may engage with social media in a professional context (*i.e.,* sharing their employer's social media posts or encouraging others to like their employer's page) during their personal leisure time. In

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angling, for example, some anglers receive 'sponsorship' from angling companies. This sponsorship, however, often only amounts to free or reduced-cost fishing tackle or bait, for which the angler is expected to widely promote the sponsor's business (see Knight and Collett, 2012). Sintas, de Francisco and Álvarez (2015) have challenged the traditional divisions between work and leisure by exploring the narratives of 30 individuals to identify the properties of their digital leisure and paid work activities performed in and out of their usual contexts. Sintas et al. (2015) observed the changing nature of communication technology and increased access to such technology, suggesting that: 'information and communication technologies have made it possible to engage in leisure and paid work activities outside their usual context' (Sintas et al., 2015. p. 79) and that this challenges the construction of the traditional meanings of work and leisure. Furthermore, Sintas et al. (2015) indicate that social media has played a significant role in reconstructing what it means to work within a connected digital society.

The pervasive nature of internet access and, by association, access to social media platforms within contemporary society means that social media interaction has touched virtually every aspect of our lives. The parts of our lives that have been unavoidably affected by social media include those that some would like to consider exclusive, such as the core family unit and existing 'real world' friendships. However, the existence of social media access does not seem to have influenced the consideration of these existing social units when using and engaging with social media, and many use social media as an extension, rather than a replacement, of existing social bonds. For example, Sharaievska and Stodolska (2015) used the family systems theory (see White and Klein, 2008) and the concept of boundaries to explore the influence the use of social networking sites for leisure has on boundaries between families and the outside world. Sharaievska and Stodolska (2015) found that families strived for clear boundaries between themselves and the outside world through control of access to their accounts by limiting what information they shared and making judgements about the appropriate use of social media. Sharaievska and Stodolska (2015) reported that participants used social media to remain connected to individuals from their past and present.

However, Sharaievska and Stodolska (2015, p. 442) also found that 'interviewees… reported they used social networking sites to maintain contact with

people they already knew and not make new friendships.'. Sharaievska and Stodolska's (2015) work seems relevant to angling and the associated use of social media, as Stolk (2010) also observed the importance of existing social bonds within an angling context. Further evidence of the positive effect of social media on leisure activities is offered by López-Sintas, Rojas-DeFrancisco and García-Álvarez (2017). They argue that the introduction of digital technologies into domestic settings has transformed free-time leisure activities.

López-Sintas, Rojas-DeFrancisco and García-Álvarez (2017) analysed 30 individual narratives to explore how digital technologies impact home-based leisure activities. The authors argue that digital technologies have increased exposure to different experiences and allow users to control those experiences. López-Sintas *et al*. (2017, p. 1) argue that 'The consumption of experiences is no longer homogeneous among household members and individuals now have greater freedom regarding their choice of home-based leisure activities.'. Whilst López-Sintas *et al*. (2017) focus on multiple forms of digital leisure activity, the authors note a social aspect to in-home digital technology. The authors note that: 'Physical distances are removed by online social media' (López-Sintas *et al*., 2017, p.9), demonstrating that there is potentially an important social function being performed by digital media. The authors note that the shift towards internet use has had a similar effect to the introduction of portable radios, freeing users from the need to gather around a communal radio to listen. This technology has also offered users greater choice over how they spend their free time by, for example, creating 'temporal fragmentation of television station programming and the use of technologies to cover gaps' (López-Sintas *et al*., 2017, p. 11). In the angling context, this may have allowed for the sharing and viewing of angling content and shows (such as online magazines and YouTube videos). Brown et al. (2012) observed that angling has not traditionally enjoyed the mass-spectator appeal required for angling to reach the heights of scheduled programming on traditional T.V. channels. However, despite the positive aspects of social media observed by some, social media has also been shown to have potentially harmful effects on leisure involvement on a family level.

Sharaievska and Stodolska (2017) also examined the links between social networking and family satisfaction to explore the bidirectional relationship between the

use of social networking sites for leisure and family and leisure satisfaction. Twenty-two individuals making up Seven families were interviewed in group settings and individually. The authors found that the influences of social networking sites on satisfaction with family leisure and family satisfaction varied. For some, the use of social networking sites helped build family leisure, increased connectedness with other members of the family unit and contributed to an increased sense of belonging or, in the case of parents, a way of establishing their identity as parents. For others, it decreased the amount of time spent with their immediate family unit, diminished face-to-face interactions, encouraged unfavourable comparisons and became a cause for concern about the development of social skills among younger family members. Boroon, Abedin and Erfani (2021) seem to concur with the observation that social media can have a dark side, identifying almost 50 negative aspects of social media interaction, the authors conclude '.Many studies have acknowledged the positive effects of these platforms, but little attention has been paid to the negative effects' (Boroon, Abedin and Erfani, 2021, p. 14).

These concerns echo some of the concerns about social media use that the popular angling press has raised (*e.g.,* see Knight and Collett, 2012; Knight, 2016). The popular angling press often sees angling social media as a distraction from the physical act of angling or, worse, an actively destructive force that some anglers use to target and intimidate other participants. For example, in 2020, the Angling Times reported on anglers not reporting record captures due to social media intimidation. Examples of social media intimidation can be seen even in the development of this work (see Chapter 4). However, Sharaievska and Stodolska (2017) also note: 'family relationships and satisfaction with family life influenced how family members used social networking sites for leisure.' (Sharaievska and Stodolska, 2017, p.231). Some participants were observed to use social media as a form of 'escape' from family conflicts to distract themselves from the situation. Others limited their use of social media to avoid sharing family conflicts with the broader society. This desire to escape real-life trials might motivate some to participate in angling discussion and debate but might also result in the negative aspects of angling's use of social media observed by Knight (2016).

This multifaceted relationship between family, leisure and social media use is of relevance to this research as it demonstrates one possible route through which anglers

may become involved in angling social media. Stolk (2010) observed the close relationship between angling and existing social bonds such as friendship and family. The strength of these bonds may find their contemporary expression within the confines of social media. Therefore, as observed by Sharaievska and Stodolska (2015), discussing leisure (in the case of this research, angling) may be one of the factors that preserve family and friendship bonds amongst individuals who find themselves geographically disconnected. Some of these bonds can be observed in this research when anglers from the same family or friendship group seem to congregate to stay in touch and discuss their recent angling adventures (see Chapter 6). Conversely, social media might have a role to play in the decline of angling since, as observed by Sharaievska and Stodolska (2017), social media can result in diminished time under certain circumstances.

When considered as a driver of 'real world' leisure activity, Aydın and Arslan (2016) sought to reveal the effects of social media on outdoor leisure preferences. The authors carried out semi-structured interviews and conducted a content analysis of the interview results. Aydın and Arslan (2016)argue that 'social media encourages travel, creates intercultural interactions and alternative leisure, incentivises leisure activities and facilitates making use of leisure.'. Aydın and Arslan (2016, p. 8) also found a strong link between leisure activity and social media use which can also be identified within angling: 'individuals have friends and groups according to their interests, and the sharing that these people do have important impacts on the leisure behaviour and preferences of the individual.'. Aydın and Arslan (2016) acknowledge the effect of social media sharing on the consumptive habits of followers, specifically in an outdoor recreation context, which would seem to confirm a Veblenesque form of conspicuous leisure and conspicuous consumption in online space.

In conclusion, the authors argue that individuals consider their free time participating in traditional leisure activities, such as spending time outdoors with families or volunteering. They view their social media, on the other hand, as a 'communication' tool that facilitates their involvement with other activities. These observances link strongly to this research as anglers use their time on Facebook to engage in a subtle but complex form of communication with the broader community of anglers who share similar interests and objectives.

This internalised separation between the roles of their leisure activity and their social media activity amongst some leisure activity participants further highlights the links between leisure and conspicuous consumption. For some individuals, social media activities are seen as distinct and separate from the leisure activities that individuals participate in; in this case, angling and social media channels become a valuable tool through which participants express their involvement and levels of achievement. Furthermore, leisure activity participants can demonstrate their devotion to activities without direct reference to them through broader social media engagement. For example, Bryan ([1979] 2008) suggested that their preference for activity setting can define anglers at higher levels of the recreational specialisation continuum. This link between specialisation and activity setting would indicate that anglers are concerned with the environment within which they carry out their activity, a suggestion that would have been confirmed by the National Angling survey (Brown, 2012b). The tendency for anglers to use social media to discuss their leisure activity might stretch beyond the actual practice of fishing. It may also enable conservation-focused organisations to reach out to potential angler supporters to inform them of environmental issues, promote proactive environmental involvement, and support such efforts. Environmental outreach might be rewarding for both parties.

On the part of the environmental organisation, it serves to raise awareness of a cause. However, on the part of the individual angler, it might serve as a subtle form of conspicuous consumption. Environmental and conservation organisations have used this tendency to their advantage. For example, Claussen et al. (2013) note that Social media platforms have been used to help communicate and increase involvement in cultural, political, and scientific circles (Claussen et al., 2013, p. 359). The authors use the formation of a committee in 2012 to explore online fisheries science communication and understand how social media platforms could be put to better use by the American Fisheries Society (AFS). A relatively high response rate of 82% was received from a survey disseminated to all AFS units, which found that almost 69% of respondents used social media. Amongst the platforms used, the researchers found that Facebook was the most dominant, with 59% of respondents making use of the platform almost exclusively for the purpose of communication. Other benefits of social media included education,

outreach, and member recruitment, demonstrating the utility of such platforms to environmental and angler engagement.

The above shows that involvement in social media communities that develop around leisure activities can positively affect recreationalists and the organisations that represent them. Additionally, potential benefits can be seen in the environment where anglers practice their recreational activity. However, these advantages must be balanced with potential disadvantages highlighted by other researchers. There is a need to understand the balance between social media use and 'real world' leisure activity participation if the potential advantages are to be capitalised while the disadvantages are minimised. In order to conduct this future research, there will inevitably be a need for covert research if the true nature of social media engagement is to be understood. However, such covert research itself poses issues that themselves are worthy of further consideration.

Conclusion:

As current literature suggests, there are strong links between the worlds of work and of leisure and the ways that recreationalists in general, but particularly anglers, choose to interact with their activity through the adoption of social media platforms. Advancing these understandings of leisure and work, in this chapter, I drew on the perspectives of Marx and Veblen before considering how the work of Bryan and Stebbins can be seen as an extension of these theoretical perspectives. In so doing, it was possible to see an observable closing of the gap between work and leisure, which may have been made possible thanks to advances in communication technology. This application of advancements in technology to the widening of the appeal of recreational activities can be observed strongly in angling. Angling itself has a history of taking advantage of technological advancements. For example, it took advantage of early printing press technology to widen its appeal by publishing 'a treatyse of fysshynge wyth an angle' in the late 15th century and subsequent publications of other influential books. Furthermore, angling continues to take advantage of technological advancements through the employment of internet technology and social media (Farmbrough, 2018) to disseminate further information about the activity of angling and angling techniques.

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Secondly, I examined angling itself and discovered a paucity of a sociological investigation into the motivations and societal impact of the activity. I highlight this in contrast to other outdoor leisure activities, which have enjoyed a more considered insight into the contemporary sociological aspects of participation (*i.e.,* see Olive, 2016; Dumont, 2017). However, it was observed that there had been some effort to understand the societal benefits of angling (*e.g.,* Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012a) generated in response to a defined need on the part of angling organisations argue their case for continued funding. I highlighted the potential failings in this research but acknowledged its effectiveness in demonstrating the need for future research. Furthermore, I observed that aspects of the National Angling Survey (Brown, 2012b) highlighted the links between that which is observable within the world of angling and that which could be predicted through the application of the work of Marx, Veblen, Bryan and Stebbins and the application of my model of recreational activity. Finally, concerning research into recreational anglers' activity in general, particularly within the UK, I demonstrated that it is necessary to step outside the tightly defined bounds of sociological theory to adopt a multi-disciplinary approach to seeking examples of research conducted within the field.

Finally, in this review of available literature, I turned my attention to the more contemporary and rapidly expanding world of social media. Here, I sought to demonstrate the links between social media and the leisure activities in which people choose to participate. It was necessary to consider social media use itself as a leisure activity. Furthermore, I highlighted a lack of research that considers anglers' involvement with social media outside the fleeting considerations of Stolk (2010) and the speculative journalistic criticisms of Collet and Knight (2012). This lack of research highlights a world where social media is simultaneously important and poorly understood among a distinct group of leisure participants. From the perspective of my leisure model, it can be seen that, for some, social media is jointly a leisure activity and a profession (*i.e.,* see Cox and Blake, 2011).

While this review of available literature seemed to explain social media use about angling in the UK, it further highlighted significant gaps in understanding. Firstly, the lack of angling specific research leaves us with a considerable gap in our knowledge of the online activity of anglers specifically. These gaps in knowledge lead to an

unavoidable need to speculate about the motivations of anglers to engage in social media activity rather than base our findings on solid foundations. This literature review shows angling, particularly the activity of angling as it is practised in the UK, to have been under-researched from a sociological point of view. No substantial consideration seems to have been given to the online activities of recreational anglers. These gaps in the currently available research demonstrate a need for further investigation into social media's role in contemporary leisure activities and, particularly, within the recreational activity of angling.

Future research to consolidate the dual world of leisure and social media engagement is needed to better understand both influences on individuals' leisure lives. This need is the gap that this research seeks to fill. When balanced against my leisure model, it is possible to see that opportunities for individuals to engage in online activity seem to have made it increasingly possible for some individuals to bring their working life closer to their professional one. This evolution of work and leisure would seem to have occurred both formally and informally. In many informal settings, it is often possible through the increasingly mobile nature of social media for an individual's leisure time to infringe upon their work time as time might be 'borrowed' from work to update social media profiles. On a formal basis, the merging of leisure and work can be seen in the growing popularity and monetization of social media platforms such as Instagram. Furthermore, through the increasing popularity of blogging (*e.g.,* see Cox and Blake, 2011), some internet users have amassed substantial followings and wealth due to their participation in online activity.

Chapter 3: Methodology

This study aims to understand how contemporary recreational anglers use social media and their involvement in user-created social groups on the Facebook platform. Secondly, it seeks to understand the effects that participation within angling focused social media communities' has on the 'world views' of anglers, both within and outside of their closed recreational community. However, the consideration of social media as a medium through which individuals congregate and engage in communication and social activity is still in its infancy. For this reason, the design of research focusing on this 'virtual' world requires careful consideration. In this chapter, I discuss the methods used to inform the data collection phase of this Thesis. This research project is designed as an interdisciplinary thesis but is contributed to most notably by the emerging method of netnography, which I will explore below.

Introduction

This research takes place in a closed Facebook group called Fishamo, which I created during my leisure time. A qualitative approach has been adopted for this project as it is a flexible and adaptable approach to understanding the complexities of online space (*e.g.,* see, William, 2003; Wilson, 2006; Blevins and Holt, 2009) and is best suited to this type of research. Furthermore, a qualitative approach allows my voice to appear alongside other participants legitimately. I consider this important as I am both researcher and an active participant in the online angling community that I am studying.

Given the popularity of social media, its role in the day to day lives of individuals, and its potential as a force to influence society (*i.e.,* see Orlowski, 2020), research which uses Facebook as the research site is underrepresented in the literature. One notable exception which uses Facebook both as a research tool and a research site is the work of Stirling (2016) which investigates the ways that school leavers use the platform in their transition to university. In terms of the use of Facebook groups to facilitate specific leisure activities, the literature is lacking. However, Facebook has recognised the importance of groups and publicly stated the desire to focus more heavily on them (see Griffin, 2019).

In considering the appropriate Facebook angling group within which to house this research, firstly, thought was given to the breadth of the angling space online. A simple search from within the Facebook search bar identifies thousands of Facebook groups that contain the keywords[7] 'fishing' or 'angling' within the UK alone, with many more available from other geographical locations. Furthermore, anglers can actively participate in angling conversations through many online platforms, including Instagram, Twitter, and personal blogs, where anglers enjoy sharing and discussing their adventures. This prevalence of engagement demonstrates that angling on social media platforms is widespread and a popular subject for social media group formation. However, angling is a diverse activity. Interest is split between those who focus on particular fish species, such as Carp or Pike, and those interested in a particular type of angling, such as fly fishing[8] or lure fishing[9] . The diverse nature of angling means that it is vital to determine a specific group to concentrate on, as there is too much breadth to the general community to allow for focused study. Furthermore, due to the specialised nature of many forms of angling, some groups, whilst they might seem significant, suffer from very low activity levels, limiting the research conducted within them. For these reasons, it was decided to focus on a single space where anglers discussed a variety of angling interests.

This initial decision was vital for this research project's ultimate form and methodological considerations. Here, I will unpick this thought process by, firstly, considering some of the philosophical issues involved in the design of this research. I will then consider the broader area of ethnography and the primary methodological approach of Netnography used in this research project and, finally, offer more insight into the chosen field site.

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[7] Keywords are words or phrases which are used to make a web page or group more visible to search engines.

[8] Using lures created from feathers and other materials, often, to imitate a fly.

[9] Using larger lures, often made from wood or plastic, often, but not exclusively, used to deceive predator fish.

Some Ethical Considerations and Issues.

When conducting research within the social media space, ethical issues are often foreshadowed by users' assumptions about their own privacy. For example, posts, photos and other data shared in 'public' forums, that is, forums which are accessible to the general public are often seen as public domain and openly accessible. On the other hand, when interacting in private social media forums, for example, groups like *Fishamo*, participants often, reasonably, assume that any information or opinions that they share are private and, therefore, immune from being used by researchers. These challenges have often hindered previous attempts at conducting research within established groups. For example, Johnson, Lawson and Ames (2018) encountered significant resistance when attempting to conduct research within private communities dedicated to military spouses. As a result of such challenges, much social media research has found its focus within publicly accessible groups with only a few notable exceptions. For instance, Lizzo and Liechty (2020) conducted successful research into an online running club which the researchers were members of and which revolved around the Harry Potter series of books and films. In the case of *Fishamo*, these challenges had to be considered when planning for ethical approval of this research project.

It was decided that, since the angling community has frequently been associated with negative social media interaction (*e.g.,* Angling Times, 2020b), the most appropriate approach to accessing a private group was to use one that had already been formed and, in which, I was already involved, as this would give me a valuable insight into the established nature of the community. I had developed the *Fishamo* social media angling group a few months before the launch of this research project, shortly after the commencement of my PhD and, therefore, the group was ideal for my requirements.

To ensure that the privacy and confidentiality of the participants in my research were maintained, I took a series of proactive measures. Given that the group was already active, there was a reasonable expectation among participants that their interactions within the group would be kept private. To accommodate this, I made it a priority to clearly communicate the purpose of my research to the participants.

I accomplished this by running a series of regular posts within the group, reminding participants that I was conducting research and that their participation was voluntary. These reminders served to keep the purpose of the research in the minds of the participants and helped to address any concerns that participants might have had about their privacy.

In addition to these reminders, I took several steps to protect the identity of the individuals involved in the research. All names used in the research were pseudonyms, and any sensitive comments were paraphrased to ensure that the identity of the individuals was not revealed. This was particularly important in cases where the comments made by participants might be considered sensitive or controversial, as it helped to maintain their privacy and confidentiality.

Finally, I personally reached out to each participant through Facebook Messenger to obtain their informed consent for the use of their comments in the research. This was an important step, as it ensured that participants were fully aware of the purpose of the research and that their comments would be used in a way that was consistent with their wishes.

While these measures seemed to work well, it is impossible to guarantee that the awareness of the research did not influence the behaviour of the participants in some way. The presence of a researcher can have a subtle impact on participant behaviour, and this is an important consideration in future studies. As such, it is important to carefully consider the potential impact of researcher presence on participant behaviour and to take appropriate steps to mitigate any potential effects.

In addition to textual conversation, there arose the matter of image sharing within the online angling community. It was felt vital that this aspect of social media interaction was not ignored but, at the same time, there was the need to offer the same level of protection to those sharing images as there was for those sharing textual information. To this end I developed a 'Line Drawing' method whereby, photos were traced, by hand, from the original. This method results in a type of graphical representation of the original photo from which data such as composition and content can be maintained whilst, at the same time, offering full anonymity to the photographer and subject. This system works well in the context of this research (*see* Chapter 5,

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Figure 7). However, as the final work can be seen as an artistic creation, it is not possible to be 100% sure that, as creator, I did not inadvertently leave out aspects that the original photographer may have considered vital.

In conclusion, the ethical considerations in the development of this study presented a delicate balance between the protection of participants' confidentiality and the obligation to uphold ethical standards. To ensure that these ethical considerations were met, I closely adhered to the University of Worcester Research Integrity Policy, which provides guidance on ethical research practices. Additionally, I also relied on established research ethics guidelines for conducting research within the realm of social media, as described by Townsend and Wallace (2016). These guidelines offer comprehensive insight into the ethical and practical considerations for conducting research in the digital age, providing a valuable framework for this study. By following these ethical guidelines, I aimed to ensure that the rights and dignity of participants were protected, while still allowing for a thorough and robust exploration of the research topic.

Philosophical Considerations:

Ontology is the study of being and existence in the world. Smith (2012, p. 47) defines ontology as 'a branch of philosophy [which] is the science of what is, of the kinds and structures of objects, properties, events, processes, and relations in every area of reality.'. Marsh and Furlong (2002) simplify and condense this proposition by noting: 'The key question is whether there is a 'real' world out there that is independent of our knowledge of it'. We can identify two central ontological ideas these being objectivism and subjectivism. According to Saunders et al. (2007, p. 159), '[objectivism] holds that social entities exist in reality external to and independent from social actors'. Searle (2006, p. 53) clarifies this position by referring to what he calls 'Observer-independent' phenomena. Observer-independent phenomena are independent of our influence (*i.e.,* force, mass, gravitational attraction, tectonic plates, chemical bonds, photosynthesis, or the solar system). Conversely, Subjectivism can be defined as a reality formed by the actors' opinions, thoughts, and ideas (Bahari, 2010). The use of Subjectivism is usually closely related to the term. Constructivism, or Social Constructivism (Bahari, 2010). Easterby-Smith et al. state that

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the *[new]* paradigm, which has been developed by philosophers during the last half-century, largely in reaction to the application of positivism to the social sciences, stems from the view that 'reality' is not objective and exterior but is socially constructed and given meaning by people."

(Easterby-Smith et al. quoted in Bahari, 2010, p. 25).

Again, this position is clarified by Searle (2006) in discussing a similar concept referred to as 'Observer-dependent' phenomena and noting that examples include a person's nationality, the rules of sports and the existence and value of money. Furthermore, Searle (2006, p. 53) offers a litmus test to help demonstrate what is Observer-independent or Observer-Dependent (objective or subjective), noting that 'a simple rough-and-ready test for whether or not a fact is observer-independent is this: Could it have existed if there had been no conscious agents at all?'. Therefore, this Thesis examines an observer-dependent phenomenon as there could not be any digital social media without the interaction of conscious agents. Thus, I work within a clearly 'constructed' (or subjective) world. My role here is to understand how individual actors interact to construct a virtual worldview that may spill out into a more comprehensive but still subjective experience of society.

Epistemology is concerned with the 'how' of knowledge and its generation. This branch of philosophy concerns how we can know things and understand the world through our knowledge of it. Ormston et al. (2014, p. 6) clarify this by noting that, for the social sciences, 'Epistemology is concerned with the ways of knowing and learning and focuses on issues such as how we can learn about reality and what forms the basis of our knowledge.'

Of the critical debates around epistemology, one of the critical issues is how knowledge is acquired. One possible answer is that knowledge is acquired purely by an inductive process; we observe the world and learn from our observations. Ormston et al. (2014, p. 6) point out that qualitative research is usually conducted inductively but suggest that this is somewhat of an oversimplification of the process.

Blaikie (2007, p. 57) suggests that the two approaches to acquiring knowledge can be understood through language. Blaikie (2007, p. 57) explains that, in inductive research, 'the conclusion makes claims that exceed what is contained in the premise' whilst, in deductive research, 'the argument moves from premise, at least one of which

is a general or universal statement, to a conclusion that is a singular statement.'. Ormston et al. (2014, p. 6) also note that Blaikie identifies two other research strategies that can be applied: retroduction and abduction. These two strategies are well summarised by (Meyer and Lunnay, 2013 p.86), who note that:

> 'Abduction involves analysing data that fall outside of an initial theoretical frame or premise. Retroduction is a method of conceptualising which requires the researcher to identify the circumstances without which something (the concept) cannot exist'.

These two strategies allow for more flexibility within the inductive/deductive dichotomy and allow the researcher to tackle results or anomalies which may have been unforeseen at the outset.

For this research project, choosing the appropriate philosophical standpoint, both in terms of ontology and epistemology, lay in revisiting the research question. We aim to understand, "How does angling knowledge facilitate participation within social media groups that form around recreational angling and to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in such groups?" I position the Thesis from a deductive epistemological standpoint as it seeks to answer a direct question. However, this epistemological standpoint can be further refined. As I seek to approach these questions within a constructed world of social media, a retroductive approach seems an appropriate tool. This approach is helpful because the data are likely to help develop an understanding of the circumstances around which angling communities form on social media and, for this reason, the circumstances without which they cannot exist.

Therefore, I will apply this retroductive thinking to my research. First, by collecting data that consists of posts and conversations that emerge within the group and then by retroductive reasoning, I will attempt to understand the specific circumstances that facilitate the emergence and growth of such groups in terms of individual angler knowledge, and engagement and activity.

However, these philosophical ideas are of little use if not applied to a methodological approach. In this research, as previously stated, I apply netnography. However, as netnography is often referred to as a way of doing ethnography online, it is worth briefly considering the broader discipline of ethnography.

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Ethnographic research

Hammersley and Atkinson (1983, p. 2) define ethnography as a field that draws on many sources. The ethnographer gathers data through interaction, either overtly or covertly, within the everyday lives of their research participants for an extended period: 'watching what happens, listening to what is said, asking questions; in fact, collecting whatever data are available to throw light on the issues with which he or she is concerned'. Indeed. Hammersley and Atkinson (1983) argue that, in many ways, ethnography is the most basic form of social research, thanks to both its long history and how it bears a close resemblance to the ways that people spend their daily life. However, Atkinson et al. (2007) suggest that ethnography has become an increasingly fragmented practice, resulting in different types of ethnography being developed for different environments and data types. With this propensity to germinate new forms within the basic framework, Netnography has emerged as an independent methodology for research in the online space.

To justify the need for netnography, Kozinets draws on Lombardi and quotes the eminent applied anthropologist: 'If we were having the same discussion in 1835, at the Royal Society, I might be questioning why we need the new-fangled term 'ethnography'' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 4). In this observation, Lombardi illustrates that the naming and need for a new methodology are perhaps due more to the society and time within which a method exists.

Online ethnographic research

As a result of the increased migration of social interaction from the 'real world' into online environments, ethnographers have, for some time, been working on novel approaches to online space (*i.e.,* see Hine, 2000; Murthy, 2008; Robinson and Schultz. J, 2009). This trend began before the emergence and growth of platforms that we now picture when we think of social media and begin almost as soon as communication with remote individuals became possible through digital means. These early studies were often carried out in email user groups. As the internet grew in sophistication, such studies became more popular and required specialised methodologies that were flexible and adaptable enough to keep pace with the advancement in technology.

Of the emergent methodologies designed to cope with the demands of researching virtual communities online, netnography, which was initially conceived as a tool for conducting market research within online consumer groups, seems to have gained the most support amongst researchers. It was decided early in the design of this methodology that netnography offered the most flexible set of tools for this Thesis.

The role of 'Netnography'

Netnography is an online research methodology that finds its origins within anthropology and ethnography. Netnography is ethnography adapted to give researchers a practical methodology to apply to research communities that form and exist in online space. Such communities are not necessarily limited to those that emerge on social media as considered by this Thesis but could also develop around other types of online interaction such as blogs, forums or even email groups. The term was first used by its creator, Robert Kozinets (1997), in his early research into online fan culture amongst X-files[10] fans during the early days of mass internet access, but the methodology was eagerly adopted by many researchers within the growing field of social media research (*e.g.,* see Mkono, 2011; Mateos and Durand, 2012; Kulavuz-Onal and Vásquez, 2013).

In his works on Netnography, Kozinet's definition of the term seems to have changed somewhat. In his original manual on the subject, he defines Netnography as 'a form of ethnographic research adapted to include the internet's influence on contemporary social worlds' (Kozinets, 2010, p. 1). After a decade of use amongst social researchers, this definition seems too broad, especially given the work of other academics in this field (*e.g.,* see Hine, 2000; Sade-Beck, 2004; Murthy, 2008; Robinson and Schultz. J, 2009). However, Kozinets seems to refine this definition in the latest edition of his manual by differentiating Netnography from other sorts of social media research. He states: 'Netnography is centred on the study of online traces' (Kozinets, 2019, p. 16) and, in so doing, he illustrates the method's applicability to this Thesis.

The first manual on the methodology (Kozinets, 2010) laid out a practical approach to conducting netnographic research in online spaces. A second edition was

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[10] The X-files was a popular American science fiction drama television series which had a large fan base. It was launched in 1993 making it ideal as a phenomenon to study the effects of fan culture upon early internet communities.

published in 2015 due to advancements in internet technology and advancements in social media research and increased recognition of the importance of the field. In 2019, Kozinets produced the latest revised edition to his seminal work in Netnography, detailing significantly updated thinking and improvements to the methodology made possible by advancing technology and developing thoughts within the field.

The new edition represents the latest thinking in the field. However, it must be noted that the rate of advancement within digital technology and the world of social media are so rapid that any attempt to study it will invariably fall victim to changes in technology. In the case of this research, such a potential change took the form of the Cambridge Analytica scandal (Wong, 2019), which greatly limited the types of data accessible from the Facebook platform.

The visibility of this mismatch in the rates of technological development and research seems to vary somewhat according to the area of social media that the researcher finds themselves working in and is particularly noticeable in youth interaction with digital media (*e.g.,* see Montgomery, 2000). However, this is less noticeable in the social media world of angling, where anglers seem to have adapted most to the Facebook platform (see Knight, 2016).

However, changes in technology which are sometimes triggered by outside forces, such as the changes made to Facebook policies due to the Cambridge Analytica scandal (see Wong, 2019), happen and can be mitigated through the focus this research project takes on the online traces of communication above the technology that facilitates it (Kozinets, 2019). Here, I mean that whilst digital technology will invariably advance. For example, there may be advances in computing and networking speeds or the emergence of new devices. However, communication tools that are more solidly set in the human psyche can be assumed to remain relatively stable and evolve more slowly. The medium of textual and visual communication has been the foundation of noncontact human communication for millennia and will continue to do so in the foreseeable future.

The 'fieldwork' location

As highlighted previously in this chapter, the group chosen for this research project was initially created by me. As such, I am both an intrinsic participant and

researcher within this space. For this reason, I have given careful consideration to the ethical implications involved in creating a social media space and its subsequent use as a research resource. Furthermore, it is essential to consider how the creation and formation of a social media group will impact the research outcome. Creators have a certain degree of 'steering' ability within groups, which allows them to build a world that abides by the rules they lay down and affords them the power to reject any who choose not to follow those rules.

Consequently, it would appear that I have, in effect, built the online world in which I conducted my research. However, whilst I created *Fishamo*, its actual shape results from the interaction between its multiple levels of users, making the process less black and white than it first appears. Therefore, I will now consider the ethical and methodological issues concerning the approach.

The group selected (known as '*Fishamo*') had several benefits for this research and overcame some of the limitations which might otherwise have been encountered in different groups. Primarily, the group was young by Facebook angling group standards. This newness meant that the group's history could easily be charted from its inception to its current position as a growing group, allowing for considerations of how recreation-focused online groups evolve. Secondly, this group does not find its focus in any narrowly defined niche, as is the case of many of the other Facebook angling groups that can be found. This lack of an angling niche allows for a broad cross-section of the angling community to be considered.

Furthermore, whilst not strongly defined by angling speciality, the group is strongly defined by geography, with 97% of members giving their place of residence as the United Kingdom. Lizzo and Liechty (2020) also focused on a single group and noted the scarcity of studies in this leisure setting. The advantages of single group research may come, in fact, from the ability to infer a degree of demographic knowledge to the work as this data is made available to group administrators by the Facebook platform. A single group focus allows for a research project that develops a deep understanding of the specific nature of angling social media participation online. It further defines the participation in terms of the geographical locality, which affects how external forces within society, for example, politics, affect angling participation both in

the real world and within a social media setting. These two aspects are important because this research project also considers the effect that the COVID-19 outbreak had on the social media interaction amongst anglers. Finally, the selection of a single, already established group allows for the minimisation of what has been termed by Wallace, Costello and Devine (2018) as the 'Netnographic Slog', that is, the hard work involved in encouraging participants to engage in a newly formed site for netnographic research.

The societal effect of COVID-19 varied widely by locality, even within the UK. For example, anglers in England could recommence angling activity before those in Wales, and those in Wales could return to angling before those in Scotland. The nature of the angling group to be used for this project allows for a more focused consideration of angling social media interaction before, during and following the outbreak within a quite narrowly defined geographical space. However, it is worth noting that the group created is not limited to the UK or, indeed, to England. Therefore the observations of anglers from different countries (approximately 3% of group participants) may have impacted the way the group engaged in angling conversation during this time as the restrictions imposed due to the pandemic internationally also varied widely.

The final consideration was access when deciding on the appropriate group to conduct my research. As *Fishamo* was initially established and grown by me, I have unlimited access to the group to conduct my research. This level of access has the advantage of bypassing the need for gatekeepers. However, it makes certain ethical issues more prevalent, which require further attention. These have been discussed later within this section.

It must be pointed out that selecting an appropriate group within which to conduct this research, even given the considerations already discussed, is essentially arbitrary. It would be just as acceptable to have studied any group related to freshwater angling within the United Kingdom. These groups could have been narrowed geographically by focusing on an endemic species to the United Kingdom or examining an angling group linked to a specific geographical location. For example, a group of anglers who discussed the fishing opportunities on the River Severn[11] could be expected

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[11] The River Severn (In Welsh: Afon Hafren) is, at 220 miles long, the UK's largest river, rising in the Welsh hills and following, roughly, the England/Wales boarder before discharging into the sea via the Bristol Channel.

to be just as geographically specific. Therefore, with so many options, it was necessary to avoid choosing one group as much as possible based entirely on convenience. To confirm the suitability of *Fishamo* as the group selected for this research, I applied some essential criteria to it. Kozinets (2010, p.89) gives such criteria that are useful to consider when choosing a site for research. Provided these criteria are achieved, we can be satisfied that the site chosen is suitable for the research project. Kozinets states that a site for research should be:

1. Relevant, the group relates directly to the research focus and questions(s).

2. Active, the group has recent and regular communications.

3. Interactive, the group should have a flow of communication between participants.

4. Substantial, they have a critical mass of communication and an energetic feel.

5. Heterogeneous. Ideally, the group should have several different participant types.

6. Data-rich, offering more detailed or descriptively rich data.

As *Fishamo* fulfils all these criteria and an added criteria not mentioned in this list by Kozinets but vital to any research project (access), it was decided that this group would be the ideal research site for this project. See the table below:

Statistical data for chosen Facebook Group (*Fishamo*) research site (accurate 21 May 2020) with relation to the Kozinets (2010, p.89) criteria.	
Relevant	100% Angling related posts and shares amongst the group users.
Active	Admin maintains a schedule of at least four posts per day, and members regularly post also.
Interactive	2600+ Comments or reactions per week
Substantial	2300+ Group Members
Heterogeneous	6.1% women[12] 93.9% Men
Age range	From 18 to 82
Data-Rich	Approximately 400 posts per month.

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[12] It should be noted that low participation amongst women is an ongoing issue for the angling world and this given percentage represents a good representation of women.

Limitations of using *Fishamo* for data collection must also be considered. This group was only 1-year old when this project was initiated. Therefore, the group may lack the maturity or unspoken rules, such as communications norms and sense of humour, of some more established Facebook groups. Furthermore, the group was established and advertised with the express intent that the group would offer a 'positive public image' for angling. As a result, some participants may have restrained themselves when discussing issues in this group and might act differently in other groups. This restraint has the effect of removing some conflict from the group (see Chapter 3), which could affect the outcome of this research project to some extent. This limitation is seen as a minor issue as it has a diverse range of members and demonstrates the nature of a mature Facebook angling group at this stage of its evolution.

Furthermore, the early stages of the group's formation are valuable as these played a part in the group's development. These early stages of group formation have been drawn to offer insights into challenging social aspects of angling on social media platforms. In the case of *Fishamo*, these challenges have ranged from mild name-calling amongst group members to direct threats to participants and, in my case, during the early stages of establishing *Fishamo*, extended to verbal attacks on my family. These aspects have been detailed in a later, dedicated chapter (see Chapter 3) of this Thesis. Personal and user safety considerations were also forefront in the decision process to use *Fishamo* as a research focus. The current membership is aware and supportive of my role as a researcher, making it a safe environment to conduct the research project. It is intended that a semi-auto-netnographic[13] approach (*e.g.,* see Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018; Villegas, 2018) (Chapter 3), coupled with the experiences of other group members who have been part of the group for an extended period, will make it possible to illustrate the differences between this group and others that anglers have access to on social space.

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[13] I use the term 'semi-auto-netnographic' here as the section that this refers to (Chapter 3) accounts my own angling experience pre-internet and autonetnography refers exclusively to the digital realm.

The Structure of Online Communities on Facebook:

In 'closed' Facebook groups, the founder has ultimate control over the group's direction. Members of the group are free to share their ideas and thoughts. However, it is through a close system of moderation and editing that a group ultimately finds its success. Facebook is aware of this editing process and offers a structure designed to allow groups to be formed around a closely monitored subject matter. Group management is achieved through a hierarchy of member 'types' that maintains the group. In this way, most Facebook groups can be seen as almost an independent state. A primary individual decides the group's direction and political standpoint, and these original decisions affect the group's future control and 'feel'. It has been shown that, although a group's founder does not always remain within a group, they are a vital component of the group's ultimate success (*i.e.,* see Kraut and Fiore, 2014).

Below, I will briefly consider each of the key individual actors involved in the establishment and ultimate success of Facebook groups. For each, I will consider the control that they have the opportunity to exert over the group's foundation and evolution.

Founders

The group founder, as mentioned above, has ultimate control over the group. Kraut and Fiore (2014, p. 722) explain that 'Founders' human and social capital before the group was formed, the decisions they made when they created the group and their behaviour during its first week all predicted group survival'. These observations demonstrate the importance of the founder in the creation of successful groups in the social media space.

Founders can only leave a group if they decide to do so. Ultimately, through the careful selection of those below the founder, the direction and tone of the group are decided. This responsibility puts a considerable onus for the public image and group success on the founder and, overall, Oligarch of the Facebook group. As a result, many new groups may fail at this stage when a group's founder cannot find adequate support for their original group idea (*i.e.,* see Kraut and Fiore, 2014). As the founder, my initial role was vital as I set the general tone of the group and decided its direction of a more generalist group. For this research, however, I have decided to step back from

administrative duties *Fishamo* mitigate the potential of my influence. This stepping back has enabled a more natural interaction within the group facilitated by other moderators of the group, who are also participants and anglers. Of course, as I initially selected administrators for the group, it can still be argued that I have had some influence exerted over the group. However, the moderators are now relatively autonomous, and communication between them is infrequent, meaning that I consider this adequate distance for this research.

Administrators:

Administrators (or Admins) are the next stage in the organisational construction of a group and are often, although not always, appointed long after the group is initially formed. If the founder successfully establishes a group that attracts some interest, management can become difficult due to the volume of issues and posts requiring review. At this point, the founder may decide to appoint other administrators who have the same power level over the group as the founder; their only limitation is that administrators do not have the power to remove the founder from the group. In Facebook terms, both the founder and the Administrators are called 'Administrators'.

As these individuals (only one in the case of the *Fishamo* Facebook group) have similar powers to the founder, their input has been an essential contributing factor to this research. However, in the case of *Fishamo*, the second appointed administrator joined to offer their experience during the troubled early days of the formation of the group and was not a pre-existing contact of mine.

Moderators:

Moderators are the lowest level of control within the group; they are the administrative level with the fewest privileges over group direction whilst still maintaining the ability to directly act to maintain order and abidance by group 'rules'. Both the Founder and Administrator can appoint moderators, but Moderators do not have the power to appoint other moderators or remove an administrator or fellow moderators from the group. This limited power means that moderators act as police within the group and might be seen as a way of allowing group members to become more involved with the direction and development of the group's culture.

Despite their low level of power, Moderators play an essential part in the control and direction of a Facebook group. These individuals are also active participants and often steer conversations. In the case of *Fishamo*, an early decision was taken to have a large group of moderators to enable the group to maintain its high standards of positivity and its strong anti-bullying ethos. Furthermore, as founder, I made an extra effort to factor in diversity amongst my group's moderators. As a result, the group has ten moderators; two female anglers and anglers from a wide demographic range in terms of educational level and life experience are represented. However, due to the predominantly white male nature of angling, recruiting ethnic diversity into the group has been challenging, and there are yet to be any minority ethnic groups represented in group admin or moderator roles which is an ongoing goal of group admins.

Members:

Members might be viewed as the workers of the group. These individuals contribute to creating the group through their 'labour'. Members create the fuel that keeps a group relevant and active by sharing their posts and thoughts, which can be seen as a creative output. It should also be noted that these individuals also make up the group's body; that is, without members, the group would not exist in any meaningful form. However, despite their crucial role in forming the group dynamic, members only profit from this work by enjoying interacting with other members. Whilst group members can report other members they believe have breached group rules, they have no power to enforce rules or directly decide the path the group takes.

It is essential to understand these hierarchies at the outset of this research as there is potential for each sub-group to influence the research outcomes or apply pressure on those below them to take part in the research process. The mitigation of this potentiality was considered when deciding on the appropriate Facebook group to study for this research. While access to other groups was possible, this could be problematic as there is still potential for the hierarchies within those groups to affect the reliability of the final research. Ultimately, I decided that, by choosing a group in which I am the founder, it was possible to be aware of any potential influence that the group's formation and the structure have on the research outcome. Furthermore, it allowed for the pre-acknowledgement of such potentialities. For example, suppose particular members were becoming suddenly influential within the group. In that case, I could

recognise this and use it to inform my research, striving to understand the mechanism behind the individual user's new prominence. In effect, by acknowledging the power structure that exists in all Facebook groups because of how Facebook has decided to implement its group formation features, it is possible to ensure the freedom to interact and flexibility to remain involved for all individuals who actively participate within the group. However, it must be noted that this freedom may seem as if it comes at a price. That price is being involved in a research project regardless of personal preference if an individual wishes to remain a part of the group. While this criterion might be potentially problematic to some group members, this is a temporary inconvenience. It is expected that this group will go on beyond this research project.

Kozinets (2015) discusses the often-held assumption that all social media data can be considered to exist within the public domain. However, I must remain mindful that the participants in *Fishamo* may be participating because of its 'Private Group' status and, therefore, can reasonably be expected to assume that their thoughts would not be shared outside of the group. Whilst announcements (see Appendix 3) that a research project is being conducted within the group might be an appropriate response to this assumption. This measure may not be sufficient in ensuring that those who wish it can choose not to participate. Furthermore, it must be acknowledged that some might self-exclude from the group if they do not wish their data to be shared, and this could be seen as a form of top-down coercion and influence upon the group content in itself. Therefore, to mitigate the fear of exclusion from the group if individuals do not want to participate in the research, regular notices have been used to inform anglers that, should they not wish to participate in the research, this will not affect their continued participation. These reassurances have been backed up by excluding angler's data generated from involvement in discussions that form part of this research project's data set.

Study design:

Social media, in general, is a vast space with multiple unanswered questions about the multiple aspects of computer-mediated communication (*e.g.,* see Weller, 2015). As a result, the space can seem daunting to any researcher hoping to make inroads into the field. For this reason, an understanding and definition of the question to

be answered is of central importance. However, the research process is an evolving one. I invariably found my research affected by changes in the outside world which fundamentally altered the intent of the research project and offered both obstacles and opportunities. At the inception of this research project, I posed a question: 'In what ways do social media facilitate engagement in the social world of angling and influence angler's worldview?'. This question intended to investigate how social media facilitated anglers' participation in their recreational activity. However, societal changes occurred on the 24th of March 2020, which fundamentally changed angling and broader society.

As COVID-19 began to spread in the UK, by the 23rd of March 2020, the incumbent prime minister, Boris Johnson, announced a national lockdown and that exercise was only permitted once per day, and it was no longer permissible to travel for exercise. This announcement fundamentally changed angling because participant activities, like angling, were no longer permitted in the UK as part of the lockdown measures. A decision was in line with many European measures that angling was a non-essential activity. In effect, this resulted in a temporary ban on angling and the overnight loss, albeit temporarily, of a way of life for many anglers and other sports and recreation participants (*e.g.,* see Gabriel et al., 2020; Mowatt, 2020; Parnell et al., 2020). The pandemic also fundamentally affected this research project and, possibly, how we need to think about online leisure activity involvement. Instead of causing a decline in social media angling activity which the ban on angling might have stimulated, there was an increase in social media activity as anglers were forced to remain indoors and find new ways to interact with their activity rather than actively participate.

The result was to alter the research project's focus slightly. Rather than seeking to understand how social media facilitated participation in the leisure activity of angling, it has become possible to ask how social media has served as a 'replacement' for angling for many anglers, facilitating participation even when angling as a leisure activity was banned. This change in angling circumstance raised the following question: whether the physical act of angling is even central to social media participation within angling groups online or if angling serves as a framework around which groups can form based on common language and mutual understanding. Therefore, the research question underpinning this Thesis transformed to:

"How does angling knowledge facilitate participation within social media groups which form around recreational angling, and to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in such groups?".

I will apply a netnographic approach to the predefined online Facebook group (*Fishamo*) to answer this question. The ability of a netnographic approach to answering this question was confirmed by reference to Kozinets (2019, pp. 146–159). The study will comprise three steps:

1. The collection of archived posts from 'sample' points in the group's history. This data is comprised of posts created since the creation of the group. The Facebook platform has archived this data, and it remains accessible to me as an administrator.
2. Four weeks of observation of the group's current activity.
3. Interaction with the community by participating in the online conversation to extract finer details relating to data collection's first two phases.

Data collection.

The relative newness of *Fishamo* offers an advantage to this research project. *Fishamo*, which was one year old at the inception of this project, has the advantage of going through the various stages of a group's evolution due to its rapid rise in popularity. Furthermore, it has had the opportunity to exist through the unprecedented COVID-19 lockdown period. These factors have had the effect of condensing much data into a finite timeline, meaning that it was feasible to collect large quantities of data to understand the phenomena that define the nature of the environment. Other groups, which have developed over much longer timeframes, might pose a challenge to collecting data, resulting in essential turning points being missed due to the vastness of the data requiring analysis.

Data collection on the Facebook platform offers practical challenges, particularly within 'closed' groups. Due to the issues caused by the Cambridge Analytica scandal (see Wong, 2019), mass collection of posts has become extremely difficult to the point of being impractical and beyond my technological expertise on the Facebook platform. This increased scrutiny over the availability of personal data leaves

the most viable and feasible option open to this research: the manual collection of data via copying and pasting individual posts. Considering this, when one factors into the equation that there have been almost 4000 posts in the group, each with up to 120 replies, the task size seems insurmountable at first sight. Furthermore, as this research aims to understand how anglers use social media, it is impossible to know which posts are important to answering the research question. Therefore, it became necessary to consider ways to reduce the task to a manageable size for me to complete.

To this end, it was decided that only primary posts would be recorded initially (original posts created by a user of the group), and replies would not be recorded at the outset. Once the primary posts have been collected, it is then possible to identify themes and return to appropriate posts to analyse dialogue around targeted discussion topics.

These primary posts were collected from selected periods in the group's formation. These key periods in the group's formation will revolve around the formation of the group and the effects of the COVID-19 outbreak. Therefore, the four-week period during which the group was formed was selected, followed by four weeks between group formation and the announcement of COVID-19 restrictions. There will then be a five-week period of post-recording around the time of the announcement of restrictions, including a two-week build-up and two weeks post-announcement. This data collection has been followed by data collection covering four weeks between the COVID-19 outbreak and the point at which 'live' data collection occurs, which consisted of four weeks. It is intended that this type of preselected timeframe for intermittent sampling will offer an overview of group activity whilst avoiding any inadvertent researcher influence in the collected data.

Covert data collection.

The final stage of my research, a four-week group observation, can be considered 'covert' data collection. While group members were aware that research was being conducted at this time, they were not informed when or what posts were being collected. This fact posed some challenges to me and the research from a methodological standpoint. Therefore, I will consider some of these challenges by examining how previous researchers have defined them before considering the approaches taken to overcome the obstacles endemic to this type of qualitative research.

Primary among the early challenges faced by those who wish to research online communities is the disconnect between the researcher and participant. Garcia et al. (2009, p. 58) suggest that 'Observation in online research involves watching text and images on a computer screen rather than watching people in offline settings.'. In this observation, Garcia et al. (2009) underline that social and digital media is a textual and graphical form of communication that encourages the researcher to investigate a social world where context is often tricky to decern. For some scholars (*e.g.,* Murthy, 2008), this disconnect risks the individual user being reduced to a simple dataset to be analysed. Murthy (2008) suggests this has led to a proliferation of 'covert' projects where the researcher is reduced to a distant observer. However, the fears of Murthy (2008) may not find grounding in contemporary practice as the internet evolves and becomes more central to the lives of the people who use It. Garcia et al. (2009) acknowledged that computer-mediated environments prevent researchers from observing their research participants directly, resulting in anonymous interaction. However, Garcia et al. (2009) suggested 'very few ethnographic studies of online settings in which members have no offline contact' (Garcia et al., 2009, p. 54). This observation indicates that the distinction between the online and offline worlds might be becoming less valuable as the two worlds become increasingly merged within our society, with online communities often being utilised to facilitate real-world meetings. This merging of the two worlds can be seen in the case of angling when clubs use online announcements to organise work parties to maintain fisheries.

In defence of covert observation within a social media setting, Nørskov and Rask (2011) suggest that such methods facilitate the observation of community participants within a: 'natural setting and might, therefore, allow for a deeper understanding of the informal interactions between community participants in a way that may not be achievable through other traditional methods (*e.g.,* interviews). However, Roulet et al. (2017) note that covert observation can be problematic because it inadvertently harms the participants by recording information that the subject might not wish to have recorded about their behaviour or participation in a given activity. Furthermore, Roulet et al. (2017) suggest that covert observation can have detrimental effects on the researcher and the quality of research because it might encourage the researcher to adopt questionable practices to obtain the information sought.

It should be noted that Roulet et al. (2017) work focuses heavily on the practice of 'real world' covert observation, but their considerations of the risks posed, both intended and unintended, hold for the covert observation of social media communities. However, these possible risks must be balanced with potential benefits. Concerns amongst university ethics committees about the ethical viability of research which involves a substantial element of covert observation, as observed by Spicker (2011), pose the risk of limiting the potential of such research methodology and, in so doing, limiting the data that is available to the researcher.

Scholars have recognised the tensions, challenges, and ethical dilemmas associated with research that could be considered covert (Litcherman, 2002; Lauder, 2003), and covert research remains controversial. However, Spicker (2011) notes that concerns amongst university ethics committees often arise from the assumption that covert research is dishonest and that the researcher seeks to deceive the subject through their activities. Contrary to this assumption, Spicker (2011) asserts that covert research is not by automatic implication deceptive in nature. To support this, Spicker (2011) points out that any work in which the researcher conducts a study without disclosing research is taking place could be seen as covert. Such practice could include research into crowd behaviour at football matches, observation of the activities of motorists or, indeed, the collection of social media content that is shared with the intention of public engagement. McCurdy and Uldam (2014) note that this type of research is covert in that the researcher does not mark themselves out as a researcher whilst collecting data within a larger crowd or protest.

Similarly, whilst the participants knew, generally, that research was being conducted within the group, they did not know when I was chatting in the group and when I was collecting data for the research project. However, Spicker (2011) posits that concerns about deception overly influence the issues around the practice of covert research and that deception, in fact, only applies to a minority of research projects. Spicker (2011) acknowledges that there are potential risks to consider when adopting a covert approach to research and suggests that these should be considered on a case-by-case basis. However, these should be balanced considering the potential benefits of conducting covert research and the context within which such research is carried out.

Data coding.

Archived posts and observations of 'live' activity make up the qualitative element of the study and inform the development of the remainder of the research. These data have been coded in various ways. The analysis of the Facebook group will reveal the nature of group involvement. Posts and post responses have been recorded and identified into three broad categories. These categories comprise:

- Information seeking, that is, posts that seek to ask the advice of other group participants.
- Information sharing is posts (or responses) seeking to share information or advice.
- Self-promotion is posting that seeks to display individual anglers' achievements by displaying fish or ownership of angling related goods.

As well as original post content, the number of reactions a post receives (in the form of likes) will also be recorded, as will the number of responses (in the form of replies or comments). This methodology will narrow down posts that might be significant for the research based on popularity. Once these most popular posts have been identified, as a form of illustration, 'word clouds' (Heimerl et al., 2014; Kozinets, 2019, pp. 351–354) have been created from the content of the posts using the R statistical programming language (R Core Team, 2021). These word clouds will present an abstract representation to the reader, enabling the identification of key themes.

Data analysis and interpretation

Netnographic research, like other forms of Ethnography, can be seen as a combination of inductive and deductive reasoning. However, as discussed in the philosophical considerations, in answering the questions raised by this research, a retroductive approach has been identified as beneficial. Charles Sanders Peirce (1974, p. 29) defines retroduction as the provisional adoption of a hypothesis. In this Thesis, I interpret this to mean that the netnographer must wade through masses of data to find meaningful data that reveals the nature of the environment under investigation. Glynos and Howarth (2018) further discuss the retroductive approach, noting that justification for our research findings does not emerge 'naturally' or 'straightforwardly' out of the

methods and techniques we deploy in our research. Instead, our methods re-problematise and re-inform the research methods, forcing us to adapt and constantly re-think to achieve our goal.

Forsythe (1999, p. 138) notes that 'A major strength of ethnography is its ability to uncover tacit assumptions', thus, allowing us to question commonly held presumptions of what is believed to be true. This idea can be further conceptualised as 'Black Swan' reasoning (Taleb, 2007) in that if the researcher has only ever known white swans, then it only takes one black swan to falsify the statement that 'All swans are white'. Similarly, the netnographer seeks data that questions our presumed ideas about social media and its role in the individual's life, or as is the case of this Thesis, an individual's involvement with their chosen recreational activity. For this research, it is possible to take this 'black swan' reasoning analogy further; not only are we hoping to come across the Black Swan, but we then hope to understand the specific circumstances under which it can exist.

In this quest to find the exception and to develop more profound meaning, it is not only the 'type' of data that is chosen (*i.e.,* photos, text, video *etc.*) but also the context within which that data is shared by its creator and understood by the researcher and other social media users who view or interact with the post. Through this interplay of image or text, intent and meaning, a complex web of data evolves, exponentially increasing the research project's complexity. Kozinets (2019) prescribes a range of approaches to the final interpretation of data. Key amongst this is 'theming'. Sutton and Austin (2015, p. 229) note: 'Theming refers to the drawing together of codes from one or more transcripts to present the findings of qualitative research in a coherent and meaningful way'. As anglers discuss their hobby on social media, key themes emerge that often revolve around key species of fish in a generalist group on Facebook. However, whilst these are the 'overt' themes that seem to emerge, this Thesis aims to discover if these themes mask deeper meaning within the community.

Throughout this research, a model of the online interaction of recreational Facebook groups is formed and expanded upon. This model provides a theoretical model by which angling focused groups form and develop on the Facebook platform and a thematic

basis for the chapters, forming the backbone of this Thesis and allowing many of its complexities to be managed.

In the next chapter, I will discuss the foundations of the model presented in this Thesis, my own early interactions with angling in a world before social media. In that chapter, I will discuss the early foundations of my angling experience, routed, as they were, in a close-knit group of friends before considering their incarnation through the internet and in my academic career before, finally, considering some of the darker aspects of angling in a social media context.

Chapter 4: Banter, Rivalry, and Concept Bridges.

The links or 'Bridges' between our physical recreational worlds and our online recreational worlds inform how we engage with our activities in virtual spaces. *Fishamo* is an online angling group that I established as an outlet for my own online recreational angling participation before becoming the focus of my research. In this chapter, I consider some of the human factors that contributed to the group's establishment and those that influenced the group in its early phases to understand better how leisure and/or recreational activities manifest themselves in virtual space. I achieve this through auto-netnography, focusing on the pre-formation and the early stages of group formation, during which there was intense rivalry within the group. Finally, I will posit 'Concept Bridges', which link the physical and virtual leisure worlds.

Introduction:

Kraut and Fiore (2014) note founders' critical role in creating successful Facebook groups. However, they also note that many groups fail before they have had the chance to become successful, revealing that around 57% of groups have failed within their first three months (Kraut and Fiore, 2014). Whilst it was not originally intended (see Chapter 4), this research has found its focus within a single Facebook group established by me as a project for personal recreational reasons related to my own angling. However, the group has shifted from a personal project to the focus of my research. Therefore, it is helpful to consider why it managed to succeed where 57% of its contemporaries may have failed. In the case of *Fishamo*, I also consider reasons why the group's evolution seems, in some respects, to have contradicted the expected trajectory by benefiting from seemingly negative factors in its early stages.

Kraut and Fiore (2014, p. 731) found that the 'founders human and social capital before the group was formed, the decisions they made when they created the group and their behaviour in the group during its first week all predicted group survival.'. As *Fishamo* is the primary focus of this study, this chapter will also introduce the group, its beginnings, and idiosyncratic structure. Furthermore, in understanding my own motivations, I will explore the motivations behind group participation for some participants. Finally, in keeping with my research paradigm (see Chapter 3), it is

essential to position myself as both group founder and researcher to illustrate my possible influence on the continuing existence of *Fishamo* and consider how this influence has affected the ongoing research. In this chapter, I will be able to, through self-reflection, consider the role of the anglers in facilitating online groups and consider the nature of recreational activities in virtual space.

Use of Auto-netnography:

Auto-netnography, as described by Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018) and Villegas (2018), offers a convenient method that complements the general netnographic approach adopted throughout this research project. Furthermore, the auto-netnographic approach considers my multiple roles in this research as an angler, group creator and researcher. It will set the narrative for the remainder of this Thesis since, as will be discussed later (see Chapter 5), groups fit into a recreational specialisation continuum similar to those observed in physical space by Bryan ([1979] 2008). Facebook itself states that 'Groups are a place to communicate about shared interests with certain people... You can create a group for anything — your family reunion, your after-work sports team or your book club.' (Facebook, 2020). This use of the phrase 'Certain people' highlights the possibility of founders exerting influence over their groups by selecting or removing individuals who do not fit their view of the group ideal. For many, this potential of building a customised space where discussion is steered by the influence of the founder and other administrators may provide motivation and the impetus needed first to start a group. However, little work has been produced that examines the motivation behind starting Facebook (or other social media) groups. Existing research has focused outside of the realm of online leisure participation (*e.g.,* Harris and Rae, 2009; Towner and Munoz, 2011; Allen, 2012; Kwok and Yu, 2013; Ramsaran-Fowdar and Fowdar, 2013; Cunha Jr, van Kruistum and van Oers, 2016; Thai, Sheeran and Cummings, 2019). As I consider myself an insider in this research field, here, auto-netnography offers a powerful tool that can be applied to begin filling this gap in knowledge. Netnography offers the opportunity for me to draw upon my early angling memories and experiences as a research tool allowing me, as noted by Hughes, Kohe and Purdy (2019, p. 517), to understand the 'particular narratives that shape our understanding of sport as a physical, embodied and emotive practice'. Below,

I will explore the utility of auto-netnography by considering its relationship to auto-ethnography.

Although it is an emerging methodology, auto-netnography has found utility in several online social interaction fields. Most notably, the fields of tourism (e. see Mkono, Ruhanen and Markwell 2015; Mkono, 2016; Tavakoli and Wijesinghe, 2019) and interactive virtual worlds, notably, 'second life'[14] (e. see Ferreira, 2011; Ferreira and Ganito, 2016; Tavakoli, 2016). Relevant to this research, auto-netnography has also been more recently employed by Gabdulhakov and Trottier (2020) to explore administrators' influence over Facebook groups. In their work, Gabdulhakov and Trottier (2020, p. 101) find that 'identity negotiation is rooted in the title and in the description of the mission of the group', further noting that 'Admins [*administrators*] not only moderate the speech of any given commentator but illustrate to other members the type of behaviour that is not welcomed'. This admin leadership can be seen in the earliest developments of the group when the group was initially named *Talk about fishing,* and the group's description was set:

> "What is Facebook for if it is not to talk about fishing, sharing
> pictures of kittens and keeping up with family? Pah! Let's stop lying
> to ourselves and start talking about everything fishing, 'Talk About
> Fishing' does exactly what it says on the tin! If you are into fishing
> (and all the best people are), then join today and help make this a
> thriving, friendly group!"

In setting this title and description, an indication was clear that this was a group about casual angling chat. The observations of Gabdulhakov and Trottier (2020) underline the importance of setting the foundation of my involvement with the group's formation and highlight auto-netnography as an appropriate way to do this.

Auto-ethnography is often confused with Autobiography by non-academic audiences'. Chang (2016, p.9) describes autoethnography as 'a research method that utilizes the researcher's autobiographical data to analyse and interpret their cultural assumptions'. At the time of Chang's writing, autoethnography, whilst growing in

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[14] Second life is a virtual world created by a company named Linden Lab in San Francisco, of their product, Linden Lab Claim: 'Our work brings people together, builds communities. Our work helps people understand who they are, helps them be better. Our work brings empathy, helps people see the world through others' eyes. Settle for nothing less than changing the world for the better.'(Linden Lab, 2020)

favour, was still criticised by some (*e.g.,* Méndez, (2013). This criticism was often based on a belief that autoethnography is narcissistic, overly introspective or self-indulgent. Despite this early criticism, auto-ethnography itself has since evolved and spawned hybrid branches and opportunities that accommodate the research of the individual's cultural life (*e.g.,* Allen and Piercy, 2005; Blinne, 2010). Auto-netnography is one of these branches, made essential through the growing reliance on digital media for social interaction in the modern world.

Auto-netnography can be seen as a branch of the broader field of Netnography but offers a more introspective view of social media and virtual world interaction. As a methodological approach, Kozinets (2010, 2015, 2019) has successfully demonstrated that netnography is an evolution of more traditional ethnographic approaches redefined to accommodate research within the communities that develop online. Since its earliest development, Netnography has been subject to a degree of evolution in terms of approach and application. What was initially conceived by Kozinets (2006) as an approach to doing ethnography online has since evolved into an in-depth methodology (Kozinets, 2019) itself, spawning sub-types such as auto-netnography (see Chapter 3). Kozinets and Kedzior (2009) further developed this idea., along with Villegas (2018) and Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018), thereby offering another tool to conduct research within digital space.

Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018) underline the utility of auto-netnography in understanding the 'human factors', for example, my personality and/or life experience, which played a key part in launching *Fishamo* as a Facebook group. However, they also highlight potential pitfalls which have remained at the forefront during the completion of this research.

Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier's (2018) observations draw attention to the unavoidable fact that, as much as I would strive to distance myself from the working of *Fishamo*, the imprint of my initial work in establishing the group will resonate throughout its history. Therefore, I cannot, nor would it be prudent, to remove myself from the research entirely. Furthermore, it highlights the issue of editing (exercised through the selection or rejection of potential group posts) both on the part of myself, in the early formation of the group, the moderation team and, under certain circumstances,

the Facebook platform itself. [15] Through this chapter, I make myself apparent by making explicit the experiences and decisions which led to the formation of *Fishamo* as it exists today. Furthermore, I highlight that moderators that have now all but taken over the ongoing moderation of *Fishamo*[16] are controlling agents in the ongoing success or failure of the group, and their involvement is key to the understanding of online groups. Finally, drawing attention to 'non-human' factors, Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier (2018) highlight the influence that the Facebook platform itself has over the group through the often controversial but influential 'Facebook Algorithm' (*i.e.,* Orlowski, 2020), which 'ranks all available posts that can be displayed on a user's News Feed based on how likely it is that the user will have a positive reaction to the post' (Mullery, 2021).

The formation of Facebook groups can satisfy multiple practical needs or desires for the group creator. Common motivations for forming Facebook groups include those within an educational context. Here, the creation of groups has been used to facilitate group learning within virtual spaces and interconnectedness among students (*e.g.,* Towner and Munoz, 2011; Allen, 2012; Cunha Jr, van Kruistum and van Oers, 2016; Thai, Sheeran and Cummings, 2019). Also, groups have been formed to facilitate businesses' marketing (*e.g.,* Harris and Rae, 2009; Kwok and Yu, 2013; Ramsaran-Fowdar and Fowdar, 2013). However, literature concerning the motivations behind the formations of primarily recreational groups seems to be absent. Therefore, in the apparent absence of such work, I can refer to research that considers the wider motivations for Facebook usage. Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012, p. 9) examine why people use Facebook. They find that many users are motivated primarily by two basic needs. One, the need to belong, second, the need for self-presentation. In the remainder of this chapter, I will consider the ways that these motivations contributed *Fishamo's* formation.

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[15] Whilst Facebook does not archive group posts (StackExchange, 2020), computational limitations can make them hard to access and posts with no moderator interaction are not recorded, therefore there are gaps caused in the dataset due to technological limitations.

[16] The process of change from my involvement in moderation to the complete control of the moderator group was ongoing and began shortly after the creation of the group. But, it was not until March 2020 that group moderation was left entirely in the hands of the moderator team.

Most writers concerned with auto-netnography have recommended keeping real-time field notes in creating auto-netnography (*i.e.,* Kozinets and Kedzior, 2009; Kozinets, Scaraboto and Parmentier, 2018; Villegas, 2018). However, as *Fishamo* was not established with the intention of eventual use as a research site, this has not been possible in creating this chapter. Instead, recollection will be used in its creation. While not ideal when used in isolation, this method is seen as equally valid by both auto-netnographers and auto-ethnographers (*i.e.,* Chang, 2016; Villegas, 2018). Furthermore, some of the challenges discussed later in this chapter have meant that the Facebook platform has removed original posts. Therefore, I have not been able to access any of the original posts associated with the issues that arose with creating this new group. While considering the limitations outlined above, I argue that this chapter makes a significant contribution to this research as I consider the groundwork that this chapter provides, especially concerning the grounding of the *Fishamo* group upon which this thesis relies, outweighs the limitations that it faces.

Challenges of working within online angling communities

In the early days of the *Fishamo* group formation, new members joined rapidly, mainly from other Facebook groups. The growth was unexpected and uncontrollable, and it was not until an image of dead fish was posted by a new member, a Pakistani gentleman residing in Pakistan, that the challenges began. The image was sensitive and provocative among UK anglers and was immediately removed to avoid backlash and potential racially focused slurs. However, this resulted in a conversation that escalated into a conflict with the individual who posted the image. The individual embarked on a campaign of cyberbullying, similar to that seen among adolescents, facilitated by the anonymity offered by the social media environment. Fear of missing out (FOMO) may have played a role in triggering the aggressive behaviour.

The individual who posted the image chose to turn to a group known for its aggressive nature in order to let his frustrations be known. The nature of this group has since led to the group being forcibly closed by Facebook due to numerous complaints. Many of this groups' participants sense of humour was openly racist and this racist humour even extended to the individual involved. Even though this individual had turned to the group for aid during a time when he felt wronged, the group still referred

to him with a racially targeted nickname. This kind of banter acts to form tighter bonds within groups and may have contributed to the escalation of the situation.

The rival group's response to the situation developed into a coordinated attack on *Fishamo*, particularly on the ambitions held by the group founder. The leader of the rival group, John, orchestrated intentional attacks on *Fishamo* by deploying members with instructions to post pictures that broke the group's rules and disrupted it through inappropriate posting or direct bullying of existing members. *Fishamo* became overwhelmed with the number and frequency of attacks, and the only response was to delete posts and block users.

This experience highlights the challenges faced when creating and managing online communities, particularly the power and uncontrollability of growth, the impact of cyberbullying, and the potential for escalation of conflicts. The issue of online anonymity and the impact it has on aggressive behaviour must also be considered. The experience has informed the way in which *Fishamo* is managed and the importance of having robust guidelines and systems in place to manage disruptive behaviour**.**

My Angling Career:

In creating an auto-netnographic account, Villegas (2018) reminds us that the researcher is faced with two primary choices at the outset, noting that netnographers should choose between defining their status or leaving it intentionally undefined. In this case, as it was my involvement with the angling world that drove me to create *Fishamo* in the first place, it is helpful to define my status within the broader social world of angling. For Ellis, Adams and Bochner (2011, p. 273), autoethnography (and by inference auto-netnography) is both process and product as: 'A researcher uses tenets of autobiography and ethnography to do and write autoethnography'. This observation is particularly pertinent to this research, where it can be seen that the ultimate creation of the *Fishamo* Facebook group, whilst done with little conscious thought about the implications, was, in fact, a culmination of three strands of my personal life (leisure, work and academic) coming together to provide the inspiration for the group.

Central to my own angling career have been the friendships that I have formed throughout my angling life. Often these friendships have been instrumental in my

continued involvement in angling, serving as initial inspiration and the impetus to continue at various points in my angling career. Spencer and Pahl (2006), discussing the formation of friendships, acknowledge all these strands (Leisure, work and academic) as potential launching points for friendships. Spencer and Pahl (2006) also note a particular mode of friendship which they refer to as 'Serial Friendship', where 'Peoples friendship repertoires are almost completely replaced at each new life-course stage or event' (Spencer and Pahl, 2006, p. 104). I see creating a new Facebook group as a mini life stage in many ways. It signifies a conscious effort to create an environment to nurture new friendships, which often fit the description of 'Serial Friendships'. These observations echo how friendships are created and enacted online.

Like most anglers, my angling career started early and did not involve social media, which was not publicly available. I was introduced to angling, as a young boy, in the mid-80s. To me, the 80s felt like an era of popular and unpopular kids, and, as the product of a lower working-class family, I fit firmly into the category of unpopular kids. Like most children of the time, we spent much of our time in small groups of other children of a similar social class. Everyone seemed to have hobbies in the 1980s. For my group of friends, fantasy role-playing games and wargames, driven by the rapid growth in, and popularity, of Dungeons & Dragons (Waters, 2004), seemed to be very popular. This interest seemed much to the chagrin of our parents, who saw the obsessive playing of role-playing games as, somehow, moralistically inappropriate (see Laycock, 2015).

In my case, my parents did not actively discourage participation in role-playing games. Indeed, they encouraged it by purchasing new games when funds allowed and by providing transport to a local short-lived D&D club. They also encouraged other activities and were keen to nurture my interest in angling when it eventually developed. Kemperman and Timmermans (2008) have shown that the environment, particularly green space availability, can influence leisure choice. While my hometown of Redditch (Worcestershire) is urbanised, the provision of green space was influential in planning the new town (TCPA, 2020). There are many lakes and fishable waters in the local areas that my friends and I could exploit as youngsters. For my friend group at the time, angling was an adventure, not unlike the adventures we allowed ourselves to imagine when playing D&D. Somewhere, out there, below the shimmering surface of the water,

there was a monster, and it was our quest to catch it. Our fishing tackle, in the beginning, consisted of branches broken from trees to be used as fishing rods. We lived in less environmentally aware times, so it was always possible to find discarded lines and hooks in the hedges around our local fishing lake. Bait consisted, usually, of worms dug up with our bare hands or bait begged off local anglers whom we saw fishing, usually only too keen to give us a handful of maggots in exchange for us going away and leaving them alone.

It feels like it was this combination of adventure, dirt and fun that first got me hooked on angling, but several authors have also noted that parents' and peers' influence has a strong effect on leisure activity choice (*e.g.,* Zeijl *et al.*, 2000; Shannon, 2008). So, living in a town with a prominent angling history that provided many angling opportunities and with a father who was himself a keen angler created the perfect storm for my lifelong involvement with the activity of recreational angling. It gave me the foundational knowledge about the primary forms of angling and provided me with the vocabulary and social group required to facilitate my later involvement in the social media angling world.

Whilst angling developed into an enduring interest, my involvement with the activity, on reflection, has been more sporadic than I often acknowledge. Varying levels of involvement characterise the sporadic nature of my leisure involvement according to the life stage that I have found myself in. Leisure involvement has long been linked to family stage. 'Researchers began investigating the relationship between socioeconomic statuses (SES), such as the level of education, level of income and occupational status, and leisure participation in the 1950s' (Lee, Scott and Floyd, 2001, p. 427). More explicitly, links to family-stage have been observed by, for example, Witt and Goodale (1981), so it can be seen that the concept of external commitments impacting leisure is not a new idea. However, despite the sporadic nature of my involvement, angling is the leisure activity that I have most frequently found myself returning to as the result of feeling somehow too Invested in the activity to leave it entirely. Stebbins (2007, pp. 71–72) notes this feeling of commitment as a factor of serious leisure, linking it to 'project-based leisure'. He notes that people often remain involved in a leisure role because they feel trapped in it, and continuance within a leisure activity becomes focused on its negative rather than positive aspects. Stebbins notes, 'The impossibility of choosing a

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different [leisure activity] ... because of the imminence of social penalties involved in making the switch'(Stebbins, 2007, p.72). For my angling career, these 'social penalties' have taken multiple forms. These forms have included potentially alienating myself from my peer group or disappointing my father in the early years of my angling career, to the pressures felt due to my work, now as a researcher within the field, specialising in angling communities. These factors have meant that feelings of being trapped within the activity have been a frequent component of my involvement with angling.

In spite, or perhaps because of these ongoing personal challenges with my relationship with the activity, however, angling has frequently provided a 'safe place' for my return when seeking inspiration or work. Therefore, it has been a natural progression that angling would feature heavily in the development of my academic career. Holley and Gardner (2012) note that several influences affect the experience of first-generation academics during their career, one of which is 'The influence of family and community'.

My academic trajectory may have taken the path that it has because I have sought to cling to what I have generally been acknowledged as 'being good at'. This inclination justified my work in the academic setting and provided me with a roadmap to navigate an academic landscape unfamiliar to me or any of my peers or family.

Interesting parallels can be seen between my recreational and academic career, echoing those observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008). Both careers demonstrated the move from general to specific and seem to have been marked by personal achievements and a desire to excel at something bigger than myself. As my angling career has progressed, it has developed from simple fishing, often with a broken branch used as a rod and dug up worms as bait, to a far more refined style of fishing which has included an interest in Fly-Fishing in its latter years. Interestingly, my fishing has taken the trajectory that Bryan ([1979] 2008) theorised, who saw fly fishing as the highest level on the angling recreational specialization continuum. This progression has been mirrored by my dedication to an academic career, from general, when I sought to gain the qualifications necessary to enter university, to specific, where I now aim to gain my PhD. These stages in both activities are marked by the accumulation of the trappings of the activity

and demonstrate the links between Bryan's ([1979] 2008) concept of Recreational Specialisation and Veblen's ([1899] 1994) theory of the leisure class (discussed earlier). Both can be seen as a progressive process whereby individuals strive to gain and demonstrate some form of imagined superiority over others in the form of awarded degrees or angling success. Both can be subverted or accelerated through wealth either in the form of money or social capital.

Bryan ([1979] 2008) demonstrates a recreational career marked by its trappings. This career can be accelerated through increased financial investment in equipment or training within the activity. Veblen's ([1899] 1994) ideas, which are much more influenced by acceleration through wealth, had already described many of the mechanics of how this recreational career works some years earlier. My angling and academic careers can be marked by the same material 'things' in the form of equipment and degrees or time and money spent on fishing trips and education that allow me to mark my success.

In creating the Facebook group, too, both of these tendencies can be seen in me. In creating the group, I have produced a personal space based on the idealistic notion that this would allow me to position myself as an angling authority. Whilst I did not initially foresee it, the idea that this would be a group where I could steer the conversation certainly was. At this stage of my angling career, as well as feeling the isolation inflicted by academic work, I also had the drive for greater success in my angling career. This need was driven by an increased feeling of isolation from the angling world, which I was becoming increasingly forced, by circumstance, to distance myself from in order to focus on my academic work. So, the creation of the group, where I initially had complete control, can also be interpreted as an effort at self-promotion by positioning myself as an angling authority in my world where everyone would know my name and come to respect my opinions. In effect, through the creation of the group, I had manufactured myself as an opinion leader[17]. This same tendency may be reflected in the involvement of others in angling on social media. Angling can be a pretty isolated activity, and anglers have traditionally gathered to discuss fishing and boast about their ability (Stolk, 2010; Locker, 2014). As fishing has declined for

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[17] For a discussion on opinion leadership see Van der Merwe and Van Heerden (2009).

some ten years (Environment Agency, 2019), anglers may have found it more difficult to gather in these traditional groups, making recourse to social media an option.

This kind of attention-seeking, conscious or unconscious, might be a side effect of giving individuals the power of persona creation through social media applications. It refers back to the need to self-represent and belong, observed by Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012), and it speaks of the idea of fame and the value inferred upon it by society and the individual actor. Because of the media-saturated society that social media and digital communication have contributed to, we find ourselves in what Fairchild (2007) termed the 'attention economy', where attention becomes the most valuable resource. Social media provides a vehicle to gain this valuable resource. Through creating the opportunity for group formation, Facebook allows individuals to stake a claim to a piece of cyberspace where the individual, if they are lucky, might hit a rich seam of attention or, at least, be allowed to dream about such an outcome. Whilst I do not think my intentions were wholeheartedly fame-seeking when creating *Fishamo*, these factors, whilst not primary, contributed to the initial creation. This leaning towards attention-seeking on my part might suggest that other anglers may also be subconsciously seeking a degree of recognition when they choose to create or participate in Facebook angling focused groups. However, there can be alternative motivational forces behind joining an online group which I will discuss below.

The Beginning, an ill-informed map

When I started the *Fishamo* Facebook group, I had been finding the combined pressures of my work and my hobby of angling challenging to manage. I craved the opportunity to reach out to others who shared my interest, even if they differed from me, because they were probably more able to participate in their hobby than I was at this time. This experience of struggling to balance work, hobby, and other societal commitments might be a motivation shared by other anglers and is demonstrated by the interaction of the *Fishamo* group during the challenges that many faced during lockdown:

Excerpt 4.1[18]

Post: April 2020	
Kyrie Miller	... And a massive, massive thank you all of you for brightening my day while stuck in lockdown. The lockdown has been tough on me struggling with my anxiety, not seeing my family and working in a supermarket that's stressful in times and worst of all no fishing! But you lot have helped me get through the day, seeing your catches. Watching the poll and looking through all my old photos bring back memories so a massive thank you!
	*Likes:*31 *Comments:* 23

Furthermore, I was transitioning into a new life stage and persona at this point. No longer was I an angler who had a few academic qualifications[19], nor was I a professional working in Angling communications. I had cut ties with English angling governance due to the pressures these commitments exerted on my academic work. The pride I had once felt by being an integral part of angling society through my employment with the Angling Trust were replaced with a life of a PhD candidate who, by necessity, developed a different relationship with the angling world. I turned the microscope on a world where I had, for so long, felt very safe and accepted. In so doing, I gradually began to see some of the cracks and idiosyncrasies of the angling world, such as angling's sometimes contradictory relationship with conservation. For example, at times, the conservation ethos of anglers seems to be more of an angling improvement, one where non-native species is tolerated as long as the species offers good sports fishing regardless of potential environmental impact. My position, somewhere between researcher and participant, was both alien and incredibly isolating and made me crave some semblance of normality in my free time whilst feeling under-appreciated within the angling community for the work I was doing. These feelings of isolation are common in modern society and are an area where leisure studies, in particular, might have a future impact (Putnam, 2000; Glover, 2018). Feelings of loneliness and isolation

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[18] See Appendix 5 for full transcript of post.
[19] I had left school at 16 having failed all GCSE's and with little clue about my future ambitions.

are particularly common among doctoral candidates (see Anta, Lugosi and Brown, 2014) and middle-aged people (see Penning, Liu and Chou, 2014). As I fit into both of these categories, feelings of isolation gradually began to emerge in my life. The same feelings of isolation in mid-life may also suggest a reason for the popularity of angling on social media, as most angling participants are within this age group or older (Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012). Whilst I cannot pinpoint the exact date of the idea being borne, I know that the group started on the 24th of June 2019 under the original name of '*Talk About Fishing*'.

As mentioned previously, Gabdulhakov and Trottier (2020) have observed that the nature of a group is contained within a group's title and description. I designed the group's original title to tell those searching for groups through the search bar of Facebook precisely what the group was about. The group description came a few days later.

The group's tone was set in these two acts (creating a group title and description). As reflected earlier in this chapter, my motivations for starting the group were many. However, at that time, my main conscious goal was to build a friendly group where fishing-related discussions could be facilitated, and my voice could be heard.

Although this group was a new venture, I was not inexperienced in creating social media groups as I worked professionally in angling and social media. In 2017 I started a Facebook group for my employers (The Angling Trust) to generate greater public engagement with the organisation. Later in the same year, I started another small group to facilitate my interests, the 'Ruffe Guide Group', which intended to serve as a space for discussion for anglers interested in fishing for Ruffe[20]. Both groups had been successful within the realms of my expectations. Although, by the time of creating 'Talk About Fishing', I had severed ties with the Angling Trust. Therefore, their group and the 'Ruffe Guide Group', being highly specialised, had limited members. However, these groups planted the seed and skills required to develop 'Talk About Fishing'. The success of these groups demonstrated the potential of the Facebook platform, driving me to create the new group.

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[20] Ruffe (Gymnocephalus cernua) are rarely fished for but relatively common small fish which inhabit most waters in the UK, they are particularly common in canals.

The observations of Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012), who noted that Facebook use is driven by two primary factors, (1) the need to belong and (2) the need for self-representation, can be seen in my motivations here. The need to belong, whilst serviced by the existence of the Ruffe Guide Group, was not adequately engaging to help with my personal feelings of isolation from the world of angling. In response, I created a new group to which I could belong. Furthermore, my imperative to work on my doctoral studies had created a distance between me and the angling world by limiting the amount of time I had available for participation. This distance that I had not felt for many years fed into my need to self-represent and reinforce my presence in the angling community. The role that conscious decisions and subconscious thought have over the individual's behaviour is contested (see Baumeister, Masicampo and Vohs, 2011). My decisions concerning my involvement with angling may have mainly been subconscious ones. Indeed, I do not recall being consciously aware of either of these drivers. Instead, I considered the group a simple extension of my broader angling interest. Other anglers may also be influenced by these fundamental drivers of Facebook involvement noted by Nadkarni and Hofmann (2012) and find these two drivers through participation in angling groups, particularly during their early formation.

The early stages of the group took the form that I had expected, with one, then two, and then a growing flow of individuals joining the group. Experience had taught me not to expect too rapid a growth within the group as both of my previous groups had taken a similar trajectory and, ultimately, began to peak in the region of 400-500 members. For Talk About Fishing, my ambitions were, from the beginning, on a grander scale. I aimed to build a large, supportive group that avoided some of the issues I had experienced in my previous involvement with the angling world. However, regardless of my aims for this Facebook group, with success came unexpected challenges and obstacles to manage.

Descending into the labyrinth

Personal experience as an active participant in several Facebook angling groups had taught me that the world of angling in the online environment was, in no way, an ideal virtual world. Instead, it seemed that the online angling community, at least to a casual onlooker, would appear capable of bringing out some of the ugliest sides of

society and concentrating it into communities that seemed to feed off inappropriate humour. Some of this interaction might be explained by the traditionally working-class nature of coarse angling (*i.e.,* Locker, 2014). It is interesting to observe, for example, that the incidences of such forms of humour seem primarily absent from game angling groups. Game angling has traditionally been associated with elitism (*i.e.,* Locker, 2014) and more advanced levels of recreational specialisation (*i.e.,* Bryan, [1979] 2008). The financial barriers to entry caused by such elitism may pose a significant obstacle to those on lower incomes. Yates and Lockley (2018, p.1310) note that 'Internet users who are predominantly focused on social media are far more likely to have lower incomes and be members of lower socioeconomic class groups'. In support of this assumption, in the National Angling Survey (Brown, 2012, p.18), a high number of respondents gave their profession as ' Not applicable (*e.g.,* retired or unemployed)' (n=5922 (21.4%)) with a further 12.6% (n=3479) giving their employment status as 'Manual'. It is difficult to say with any certainty if these figures hold today, almost a decade later. However, Brown's (2012b) survey represents the latest survey of the angling community in the UK. The findings broadly correlate to Locker's (2014) findings in her social history of the activity covering the period from 1750 to 1950. Therefore, it seems likely that, manual workers and low waged or unemployed individuals still make up a significant portion of the coarse angling community.

The significance of this 'Manual' work status here might be found in, for example, the work of Collinson (2016, p. 435), whose research amongst a group of shop-floor workers found that ' Manual workers were required to display a willingness, for example, to give and take a joke, to swear, to be dismissive of women, and to retain their domestic authority'. These are traits that can be seen amongst the members of some social media angling groups. The angling press has noted this unfortunate side of angling (*e.g.,* Knight, 2016) and is a regular conversation piece in angling meetings and organisational gatherings.

My first realisation of this darker side of angling came during my MA studies in social media, where my final dissertation focused on the sexist nature of many angling

memes[21] (Wedgbury, 2017). I had noticed that angling, whilst popular amongst men, was not popular amongst women (*i.e.,* Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012; van der Hammen and Chen, 2020). I found this puzzling as there is no physical difference that made angling more suited to males as far as I could see. Instead, I thought there must be more to the story. Perhaps women, for example, felt alienated from the activity and, therefore, did not feel that they could participate.

Furthermore, during my exposure to the online angling community, I discovered a tendency toward xenophobia within the angling community, with Eastern and Central Europeans being a particular target of this behaviour due to occasional incidences of this group taking valued fish, usually carp, to eat. Sometimes taking a fish was because of theft but, more often, because of misunderstandings about UK angling practices. However, as a result, Eastern and Central Europeans were often excluded from or openly discriminated against in angling groups online (see Carey, 2017). For an example of such discrimination, see Appendix 4.

Finally, mainly through personal experience gained whilst working in the field and participating in Facebook angling groups, I noted that anglers could often engage in aggressive behaviour towards each other. These exchanges seemed to range from the mild, seemingly harmless joke to highly aggressive attacks that anglers justify under the 'Banter' general heading[22]. Plester and Sayers (2007, p. 158) suggest that banter 'means to deflate someone else's ego to bring them to the same level as others'. The 'Banter' phenomena are not unknown in other sub-cultures (*e.g.,* Norris, 2013; Attenborough, 2014). However, it can feel very targeted and activity-specific within an angling community context. Einarsen and Skogstad (1996, p. 187) make explicit the difference between bullying and what falls outside of the definition of bullying by pointing out that:

> to be a victim of bullying one must also feel inferiority in defending
> oneself in the actual situation. This definition is not limited to a
> predefined set of negative acts. It covers all situations in which one or
> more persons over a period feel subjected to negative acts that one

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[21] In the context of social media and online activity, Meme's are images or 'jokes' which become viral and spread through repeated sharing in online space.

[22] Banter ('Bants' 'Banta') is defined by Oxford Languages as 'the playful and friendly exchange of teasing remarks.'

cannot defend oneself against. Even if a single serious episode, *e.g.,* physical assault, may be regarded as bullying and harassment, this definition emphasizes 'repeated negative acts'. Consequently, serious conflicts between parties of 'equal' strength, or isolated episodes of conflict, are not considered as bullying."

This clarification draws a sharp line between banter which, in Plester and Sayers's (2007, p. 158) definition is concerned with bringing others down to an equal level with others and bullying, which, as defined by Einarsen and Skogstad (1996), involves the creating of inequality and the manufacturing of superiority of one individual over another. This difference demonstrates that what often happens in angling communities online is, in fact, bullying and not banter at all. The observance of this bullying by others is occasionally reacted against by more experienced anglers online:

Excerpt 4.2

Post: *Date Unrecorded*	
Ricardo Rolfe	... recently I've took the time out to start posting on various groups online purely sharing my fishing experiences now in these groups it deeply saddens me the sheer amount of utter hate and bitterness across the board aimed at anglers young and old! It's pretty much every post you have multiple online trolls and people actively attacking anglers young and old with straight up bullying! Now sometimes there is an error in the post or something that not right but the sheer amount of hate and negative posts really shines through! Can you imagine being a newbie and you join a group in hopes of meeting like-minded anglers willing to learn from them and take away valuable info........ well most would read these pages and groups and be completely put off the sport especially posting anything in fear these hidden assholes jumping on posts and shouting off at anglers who genuinely were not aware or wanted to learn! I've recently seen numerous posts where young lads in low teens have had some really bad comments on their posts where grown ass men are making utter cocks of themselves and really putting a negative stigma on what should be a post from someone who's really proud of what they

	have done! The amount of comments I read from anglers who simply do not post anymore or refuse to add a weight to a photo for the surge of complete wankers hounding the post! It's everywhere from fly pages to the single species pages! Can we not just celebrate the sport and be happy for others and when somethings wrong people offer to assist and help not bully often young learning anglers........ looking from the outside it's a piss poor scene and very very off putting!
	I guess everyone's had a skin full this year buy doesn't give you the right to behave like assholes! The more you dig in these pages the more hate you read it's very off putting and such a shame! Angling should be an Avenue for likelikeminded guys to share the love of the beautiful sport not belittle others and make others not want to share........
	...

	*Likes:*86	*Comments:*64

In this post, Ricardo points out the bullying which seems endemic within the online angling world. He also underlies some of the reasons that anglers use Facebook to engage with their activity in the first place and some of the reasons why angling might be suffering a participation crisis by noting how anglers who might be eager to learn could be discouraged when faced with the negativity in online groups. Ricardo is not alone in his observation. Due to awareness of the problem within online groups, it remains a subject of occasional focus within the mainstream angling press with social media attacks, sometimes directly affecting anglers' success and progress within their activity (*e.g.,* Angling Times, 2020).

In my imagined group, instead, I hoped to create a group where female and male anglers alike spoke about their interest along with Eastern European anglers and new anglers. The idea was that, together, the collective group would be a peaceful and friendly one dedicated to the idea of supporting and helping in their fishing activities. This utopia, however, was not to be.

Initial Success in Group Development.

Aware of the potential dangers of negative angling influences, I decided to make the group private from the outset. Under the private model, only members can post or read other group members' posts. This format provides the group creator with a certain degree of control over the group's membership, potentially affecting the initial direction of the group's formation. Under this model, I was aware that the group's success would depend on the goodwill of other anglers.

Kraut and Fiore (2014) found that a founder's human capital and social capital go some way towards predicting the long-term success of the Facebook group. Therefore, I thought that my long association with Facebook and professional involvement with Facebook groups would provide me with credibility when creating *Fishamo*. However, Kraut and Fiore (2014) also observe that the decisions made within the first weeks of the group's creation strongly predicted its success. These decisions include the decoration of the site (with logos, headers, and descriptions) and the appointment of other administrators during the early stages of group formation. Aware of Kraut and Fiore's (2014) work, I made efforts to follow their advice in the early creation of *Talk About Fishing* (*Fishamo* later) as I thought this might prove fruitful in ensuring the group's success.

Nevertheless, I neglected to elect other administrators at this early stage as it did not occur to me that it would be necessary. In retrospect, this mistake demonstrated my overconfidence and lack of experience in handling issues within the group. Ultimately, as I will explain later, the group decoration proved far less influential to success than the appointment of other moderators and admins.

Indicators of group success were all present in the early days; members joined quite rapidly, reaching over1500 new members within the first month. These members were primarily known to me from my other ventures into Facebook group formation. Because I knew many of these members, I could confidently manage the group's growth without help and without foreseeing the problems that lay over the horizon.

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An Unexpected Problem.

Within the first three days of group formation, *Fishamo* enjoyed a degree of success, with new members joining rapidly. These members came mainly from my other Facebook groups, but because members were able to invite friends, the numbers were inevitably boosted by the friends and acquaintances of other members. It was the power and uncontrollability of this element that was not foreseen, as such rapid growth had not been experienced in the other groups I had created. Overnight, an image appeared on the group showing dead fish displayed by a man who gave his location as being Pakistan. The display of dead fish, mainly carp,[23] is a highly sensitive and provocative image amongst UK anglers where catch and release, in which the goal is to return the fish to the water as unharmed as possible, is most commonly practised. I immediately removed it from the group to avoid the inevitable backlash and potential racially focused slurs that I foresaw because of this image. Almost instantly, a second image appeared. In what I saw as an attempt to protect the individual involved from the racial abuse which would surely be coming his way, I decided to block the individual from posting to the group whilst I spoke to him about the issue. The conversation did not go as I was expecting. In response to my polite request to stop posting images of dead fish, I received a barrage of accusations that my decision to suspend the individual from posting temporarily was somehow racially motivated. My assertions that my decision was not racially motivated but was an attempt to negate potential disruption within a group that overwhelmingly believed in catch and release were repeatedly rebuked, and our discussions descended into an argument. My response gained from experience working professionally with angry individuals online was to choose not to argue and end the conversation. A solution, I thought, would see an end to the conflict. However, my professional experience working in social media had not prepared me for what happened next.

The individual involved embarked upon a campaign of behaviour that mirrored that seen by researchers in the field of cyberbullying (see Law *et al.*, 2012), mainly

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[23] Carp are one of the most popular species of fish pursued by UK recreational anglers, supporting a multi-billion-pound industry and with individual fishes sometimes being valued into their thousands, many IK anglers take great pride in the careful handling and safe return of fish who can, themselves, become celebrities amongst anglers.

amongst adolescents. Cyberbullying is seen primarily as a form of social exclusion (see Underwood, 2003) in which the individual is generally excluded from social situations by a campaign of gossip and rumour spreading. However, some theorists argue that cyberbullying is different from social exclusion bullying. It is facilitated by the degree of anonymity afforded to the individual by the social media environment (see Peter, Valkenburg and Schouten, 2005).

Eraslan and Kukuoglu (2019) note the phenomenon of 'Fear of Missing Out' (FOMO). FOMO can be described as a behavioural pattern in which individuals are driven to constantly check social media updates in the fear that they miss out on some vital piece of information or that others are talking about them. Eraslan and Kukuoglu (2019) further observe that such a behavioural pattern triggers aggressive behaviours in some individuals. Therefore, it must be considered that partial responsibility for the initial spark of aggressive behaviour exhibited by this individual may have been an expression triggered by my decision not to engage in continued conversation with this individual. Regardless of the initial spark, the conflict was growingly aggressive and seemed potentially disastrous to the fledgeling group.

In this case, the individual involved chose to facilitate his campaign amongst a group that I knew was renowned for its generally aggressive nature and which I had become aware of during my employment with the Angling Trust. This group has now been forcibly closed by the Facebook platform due to numerous complaints from other Facebook users. Surprising to me was the observation that the group members involved were directly and openly racist towards the individual. The group participants addressed him by a seemingly well-established nickname of 'Goat f***er', frequently referring to him as such whilst supporting his efforts to affect *Fishamo* adversely. This kind of acceptance of clearly racially targeted and motivated nicknames seems to echo the observations of other researchers (*i.e.,* Plester and Sayers, 2007; Collinson, 2016) who argue that such 'banter' and name-calling acts to form tighter bonds within groups. These bonds may have contributed to the escalation of the situation, which transformed quickly from what I perceived to be a minor issue into a significant problem.

The rival group's response to what they may have seen as an affront to one of their own members developed into a coordinated attack on *Fishamo*, particularly on the

ambitions I held for the group. Rather quickly, the original individual faded into the background of the situation. Replaced, instead, by the rival group's leader/founder, who was also a member of *Fishamo*. The new individual involved (whom I will refer to as John) seemed to revel in the opportunity to disrupt my newly emerging group. To do this, John orchestrated intentional attacks upon my group by deploying members of their group with express instructions to post pictures that broke *Fishamo's* rules and intentionally disrupted the group through inappropriate posting or direct bullying of existing members. For a time, *Fishamo* became overwhelmed with the number and frequency of attacks. The only response possible was to delete posts and block users in the act of censorship which, although I felt it necessary, was not the group's intent at the outset.

These attacks amounted to what might be termed 'Cyberbullying'. Much cyberbullying research has been conducted on adolescents and much younger individuals'; therefore, research that looks directly at cyberbullying within adults is limited. Nevertheless, Jenaro, Flores and Frías, (2018, p. 119) observe:

> The impact of cyberbullying in adult populations may be as severe as with younger populations. The differential impact of such experiences depends on the interaction of personal and environmental factors, with emotional intelligence and social support being some of the most influential variables.'

Due to Facebook's policy of removing offensive posts and the attacking group having now been closed by the Facebook platform, the content of the posts is no longer available to share in this research. However, even with my experience in the professional world of social media, I found the ferocity of the attacks shocking. I struggled to cope with their seemingly relentless nature, which felt like they were further deepening my feelings of isolation for a while. However, as noted by Brack and Caltabiano (2014), this form of infrequent cyberbullying has little effect on the long term self-esteem of an individual. Furthermore, I feel that extensive professional experience in angling's online culture was instrumental in my ability to cope with and ultimately overcome the issues associated with this attack. The effects on group members were also not too severe. Observation of this minimal effect on the group may suggest that this type of behaviour may have emerged as an effective method for filtering out less experienced individuals from the online angling community. Moreover,

this would, broadly, comply with the findings of Bryan ([1979] 2008), who found that close-knit peer groups of fellow experts characterised the higher levels of recreational specialisation.

Bryan ([1979] 2008) observed that, in an outdoor recreational setting, those charged with managing recreation were often faced with conflicts between recreationalists, noting, for example: 'Reservoir fishermen want restrictions on water-skiers [*and*] backpackers ask for a ban on all things 'artificial'' (Bryan, [1979] 2008, p. 1). If we bring these observations into the contemporary world of social media, it might be argued that the conflict between the two groups may have been triggered by the competition of 'space' in a virtual sense. Both groups occupied the angling space, and the rival group saw many of their members join *Fishamo*. This increasing success of *Fishamo* might have triggered a response like that experienced by those charged with providing recreational space in the real world. In this case, the contested space takes the form of the 'fishing theme' adopted by both groups. This theme could be argued to be merely a facade to justify aggressive behaviour in the case of the rival group and one which, in the creation of my group, I hoped to expound in its purest and most cooperative form.

Conversely, from the point of view of the rival group, it could be argued that my group, through the outward adoption of a non-aggressive, cooperative approach, were, in fact, the aggressors by taking what could be seen as a morally superior stance. Therefore, the creation of the new group might have been seen as taking a position of superiority within the angling space, which the other group felt some ownership over. It is important to remember that, whilst the other group in the exchanges described above may have given the appearance, to me, of aggression. The situation could have merely been a misinterpretation and their perception of the situation could have been quite different. Furthermore, the seeming aggression of the opposition group might not have been innately aggressive at all and might have simply been the outward expression, or "frontstage", of a type of character that the anglers in this group felt they had to portray in order to successfully participate in the group that they had chosen to become part of.

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Frontstage, Backstage and self-Representation.

Erving Goffman introduced the concept of "frontstage" and "backstage" behaviour in his work on the presentation of self in everyday life (Goffman, 1959). The frontstage refers to the public setting where individuals present themselves in a certain way that is consistent with social norms and expectations. In the frontstage, individuals are in the presence of others, and they engage in what Goffman calls "face-work" to create a desired impression. They use various cues such as clothing, body language, and speech to signal their social identity and align their behaviour with social norms and expectations.

The backstage, on the other hand, refers to the private setting where individuals can be more authentic and relaxed. In the backstage, individuals are not in the presence of others, or they are in the presence of people who are familiar to them and understand their behaviour. In the backstage, individuals can let their guard down, and engage in behaviour that is not consistent with social norms and expectations.

Goffman's concept of frontstage and backstage behaviour can be applied to various areas such as gender, race, social class, and organizations. In the field of gender studies, for example, it has been used to analyse how individuals manage their gender identity (*e.g.,* Miller and Arnold, 2001) and navigate gendered expectations and stereotypes in public and private settings (*e.g.,* Rose *et. el*. 2012). In the context of this research, Goffman's concept of frontstage and backstage might go some way towards understanding the reasons that female participation is relatively low as the public maintain a perception of angling as a male sport (Lines on the Water, 2018).

A New Beginning:

As I initially predicted, a policy of not responding to aggressors coupled with a gradual 'weeding-out' of those individuals who would cause disruption within the group eventually began to work. Still, to transform an unstructured group based upon the idea of a single individual (me), there had been a need for the group's near collapse. Certain changes needed to take place, not least the conscious 'stepping back' from the group and handing over of control to a growing group of administrators and moderators, many of whom shared my frustrations with the 'Banter' culture amongst online angling

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groups but who approached the issue with various alternative viewpoints. Kraut and Fiore (2014) found that sites with more administrators had a higher chance of longer-term survival, which could have been a factor in the groups' ultimate success. However, Kraut and Fiore (2014) also discuss the 'liability of newness' (see Freeman, Carroll and Hannan, 1983), in which it is theorised that an organisation's (in this case, Facebook group) survival might be adversely affected if it is new. Controversy exists over an organization's age, directly affecting long-term success (see Kraut and Fiore, 2014), and the idea of 'newness' might be more accurately expressed as 'start-up size'. However, in the case of *Fishamo* and Facebook groups in general, 'start-up size' can be further conceptualised to consider content volume, which may be a more accurate way of expressing the value of high numbers of individuals within the group. Put simply, more members mean more content.

As with many Facebook groups, *Fishamo* found itself in a difficult position from its outset. There was a need to generate content to attract users and attract users to generate content (*i.e.,* Resnick *et al.*, 2012). It is possible that the influx of negative users into the group during its early development had the effect of generating large amounts of content which, in turn, had the effect of attracting more new users to generate more content. This scenario is borne out by commonly held theories about how the 'Facebook Algorithm'[24] works. No one can be 100% sure about the Facebook algorithm (because Facebook does not share all technical details about it). However, it seems clear that the goal of the 'Facebook Algorithm' is to ensure that our feed features things that we are likely to be interested in based on our previous interaction with posts on the platform (*i.e.,* Orlowski, 2020). It probably does this not only by considering the Facebook activity of the individual but also by considering the activity of an individual's more comprehensive network. Therefore, it is possible that the influx of disruptive users during the early days of the *Fishamo* group, coupled with the gradual implementation of a more diverse moderator base, meant that more people were exposed to posts on the group. This, potentially triggered its early growth allowing for more, less disruptive anglers to find the group and continue its cycle of growth.

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[24] The 'Facebook Algorithm' is a term often used to refer to the software element of the Facebook platform that decides, based on user preferences and online activity, what to show in the users main feed. This Algorithm has often been villainised as being, potentially, manipulative (*i.e.* Orlowski, 2020).

However, once new members were recruited, there was a need for a reason to remain and this, I posit, is the concept bridge.

Concept Bridges

Whilst *Fishamo* was created by my own idle musings, its development and growth show how recreational activities manifest themselves online. Both Bryan ([1979] 2008) and Stebbins (2007) talk of recreational careers where individuals find their focus within an activity and dedicate their time to the fulfilment of that activity. For Bryan ([1979] 2008), this takes the form of a progression from general to particular whilst, for Stebbins, it is simply the 'Systematic pursuit of an amateur, hobbyist or volunteer core activity sufficiently substantial, interesting and fulfilling in nature for the participant to find a career therein.' (Stebbins, 2007, p. xii.). However, neither author seems to give any extensive consideration to the mechanics behind the emergence of the activities they seek to classify.

Moreover, in this area, extensive gaps in our understanding remain. The emergence of leisure activities in the real world is complicated due to the numerous physical and temporal factors in recreational activity formation. However, recreational activity representation in virtual space seems to have revealed itself to us somewhat within this self-reflective study of the formation of the *Fishamo* group.

It can be seen from the above that anglers and recreationalists, more generally, are keen to take advantage of the digital world, which is made available to them to facilitate further involvement with their chosen activity. Because of how such groups are generally framed (as 'Angling Groups'), it would be easy to think of online angling as the same as angling in the real world. Therefore, it would be reasonable to assume that they would likely attract the same 'type' of participants subject to the same social norms as the real-world activity. Still, in practicality, the two activities (the activity of angling and the activity of discussing angling online) are not truly similar. It is impossible to participate in the physical act of angling within an online space. This limitation in the online space has necessitated the formation of what I will call a 'concept bridge'.

The formation of a concept bridge:

By using the term 'concept bridge', I mean that for anglers to engage in their activity online, angling activity has been forced to contract and transform to facilitate its interpretation in its new virtual environment. To such a degree, we are no longer talking about angling but rather an avatar of angling when we consider online angling groups or their activities. As with many leisure practices that find their expression online, the activity becomes different. It cannot be argued that online anglers are physically angling in the online space. Instead, they have taken on the role of the famous anglers of previous generations and have become storytellers, photographers, and sharers of ideas, little more than diarists in many ways. However, having emerged from the physical-world activity of angling, there persists a need to be connected to the activity. This need is fulfilled through a 'concept bridge' allowing real-world activities to find their representation in social media.

Concept bridges are not caused by intent or design but emerge through necessity. They differ from 'subject matter' in magazines or other media as they have a direct purpose of facilitating two-way conversation, potentially between strangers, around a central theme that is involved enough to facilitate conversation but safe enough to avoid either party needing to share information about their personal life. Mark Zuckerberg is quoted as saying: 'By giving people the power to share, we are making the world more transparent.' (Liner, 2020). However, this level of transparency does not rest comfortably with most and many authors have written about the potential problems of oversharing on Facebook (see Paullet and Pinchot, 2012; Agger, 2015; Hosking, 2018). Sharaievska and Stodolska (2017), for example, observe that users often take specific measures to avoid oversharing and to keep a safe distance between their online life and their family life. This need to maintain a safe distance and remain mindful about what we choose to share may result in only a narrow-defined safety zone that dictates what we can disclose about our real-world personal life in the online environment. As a result, general timeline social media (social media interaction that occurs outside of groups) itself might not be as helpful in making connections outside our ring of immediate family and friends as we might think. Instead, if we are to exploit social media's 'social' aspects to their full extent, we must think of more diverse subjects to discuss online, and our hobbies seem to be a natural resource. Unfortunately, when we

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choose to do so, we are faced with the problem of our recreational activities not being compatible with the new environment in which we now want them to exist. Therefore, anglers seem to shape their activities to fit within the confines of what is possible in the virtual world.

Angling cannot exist online the same as it does in the physical world, so it must change somewhat to fit its new environment. In so doing, we create a concept bridge, a link between the physical world and the virtual world where two different activities connect through a commonly held concept. In the case of angling, that concept is angling, but our activities in the real world, the physical act of catching fish, for example, do not translate into the symbolic world of online space. Even if we consider online angling games, these are very different to the physical act of fishing for a physical fish. In social media space, fishing is sharing catches and advice or sharing a commonly held sense of humour amongst participants serving a similar role to the type of 'banter' observed in Collinson's (2016) study. While both physical-world and online angling exist independently, they influence and shape each other through the exchange of data facilitated by the concept bridge. However, they are not alike in any other way.

Conflict in the Great Indoors

As we have seen, one of the ways anglers use social media to interact with their activity is by creating online groups. These groups can be prone to conflict just as recreationalists can be in the physical world. Bryan ([1979] 2008) discusses the conflict that commonly arises amongst recreationalists competing for limited natural resources. Bryan ([1979] 2008) points a finger toward his theory of recreational specialization contributing to conflict, noting that, often, recreationalists who enjoy various activities come into conflict for the resources they need to participate in their activity. For example, powerboaters, canoeists, windsurfers and anglers could find themselves competing for the same limited resource. As can be seen from my own experiences in creating *Fishamo*, the same phenomena can occur in online environments also. However, the resources competed for are not the same in the virtual world as in physical-world environments.

Compression is a product of this shift from the real world to the online world. Whilst there are (in 2020) 66.65 million individuals in the UK, there are only 46.12

million Facebook users. That means a natural feature of online life is that there are proportionally fewer participants in any activity's online representation than in the real world. Furthermore, in the online space, anglers are freed from the traditional gatekeepers of the real world (*e.g.,* book editors and broadcasting companies). Instead, they can create new web pages, groups and Facebook pages at their whim resulting in new forms of contested space where conflicts occur over the attention of others rather than of natural resources. Because of the effects of an 'attention economy' where the attention of others becomes the most valued resource (*i.e.,* Fairchild, 2007). In this environment, groups and groups creators create more and more groups that all seek the attention of decreasing numbers of people[25]. Here, bitter rivalry can occur as one group sees members giving less of their attention to them to focus more on another group. Whilst it is rare, reactions might even extend, as was the case with *Fishamo*, to intentional invasion and what amounts to cyber-war where only the strongest of two groups will survive.

Conclusion:

I have taken an auto-netnographic approach to social media group creation on the Facebook platform in this chapter. I was drawing on my own experiences to explore how anglers and the larger online angling community use social media to engage with their recreational activity. With the initial inception of *Fishamo*, I cannot deny that its creation and direction were my own inspiration emerging from my personal life history and broader involvement with angling. This personal involvement posed the potential problem of a research project that concerned itself with a world of my own creation and, therefore, would potentially be of little use outside of this context. This problem was cause for some concern in the decision to use the group to answer the questions posed by this thesis. However, as an angler myself with my own history and challenges within the activity, this chapter has shed light on how anglers use social media to engage with their activity. I have demonstrated that one-way anglers engage with their activity is by creating groups to facilitate their involvement in the broader social world of angling. In

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[25] According to government figures based on fishing licence sales, angling has been steadily decreasing since its peak in 2010 (Anthony, 2018)

so doing, we create 'Concept Bridges' that allow us to make new friends and acquaintances in a virtual world without the need to disclose personal information.

Furthermore, this chapter has highlighted the differences between real-world activities and their incarnation in virtual space, positing the existence of a 'concept bridge' which serves to inform two separate activities which revolve around a single linking concept. The chapter also looked at the tendencies for 'banter' within the angling community and saw how this could be weaponised under certain circumstances as an approach to enacting conflict online. Finally, through personal introspection and reflection, this chapter has shown that, no matter how strong a founder's original link with a group is, this only provides the spark for initial group formation and what happens after this spark is outside the control of the founder.

Contrary to Kraut and Fiore's (2014) findings, in the particular case of *Fishamo*, my social and human capital seems to have served me poorly in terms of actually attracting members. In the creation and success of *Fishamo*, it was my attempts to control the content of the group in its early days seem to have facilitated an influx of users as a result of conflict with a rival group which, in turn, increased the visibility of *Fishamo* to other Facebook users. This process had very little to do with the people I initially invited to join the group or me. Indeed, the only factor observed by Kraut and Fiore (2014), which seems to have been equally pivotal to the success of my group, was the recruitment of additional moderators, which could be deemed another form of success through social capital. However, the group's moderators were not known to me before the establishment of *Fishamo*, so, again, I cannot claim the success of any prior social capital here either. However, Kraut and Fiore's (2014) findings suggest that this might be an exception rather than a rule.

The main lesson learned from considering my involvement in the creation of *Fishamo* is that online, where all are free to start their own group or social media movement, provided that they have access to the technology to do so, it is much easier to see where ideas start than how they will evolve. For example, in the case of *Fishamo*, it was thanks to a single idea of a single individual (me) that germinated the group. Nevertheless, the group that grew from the seed does not represent me but the community that formed it. The actions of one individual give the group life. However,

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the meaning is finally formed by the interaction of internal and external forces, the interpretation of the viewer in the case of the artwork, and the growing influence and reshaping of group themes thanks to its users in the case of the social media group. Like many other interests, Angling takes on a duality of existence. It offers the user a 'safe' subject to discuss, forming a 'concept bridge' to facilitate discussion about a subject that's not too close to home. Still, it also becomes a passion in itself. It risks becoming an 'unsafe' subject for its participants due to individuals' passion for their activity or the territoriality that some individuals seem to exhibit in virtual space. In the early stages of this shaping of the group, my next chapter will find its focus.

Chapter 5: An Online Angling Career, Recreational Specialisation in the Online Space.

Many men [and women] go fishing all of their lives without knowing that it is not fish they are after.

Henry David Thoreau

In chapter 4, I considered my involvement with the angling world, which ultimately led to the creation of the *Fishamo* group. In that chapter, I demonstrated the challenges that groups face and the mechanics behind the concept bridges that link virtual and physical world activities. This chapter will explore the motivations for online angling engagement considering leisure and leisure class theories, informed by data taken from *Fishamo*. This process will demonstrate the mechanism by which the Recreational Specialisation Continuum can still operate, even in a world devoid of physical possessions.

Consequently, in considering the motivations behind online angling involvement, I will posit the existence of what I term a 'Valhalla group'. The term Valhalla group symbolises a group populated by highly experienced anglers that other anglers aspire to join. This chapter will demonstrate how anglers use a subtle but interesting form of 'conspicuous consumption' and 'conspicuous leisure' to facilitate progression along a 'virtual' angling career.

Progression in the absence of physical space

During the early years of the Facebook platform itself, Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin (2008) examined some factors contributing to identity construction on the forum. Zhao, Grasmuck and Martin's work (2008) is helpful to this Thesis because, based on observations within *Fishamo*, Facebook groups appear to act as a microcosm of the platform itself, and the formation of 'in-group' identities seemed to play a vital role in the formative stages of *Fishamo*. Whilst I have not been able to pinpoint an exact date for the launch of the 'Groups' feature on Facebook, the promotion of Facebook Groups has become a key focus of the company (Griffin, 2019). This focus has meant an increased interest in groups and the emergence of many 'interests specific' Facebook

groups in recent years. *Fishamo* is just one small example in comparison to some[26]. Each of these emerging groups has the potential to act as a stage in a larger recreational specialisation continuum, as outlined by Bryan ([1979] 2008). However, In the absence of a physical space in which these recreational specialisation stages can form online, I Posit that it is group identity and the group's unique atmosphere or 'collective personality' that defines it as a stage in the recreational specialisation continuum in the absence of physical agency. To investigate this, I will first consider the factors contributing to *Fishamo's* unique 'collective personality' before considering how the 'collective personality' of groups like *Fishamo* works to form distinct virtual environments through which recreationalists progress in the construction of their recreational career.

The desire for progression within a virtual angling career might supply motivation for group involvement and answer the question 'How do anglers use online groups to interact with their recreational activity?'.

The Collective Personality of *Fishamo*:

It may seem somewhat unusual to consider an entity such as a social media group to possess its own personality. However, we can see collective personalities as the behavioural regularities that manifest in a group (Hofmann and Jones, 2005), and collectives of people in both the physical and virtual worlds[27] can assume a collective personality that is distinctly their own. *Fishamo's* collective personality seems to be created by the group members, but group moderators also contributed to and reinforced it. As discussed in the previous chapter, the key to the long-term survival of Facebook groups would seem to be the recruitment of moderators. Whilst I had resisted this in the early days of *Fishamo*, the importance of this step had become increasingly apparent in the latter stages of the group's formation. As a result, it was prioritised as the initial

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[26] For example, UK Angling Groups (https://www.facebook.com/anglingintheuk/) is a network of fishing groups, each with a specialist focus and many enjoying a membership in excess ot 10000 members.
[27] In using the terms physical and virtual worlds, I aim to distinguish between interaction facilitated by Computer Mediated Communication (Virtual world) and interaction that does not require computer technology to facilitate it (Physical world).

influx of disruptive members was gradually decreased by close content moderation and the banning of disruptive members from the group (see Chapter 4).

Binns (2012) considers this 'weeding out' the role of the moderator in contemporary online space. This view holds well in the case of the moderators for *Fishamo,* who took it upon themselves to maintain certain levels and standards for the community as laid down in the Fishamo rules (see Appendix 1). Zygmunt Bauman (2013) used the analogy of 'gardeners' responsible for shaping society. Binns (2012, p. 547) observes that community managers are 'take[ing] up the role of Zygmunt Bauman's gardeners in what they sometimes refer to as "walled gardens" within the internet's wild domains'. Just as gardeners might rearrange flowers and remove the weeds to create their own artistic or emotional expression in their flowerbed, so did *Fishamo's* moderators carefully prune and edit the group's content to create its unique collective personality. This 'pruning' indicates that it is the group's moderators, themselves selected from the collective membership of the group, that have ultimately formed the unique personality of *Fishamo*.

Early decisions in the choice of new moderators were made by me. They were elicited by a group post asking for volunteers. In these early stages of group formation in 2019, as we will see, the group itself struggled to find its identity, and the postings within the group were, whilst encompassing the angling theme, widely diverse. Similarly, the moderators, like the members, were a diverse group selected to represent as many social subgroups as possible and included a wide range of age groups (from 17 to 80). For instance, I intentionally included a female angler because of the low participation levels amongst women in angling. These decisions stemmed from my intent to include a wide selection of individuals to encompass the 'all welcoming' ethos that I wanted my group to project. It is worth noting that, at this stage, the group was still not intended as a place of research and, therefore, little consideration was given to the potential effects of projecting my ethos and ideals onto the group. However, the effect of hand-selecting group moderators generated a paradox. We had created a group that aimed to be inclusive. However, it was formed through a process of hand selection and pruning. This process may have been partially responsible for what appeared to be a sanitising of the group during its early stages of development. This sanitisation effect is reflected in the findings of Chan (2018, p. 17), who noted: 'Homophilous networks are

often characterised by greater interpersonal trust and attachment that places greater incentives among members to conform to group norms and values to gain social approval and achieve a positive sense of self.' An example of the strength of interpersonal trust and attachment that *Fishamo* generated can be seen in the dialogue below:

Excerpt 5.1

Comment: April 2020	
Harry Chauhan	Been a pleasure talking predictions and which pictures to choose with ya mate, we've had a good laugh lol, which im sure will continue into chase the Ace no doubt lol. Once this is over get out there and catch yourself some monsters for next year, you said you wanted to and i have no doubt your more than capable!

	*Likes:*2	*Replies:* 7

Comment 8:	
Harry Chauhan	Been a pleasure talking predictions and which pictures to choose with ya mate, we've had a good laugh lol, which im sure will continue into chase the Ace no doubt lol. Once this is over get out there and catch yourself some monsters for next year, you said you wanted to and i have no doubt your more than capable! 😁

Like: 2

Comment 8(i):	
Oscar Banks	Kristopher Rostin been a top bloke through this whole thing! Made a real friend for life even though we've been rivels through the comp so far 🤣 thank you so much mate really appreciate keeping me occupied during lockdown

Like: 1

Comment 8(ii):	
Willie Wraight	Kristopher Rostin you better stay in touch!

Like: 1

Comment 8(iii):	
Kristopher Rostin	Willie Wraight i can assure you, I will be definitely be keeping in touch mate! Once lockdown over and i finally get a chance to target some zander, you will be the very first

	person to see the first fish i catch. Chatting to you the other night has seriously got me quite excited for the zander fishing this year. It's been just the slightest things that could change it all for me!
	Like: 1

Comment 8(v):	
Willie Wraight	Kristopher Rostin it has been a pleasure to help you 👍 this page will help all us anglers to be more competent at every level and most important, enjoy it more 👍
	Like: 0

Comment 8(vi):	
Kristopher Rostin	Willie Wraight your 100% right mate, this page will continue long after lockdown and we will all learn things off of each other as time goes by!
	Like: 0

Similarly, a desire to fit in (see Seidman, 2013), particularly with the group's strongly expressed rules of friendliness and openness, may have caused the self-regulation of members when deciding what to post within the group. This self-regulation may have resulted in members being aware of their online image, similarly to self-awareness in the physical world. They might have expressed this by creating posts that they did not feel were too controversial or likely to show them in a negative light. Such posts included simple 'Thanks for the invite' or predominantly image-based posts (Figure 7) that could have elicited responses but avoided the possibility of offending by avoiding too much text. Similarly, this same motivation coupled with a need to abide by group rules may have also influenced early moderators' decisions about what to allow and remove.
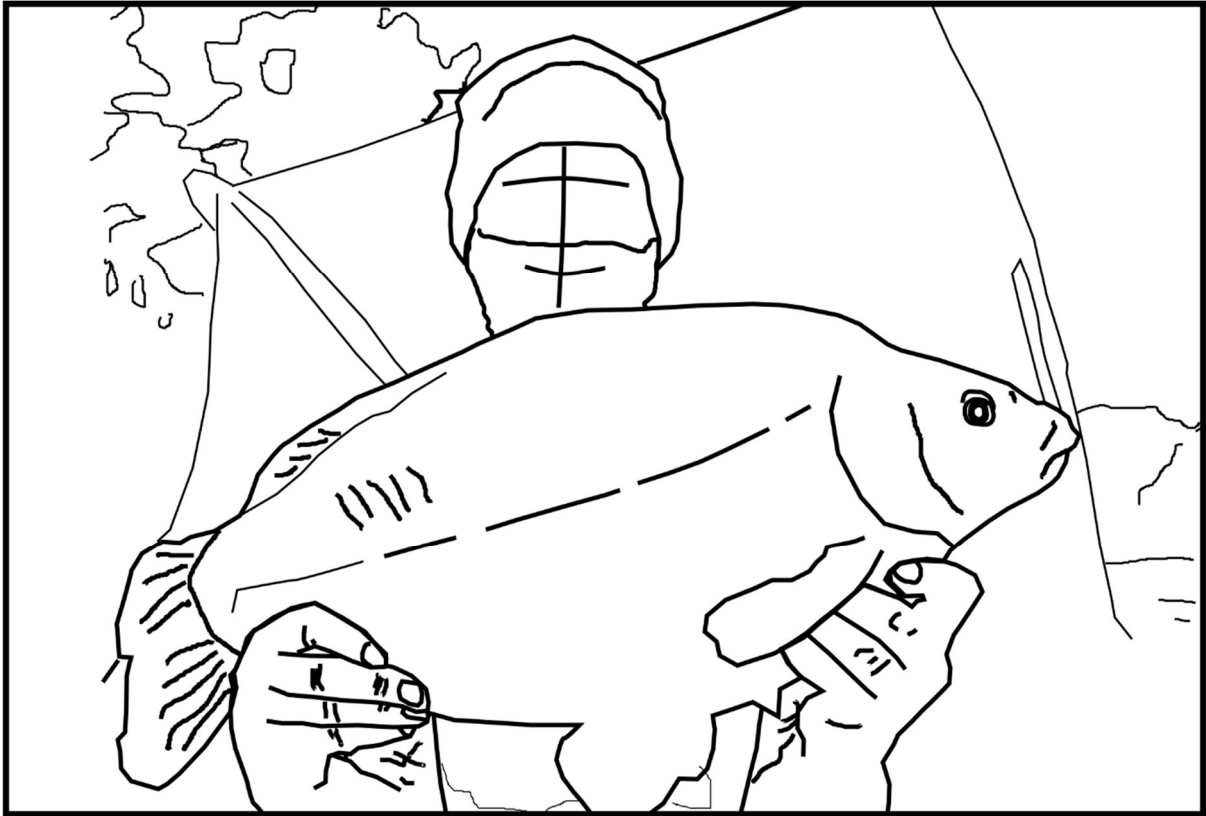
Figure 7 Generic Fishing Image[28]

This process demonstrates a posting ethos that may have been adopted to introduce oneself to a new group and is designed, consciously or unconsciously, as an exploratory post to gauge the group's collective personality. As anglers began posting within the group, they started to 'feel their way' by regularly posting 'thank you for the invite', which often received many likes, alternatively, by liking a few posts themselves and avoiding controversy by posting images of fish that were neither too large nor too small and carefully observing the unspoken rules of angling, such as unhooking mat usage[29]. Anglers continued to explore the group at this early stage. In fact, 'likes' on all types of posts seem to outweigh the number of posts, suggesting that individuals liked posts to ease their entrée into the group without committing to contributing anything to

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[28] Figure 7 shows an example of a generic image (anonymised by me through line drawing) posted to the *Fishamo* group, this is one of 7 images in a single post, showing the same individua, an accomplished angler with many specimens captures to his name, displaying a modestly sized fish. All other photos, similarly, are of moderately sized captures and the photos are not accompanied by text.

[29] Unhooking mats are soft, waterproof mats designed specifically to rest, mostly, larger fish on whilst the hook is removed from the mouth. For many anglers this is the minimum requirement for good fish care and comments are often made about anglers who do not use an unhooking mat. These comments are so common that those who make them have been nicknamed 'The Mat Police' or the 'Matstarpo' by many online anglers.

the newly formed community. For others, a 'Thanks for the add' post was a way to seek permission to engage more deeply, an engagement which was always encouraged by other members.

Despite the sometimes-mundane nature of members' posts at this point, their willingness to continue inviting others meant that initially, at least, new anglers joined regularly, and the confidence to post within the group grew along with its membership. This increase in posting indicated that members were moving from the periphery to become increasingly involved core group members. However, even this initial spike in posts and new members was short-lived, and soon a period of stagnation seemed to establish itself. Over time, the ethos of fighting against the 'banter' culture (see Chapter 4) seems to have had some adverse effects on growth. The sanitising effect of strictly expressed rules and the selection of moderators based on their eagerness to abide by the 'everyone welcome' ethos seemed to prove detrimental to continued growth. Soon, a period of flattening out seemed to establish itself. This phase may have been caused by the strict moderating of group involvement. This flattening out phase may have posed a risk to the group itself and has been observed in other settings. Researching Friendster, a once successful social network that declined and ultimately failed, Garcia, Mavrodiev and Schweitzer (2013) observed heterogeneity amongst users who are more likely to leave as their friends become less active online.

The flattening out phase experienced was marked by a decline in posts in general from a few per day to only a few per week. When posts were made, dependence on certain types of low engagement posts seemed to fill the space where it had been envisioned that lively debate and friendly cooperation would occur. This phase may demonstrate a limiting influence on the group because of overzealous rules and attempts at strict control, which discouraged potential participants from involvement. However, in the case of *Fishamo*, it is interesting that this sanitisation caused by the recruitment of moderators committed to the strict abidance of the 'rules' did not ultimately impede the group's evolution in the long term. In fact, the arrival of lockdown restrictions bought about by the COVID-19 pandemic and the ultimate limitations imposed upon anglers enabled the group to grow beyond its unintentionally self-imposed limitations.

COVID-19 was never actively discussed within the group or amongst the moderation team. It was widely reported in the angling and online press that the popularity of angling took an upturn during the pandemic (Environment Agency, 2020), and this seems to have had some influence. It is difficult to say if this upturn would have happened in *Fishamo* if not for the pandemic's arrival. However, in the online space outside of mine or the moderation team's control, engagement in angling more generally seemed to increase, so it seems reasonable to assume that the pandemic positively impacted growth.

This time, the increase seemed to be fuelled by more experienced anglers who seemed driven by a desire to participate rather than disrupt the group. However, the influx made moderation difficult again, and conversation became less controlled by the moderator group. This increase in participation in the face of a lack of strict moderation might indicate the actual lack of 'influence' over group direction, which can be exerted by group founders and those they appoint to represent them within the virtual group setting. Growth spurts seem unpredictable and uncontrollable, with a return to stricter moderation only possible after new members have already begun to participate and influence the group.

A not so lonely activity.

Working in the world of blogging as an online outlet for personal expression, Cox and Blake (2011) demonstrate the role information sharing serves in the online world. For example, as contextual background to their focus on the world of food blogging (Cox and Blake, 2011, p. 206) mention the centrality of the internet for genealogical research, noting: 'Partly by virtue of the amount of time spent on such leisure pursuits, those practising them can feel quite isolated'. Cox and Blake (2011) then point out that the importance of such groups for knowledge exchange and information sharing is well known (*i.e.,* see Ploderer, Howard and Thomas, 2010). Similarly, it can be argued that anglers who express their interest in their leisure world through seeking out and participating in information sharing opportunities have found Leisure/Social Worlds which play an essential role in the construction of both their individual identities and in the broader social world of angling.

Part of the utility of such leisure worlds is their ability to holistically accommodate varying levels of expertise within a single overall activity. This ability might allow for the interaction to alleviate feelings of isolation, even for very advanced or inexperienced individuals. Ploderer, Howard and Thomas (2010, p. 419) observe that 'Amateurs are found in arts, sports, or entertainment, where they are linked with professional counterparts and inspired by celebrities'. However, they find that the links that such worlds provide for those at differing stages within their recreational career vary depending upon the stage at which they find themselves. In this observation, Ploderer, Howard and Thomas (2010), whilst not mentioning either paradigm explicitly, further demonstrate the links between the construct of Serious Leisure (*i.e.,* see Stebbins, 1982, 2001, 2007) and Recreational Specialisation Continuum (RSC) (*i.e.,* see Bryan, 2000, [1979] 2008) by reaffirming career progress within recreational activities which both Stebbins (2007) and Bryan ([1979] 2008) agree upon. Also, by demonstrating a possible staged progression within activities (Amateur-Professional-Celebrity) on a macro scale similar to that observed and demonstrated by Brian (2008 pp. 59-84). These observations by Ploderer, Howard and Thomas (2010) allow us to consider the activity in online worlds similar to angling, where the lines between amateur and professional may be more blurred than, for example, the lines between amateur and professional association football players. Ploderer, Howard and Thomas (2010) focus on aspects of isolation involved in the importance of collaboration on social network sites amongst recreationalists, but there may be other aspects at play, particularly in angling, that bind participants in recreational activities into strongly cohesive groups, this being the need for security, and this may also demonstrate the reasons behind territorial and, sometimes, aggressive behaviours such as that observed in Chapter 4.

Safe Spaces.

Whilst angling would appear to be the most socially accepted form of recreational hunting (for discussion, see Arlinghaus *et al.*, 2007), many groups and individuals both in the social and scientific realms criticise angling as a cruel practice (*i.e.,* see PETA UK, 2019; Koopmans, 2020; Schwingle, 2020). For this reason, anglers seem to be constantly aware of outsiders or 'anti's' and, as a result, seem to constantly

self-regulate in an attempt to appease anti-fishing factions which they imagine to be watching them, as this comment on *Fishamo* demonstrates:

Excerpt 5.2

Post: *September 2019*	
Carl Ball (Admin)	From now on guys any photos you post stood up holding fish[30] they will not be accepted, if you repeatedly post pictures standing up you will get a warning then after that removed... Sorry to be the sheriff but fish care is a must guys....
	Like: 22 *Comments*: 22

For this reason, the formation of groups may encompass a protective element, enabling anglers to possess a space where they are free to discuss their activity away from anti angling elements and where they can feel supported in their choice of recreation. These spaces, therefore, mean that group participants do not risk open criticism (at least in regard to their practising fishing) if they are accepted as part of the group[31]. Therefore, Facebook angling groups may offer a level of ego-protection as observed in other contexts (*e.g.,* see Jones, 2000). However, such freedom comes at a cost in the virtual world as it does in the physical world. Facebook groups create a panoptic world (see Foucault, 1977) online, allowing others to observe the activity of group participants

The Panopticon is a model of power and control based upon an architectural design (Figure 14) by Jeremy Bentham in the mid-19th Century. The design was created for prisons, insane asylums, schools, hospitals, and other places where there was a need for authoritarian control. However, instead of using violent methods, such as torture, the belief was that a progressive modern state required a new way to regulate its citizens. The Panopticon allowed for a new form of coercion and control, maintained through the constant observation of subjects. Each subject was isolated from the other, with no

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[30] Standing whilst holding fish is considered dangerous to the fish in case it is dropped, common practice is to crouch close to the ground when holding fish for photographs.

[31] It should be noted that anglers are not only prone to criticism and attack from the wider non-angling world but also from within their own community. For example, Match Anglers are very critical of Zander anglers who they see as supporting a species which threatens their own sport.(Angling Times, 2021b)

capability of interaction or communication. However, the structure would allow guards to continually see inside each cell from a vantage point in a central tower, where the subjects could not see them. This constant threat of observation acted as a control mechanism. For Foucault (1977), the Panopticon became a metaphor to explore social power and control systems.

Within the context of the Facebook group, the Panopticon seems to form part of an exchange mechanism. In exchange for certain freedoms, all become subject to surveillance from moderators who submit themselves to surveillance from the group founder, who is him or herself subject to surveillance from the Facebook platform controllers.
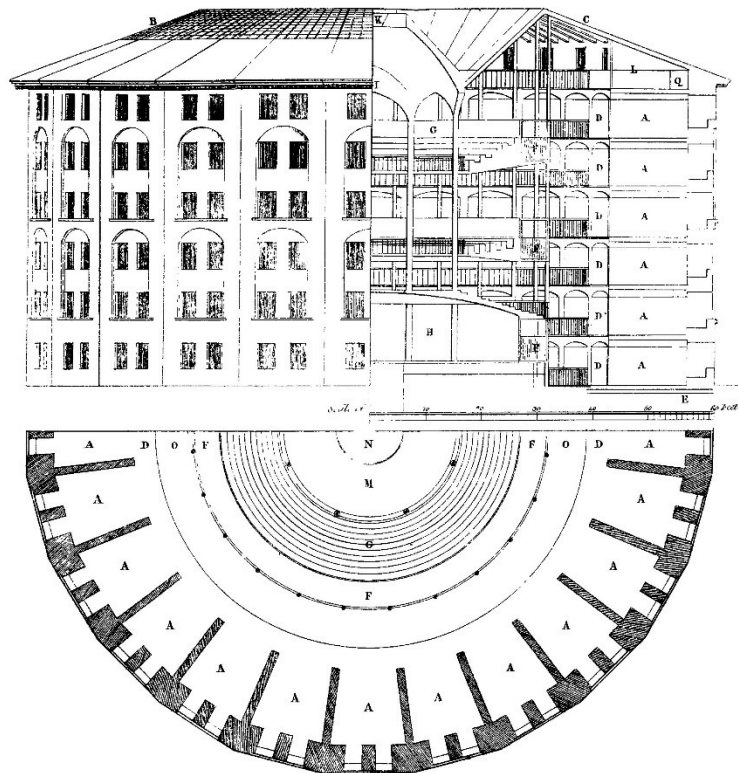
Figure 8 Plan of Jeremy Bentham's panopticon prison.

Moreover, this hierarchy of surveillance does not end there. The panopticon is fractal in nature. Even the Facebook platform itself is forced to offer itself up to organisations greater than itself, as can be seen from recent press coverage (see Guardian staff and agencies, 2021), illustrating the unavoidable links between online and physical world life, which echoes down to the apparently innocuous world of the

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angling group. This fractal nature of the panopticon is perhaps best illustrated in Foucault's (1977, p. 204) own words:

> The Panopticon may even provide an apparatus for supervising its own mechanisms. In this central tower, the director may spy on all the employees that he has under his orders: nurses, doctors, foremen, teachers, warders; he will be able to judge them continuously, alter their behaviour, impose upon them the methods he thinks best; and it will even be possible to observe the director himself … enclosed as he is in the middle of this architectural mechanism, is not the director's own fate entirely bound up with it?

We can see that Facebook groups may emerge for many reasons from this perspective. They mirror physical world communities in that they are interlinked through a more extensive, all-encompassing social world that accommodates and enables anglers to participate and interact with their chosen leisure activity within an environment that offers support and, under certain circumstances, a degree of protection to the participants if they are willing to pay the cost of conformity. These factors, coupled with Stebbins's (1982, 2007) conceptualisation of Serious Leisure, enable us to see the close links between recreational activities and the social worlds they inhabit. These links take the idea of concept bridges linking two interrelated and mutually conceptually informative worlds into a further layer of complexity, allowing us to understand further how anglers use social media to participate in their chosen activity.

However, by positioning angling within a wider Social World environment, we still render online angling participation as a two-dimensional activity consisting of physical world participation and virtual world participation without considering the array of levels of participation (and participants) within them. However, these aspects of safety and varying levels of participant and participation may go some way toward answering our initial research question. Individuals interested in Angling may initially be using social media as a safe place to talk about and gain information about a new hobby and, only then, become more embroiled in the separate activity of online angling that sometimes launches online angling careers. This observation is echoed in the upsurge in *Fishamo* members during COVID-19 when anglers turned to social media not to learn about a new interest but to continue to participate in an activity taken from them by lockdown restrictions.
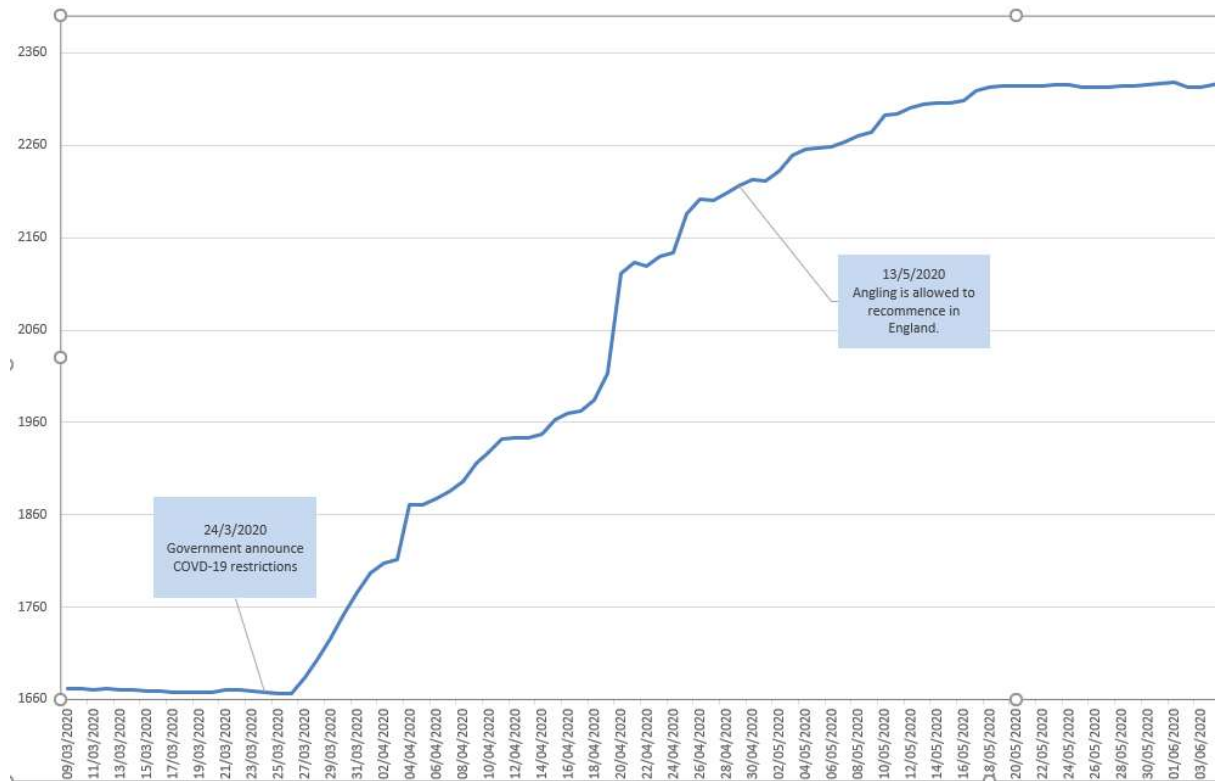
Figure 9 rapid membership growth of Fishamo as a result of COVID-19 restrictions

Virtual Angling Careers:

Within angling online, as with angling in the physical world, entrée to the activity can be fraught with difficulty. Often these challenges can result from anglers attempting involvement in groups that are higher on the recreational specialisation continuum than is matched by the individual's current level of expertise, as can be seen by this exchange:

Excerpt 5.3

Post: *June 2020*	
Carl Ball[32]	So, the scenario go's a little like this .... We have a member who's been fishing LESS then a handful of times so he joins *#Fishamo* for help and advice ... Rather then that he got abuse instead and not sure if he even wants to go fishing again 😭 Though I don't post I do keep an eye out and as ADMIN from this moment on ANY shitty replies or picking on folk it will be a 3.2.1....your gone
	Likes: 31 *Comments:* 14

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[32] Group second admin

Comment 11	
Micheal Basset	Some people forget we all start somewhere
	Likes: 4 *Comments:* 0

Comment 12	
Andrew Butler	Some people are weapons 😡
	Likes: 1 *Comments:* 0

Comment 13	
Roger Byford	The groups I run do not get a second chance
	Likes: 2 *Comments:* 0

Comment 14	
Jermaine Crafts	No need for it. We all have to learn
	Likes: 3 *Comments:* 0

As we can see, the condemnation of those who singled out a new angler was almost universal[33], yet the new angler was still singled out. This behaviour seems to map well onto the RSC construct (Bryan, [1979] 2008). The levels of specialisation observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008) in his recreation specialisation continuum and, on a broader scale, by Ploderer, Howard, and Thomas (2010) are a vital component in the ongoing participation of a recreationalist within their chosen activity. The above discourse demonstrates the potential for careers to be cut short or, at least, interrupted by other group participants. These individuals may perceive that entrée to the activity has been attempted at an unacceptable level. It can be likened to the mild 'hazing' experienced in other sports, which has is defined by Crow and Macintosh (2009, p. 449) as:

> Any potentially humiliating, degrading, abusive, or dangerous activity expected of a junior-ranking athlete by a more senior team-mate, which does not contribute to either athlete's positive development, but is required to be accepted as part of a team, regardless of the junior-ranking athlete's willingness to participate. This includes, but is not limited to,

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[33] Comments missed from the conversation were an offshoot discussion about site administration and did not refer to original post.

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any activity, no matter how traditional or seemingly benign, that sets apart or alienates any team-mate based on class, number of years on the team, or athletic ability.

The need for new anglers to enter conversation within groups appropriate for their angling experience demonstrates the potential for such 'hazing' to take place and illustrates a recreational specialisation continuum active within online angling participation. By this stage in the group's development, *Fishamo* seems to have developed past the stage of being a group where inexperienced anglers can participate freely to one where a certain degree of skill and prerequisite knowledge is required to engage effectively[34], demonstrating that the group, itself, has changed. Bryan's ([1979] 2008) ideas assist in developing an understanding of this phenomenon and provide a model through which we can begin to understand both the recreational career of the individual and the causalities and evolutionary process behind the formation of multiple Facebook groups that relate to the single activity of angling.

Whilst the work of Stebbins (2007) accommodates the concept of social worlds within serious leisure activities, Bryan's ([1979] 2008) concept of RSC develops a deeper understanding of these worlds. Unlike Stebbins (1982), Bryan's ([1979] 2008) conceptualisation of RSC found its initial inspiration in the social world perspective (see Ditton, Loomis and Choi, 1992). For Bryan ([1979] 2008), as recreationalists became more experienced and skilled in their activity, their requirements became increasingly specialised. This increased specialisation was represented in a continuum from general to specific. Less committed participants had general requirements to facilitate their recreational participation, whilst elite recreationalists tended to have precise requirements regarding location and the equipment used.

As noted by Ditton, Loomis and Choi (1992), since Bryan's ([1979] 2008) conceptualisation of RSC, many other researchers (*e.g.,* see Graefe, 1981; Wellman, Roggenbuck and Smith, 1982; Kauffman, 1985) have examined the recreational specialisation construct. Moreover, in more contemporary times, the construct continues to offer utility to academics interested in the nature of recreational activity amongst

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[34] It is important to note that the increased level of knowledge to participate in the group is not the same as requiring anglers to achieve a certain skill level before they can participate at all. Bryan only indicates that conflict is caused when participant who are lower on the recreational specialisation continuum participate in the domains occupied (or claimed) by higher levels.

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specialist leisure social worlds (*e.g.,* see Chih-Peng, 2018; De Salvo et al., 2020; Yeom and Kang, 2020). Furthermore, intrinsic links between RSC and serious leisure have been established. These links have been made, principally by Lee and Scott (2013, p. 460), whose findings suggested that serious leisure and RSC were measuring the same thing. However, links have also been noted by Tsaur and Llang (2008) and Scott (2012), which point toward the utility of a combination of both constructs in developing a deeper understanding of leisure worlds (see Scott, 2012).

Bryan's ([1979] 2008) work explicitly adds to the study of leisure social worlds, giving an increased sense of dimensionality within leisure social worlds. That is, Bryan's ([1979] 2008) specialisation continuum allows for a deeper consideration of what Strauss (1978) observed as 'subworlds'. Strauss (1978, p. 123) observed subworlds forming due to 'never-ending segmenting, ' often due to advancements in technology, differential experiences within the world, or new generations of members. Similar subworlds can be explicitly observed within a leisure/recreational context. By studying anglers, Bryan ([1979] 2008) demonstrates that anglers fit within a continuum from occasional fisherman to Technique-setting specialist (Figure 16): each with specific needs in terms of setting and equipment:
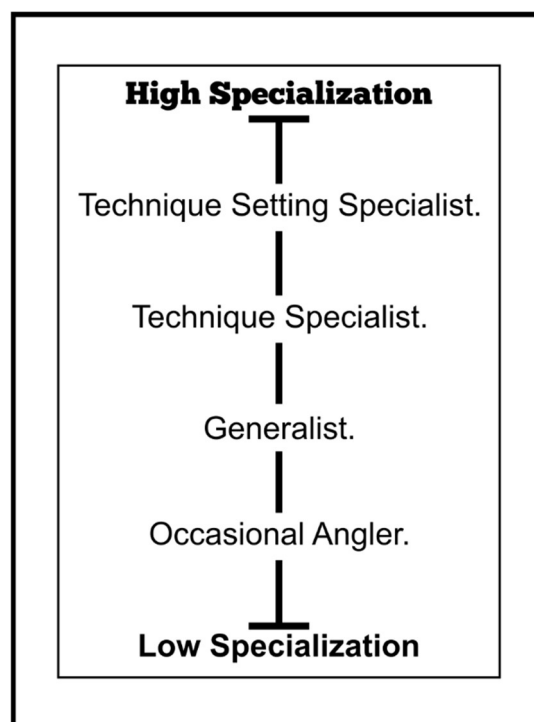
Figure 10 Angler progression (Bryan ([1979] 2008, p. 45)

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Each can be seen as a subworld of angling. This segmentation, again, is underlined as a social world trait by Strauss (1978, p.122), who notes not only these phenomena but also offers some clues into how various stages along a continuum might form by noting: 'once underway, organisations inevitably evolve to further one aspect or another of the world's activities.' This organisational evolution can be seen in the range of involvement illustrated through posts in *Fishamo*. In the early stages of group formation, anglers accessing and using the group can be seen to be relatively low on the RSC:

Excerpt 5.4

Post: *Nov 2019*	
Lisa Russell	What do people honestly think of new Angler's? I am a new and female angler so I face more challenges than most. I find it hard to visit fisheries with established Angler's and often feel intimidated. Is there a way to welcome and encourage people like me? Many Angler's have learnt from family but we don't have that. We can only learn from books and experience. I know there are people providing lessons but often these are not affordable. Sometimes it just takes a friendly face on the bank to say "can I help".
	*Likes:*24 *Comments:*47

Comment 2	
Steve Wenman	I think most anglers would welcome all new anglers Lisa Russell. Keep an eye out for Angling Trust coaching events such as 'Lets go Family Fishing' in your area, these are all free of charge.
	Like: 1 *Comment:* 0

Comment 6	
Willie Wraight	There are loads of us out there who love to help. There are some very family friendly and helpful supportive waters depending on your location. Also, a group like this will give the help and support to continue your angling journey 👍
	Likes: 2 *Comments:* 0

The above post and comments (all of which are of a similar supportive tone) demonstrate the utility that *Fishamo* served in its early stages to anglers with limited or

no experience. Anglers seem to be accessing the group from the standpoint of making new friends and expanding their social connections within the recreational activity, building their online identity as they go. However, as time passed, *Fishamo* shows the evolution of the group towards a more specialised and skilled membership, as can be seen in this post made one year later:
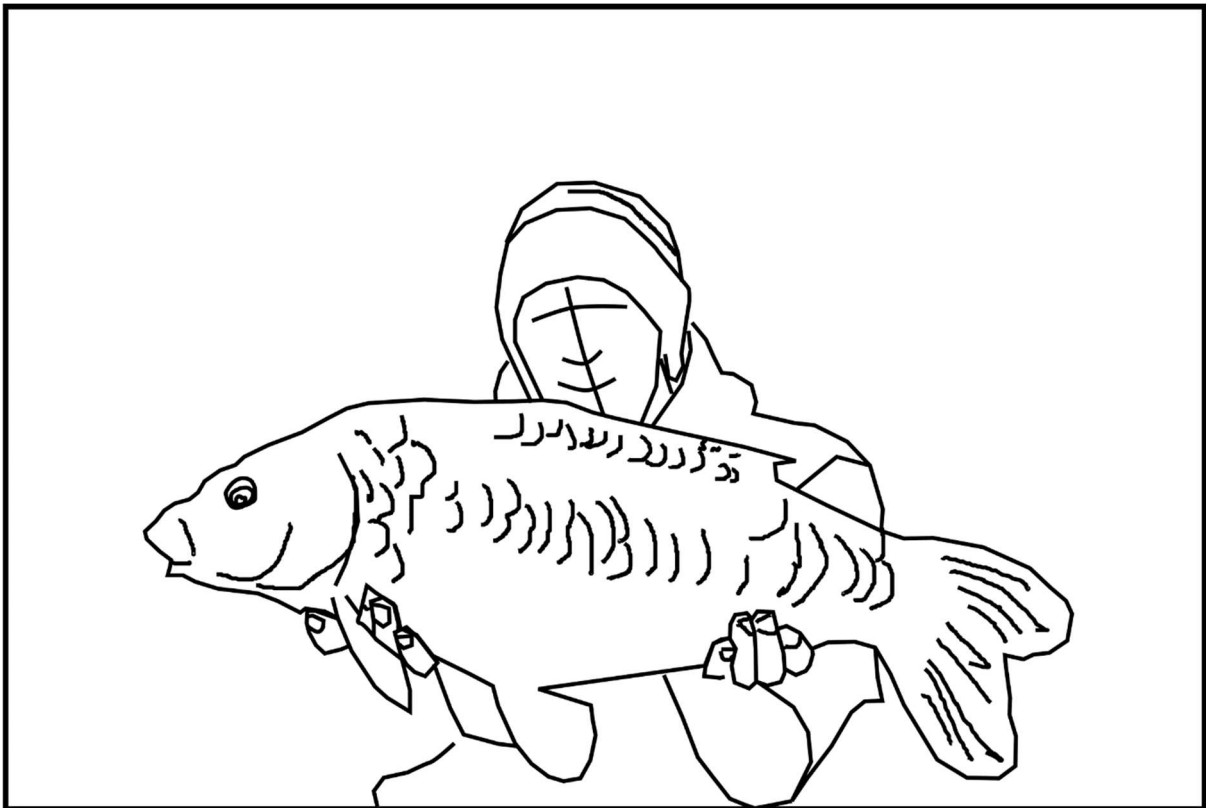
Figure 11 line drawing of a photo posted by angler.

Excerpt 5.5

Post: Nov 2020	
Dale Collings	All the 2s this weekend on the middle Trent 2 chub 2 carp 2 barbel 😊 both chub between 4-5lb the barbel topped with an 11lb 8oz beaut a 19lb 9oz mirror and an absolutely stunning 13lb 13oz mirror was blown away by it 😍
	Likes: 22 *Comments*:0

Whilst the above post does not receive any comments, the tone is entirely different. The angler feels more comfortable boasting about achievements rather than apologetic for any real or cautiously expressed sense of inferiority like that often experienced in the group's early days. This progression in the skill level of participants illustrates the progression of a virtual angling career by capturing snapshots of anglers who find themselves at different stages within such a career than those who were involved in group participation during the early stages of *Fishamo*.

This progression would also hint at similarities between online recreational worlds and a recreational progression within online recreational activity similar to that observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008) in the physical world. Indeed, some links with Bryan's ([1979] 2008) concept can be seen in research focusing on digital leisure worlds. Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), for example, working in the virtual world of Second Life, state that, on that platform at least, the interaction between participants is primarily driven by the creation of subcultures which they see as mirroring real-life settings such as shopping malls or night clubs or they can be gathered around historical settings. However, these 'Sub-cultures' could be better expressed as subworlds because, as demonstrated by Strauss (1978), technology is a key driver in social subworld construction and the world in which Kaplan and Haenlein (2009) are working is one made possible through the technology of another subworld, in this case, the wider online world of the internet. Those users who find themselves participating within this world and, specifically within one of the 'sub-cultures' of Kaplan and Haenlein (2009), seem therefore to be expressing their virtual status as 'setting specialists', which is also observed in the physical world subworld of anglers in Bryan's ([1979] 2008) work.

As I examine in this Thesis the links that exist between leisure and the online interaction of anglers, it seems reasonable to assume that, in line with Bryan's ([1979] 2008) RSC, a progression from general to specific in online space similar to that found by Bryan ([1979] 2008) amongst real-world anglers exists. Therefore, there is likely an upper level of RSC amongst online anglers, which I will call a 'Valhalla group', to which only the most elite of online anglers can gain access. Such a group would be populated by the most well-known anglers, those who have attained significant social capital through demonstrating their personal skill as anglers either as a result of capturing and displaying large fish or through offering regular and practical advice to

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other anglers. However, whilst such groups are possible to theorise, their actual existence, due to their natural exclusivity, is only possible to support through anecdotal evidence. On a more practical level, it is possible to observe the gradual evolution of *Fishamo* itself from a generalist angling group to a more specialised space that echoes the progression experienced by individual recreationalists and offers an insight into the way that groups develop and take their place along the specialisation continuum. The group (space) and the individual (angler) progression demonstrates a more fluid, extended progression within the malleable, virtual recreational specialisation continuum than is possible in the physical world, where environments are more fixed by external forces such as nature (Figure 34). Through this process of evolution, groups become part of how anglers use social media to progress within their activity, but because the groups that anglers inhabit themselves progress along a similar recreational specialisation continuum, the same group can serve anglers at different points in their career as well as serving individuals as they progress through their personal career.

Quest for Valhalla

In Norse mythology, Valhalla is the glorious hall where warriors who are slain in battle are taken by Valkyries (Tetzner, 2021). It is often described as a warrior paradise where only those who have proven themselves are granted entry. Because of the nature of the Valhalla mythos, where some worthy warriors are admitted whilst others are refused entry, I use the concept of a 'Valhalla Group' here to describe a Facebook Angling group that exists only to admit a 'chosen few' anglers who have achieved a special status within either the physical angling world or the online angling world.

Bryan ([1979] 2008, pp. 59-87) uses his RSC to examine a range of recreational activities, finding within each the hallmarks that typify his theory of RSC. Because Bryan's ([1979], 2008) original work was produced in a pre-social media world, and even the re-publication of his work was released when Facebook and mainstream social media were still in their infancy, the considerations of social media are absent from the work. However, a similar progression to that observed by Bryan in his recreational specialisation continuum can be seen in how *Fishamo* has developed over its early phases. The observance of this progression shows how new groups can evolve to

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become 'Valhalla Groups' and is one of the contributions of this work. *Fishamo* has Transformed from a group that was very broad in how anglers interacted with their leisure activity through engagement with it to a group that has become increasingly specific and focused on a particular form of online angling activity. Here, I further demonstrate the habit of group formation to move from general to specific as the *Fishamo* group grew and found its ultimate place as a group of anglers. In so doing, I will examine the existence of higher and lower groups of angling participants on the Facebook platform to illustrate the levels of RSC which exist within digitally mediated leisure worlds.

Group Formation

Tuckman (1965) developed a four-stage developmental model to illustrate the process of group formation. The four stages described by Tuckman (1965) appear to be present within the formation of the *Fishamo* Facebook group and, as such, offer a helpful model through which to understand *Fishamo*'s formation and evolution.

Tuckman's four stages (forming, storming, norming and performing) describe the stages that groups undergo during formation. Stage 1 (Forming), which can be seen in Chapter 4 of this thesis, describes the very earliest idea of *Fishamo* describes the initial stages of group formation. During this time, group members can be seen as 'testing the water'. They are interested in finding out if the group fits their needs and if it were something they would participate within. Participants are likely to frequently post 'Thank you for the add' type posts in this stage. Other anglers are likely to 'like' rather than comment, as this indicates the lowest level of commitment on the participant's part.

The second level (Storming) is sometimes likened to the first argument in a romantic relationship (Lumen, 2021). It is characterised by 'conflict and polarization around interpersonal issues' (Tuckman, 1965, p. 396). This stage can be seen most powerfully in the formation of *Fishamo* during the early invasions of the opposing group.

Thirdly, a period of 'Norming' ensues. This period is a time of overcoming group resentments and conflicts. Tuckman (1965, p. 396) notes that at this stage, 'new roles are adopted'. This stage can be seen within the *Fishamo* group as the 'post-

conflict' stage, where interested individuals stepped forward to help the group by volunteering as moderators and administrators. Also, during this stage in *Fishamo*, more stringent rules were established, and a conscious effort to oust negativity was made.

Tuckman's final stage is 'Performing'. At this stage, an equilibrium is achieved, and group efforts are directed to achieving the group's goals. This stage can be seen in the current incarnation of *Fishamo*, where anglers enjoy peaceful conversation and simple competition revolving around the sharing of fishing photos.

Bellow, I analyse points and posts in *Fishamo's* development, which further demonstrate the predictable nature of group formation along the path proposed by Tuckman.

One of the first recorded posts on *Fishamo* involves an angler asking for opinions about a fish he has caught. The angler suggests that the fish is his personal best but claims a lack of weighing scales for his reasons for asking the opinion of other anglers. The angler does not attempt to claim any size for the fish himself, simply contenting himself by asking the opinion of other anglers. When others offer an opinion, he seems to accept their judgment without question, even allowing it to fluctuate negatively without any protest.
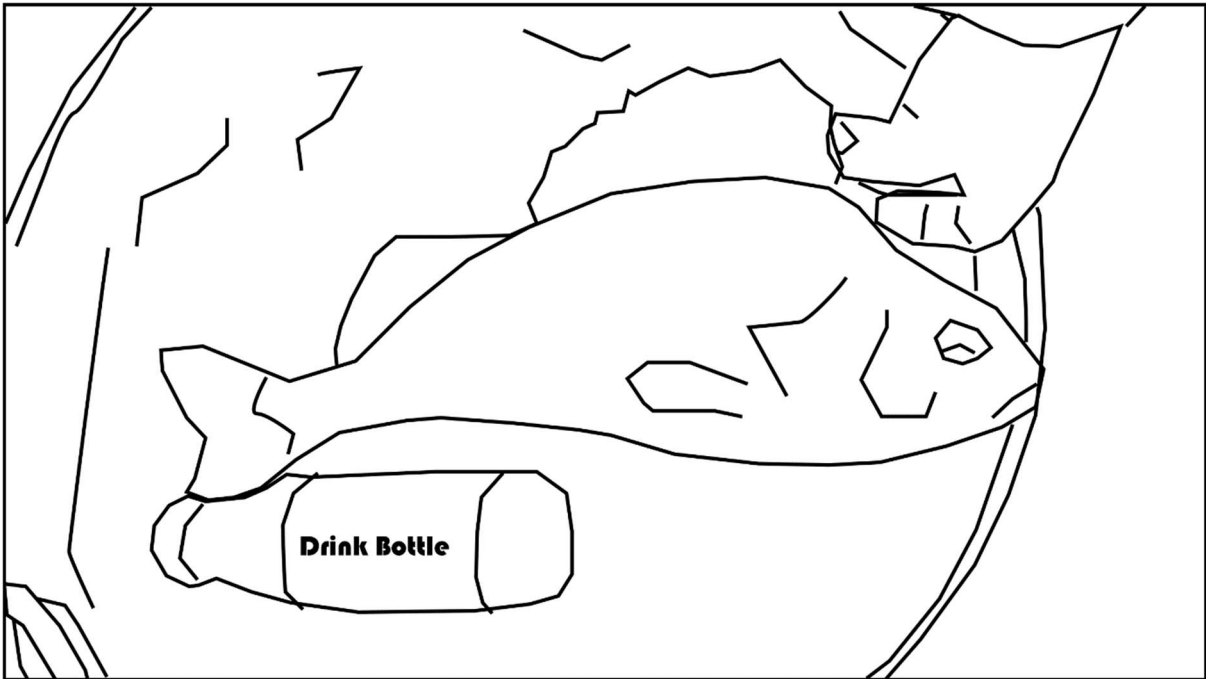
Figure 12 line drawing of early Fishamo Post

Excerpt 5.6

Post: *July 2019*	
James Gibson	Had this last year it's my PB but did not have any scales to weigh how big do people think it is
Like: 30	*Comment:* 8

Comment 1:	
Lee Lyons	Touching 3lb
Like: 1	*Comment*: 0

Comment 2:	
Jack Catchpole	Agreed 2 1/2 lb... ish.
Like: 1	*Comment*: 0

Comment 3:	
Tony Goodearle	2 n a half at best.
Like: 1	*Comment*: 0

Comment 3:	
Jack Catchpole	Nice Perch though. My PB is only 1 1/2 lb.
Like: 1	*Comment*: 0

Comment 4:	
James Gibson	Ye I was thinking between 2 and 3 lbs there is a couple bigger than that in a half of an acre pond I got it from but they only seem to take live bait
	Like: 0 *Comment*: 0

Here, it is possible to see that James has posted a very open question and, most importantly, he does not claim authority over the answer. This exchange seems to be a passive approach to posting and reflects the generalist nature of the group at this time when new friendships and relationships between users are just beginning to emerge. Bryant and Marmo (2012) examined the rules of Facebook friendships and inductively developed a list of Facebook friendship rules. One of these rules observed here is: 'Do not post information on Facebook that could be used against you.' (Bryant and Marmo, 2012, p. 38). Anglers can sometimes find themselves judged for claiming weights for fish without proof or which appear to be too heavy compared to photographic evidence. As James's choice is not to share his prediction for the weight of his fish, this serves to protect him from the potential judgement of others.

Meanwhile, other commenters on the post (namely, Lee Lyons & Jack Catchpole) offers examples of another rule observed by Bryant and Marmo (2012, p.38): 'Do not say anything disrespectful about someone on Facebook'. The avoidance of offence through offering generous predictions about the fish's size seems to create for those commenting the possibility of a new friendship without jeopardising their reputation. Conversely, Tony Goodearle chooses another approach using a slightly guarded but dismissive tone. This approach seems to go against the rules observed by Bryant and Marmo (2012), and, interestingly, Tony was later removed from the group by other moderators for his generally negative tone[35]. This interaction, then, illustrates the benefits of sticking to rules[36], even those not explicitly defined within the group context, whilst also illustrating the potential consequences to those who do not understand the appropriate etiquette. However, most notably for this Thesis, it

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[35] Possibly demonstrating the way that moderators guard the safety of others in the group through participation editing.
[36] Such as easing group entrée.

demonstrates the very generalist nature of early-stage Facebook groups that focus on angling.

Further examples of 'generalist' posting exist in the early stages of the group's formation. For example, posts that seem to be attempting to gauge the makeup of group membership by asking questions about other group members' fishing preferences:

Excerpt 5.7

Post: August 2019	
Cory Weller	Is this group about sea fishing too or just course fishing?
	Likes: 12 *Comments:* 19

Memes, or humorous posts designed to elicit sharing, also seemed prevalent in the group at this time.

Figure 12 example of social media angling meme

Du Preez and Lombard (2014) considered the role of memes in constructing Facebook personas and found that memes were 'unconstructed' signs of an individual's persona. That is, whilst personal profile pictures and descriptions are shaped and designed by the user, memes are pre-existing, selected and shared by the user and, therefore, are a subtle way of expressing information about the user. If this were the case, then the use of memes in this constructive, almost tactical, way would demonstrate a degree of experience within social media more widely that is being utilised to facilitate entrée into this specific social context. Perhaps, these are individuals adopting interaction within angling social media groups following the adoption of a new hobby, or they are physical world anglers on the lower levels of RSC who are only now beginning to speak about their activity online. Of course, it is also possible that, for some, the posting of humorous memes represents a methodology for circumventing the group's strict no 'banter' policy (see Chapter 3) again, demonstrating a level of skill and subtlety which would demonstrate the individual's skill and experience in adapting to the requirements of successful social media use.

Furthermore, posting in the group at this stage seems to reflect the lower level of expertise amongst the anglers participating in the group conversation. These observations are indicative of a low level of the RSC. Multiple examples exist from this type of post during this early stage of the group; from anglers who do not have the experience to know exactly what it is that they are catching, *e.g.,*:

Excerpt 5.8

Post: *August 2019*		
Troy Coleman	Can someone help identify this fish please	
	Likes: 12	*Comments:* 14

To anglers who clearly have some angling knowledge but are not far along their own recreational specialisation continuum yet, and actively seek the advice of others more experienced than themselves.:

Excerpt 5.9

Post: August 2019	
Patrick Gains	After some advice guys. I have some new pop-ups[37] never used them before I wanted them in pink but only had white. so was just sat thinking could I soak a couple of them in vibrant pink food colouring would that work as anybody ever tried anything like this before
	Likes: 2 *Comments:* 12

All these factors seem to confirm that *Fishamo*, at this stage, was a low-level group within the recreational specialisation continuum. In the social media space, groups, it would appear, represent an avatar of the physical world's environments observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008). For example, Bryan ([1979], 2008), in studying recreational anglers, discovered, at the lowest level of RSC, the level Bryan ([1979] 2008, p. 45) labels 'Occasional Anglers', that, at this stage, anglers are interested in 'Catching a fish, any fish on any tackle.' Or who has only a limited knowledge of methods? At this stage, anglers are not overly concerned about the equipment used or species caught. They are preoccupied, instead, with the 'how' of catching more fish, as can be seen by this post:

Excerpt 5.10

Post: August 2019	
Amber Rackham	Any advice for a novice on river fishing? Only been fishing for a few months but I luckily own a place about 100ft away from the river 7 and would really like to test it out more so far have caught roach, chub and pike on it what other fish could I expect? I'm happy to try and get as many species as I can, Do I need special rigs to catch them? Currently use maggots and sweetcorn as bait on size 10 hook , is there anything else I could use? Thanks in advance for any tips 😊
	*Likes:*16 *Comments:*11

In other words, *Fishamo*, at this early stage in its development, represented a virtual environment in which anglers were not interested in high-level skills and tactics

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[37] Pop-ups, in this instance refers to a method of presenting buoyant bait to fish, the bait pops-up just above the bed of the river or lake, held down by weight. In this way the hook is better poised to be successful upon a fish eating the bait.

but merely interested in catching any fish under any angling means and becoming part of the community as they do so. Interestingly, however, the anglers who respond to some of these posts demonstrate a level of skill in angling. This increased skill level amongst participants may represent the first buds in the group's evolution. It shows that more experienced anglers gradually begin to emerge to capitalise on the opportunity to share their knowledge with inexperienced anglers and potentially increase their social capital to further their online angling career by demonstrating their expertise.

Bryan's work does not predict how long recreationalists remain at each level of the recreational specialisation continuum or that all anglers will progress. It only suggests that different activities will have varying levels through which recreationalists progress, largely dependent on the activity's complexity (Bryan, [1979] 2008). As a result, anglers would seem to remain active in a group that meets their personal level of recreational specialisation for as long as it serves their needs. Furthermore, because Bryan ([1979] 2008) was working within a physical world, he did not consider the progression of environments where different recreational specialisation levels found themselves. For Bryan ([1979] 2008), the environments of RSC were concrete, and it was the progression of the individual which facilitated movement and preference between them. Due to the recent restrictions placed upon the accessibility of data following the Cambridge Analytica scandal (BCI, 2018), as discussed in Chapter 3 of this Thesis, it is not possible to track where group members come from or go. The movement between groups could be inferred as certain anglers vanished from active involvement over time and new anglers became prominent in group involvement. Furthermore, in the flexible world of virtual space, it seems there may be a dual aspect to RSC where not only the individual progresses through their career but, equally, the environment (or group they are participating in) progresses through its own recreational specialisation continuum.

This possibility seems to be supported by Plant (2004, p. 62), who observes the tendency for online communities such as Facebook groups to develop and transform over time, noting: 'communities are dynamic by nature and thus it is important that researchers and organisations have the ability to identify and classify them.'. However, the classifications of online communities have tended to be individually based and focused on a typology of groups (*i.e.,* see Lazar and Preece, 1998) with little

consideration given to the evolutionary nature of individual groups. Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil *et al.* (2013, p. 307) examine more closely the lifecycle of online communities, noting:

> Vibrant online communities are in constant flux. As members join and depart, the interactional norms evolve, stimulating further changes to the membership and its social dynamics. Linguistic change—in the sense of innovation that becomes accepted as the norm—is essential to this dynamic process: it both facilitates individual expression and fosters the emergence of a collective identity.

In this observation, Danescu-Niculescu-Mizil et al. (2013) demonstrate the mechanism by which online groups follow a continuum similar to that observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008) in the recreational careers of individuals in the physical world. In the case of *Fishamo*, this process can perhaps be best observed by changes in communication and levels of interaction in the group, along with periodic influxes of new members that serve to change the focus of the group's activity. These influxes tend to be followed by a period of calm when participants in the group settle into new behaviour patterns.

Therefore, if Bryan's ([1979] 2008) RSC also applies to the evolutionary process of Facebook angling groups, we can assume there are higher and lower groups than *Fishamo* on the Facebook platform. Such higher groups would be typified by technique or setting specialists. They would, perhaps, be highly exclusive groups that use the Facebook privacy settings to ensure access only to those who are invited. At the highest level of specialisation (a Valhalla group), the group might be secret and only operate on an invitational basis from its administrators.

The existence of such 'Valhalla' social media groups is possible to theorise. However, it is difficult to prove their existence by their very nature, as acceptance into such groups is unlikely to be extended to individuals like me who have not attained particular social capital within the broader physical world or Facebook angling community. Instead, I must rely on anecdotal evidence for such groups gleaned from interaction within the *Fishamo* group itself.

In an attempt to gain this evidence, I posted on five Facebook angling groups where I am currently a member and expected to find a cross-section of the angling

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community to find out if anyone had heard of such a thing. The majority of responses were dismissive of the possibility of such groups and seemed to be under the impression that anglers would only interact on social media as a way to share their expertise. However, the groups in which I posted this question are populated primarily by what I would consider lower-level anglers because these groups were either aimed at beginners or were the groups belonging to organisational bodies which also seem to attract beginner anglers who are making their first entrée into the activity or anglers with a greater community spirit than some who may assume that everyone shares such a community-minded attitude. Conversely, the same post in *Fishamo*, which has now evolved to a stage where some very experienced and well-known anglers are involved, elicited a different answer that does, indeed, point towards the possibility of Valhalla groups' existence.

Excerpt 5.11

Post: *January 2021*	
Andrew Wedgbury	A quest for Valhalla... looking for your help again; as part of my PhD research, I have theorised something that I think SHOULD exist, and I was wondering if anyone can help me find it? I am looking for a Valhalla of fishing Facebook groups[38].... If anyone can think of a Facebook group that would fit that bill, I would appreciate it!
	Likes: 2 *Comments:* 14

Comment 1:	
Darrell Abbott	River Thames angling groups would fit the bill, I'm certain there's a few ultra-secret Thames groups that probably take years to get into because of the info provided.
	Like: 0 *Comment*: 0

Comment 2:	
Andrew Wedgbury	...that makes sense because the anglers in those groups have a valuable local knowledge! Which makes people want to join them!...
	Like: 1 *Comment*: 0

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[38] In the actual post, I gave a long description of what I meant by 'Valhalla Group' excluded from this reproduction of the post as much of it would be repetitive.

Comment 3:	
Darrell Abbott	... I can think of a few top Thames fishermen that are members here, but it'll be a fight club situation, first rule[39]........
Like: 0	*Comment*: 0

Comment 4:	
Andrew Wedgbury	... Do you think any of them would speak to me fully off the record and with me promising not to mention the groups they are members of in any of my writing?
Like: 0	*Comment*: 0

Comment 5:	
Darrell Abbott	...hard to say, keep this post active and a few may turn up. But I wouldn't want to 'volunteer' anyone. The few groups I know of are basically a group of anglers who are fishing the same areas sharing info on successes and defeats, I can think of 4 possibly 5 lower Severn anglers I would happily share any info I could to help out. But that's 4 out of 100s if not 1000s of anglers. But I'll share any info I can about the Wye to anyone that asks, funny ol game this fishing lark.
Like: 0	*Comment*: 0

This exchange seems to confirm not only that high-level groups are operating in digitally mediated social space, which can be seen as avatars of physical world environments where anglers gather, but also my own lack of readiness to be invited to participate in such groups and angler's reluctance to disclose who might be members of such groups openly. A further exchange on the same post illustrates that these Valhalla groups are sometimes very firmly attached to physical world activity and that membership in a physical world club might be a prerequisite for the membership of some.

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[39] This terminology is taken from the popular Hollywood movie 'Fight Club' (Fincher, 1999). Famously, the first rule of Fight Club is 'You do not talk about fight club'. Since the films release this has become shorthand for something that is very secretive.

Excerpt 5.12

Comment 6:	
Richard Bonner	What about private fb groups for angling clubs? Would that count 😊
	Likes: 2 *Comments:* 14

Comment 7:	
Andrew Wedgbury	.... I suppose it might, it kind of fits... particularly those clubs with very long waiting lists
	Like: 1 *Comment*: 0

Comment 8:	
Richard Bonner	I've recently become a member of one this season, I was on the waiting list for seven years 😐 but worth it 😄 👍
	Like: 1 *Comment*: 0

Both of the above exchanges illustrate not only that a recreational continuum may exist in virtual space, as Bryan has shown it ([1979] 2008) to exist in physical worlds, but that these 'Valhalla' groups may also, themselves, be closely tied to setting preference which is a critical element of Bryan's Recreational Specialization theory and the social status of the individual similar to that observer in the Leisure Class by Veblen ([1899] 1994). For example, Richard Bonner's experience was one of waiting for seven years to be admitted to an exclusive fishing club with access to highly sought after waters. Here, access to the Valhalla group was not based on superior skill, but long-term dedication and, one can imply, a desire to fish the locations controlled by the angling club (setting). Further examples of ways individuals might bypass the need for high levels of skill to access Valhalla groups might be through long-held friendships or family and historical links such as those described by Stolk (2010). Or, perhaps, through control of these groups by ownership of companies or the fisheries themselves[40]. Nonetheless, it remains evident that Valhalla groups should exist. Access to them depends on something exemplary within the individual's participation within angling, which makes them stand out to their peers.

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[40] Although this is speculative as none of these showed up in the data.

Whilst both Stebbins (1997) and Bryan ([1979] 2008) posited the concept of a recreational career, the reasons behind the individual's progression within their recreational activity have mainly been left to the assumption that participants will want to progress within their recreational involvement (*i.e.,* Oh, Sorice and Ditton, 2010). Only limited consideration has been given to the motivations and stimulus which cause some recreationalists to progress within their activity whilst others do not. Indeed, Scott and Shafer (2001, p. 334), in considering motivations, conclude that 'most [participants] probably either maintain involvement at a relatively fixed level or decrease their participation over time', further noting that, in fact, 'many people have little inclination to progress toward the so-called elite end of the specialisation continuum.'. However, whilst this would appear to be accurate and finds support in the work of Scott and Godbey (1994), who also came to the same conclusion working within the world of Contact Bridge. This conclusion offers little help here where we seek to understand how online anglers progress within their activity using social media.

The question of motivation is made more complicated in the elastic world of online social media, where anglers might find themselves participating in various Facebook groups, each with a different level of specialisation. Here, we can draw attention back to 'Darrell Abbott' in the above section of this chapter (Excerpt 5.11), who confirmed the possible existence of higher-level groups within the Facebook platform. Whilst he confirms that there may, indeed, be groups which he knows of who exhibit higher levels of recreational specialisation, at the same time confirming that he is aware of other members of these groups within *Fishamo*, Darrell also maintains a high involvement with *Fishamo*, which has not yet reached this status. This scenario would be unlikely in the physical world environment. For example, whilst not inconceivable, it is unlikely that an elite fly angler would be content fishing in waters frequented by inexperienced individuals, as evidenced in Bryan's findings ([1979] 2008, pp.28-47).

Nevertheless, skilled anglers happily interact across various groups within the social media platform. Many are members of many different groups, even if they are not active. To understand this phenomenon within Facebook angling groups, it is helpful to develop a deeper understanding of the motivations that are particular to those who would participate in their activity using online groups, as well as those motivations

which are involved in the career stages that can be recognised within the recreational specialisation continuum.

Social media as a support mechanism

Much of the research currently available that considers the motivations of Facebook group participation has been conducted by examining the involvement of student or political participants. It has mainly occurred within an educational or political engagement context (*e.g.,* Mazer, Murphy and Simonds, 2007; Park, Kee and Valenzuela, 2009; White, 2009; Deng and Tavares, 2013). This body of research has revealed how students have used Facebook to engage with their education demands and the need to participate socially. For example, Park, Kee and Valenzuela (2009, p.732) concluded that 'The data shows that students join Facebook Groups because of the need to obtain information about on- and off-campus activities, to socialise with friends, to seek self-status, and to find entertainment. Other studies have focused on using Facebook groups associated with specific medical conditions or interests (*e.g.,* see Orgad, 2005; White et al., 2018) and found that participation is often motivated by a need to either give or receive support from other participants. For example, White et al. (2018, p. 716) found that: ' individuals were motivated to participate in the community to make contributions in many forms, whether informational, technical, emotional or even financial'. Unfortunately, studies that find themselves specifically focused upon motivations for participation within recreational activity Facebook groups are minimal. However, Lizzo and Liechty's (2020) more recent work does offer some insight into recreational Facebook group membership, pointing towards a 'Sense of Community' as one of the driving factors behind community participation in a Harry Potter-themed online running club. This sense of community may also play a large part in the membership base of *Fishamo*, with posters in the group occasionally referring to themselves in the singular as a community. For example, in a post where a member of the community updated the group about the ongoing struggles of a family member's health and recovery, a group member commented:

Excerpt 5.13

Comment February 2021		
Darrell Abbott (*Moderato*r)	Great news wish her the very best from all of us at *Fishamo*	
	Like: 2	*Comment:* 0

This collective use of the word *'Fishamo'* in posts and comments might point toward a community feeling within the group itself, which has been underlined to contribute to the user's continued usage (Zhang, 2009). However, it still fails to account for the reasoning behind group membership in the first place. Furthermore, it fails to answer questions about why people choose to move between groups and focus their participation on increasingly advanced groups as their experience and skills develop. In the remainder of this section, I will examine this question more closely, using the work of Veblen ([1899] 1994), who theorised the role of consumptive practices as a mechanism for expressing social class. Also, I will consider the work of Currid-Halkett (2018), who further considered Veblen's work and posited changes that modern, aspirational living has made to it. These ideas can be balanced with consideration of the work of Bryan ([1979] 2008) to begin to build a model of the mechanisms by which progression within online groups occurs.

Consumption in the world of angling

Veblen's 'Theory of the Leisure Class' observed how certain members of society displayed their social status through consumptive practices. These consumptive practices included 'Conspicuous Consumption' and 'Conspicuous Leisure' and facilitated the leisure class's demonstration of their superior social status through demonstrating their freedom from the requirement to work. These practices lead to either aspiration amongst the less affluent classes who aspired to emulate the wealthy or hatred in which the less affluent classes sought to overthrow the wealthy. Aspirational behaviours can be observed on many social media groups, including those that form around recreational angling activity online. Particularly concerning time spent (conspicuous leisure) fishing, for example:

Excerpt 5.14

Post: April 2021	
Terrence Beadle	the moment I fulfilled my dream of catching a peacock bass in the Amazon in 2006. I thought, wrongly that I would turn up cast out and catch one first chuck! Reality is very different. I spent hours and hours trying to catch one! One of my favourite captures!
	Like: 14 | *Comment:* 2

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..Or...

Excerpt 5.15

Post: September 2021	
Andre Beer	A little bit about myself.....Prior to casting plastic for 'home grown' predators I spent 23 years chasing much bigger predators offshore in blue water. Met up with some fantastic captains and anglers and was fortunate to be selected to represent England at 7 World Big Game Championships. My fishing these days is mostly 'mini' big game...As I am currently unable to work you will get to see a good few pictures of my fishing adventures.
	Like: 33 | *Comment:* 0

Each of these examples demonstrates consumption in the world of recreational angling. This consumption manifests both in the form of conspicuous consumption, that is, the ability to afford to fly to exotic locations to fish, and in the form of conspicuous leisure, that is, the ability to spend prolonged periods in exotic locations to facilitate angling. The action of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure upon others has the effect of building aspiration. Other anglers see the success and adventures and wish to emulate this for themselves, as is demonstrated in this post from an Algerian migrant angler who regularly participates in *Fishamo* and is finding increased success in the British angling scene.

Excerpt 5.16

Post: August 2021	
Khalil Saidi	As a fishing passionate, i struggled and was really hard to enjoy my passion in a desert area of Algeria and the closest water was 2 dams like an hour driving or so. Also there is no fishing tackle there specialised in freshwater fishing and was really hard to improve with the same few bits that i got! I did not born in fishing family but i don't know how the heck I love fishing! Before that even started my sessions, i was watching a lot of documentaries and my best one was always RIVER MONSTERS, yes Jeremy wade was an absolute idol and also an inspiration. so i came to England on march 2018 and I met him march 2019 and that was an amazing time to spend with such an angler! My dream now got bigger, because i am in an island where the fishing is a culture and people they breath it, looking forword to fish all over England than the rest of the world... Big wild rivers is what i am aiming for.
	Like: 41 *Comment:* 4

However, these types of activities might be financially or, as in the case of Khalil, physically beyond the reach of other anglers, which can have a disheartening effect and, on occasion, may result in open comments of jealousy or envy. For example, specimen anglers who catch large or record fish often become the target of online abuse (*i.e.,* see Angling Times, 2020). This abuse might lead to some anglers seeking out more private groups to share their fishing experience and knowledge. Hence, Valhalla Groups may emerge. Or, alternatively, result in anglers choosing to create groups which are open only to those with similar resources, either financial or in the form of skills. This tendency may explain the motivation of groups of higher or lower status within a Facebook angling group context. However, explicit outward displays of consumption, particularly in the early days of group formation, in the form of graphic displays of conspicuous consumption, are not as common within the group as might be expected. This lacking might suggest that, although conspicuous consumption is as powerful a driving force in society now as it was in the days of Veblen, the form that this

consumption takes may have shifted. Valhalla groups may act as places where a select few can expand their knowledge to be then able to better their displays of skill in other groups. This motivation would undoubtedly be the case in the type of group described by Darrell Abbott above (Excerpt 5.11).

Indeed, Veblen's ideas have come under criticism since their inception (*i.e.,* see Campbell, 1995; Trigg, 2001). However, Currid-Halkett (2018) supports Veblen's theory but proposes that the increased availability of goods has diluted Veblen's conspicuous consumption to all sections of society. This dilution has made the consumption of goods less important to the outward display of status. Currid-Halkett's (2018) work, instead, noted the emergence of an 'Aspirational Class' noting that the Aspirational class is marked by individuals who mark their status through 'actively choosing their way of life through an extensive process of information gathering and forming opinions and values' (p. 19). In the case of the 'Aspirational Class', Currid-Halkett (2018) argues that only some of their decisions will be based on money whilst many will rest, instead, on cultural capital. In effect, Currid-Halkett (2018) argues that an Aspirational class, who have attained higher levels of formal education and are driven by knowledge, will mark their social status through consumption of more culturally informed choices. For example, they will 'drink almond milk rather than regular milk, and reuse grocery bags every week.' Currid-Halkett (2018, p. 21). This form of conspicuity has also been termed 'Conspicuous Conservation' by some (*e.g.,* Griskevicius, Tybur and Van den Bergh, 2010). It is the act of choosing environmental choices to enhance social status. Whilst many individuals would argue that such choices are made out of genuine concern for the environment, this argument demonstrates the level of awareness that individuals demonstrate concerning their own Conspicuous Conservation (or consumption) (*i.e.,* see, Norton, 2013). The fact that discussions around, for example, meat consumption are increasingly prevalent on social media platforms (*e.g.,* Maye *et al.*, 2021) underlines the importance of this kind of consumption within contemporary society. Furthermore, links between engaging in more environmentally conscious choices based on health, environment or moral choice and the gaps in social class have been debated in the public domain (*i.e.,* Stine, 2019), suggesting that such choices and social status might be very closely connected for those who choose to display their choices publicly. This correlation would suggest that, while

some individuals may not be consciously aware of their participation in an Aspirational Class (Currid-Halkett, 2018) system, one does exist with clear demarcations based on wealth similar to those observed by Veblen ([1899] 1994).

This system can also be seen within *Fishamo*. It might be the driver behind anglers' desire to join other Facebook groups and the impetus required to form a recreational specialisation continuum within online angling groups. However, how this works within online groups would seem more subtle than in the physical world.

In Facebook angling groups that would often frame themselves as non-competitive, competition would seem to be as intense as it is within physical world life. The attention of anglers is a resource that all group creators and administrators clamour for. As a result, groups often discourage other groups from promoting to their members, possibly because they perceive this as a potential threat to their survival. This behaviour can be seen in earlier Chapter 4, where the rival group perceived *Fishamo* as a threat and took measures to infiltrate and disrupt the community. However, as members join groups, they tend to declare their interests, and, as a result, friendships and alliances germinate. For example:

Excerpt 5.17

Post: September 2019	
Andre Beer	Just joined the group and as an avid predator angler thought that I would post a few of my own favourite perch pics.
	Likes: 87 *Comments:* 21

Here, Andre introduces himself to the group and indicates his interest in predator fishing. As can be seen, by the large amounts of likes and comments, his appearance is welcomed by the other group members. Andre is a respected angler, and his appearance is beneficial to the group, but also, his interaction in this group is helpful to his own social media following as he will have received several friend requests because of this post and his introducing himself to a new audience of anglers. This case is not an isolated one, and the pattern of introducing and explaining is repeated often, for example:

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Excerpt 5.18

Post: December 2019	
Curtis Ayerst	Thanks for the ad. I'm predominately an LRF[41] angler fishing around Cornwall and South Devon. Looking forward to joining in and contributing. This is a small scorpion fish I caught recently from a rock pool at Charlestown.
	Likes: 19 *Comments:* 0

In the above two examples, it is possible to see that the first angler, Andre, received 87 likes for his post whilst the second, Curtis, received only 19. Therefore, it is possible to infer that the angler with the most likes is in the best position to gain more new friends due to his post. Even when we consider disparities that might occur due to popularities of different types of angling, this observation holds. In this case, the relative popularity observed in types of fishing is a factor in the relative success of the angler and the potential reach of their influence. So, Andre Beer can be said to be more influential in this particular social media context. This observation is relevant here because of the way that Facebook groups grow.

Within Facebook groups, there is a prominent button asking group members to 'invite friends. It is through the inviting of friends that groups grow within the platform. The most influential anglers will attract new anglers to a group both overtly, through actually asking friends to join a group, and covertly, through interacting with a groups conversation or posting within a group, which will make it more prominent to other Facebook users (*i.e.,* see Orlowski, 2020). In this way, anglers who became friends with other, more specialised and publicly known anglers are more likely to become aware of their Facebook activity in more specialised groups. Therefore, they are more likely to aspire to become members of the groups that the anglers they admire or are friends with are part of. Under these circumstances, for some anglers at least, this social capital gained through improving one's own skills and becoming more prominent within the community links to conspicuous consumption online in the same way that financial capital links to conspicuous consumption in the physical world and facilitates access to

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[41] Light Rock Fishing.

increasingly more advanced groups online just as physical world wealth might facilitate access to elite members-only clubs in the physical world (Kendall, 2008). The importance of a broad social group to the awareness of and progression to gradually more advanced groups can be evidenced by the high number of 'thanks for the add' posts during the early stages of group formation referred to earlier in this chapter and the continued, occasional, 'thanks for the add' posts that continue to be seen now, increasingly from more experienced anglers, for example:

Excerpt 5.19

Post: *April 2020*	
Terrence Buckle	Just like to say thanks to Gary Brisley for inviting me to this page and thanks to everyone on here, it's so nice to go through old pictures and post them. Absolutely no negativity or stupid comments. It's something I think everyone needed right now, so we'll done and a massive thank you to Andrew for setting this all up!!!!!!!!!
	Likes: 18 *Comments:* 7

By gaining access to these groups, anglers climb a virtual social ladder similar to that described as the leisure class by Veblen ([1899] 1994). They become exposed to more highly skilled and experienced anglers. They then aspire to become part of even more specialised group environments, increasing their conspicuity to the angling community as 'known' anglers as they go. This process mirrors the recreational specialisation continuum outlined by Bryan ([1979] 2008).

It can be seen then that, whilst overt consumption of specialist fishing tackle and the expensive trappings of angling is not always exhibited within a group context, at least not in the case of *Fishamo*, other forms of consumption are evident which facilitate, indirectly, the movement from groups of lower specialisations to groups of higher specialisations amongst the online angling community. This constant impetus to improve and develop in their angling can contribute to the leisure careers of some online angling community participants. The anglers are consuming to assert their status in a similar way to the leisure classes observed by Veblen ([1899] 1994), but, as observed by Currid-Halkett (2018), what they are consuming is not necessarily expensive trappings and commodities. Instead, they use their cultural capital to consume

knowledge and then display it to attain higher status within the broader online angling community. Whilst outright statements of this process are not common within the *Fishamo* group, perhaps due to a reluctance to admit needing help, the gaining of social capital and exchange for knowledge can be seen in Excerpt 5.19 (above). However, these observations alone do not explain the mechanism of RSC within online angling and possible wider online recreational context.

Anglers who have achieved a level of notoriety or popularity within the social media context, such as Andre Beer in the above example, are acting as social media recreational influencers. Freberg et al. (2011, p. 1) defined social media influencers as 'independent third party endorsers who shape audience attitudes through blogs, tweets, and the use of other social media'. Many influencers now use their influence to make a living through interacting with their followers on behalf of brands via social media outlets such as Instagram. However, in the case of recreational influencers, I posit that those who have achieved a level of fame are not necessarily aware of their effect on the recreational specialisation continuum. Instead, their influence on the ambitions of others to emulate them is a by-product of their drive to improve their own wider angling success and, under certain circumstances, influence. In this, I mean that the observance of some successful influencers attracts the attention and aspirations of other anglers, some of whom become 'wannabe' influencers.

Gómez (2019, p. 19) defines 'Wannabe Influencers' as an 'Amateur who tries to copy the practices of successful influencers in their quest for attention.'. The online world is abounding with such 'wannabe' or early-stage influencers. Who frequent groups and post their content in the hopes of building their following, for example:

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Excerpt 5.20

Post: *Date Unrecorded*	
Sean Amos	Please delete if not allowed, but I have a small fishing YouTube channel that you guys may wish to have a look at. I haven't uploaded for a while but I'm planning to get out with my camera very soon! If you would like to, it would be great if you can subscribe. If you have your own channel, drop the link in the comments of this post and I'll happily sub you back! Tight lines guys ????????????
	Likes: 15 *Comments:* 4

Such 'Wannabe' influencers experience varying success due to their 'lack [*of*] key skills or the professional approach that successful influencers have.' (Gómez, 2019, p. 19). They can often be identified by the apologetic nature of their entrée into a group conversation. However, through perseverance, some will have tremendous success whilst others will build a moderate following (see Gómez, 2019) within the online angling community. Others will have very little success but remain interested in the specific area of angling that they choose to try to become influential in. In the quest for knowledge about their activity, these individuals might find that they progress along the recreational specialisation continuum within online angling, which gradually increases acceptance within higher levels of the recreational specialisation continuum of online angling groups.

Here, then, links can be made between Veblen's ([1899] 1994) theory of the leisure classes and their habit of consumption to facilitate their social standing, Currid-Halkett's (2018) theories of the aspirational class and their craving for knowledge to assert their social standing and both Stebbins (1982) 'Serious Leisure' and, particularly, Bryan's ([1979] 2008) 'Recreational Specialisation continuum' in the habits of online anglers. We can see, for example, that anglers crave knowledge that they gain from other anglers, often through the use of social media groups like *Fishamo,* which they then display almost as a mark of their achievement and social standing. However, for anglers to benefit from advancement in social standing, there must be a way to gauge such status levels, at least against fellow anglers. This is where Stebbins's (2007) concept of a recreational career, which itself seems to be expressed through Bryan's

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([1979] 2008) recreations specialisation continuum, comes in. Ultimately, the mechanism which is created by the interactions between consumption (of goods or knowledge), a recreational career and the non-physical world of social media can be expressed in a linear progression from general involvement to specific involvement facilitated by the consumptive process.

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have discovered a complex mix of social leisure worlds and recreational careers, characterised by a progression from general involvement to increasingly specialised levels of involvement. Progression through these careers seems to be typified by non-traditional consumptive practices where anglers seem to be consuming knowledge to enact their involvement in the accepted norms of the activity. The highly diverse angling world facilitates the breadth of knowledge available to anglers in terms of the various specialisations. Those who conform to the angling 'norms' and achieve success in their angling pursuits, a success which is defined not only by large fish but also by friendliness and generosity of information and advice, gain increased influence in the angling world and progress toward a hypothetical 'Valhalla Group' whilst those who do not achieve, or show limited technical skill or dedication to learning might often become increasingly ignored and disillusioned within the community.

The social world that I discovered online is quite unlike that which may be perceived by the casual observer who often misunderstands angling and, sometimes, only sees the solitary angler enjoying his activity to the exclusion of all others (*i.e.,* see Stolk, 2009). In its place, I found an extraordinarily complex social environment in which the existence of other anglers is pivotal to the progression and achievements of the individual recreational career progression of the angler.

Through the work of Stebbins (1982) and Veblen ([1899] 1994)as well as Currid-Halkett (2018) and, particularly, Bryan ([1979] 2008), it has been possible to piece together a conceptual model of the recreational continuum of anglers within online space similar to those mapped out for other recreational activities by Bryan ([1979] 2008). However, by considering the motivating factors that might be present in

engagement in online activity amongst anglers, I have been able also to posit a motivational stimulus for the progression between recreational stages of an angler's online career. We can now conceptualise another part of this thesis's question. In this, I suggest that anglers use social media as a platform for the complex enactment of their recreational career and that, for online anglers, in a similar way to the progressions observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008), progression from general to particular, can be demonstrated in a similar way in the virtual world as it can for physical world anglers. Indeed, we have been able to posit the existence of a 'Valhalla' group within the online angling space of Facebook through the anecdotal evidence offered by *Fishamo* group members. It is worth noting, here, that during my research, I made several attempts to access these Valhalla groups. My efforts to achieve this consisted of approaching individuals with high status in the angling community directly to ask for assistance. To identify these individuals and find those who might be able to assist me in accessing Valhalla groups, I approached those whom I knew, or who claimed to have some form of connection with potential Valhalla group members. This proved to be a time-consuming process. Whilst I had good contacts with people who participated in such groups, particularly those groups associated with the river Thames (Chapter 5, p.144), I failed to gain entrance and those who, I was told, were members, either never admitted or denied that the groups existed when they were approached.

It was perhaps due to my lack of history of capturing specimen fish or lack of notoriety as an angler within the wider community that I was unable to access these exclusive groups. Access to Valhalla groups is limited by their confidential nature and requires membership in the required circle of friends or influential angler groups.

Despite this setback, circumstantial evidence, such as private conversations, indicated that these groups do exist. The evidence suggests that Valhalla groups are primarily created to provide a platform for the inclusion of certain privileged individuals within the angling community and to leverage the benefits of social capital. This includes access to exclusive fishing spots, specialized gear, and knowledge sharing among group members.

The concept of social capital highlights the significance of considering not only the physical and tangible components of research, but also the social and relational

elements. In this case, my lack of social capital, specifically in the form of a history of capturing specimen fish or notoriety as an angler, meant that I was unable to access and participate in these groups to gather a more comprehensive understanding.

It is important for researchers to acknowledge the role of social capital and its impact on the research process, and to develop alternative methods of verifying the existence and characteristics of groups like Valhalla groups. In my research, I relied on indirect methods, such as private conversations, to gather information about these groups. Although these methods enabled me to gather valuable information, they also meant that I could not directly observe or participate in these groups to gain a more in-depth understanding. Still, the search was justified as it demonstrated the recreational career progression of both anglers and the groups they participate in. Furthermore, it took us a step closer to such groups, perhaps, opening up a new research avenue for future investigators.

Despite the discoveries made within this chapter, we have only been able to demonstrate the careers and motivations behind angling social media participation during socially 'normal' conditions. On 24 May 2020, the incumbent prime minister of the UK announced strict measures in response to the COVID-19 pandemic (see Neilan, 2020). These measures were echoed throughout Europe and the world and had a profound effect on recreational activity (*i.e.,* see Gabriel *et al.*, 2020; Mowatt, 2020; Parnell *et al.*, 2020), and anglers, in particular, were highly affected by regulations that effectively meant a temporary ban on the physical world activity of angling. In the next chapter, I will review the effect this had on the *Fishamo* group, which (along with other angling focused groups) experienced unexpected rapid growth in membership. I will also attempt to understand the cause of this in light of what we have discovered in this Thesis.

Chapter 6: Nostalgia games and dangerous times

Fishamo had, over its lifetime, become a reasonably successful online group. While many angling focused groups enjoyed far higher engagement and membership numbers, *Fishamo* successfully eradicated many negative aspects (such as bullying and 'banter' (see Chapter 4)) from the group by implementing strict rules and mobilizing a large moderation team (Chapter 3). Whilst this had been a successful tactic to obtain our ambitions of a 'friendly' angling Facebook group, it seemed to have come at a price. New members had petered off ever since the initial hostilities had ended, pointing towards the possibility that it was, in fact, the hostilities themselves that had contributed sizeably to the success of the group (Chapter 4). What was left was a group that hovered at around 1600 members and had reasonably regular interaction. Still, the price was that this interaction, when compared to other groups, seemed somewhat mundane from my perspective. Those who made up the membership of the group appeared, on the whole, to be less experienced anglers which affected the group's quality and attractiveness to others adversely overall (Chapter 5). However, none of us could have predicted the changes that were about to happen globally as a seemingly mysterious virus gradually grew to wreak havoc worldwide.

This chapter will consider how the COVID-19 pandemic affected angling online and *Fishamo's* and the wider angling community's mitigations against this. Furthermore, I examine the introduction of a game element into the *Fishamo* group and consider how this altered the group's trajectory and impacted the anglers who participated. To do this, I will briefly examine the effects of the pandemic on the broader world of leisure before examining the early impact that the pandemic had specifically on recreational angling. I then consider the approach that *Fishamo* took, including gamification, to engage anglers during the lockdown and consider how important an aspect of the competition was to be enabling *Fishamo* to grow during this time.

On the 23rd of March 2020, at 8:00 pm (see Neilan, 2020), the incumbent prime minister, Boris Johnson, announced that the country was to enter into a hitherto unprecedented national lockdown in response to the growing COVID-19 pandemic.

Covid-19 had begun, according to contemporary reports, from a zoonotic source (World Health Organisation, 2019; Lovett, 2021). The extreme nature of the prime minister's action took some by surprise, even though there had been a growing awareness of the rapid spread of the disease in the UK ever since the first UK death was reported earlier the same month (BMJ, 2020).

Lashua, Johnson and Parry (2020) draw attention to the devastating effect that Covid-19 and the measures necessary to combat its spread had on leisure activity of all forms, noting that, as of May 2020, more than 300000 people had already lost their lives to the disease. The term 'unprecedented' seemed to become ubiquitous during the COVID-19 pandemic. Justifiably, as almost all indoor and outdoor leisure facilities were closed down, spectator sport was halted to protect the public from the pandemic. For some, the cessation of all available leisure activities outside the confines of one's own home was much more than an inconvenience. It posed real threats to health and personal welfare as the depression of social isolation coupled with the danger, for some, of unemployment and the lack of leisure outlets posed a severe risk to the mental health of many (see Fofana *et al.*, 2020). These facts were and, at the time of writing this dissertation, continue to be exacerbated by what the popular press termed an 'existential crisis' in the leisure industry itself (Pickard, Ralph and Hancock, 2020). However, it would be wrong to assume that all leisure ceased, even in the earliest stages of the pandemic. New opportunities presented for those who could no longer participate in their favoured activity, and forgotten hobbies and pastimes came to the fore to fill the gap left by the more popular, mainstream activities (Johnson, 2020).

Furthermore, for those who did not know how to find new hobbies or wanted to reach out to other people, the internet became a vital lifeline leading to many people turning to virtual worlds during their increased time at home during the lockdown restrictions (Griffin, 2020). However, it seemed that social media could not offer those who were feeling trapped at home any release from the strain of COVID-19. Social media users were blamed for spreading several COVID-19 conspiracy theories that emerged during the lockdown, which were widely reported by the popular press (*e.g., see* Browne, 2020). Therefore, it would seem reasonable that many individuals who chose to turn to social media when seeking respite from the distressing news of the ongoing pandemic would seek out social media groups and sites where they could avoid

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the constant reporting and theorising about COVID-19. Because of this, as discussed previously in Chapter 1, recreational activities may have been responsible for providing a convenient 'concept bridge' to allow access into online discussion whilst avoiding the subject of the pandemic.

Fishamo, Angling during the pandemic.

By the end of 2019, *Fishamo* was doing well but had stagnated as anglers seemed to have become somewhat restricted in the nature of their conversation and conversations that did occur were often mundane, such as this discussion about luncheon meat and the best brand to use for bait.

Figure 13 Luncheon meat to be used as bait

Excerpt 6.1

Post: *July 2019*	
Rylan Ingham	Well as we had a big win on the Euromillions last night £4 LOL,

	My share being £2 thought I'd treat myself to a couple of tins of meat and see if I can catch me a few 🐟🐠🐟🐠🐟🐠🐟🐠🐟🐠🐟🐠 Tomorrow weather permitting.
	*Reactions:*34 *Comments:* 44

This stagnation may have resulted from not having a specific driver for dialogue within the *Fishamo* group or the lack of specialism in this early stage of *Fishamo*'s development. However, later, more comprehensive world events were to the group in ways that were beyond my expectations.

The Angling Trust[42], possibly mindful of the instant backlash that would occur following the prime minister's announcement, responded with a social media post on their Facebook page immediately following the statement:

Excerpt 6.2

Post: *March 2020*	
Angling Trust	LET'S BE CLEAR. THE LOCKDOWN MEANS NO FISHING. WE WILL SEEK CLARIFICATION AS TO WHETHER FISHING IS AN ALLOWED FORM OF EXERCISE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, BUT FOR NOW WE CANNOT LEAVE OUR HOMES FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN THE REASONS STATED BELOW. STAY SAFE People in the UK will only be allowed to leave their home for the following purposes: Shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible One form of exercise a day – for example a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household Any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person Travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home Police will have the powers to enforce the rules, including through fines and dispersing gatherings. To ensure compliance with the instruction to stay at home, the government will: Close all shops selling non-essential goods, including clothing and electronic stores and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship

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[42] The Angling Trust is the governing body of angling in the UK.

	Stop all gatherings of more than two people in public – excluding people you live with Stop all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals Parks will remain open for exercise, but gatherings will be dispersed.	
	*Reactions:*385	*Comments:* 1k

As seen from the above, the response was sizeable and came quickly from the angling community. For many anglers, the rules about lockdown seemed confusing. This confusion, perhaps, was later compounded by the variance of lockdown rules across UK nations (see Cushion *et al.*, 2020). Some accepted that angling would stop from the outset and encouraged others to do likewise. For example:

Excerpt 6.3

Comment:	
Danny Burrows	Fish ain't going anywhere be patient and we will all fish again if your gunna try and flout the rules then f you. Fishing is a about patience we should all know how to sit and wait for a bite so sit tight and wait this out.
	*Reactions:*10 *Comments:*2

...And...

Excerpt 6.4

Comment:	
Jamie Attwell	Can't believe how selfish some of you are. Justifying your right to fish is sickening. I'm an avid angler and had gear ready to go today. Just have to accept lockdown
	Reactions: 8 *Comments:* 1

Others considered the naturally solitary nature of angling adequate to comply with the newly enforced social distancing rules and felt that angling was, or at least should be, exempt from the limitations imposed upon society by the new regulations. In their frustration, many anglers turned to social media to share their annoyance at the effective banning of angling during the enforcement of essential covid restrictions. For example:

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Excerpt 6.5

Comment:	
Rebecca Appleton	A few hours fishing, alone. This can be included as your exercise? Can it not? The courts will be jammed with Anglers...
	Reactions: 82 — *Comments:* 44

...Or...

Excerpt 6.6

Comment:	
Stephen Brisley	Where not on lockdown no where did the PM mention the word lockdown! No gathering of more than two people in a public area so if you go fishing on your own go from house in vehicle on your own it is impossible to cross contaminate anyone your on your own if you come across any others fishing keep your 2m social distance but even better more please get the facts before announcing on here!
	Reactions: 20 — *Comments:* 19

As emotions and concern within the angling community continued to run high, Jamie Cook, the newly appointed Chief Executive Officer of the Angling Trust, made a further plea to the Angling community to remain at home and not go fishing (Angling Times, 2020a):

> In light of the Government's announcement on 23rd March, the Angling Trust and Fish Legal are asking that all anglers follow the current guidance and stop fishing. Whilst we understand the proven benefits on active lifestyles, physical health and mental wellbeing that angling provides, it is not currently classified as one of the safe exercises in which to engage. The Angling Trust have sought clarification on this point and we hope to work with Government, the Environment Agency and Sport England as things move forward, to ensure that access to fishing and the benefits it brings are part of the nation's plan for ensuring our community's health and wellbeing. For now, though, we as a community must take responsible action to protect ourselves, our families and our communities through this period. This is about saving lives and supporting the NHS.

However, this did not seem to help the situation. Effectively angling had been banned for the first time in its long history. Many anglers, now feeling robbed of their

recreation in the real world, it would seem, decided to focus their attention on the world of social media angling. The effects of this were not instantly recognisable in the *Fishamo* Facebook group. *Fishamo* anglers had not mentioned the controversy going on in the broader world of angling on the group. However, I witnessed some group members making politically charged comments on other private groups. Perhaps this lack of discussion within *Fishamo* was because of our strict rules and the previously discussed lacklustre nature of posting at this time. Instead, those who were politically minded focused their attention on other Facebook groups and pages, such as those owned and operated by the Angling Trust, where they were more likely to engage with the conversation more deeply.

For some angling group administrators, me included, the changes to fishing were troubling. I was concerned that the enforced restrictions on physical world angling might have a knock-on effect on angling in the long term. I was worried that some anglers would stay at home and, inevitably, some might never return, thus, further exasperating the ongoing issue of declining angler numbers. Whilst it was not spoken about directly on *Fishamo*, there was a sense, detectable through my personal timeline, that similar worries were prevalent amongst those who ran other online angling groups. Some, like *Fishamo*, sought to find ways to counter the lockdown. One Sea Fishing group ran angler awards. The Angling Trust sought to entertain anglers frustrated by the situation by creating a new website entitled Fishing Buzz (see Angling Trust, 2020b), which gathered the many resources available to anglers online into one central hub. *Fishamo's* direction took the form of friendly competition between online anglers.

Building Bridges

As discussed in chapter three, I use Concept Bridges to describe the links between physical world recreational activities and online world recreational activities that cannot exist in the same context. Angling, which could be defined as the act of catching fish[43], cannot exist within an online environment because there are no physical assets (rivers or fish) to facilitate this.

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[43] Specifically the act of catching fish with a hook.

When this occurs, recreationalist form what I refer to as a concept bridge. While actual fish cannot be caught within the online world environment of Facebook. Anglers participate in their activity in this world through the concept bridge of image sharing and discussion. Another example is physical world angling simulated through computer games. In each case, however, the physical act of catching fish is rendered impossible by the lack of physical presence in the virtual world. By forming a concept bridge (see chapter 3), we create a 'safe' environment where we can engage in discussion without disclosing personal information to strangers (figure 15).
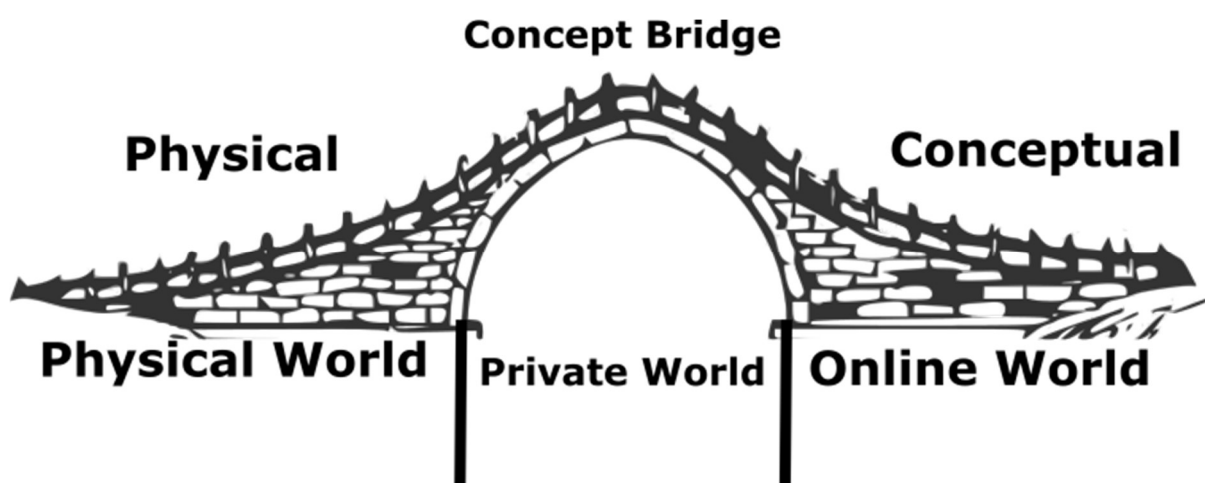
Figure 14 The Concept Bridge.

In the case of *Fishamo*, the advent of lockdown made possible a very specific type of game in the form of competitive online fishing, even in the absence of physical world fishing. Here I will discuss this particular concept bridge and its implications for the group.

Gamification

The importance of games to humans has been acknowledged since Huizinga's ([1949], 2003) seminal work, Homo Ludens. Indeed, it is easy to see the idea of the game in the work of Bryan ([1979] 2008) and Stebbins (1982, 2007), which seems to point towards a game element within the leisure sphere[44]. However, gamification has its complexity. Deterding *et al.* (2011) note that part of the problem with settling on an all-encompassing explanation for the term comes from disagreements amongst the

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[44] I mean, of course, in the gradual development of a career over time through engagement in a leisure activity.

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academic community as to whether it is a new phenomenon or simply a new name for much older ideas (*e.g.,* Huizinga ([1949], 2003)). Furthermore, Deterding *et al*. (2011) note that the term first emerged in 2008 but did not enter into everyday use until 2010. This finding is supported by Bozkurt and Durak's (2018) systematic review of the topic, which would explain why the word 'Gamification' does not appear in the works of Bryan or Stebbins.

Ultimately, Deterding *et al.* (2011, p.10) defined gamification as 'the use of game design elements in non-game contexts'. Another helpful definition comes from Zichermann and Cunningham (2011, p. xiv), who suggest that gamification can be defined as 'the process of game-thinking and game mechanics to engage users and solve problems'. However, in the context of this Thesis, when we refer to gamification, I lean towards a blended version of these two definitions seeing Gamification as the process of game design elements in non-game contexts to encourage user engagement.

Life is a game:

Suits (1967) asked: 'Is Life a Game We Are Playing?'. Suits (1967) suggests that life might be a game and ponders whether it is possible to play a game without being conscious that we are playing it.

Agree or not with the opinion that life is a game, Suits' argument highlights one undeniable fact about life: many game-like elements are found within it. To demonstrate this, Suits (1967, p. 209) defines the concept of a 'Game' for the reader as:

> To play a game is to engage in activity directed toward bringing about a certain state of affairs, using only means permitted by certain rules, where the means permitted by the rules are more limited in scope than they would be in the absence of the rules and where the sole reason for accepting such limitation of means is to make possible such activity.

Here, Suits demonstrates that, in life, as in games, we abide by constructed rules that often make little practical sense, but which exist only to facilitate the game's playing. This point is seen as much in sport and leisure as it can in life. What, for example, is the practicality of a footballer not touching the ball with their hands when simply throwing the ball into the goal would be much easier? More importantly for this Thesis, what is the practical use of catching fish with a rod and line when a net would

be more efficient[45]. Or, indeed, what is the practical advantage of returning a fish, a valuable source of food, to the water when it could potentially sustain you for a day?

Both Bryan ([1979] 2008) and Stebbins (2007) have answered this question, it would seem, without directly addressing it. The reason for catching fish within the confines of rules, or any other activity that appears to have been rendered unnecessarily complicated (of which there are many examples from the world of sports and leisure), is to facilitate a recreational/leisure (or sporting) career. In his paper, Suits (1967, p. 209) suggests: 'it may be thought strange, if not absurd, to suppose that anyone could play a game and not know it.'. However, I would posit that it is the role of the social scientist to examine and strive to understand the 'rules' of the game. These rules exist on two possible levels. Firstly, on a societal level, angling within the UK and worldwide is governed by strict laws and regulations. In this context, as observed by Ingham (2004), one risks becoming a criminal by choosing to ignore the rules. However, on a more individual basis, in developing his recreational specialisation continuum, Bryan ([1979] 2008) has shown that we play the game of leisure to advance along a series of stages. Each stage requires more skill and ability than the one that preceded it, not unlike a video game level.

The social media game.

Within the online world, a general acceptance of the benefits of creating interactions that appeal to the game-playing nature of users and the potentiality for game playing to contribute to the creation of online society and communities has been accepted for many years (*see* Hamari, Koivisto and Sarsa, 2014). Extensive research has also been conducted into the effectiveness of gamification for increased engagement in an online environment[46]. However, the links between the concept of serious leisure in digital space are of particular interest to this Thesis.

Stimulated by the COVID-19 pandemic, Comerford (2020) investigates the links between a popular game, 'Animal Crossing: New Horizons' (ACNH), launched during the pandemic, and serious leisure. Comerford (2020) posits that Animal Crossing

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[45] Fishing with a Cast Net is a popular sport in some countries but is illegal in the UK (Environment Agency, 2017)
[46] For full literature review see Hamari, Koivisto and Sarsa (2014)

players are engaged in serious leisure and that their whole persona becomes tied up in their online play. Comerford (2020, p. 107) notes that: 'the habits and activities developed by ACNH players lead to identity formations that move between those players' in-game and out-of-game experiences during the pandemic.'. Similarly, this same phenomenon is seen amongst *Fishamo* members. Some of them become so engulfed by the *Fishamo* group that some start to refer to themselves collectively as '*Fishamo*'. However, the persona formation of the Animal Crossing players is not formed by a flat one or two-dimensional exchange of words across a network but by the motivations and stimulations offered by the addition of gameplay (Comerford, 2020). So, I posit that the growth experienced in the *Fishamo* group was aided by adding a 'game' element in the form of competition during the pandemic crisis. This game element strengthened the links between *Fishamo* members and shed light on why anglers (and other leisure participants) use social media to interact with their activity.

Thus far in this research project, I have examined the work of Stebbins (2007), Bryan ([1979] 2008) and Veblen ([1899] 2003). These theorists have approached the subjects of leisure and social interaction from different directions. All, it would seem, have come to a similar conclusion. There is a game that drives social interaction, or the quest for a leisure career in the case of Stebbins and Bryan, with the specific inclusion of levels that are strikingly like those of modern computer games in the case of Bryan. And, for Veblen, the game was a more overt and, some would say, insidious type of game where 'points' are scored against your opponent based on the value of your possessions or your capacity to expend more leisure time thanks to your social class. Indeed, regardless of the way that it is presented, from evolution to the theory of the leisure class, it is difficult to deny that at every level of life and permeating every level of western culture, there is an ever-present element of competition that dictates progress.

The 'game' of *Fishamo*

As mentioned previously in this chapter, the 'gamification' of *Fishamo* came almost by chance. Eager to alleviate some of the potentially harmful aspects that may have been caused by lockdown, the measures necessary to control the spread of the virus, and the cessation of angling, many Facebook groups took various approaches to increase the efficiency of their Facebook engagement activities. Others were already using many potential strategies, such as creating angler awards and launching new

websites. However, my research suggested that a degree of shared reminiscence was potentially an excellent approach to increasing interaction among anglers who used social media to engage in recreational activities.

Confident that the anglers in the group would be more than happy to share their photos, I decided to create a post asking, specifically, for pictures of the angler's best Barbel[47]. The first post read:

Figure 15 'Pre-Lockckdown' Fishing Competition promotional post

Excerpt 6.7

Post: *March 2020*	
Andrew Wedgbury	PRE-LOCKDOWN FISHING!!! OK folks, let's get back into fishing mode and play pre-lockdown fishing!! Each day there will be a species (Today, it's Barbel). The rules are. 1. You share a picture of a fish of the correct species that you caught Pre-Lockdown! 2. Then all the pictures will go head to head for you to vote on until we have a winner! 3. Points are awarded 10 points for first place, descending to 1 point for tenth place if there are 10 entries, but the same scoring will count if

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[47] Barbel are a popular species of river fish much beloved by anglers who often become actively involved with the society which is dedicated to Barbel Anglers, originally founded by prominent Barbel anglers Mike Ball & Steve Pope in 1994. (The Barbel Society, 2021)

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	there is only 1 entry so you could get 10 points just for submitting a fish!
	4. The winner is the angler with the most points at the end of the lockdown!!
	Don't sit at home moping, lets acknowledge the great anglers we have on this page!
	Likes: 4	*Comments:* 12

As can be seen, whilst it was not my conscious thought at the time, in creating this competition, intended purely to engage the anglers of our group, I had demonstrated some of Suits' (1967) ideas. The game applied rules to taking photos of fish. It specified the species the photograph had to be of but allowed anglers to use historical images in the absence of the ability to take contemporary photographs. This simple concept meant that anglers could compete in their favourite activity online even though the opportunity to engage in physical world angling had been denied. Furthermore, this competition style highlighted another aspect of 'Life as a game' that Suits (1967) noted: it is possible to be playing a game without knowing it. Suits (1967, p.209) had stated: 'one might choose to define "playing a game" in such a way that whatever other things it might be possible to do unknowingly, game-playing is necessarily not among them.'. However, this competition does seem to demonstrate participation in a game without realisation.

Anglers did not know they would be using them to compete when taking their photos. Still, they did know that their picture was better than someone else's photo online, and, therefore, they were unconsciously competing with other anglers by taking and showing their photo to others. Competition in this form ties together the work of Veblen ([1899] 1994) and Suits (1967). Anglers were playing the 'Game' of status improvement by taking the best photo of the best fish they could, similar to conspicuous consumption theorised by Veblen ([1899] 1994), but were unaware that they were playing a game, as suggested by Suits (1967). This thesis is not the first work to have linked gaming and the leisure class. For example, Niman (2013) demonstrated links between MMORPGs[48] and Veblen's ([1899] 1994) theory. In creating the competition, I, acting on behalf of *Fishamo,* had not changed the rules of a game to find the best fish that had been played out on social media for many years. Instead, I had merely given them agency and form in the shape of written regulations. It was, perhaps, because

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[48] Massively Multiplayer Online Role Playing Games.

anglers were so familiar with the format of sharing photos on commenting or liking the best that there were no requests from the group to change my rules.

The uptake amongst anglers:

As seen from the above post (Excerpt 6.7), uptake amongst anglers was cautious at first, with only 12 anglers submitting an image to take part. This low engagement was commensurate with the group's state at the time, where interaction had declined, as discussed previously. However, the change in attitude was rapid with the posting of the first vote. Anglers who, perhaps, were a little cautious of the concept of competition based, essentially, upon nostalgia seem to embrace the idea as they begin to vote on the photos that others have entered:

Excerpt 6.8

Post: *March 2020*	
Andrew Wedgbury	WOW!!! Some epic barbel images for day one of our pre-lockdown fishing competition!!! Now it's time to choose your favourite!! The photos in the poll may be a little small, so remember to take a look at each of them again and then simply vote for the one you like the most! I'll announce the next species this evening!! If you are in the running, be sure to mention the group to friends to get your votes up and open the competition up to more people! Today's entries came from Frank Willmoth, Darrell Abbott, Neil Cooper, Gregory Acres, Oscar Banks and George Burt! Thanks for taking part guys!
	Likes: 6 *Comments:* 18

Comment 1:	
Tommy Goodenough	Come on, George, you deserve this. 😎
	Likes:2 *Comments*:9

Comment 1.1:	
George Burt	Tommy Goodenough Thankyou mate it was a special fish to be caught on float gear
	Likes: 1

Comment 1.2:	
Geoffrey Loader	You've got my vote. Is this the only reason you invited me to join!? 😊 😛
	*Likes:*1

Comment 1.3:	
George Burt	Geoffrey Loader no mate get yer photos up
	Likes:

Comment 1.4:	
Geoffrey Loader	Too late for this one mate. Missed the Bream one as well. Never mind!
	Likes: 1

Comment 1.5:	
George Burt	Geoffrey Loader still can Get on leader board mate early days
	Likes:

Comment 1.6:	
Geoffrey Loader	How?
	Likes: 1

Comment 1.7:	
George Burt	Geoffrey Loader tomorrow they put another fish up
	Likes:

Comment 1.8:	
Geoffrey Loader	Might have a few decent chub ones.
	Likes: 1

Comment 1.9:	
George Burt	Geoffrey Loader there's loads to go at mate I'm sure there's other species we have caught

Comment 3:	
Kristopher Rostin	Damn! Missed day 1 lol

*Likes:*1	*Comments:*5

Comment 3(i):	
Andrew Wedgbury	Kristopher Rostin, start whenever you like, not everyone will be able to submit an entry for every fish... plenty of time to catch up! 😛
	*Likes:*1

Comment 3(ii):	
Kristopher Rostin	Andrew Wedgbury well I got the day 2 bream in so that's a start lol. Good bit of fun 🙄
	Likes:

Comment 3(iii):	
Kristopher Rostin	Look forward to seeing the species for day 3 lol
	Likes: 1

Comment 3(iv):	
Darrell Abbott	Kristopher Rostin I missed day 2, no pics of Bream 😂 😂 😂 😂
	Likes: 1

In the above exchanges, made on the occasion of the first vote, we can see that anglers encourage each other's participation. They seem to be giving the simple game of 'best photo' a little more serious consideration whilst, at the same time, remaining light-hearted about the whole process. This new enthusiasm confirms that the reluctance to participate during the first round of the competition was perhaps more due to a reluctance to 'act first' on an untested idea than a reluctance by existing members to participate.

Burke, Marlow and Lento (2009) observed this reluctance and slow initial uptake amongst participants on social media platforms. Burke, Marlow and Lento (2009) studied the early interactions of 140,000 Facebook newcomers and found that users who

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see their friends sharing information on the platform commonly engage themselves. In the above exchange, we can see this in action as friends began to encourage each other to participate, and it would appear to have been this and an eagerness to gain votes for themselves that became the main drivers behind the group's growth. This process has allowed for community formation around a central concept and illustrates the formation of a concept bridge. In this case, the competition itself forms the concept bridge, offering a vehicle through which anglers who would not usually have come into contact with each other could now interact and grow a new community built around new friendships and connections.
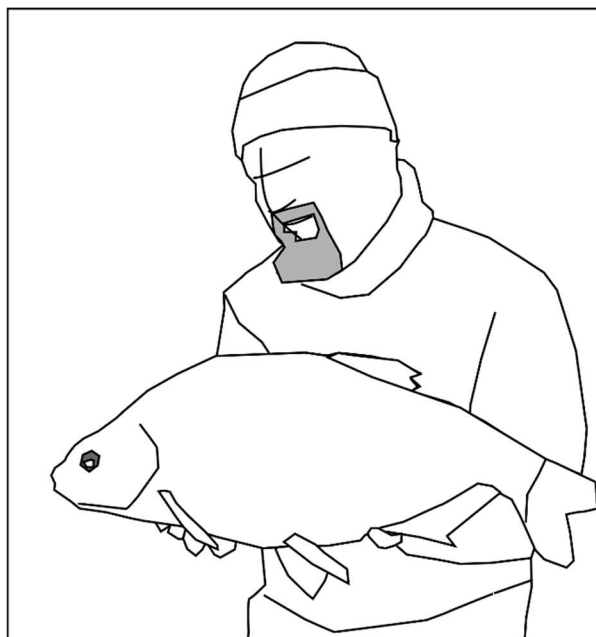
Figure 16 line drawing of angler with a bream.

Excerpt 6.9

Comment: March 2020	
Reece Browne	From a small river last season, ive spotted 10 together so gonner see if i can get few out. The small rivers not known much for Bream that makes the catch more special.
	Likes: 4 *Comments:* 14

Comment:	
Darren Skinner	Reece Browne nice looking fish bud 👍
	Likes: 1

Comment:	
Reece Browne	Darren Skinner thanks ive had bigger from this small river mate. The rivers more known for barbel chub but seeing these Bream together makes it more of a challenge as not many folks will hook one. 👍
	Likes: 2

Comment:	
Darren Skinner	Reece Browne respect for that mate 🎣 🐟
	Likes: 1

The second round could already see the effects of this. Bream is not as popular a fish for anglers to pursue as Barbel, mainly due to the slimy mucus-like substance on their skin, lacklustre fight, and pungent smell. However, Bream attracted more than 50 entries, representing a jump of almost five times the number of entries from the first round of the extremely popular Barbel. This jump suggests that, by this time, anglers were beginning to adopt the concept of the competition, and, as they did, friendships seemed to form based on participation in the competition itself.

These friendships were cautious at first and seemed based on pre-existing relationships either of a familial type or pre-existing friendships made either offline, similar to those noted by Stolk (2009) or in alternative groups on the Facebook platform or other places of interest to online anglers. However, as the competition progressed, these friendships seemed to strengthen in their links to *Fishamo* and the competition itself.

These observations demonstrate the potential of the Facebook social media space for angling. It provides a mechanism for forming bonds and friendships in a recreational space that can often be largely solitary or limited to just a few close friends. As mentioned previously in chapter 1, the level of social interaction existent within the angling community often exceeds that which is assumed by the casual onlooker without direct angling experience. Indeed, as Locker (2014) noted, angling's origins, at least those of coarse angling, lie in the

times of the industrial revolution when factory owners sought to control the rebellious nature of their workers. As a result, angling was born in the highly social atmosphere of pubs. Even today, anglers still seek to come together to discuss angling either through club annual general meetings (AGM) or organised meetings such as those organised by the Angling Trust or other organising and governing bodies of angling (see Stolk, 2010).

Under the new restrictive conditions of a national pandemic and associated lockdown, anglers who may have once sought to meet in these traditional gathering places turned to social media. For a time, social media served as an avatar of the pub or social club or riverbank and enabled interaction to go on unabated. This change in social setting resulted in a positive impact on anglers, at least those in the group. Anglers who would typically have interacted negatively on the Facebook platform seem to have begun to value the opportunity to interact positively, resulting in friendships that could not have germinated under other circumstances. This friendly new approach to interaction can be evidenced by reactions to a post posted towards the end of our *#lockdownlegends* competition:

Excerpt 6.10

Post: *April 2020*	
Andrew Wedgbury	What has been your best memory of Lockdown Legends 2020, and what have you learnt that you will be taking into Lockdown Legends 2021?
	*Likes:*7 *Comments:*37

Comment 1	
Oscar Banks	Making new friends such as Kristopher Rostin and Wesley Baker, seeing Gary Brisley amazing catch of a lifetime and helping my anxiety through the lockdown. Next year catch a Zander and Catfish
	Likes: 5 *Comments:* 8

Comment 1(i)	
Gary Brisley	Oscar Banks been a good laugh mate...keep fishing and stay happy pal! 😘 when we can get back out again that is🙇
	Likes:

Comment 1(v)	
Oscar Banks	you're a top bloke, mate keep up the good work 🤘
	*Likes:*1

Comment 1(vi)	
Gary Brisley	Oscar Banks, thanks mate, you too pal. Looking forward to seeing your pictures of monsters after the lockdown 🎣 🎣 👍
	Likes:

Comment 4:	
Kristopher Rostin	I think the camaraderie between everyone on here is what I'll remember. We're all going through a terrible time together but keeping each other's spirits up by sharing pictures, sharing stories, sharing hints and tips, offering each other trips places and overall having a great laugh with no nastiness or negativity. As for lockdown legends 2021.... i think just keep going out there enjoying it, make the most of the time I get on the bank, catch the few species i didn't have and take photos of absolutely everything! Lol.
	Likes: 4

The above exchanges explicitly illustrate the vital role the competition took on for some who took part. It also draws attention to the second part of the question that this Thesis aims to tackle. That being, 'How important a role does fishing play to participants in online angling groups'. Harvey (1999) noted that the sport of angling could legitimise the exclusion of others (*e.g.,* females and non-hegemonic males).

However, in this instance, angling seems to have served as a vehicle for creating friendships at all levels of the angling community. New and inexperienced anglers competed, shoulder to shoulder, with well-known anglers and those who have achieved some degree of celebrity within the angling world. Again, this mingling of anglers demonstrates the utility of the 'concept bridge' as discussed in Chapter 1.

To partly demonstrate the hegemonic nature of the competition and the bonds formed during it, we can point, again, to the low levels of involvement by female anglers in the group. Only two female anglers took part during the competition, one entered only one photo, and the other took part intermittently. This statistic is demonstrated further by the membership statistics of *Fishamo,* where female membership remains frustratingly low despite early efforts to include all in the group:
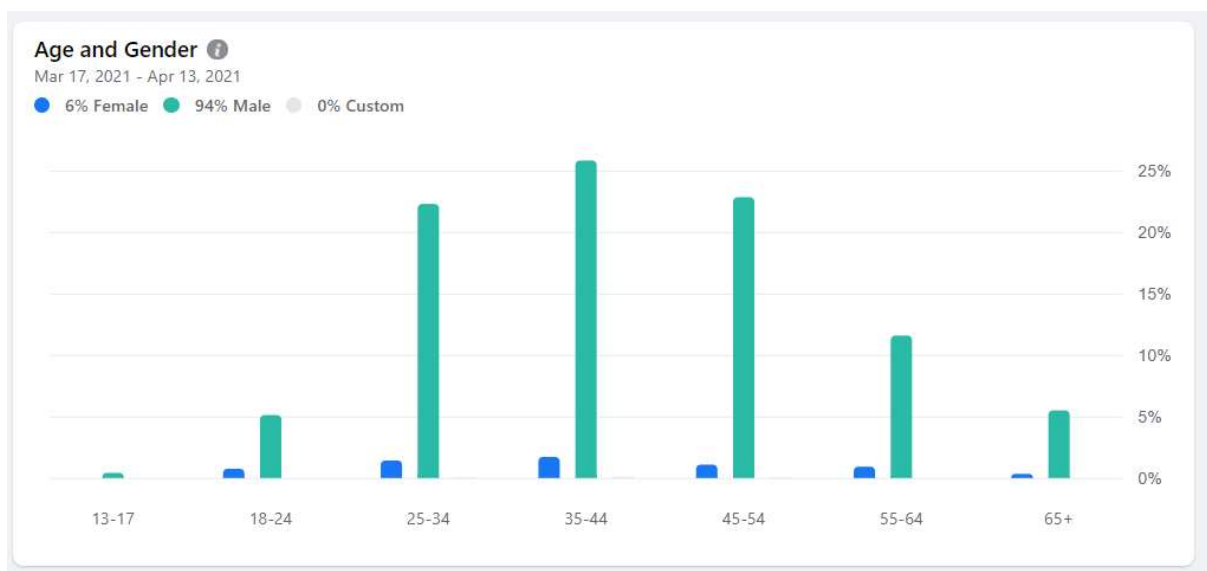
Figure 17 Fishamo Age & Gender Graph

Moreover, it can be seen from the above graph that male participants aged 25 to 54 are dominant. Perhaps, this demonstrates the male hegemonic nature of online and offline angling participation, which stems from the earliest days of recreational angling when women were actively discouraged from participating (Locker, 2014). It also illustrates the difficulties of encouraging female participation in a male-dominated activity. While there have been advances in the last two years, female recruitment has long been a bugbear for the angling community and organisations like the Angling Trust (Garnett, 2020). However, whilst there is an evident lack of women in the group and the

competition. This underrepresentation does not mean that women were absent from the activity.

However, female presence in the *Fishamo* competition does nothing to dispel the observation of a male-dominated environment in online angling (at least in *Fishamo*), as female participation seems to have been fleeting. The female participants seem to have taken on the role of supporting the endeavours of the male participants. This role appears mainly to have come in the form of mothers, sisters, and female friends joining the group to vote on the photos of the anglers they supported.

Excerpt 6.11

Post: *April 2020*	
Andrew Wedgbury	What a great competition this has been? Raymond Arthur played an absolute blinder in the wildcard round and is the first Lockdown Legend! However, every single competitor is a legend! Our top 10 are the pinnacle of a leader board with 132 entries. That goes to show just how competitive this thing was...
	Likes: 71 *Comments:* 49

Comment 1: *(2nd Place)*	
Kyrie Miller	Well done Raymond, and well done everyone else 🤘
	*Likes:*4 *Comments:*5

Comment 1(ii): *(Non-Participant, relative of Kyrie Miller)*	
Charlotte Scott	Kyrie Miller well done xxxxx
	*Likes:*1

Comment 5: *(Non-Participant, mother of Kyrie Miller)*	
Sarah Miller	Well done son 2nd still good, Kyrie Miller xxxx
	*Likes:*2 *Comments:*0

Comment 6: (Non-Participant, friend of Raymond Arthur)		
Helen Irving	Well done Raymond x	
	Likes:1	*Comments:1*

Comment 1(i): (Winner)		
Raymond Arthur	Helen Irving thank you 😊	
	Likes:1	

Comment 6: (Non-Participant, relative of Kyrie Miller)		
Olivia Parkin	Well done Kyrie you did well xx	
	Likes:1	*Comments:0*

A Growing Community

During this time of increased interaction, *Fishamo* grew membership numbers rapidly. As mentioned previously in this Thesis, research into the growth of online groups (such as those which form on the Facebook platform) is limited. However, the research that investigates the online communities which grow around specific brands is far more extensive both in terms of known brands (*e.g.,* see Laroche *et al.*, 2012; Goh, Heng and Lin, 2013; Laroche, Habibi and Richard, 2013; Bapna, Benner and Qiu, 2019) and sporting brands (*e.g.,* see Popp and Woratschek, 2016; Popp, Germelmann and Jung, 2016; Alonso-Dos-Santos *et al.*, 2018). The findings from these studies can help understand the phenomena of group growth in this context.
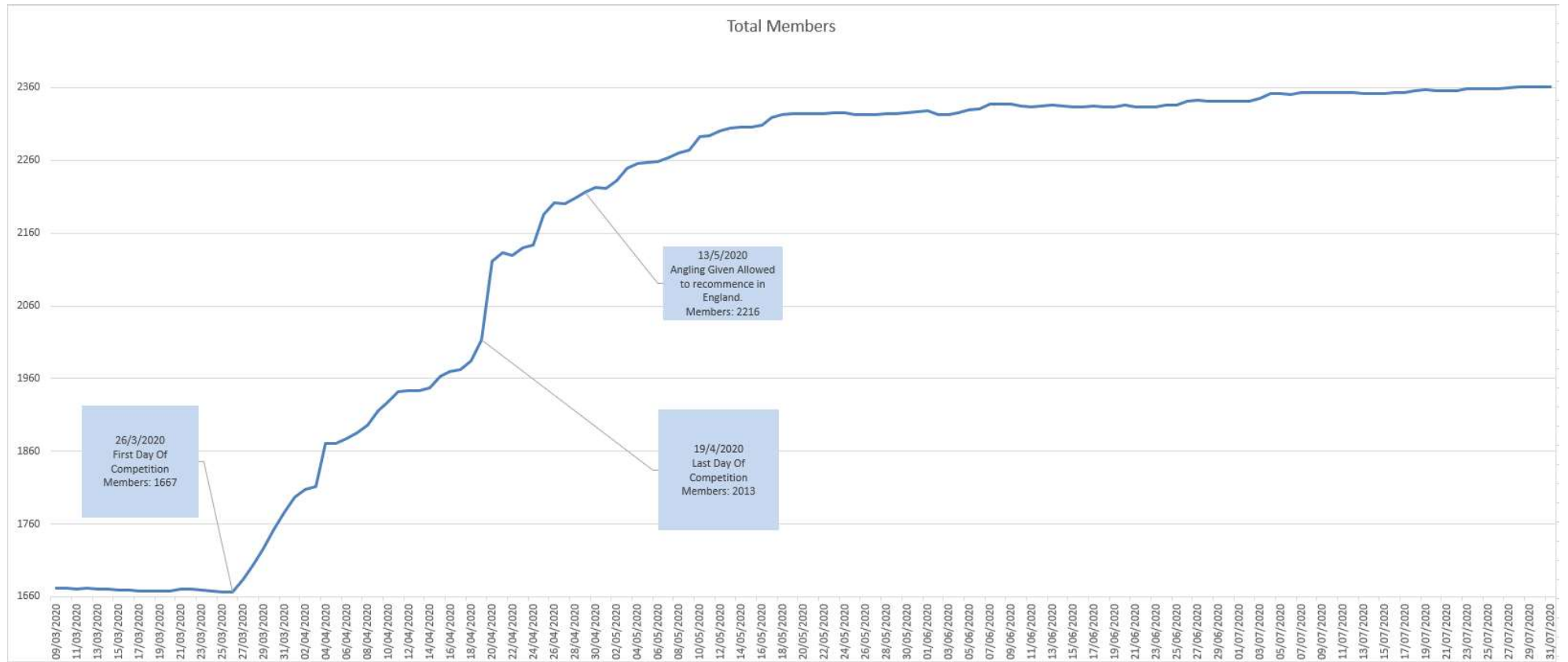
Figure 18 Growth of Fishamo During Lockdown

Bapna, Benner and Qiu (2019, p. 425) found that 'engagement, that is, "likes" in response to firm posts, in the online brand community is associated with subsequent growth in the community.'. This finding also seems to support the documentary 'The Social Dilemma' (Orlowski, 2020), investigating the Facebook algorithm, which found that it most probably[49] works by delivering information to users based on their preferences and buying habits.

In figure 19, we can see evidence of this in the *Fishamo* group environment. The group increased between the beginning and end of the photo-sharing competition. As shown in figure 19, growth continued beyond the end of the competition and beyond the date that Angling was formally allowed to recommence. This growth follows the pattern predicted by Bapna, Benner and Qiu (2019) as it coincided with a sharp upturn in engagement[50] in the form of likes, comments and, of course, posts in the form of angler photos.

The relevance of this to this Thesis is twofold. Firstly, the influx of anglers into the group is seen across the online angling space. Many other angling-related social media groups enjoyed rapid growth because of their efforts during the lockdown. For example, the Facebook group of the Angling Trusts also grew during this time from slightly more than 2000 members to over 4000 members. In a different social media context, the Angling Trusts Facebook page grew from almost 30000 likes and follows to over 50000. Other groups that occupied the Angling space on Facebook and across the web also saw dramatic growth. This growth would suggest that, whilst the element of competition worked for *Fishamo,* multiple approaches to angling promotion worked. In fact, the subject of angling itself became a concept bridge for many. The challenge, then, became keeping anglers engaged within the many groups that were serving this influx. In this regard, the element of competition seems to have worked well both at the time of unprecedented growth and since. The competition is now in its third year with only a slight fluctuation in participation.

Secondly, it would seem that this growth in interest had knock-on effects in the physical world of angling, as is demonstrated by the significant increase in angler participation following the easing of lockdown (Environment Agency, 2020). Demonstrating, perhaps, that the concept bridge, as discussed in Chapter 3, works both ways to influence people's interests outside their online activity, which is observed in other spheres of leisure

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[49] Facebook use an algorithm to decide on the content that we see in our timeline (DeVito, 2017). As do not release details of how their algorithm works, it is not possible to state this as fact.
[50] Unfortunately, due to the fact that Facebook limit the amount of time that they store engagement data, the graph was unavailable to demonstrate this.

activity. Notably, Tham, Croy and Mair (2013) investigated the links between leisure and destination choice in tourists. This phenomenon suggests that the decline in angling experienced since 2010 (Anglers Mail, 2018) may have been due, in part, to failings in the marketing efforts of angling organisations and a lack of focus on engaging the online community of potential anglers. However, more importantly for this Thesis, the rapid rise in participants within the *Fishamo* group demonstrates the mobility of groups to higher stages in the recreational specialisation continuum as indicated in chapter 4.

As competition in the group took off, we experienced an influx of more anglers and more experienced anglers. These were anglers whose online careers had already progressed exceptionally well and who had become seasoned online exponents of angling. For some, the online world was the only place where their angling career found expression and they were already experienced in the use of photos to demonstrate their angling prowess. These anglers seem to have progressed their angling stature through a process that resembles Veblen's ([1899] 1994) theory of the leisure classes. That is, they had spent long periods sharing their photos in various online forums or through their social media outlets and, in doing so, had cemented their social position within the online angling community, and their decision to become involved in *Fisham*o demonstrates the group itself had progressed along its own recreational specialisation continuum at this stage. With their social position came a certain degree of fame for some new members. *Fishamo* evolved, almost overnight, from a community occupied by relatively inexperienced anglers, as discussed in chapter 4, to a community populated by experienced and skilled anglers and photographers, many of whom graced the pages and, in some instances, the covers of the real-world angling press. Their arrival in *Fishamo* was driven by direct invites from other anglers and, to some extent, would have been thanks to the Facebook algorithm (Orlowski, 2020), increasing *Fishamo*'s visibility amongst the wider online angling community. These anglers were now able to displace the existing lower-level anglers that had previously made up the majority of the engaged angling membership of *Fishamo* and, in so doing, move *Fishamo* itself into a higher level along the recreational specialization continuum.

This process echoes that Bryan ([1979] 2008) observed that conflicts could occur due to multiple levels of recreational specialisation laying claim to contested spaces. Whilst there is no evidence of actual conflict between the anglers who moved in to take residence in the conceptual space provided by *Fishamo,* we can see by the decline in interaction from many of the already resident anglers within the group and the increase in displacement that has

occurred. This displacement demonstrates another paradox faced in attempting to manufacture social groups within the Facebook platform. The group's progression itself works against the initial hopes of the group, particularly when creating a group whose initial aim was to be welcoming to a cross-section of the angling community.

The evolution of a group:

Evolution suggests the gradual progression of a species or idea through an incremental change in its simplest form. This process is often referred to in shorthand form as 'The Survival of The Fittest'. However, this is not Sociological Darwinism being suggested with its uncomfortable connotations with Naziism (Washington, 2011; Weikart, 2013) but a form of evolution more driven by technology and the gradual growth of expertise within a Facebook group due to its visibility to a broader audience. In his work investigating the phenomena of recreational specialization, Bryan ([1979] 2008) equally highlighted a form of evolution that occurs on a far shorter timescale. In this case, the progression of the individual along a path resulted in them becoming more specialised recreationalists. This results, ultimately, in serious leisure. Ultimately, individuals become so specialised that their leisure becomes a serious pursuit that they are so invested in that they can no longer leave it without consequences for themselves or others (Stebbins, 2007). It is this idea of being 'invested' in leisure that, in itself, is of interest to this Thesis as it was Veblen ([1899] 1994) who first explicitly demonstrated the idea of investment in leisure, suggesting that leisure and leisurely consumption through the dual processes of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure are the driving forces which establish a social class. This points toward strong links between leisure and place, as both conspicuous leisure and serious leisure, are strongly linked to distinctive places in the form of leisure participation spaces.

Therefore, it can be argued that, although it is not expressly discussed in either Veblen's or Stebbins's work, both concepts are bound within an overarching link to 'place'. Indeed, it falls to Bryan ([1979] 2008), who does not link his work with Veblen's 'Theory of the Leisure Class' to demonstrate the value of 'place' within leisure activity and consumption paradigms. Bryan ([1979] 2008) shows the importance of place for recreationalists and demonstrates that different 'places' are of value to recreationalists at other points in their career. The same might be said for the virtual places that occur online and become leisure-focused online groups.

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Because of the eras in which they are working, none of the above theorists has demonstrated links between consumption, a leisure career, and social media. I have shown throughout this Thesis that 'virtual place' can be of as much value to the individual recreationalist as the physical world spaces which their activities inhabit. However, we must acknowledge that 'virtual space' and virtual place' differ significantly from their physical world counterparts.

In considering 'virtual space', which is more often referred to as cyberspace, we first face its lack of physicality. Nevertheless, in the context of online angling groups, this cyberspace is intertwined and dependent upon physical places, in the case of angling rivers and lakes and the geographic locations that they inhabit. This facet of cyberspace led Batty (1993, pp. 615–616) to define cyberspace as a 'new kind of space, invisible to our direct senses, a space which might become more important than physical space itself [*which is*] layered on top of, within and between the fabric of traditional geographical space'. Cyberspace is the imaginary online world, simultaneously intangible and tangible. On the other hand, 'virtual places' are the constructs that give some sense of geography and navigability to cyberspace. They are the web pages, chat rooms and social media groups. They depend on a network structure to exist and rely on the interaction of individuals who participate (Dodge and Kitchin, 2018).

In this context, *Fishamo* represents a virtual place that has demonstrated a progression for anglers from lower specialisation to higher specialisation. However, at this stage, *Fishamo* does not seem to have proved itself as an established place of higher specialisation. Instead, the group showed an evolution, facilitated by the anglers who had chosen to join the group. In effect, the anglers who join the group do not make the place they inhabit but themselves 'become' the place they inhabit. And it is through the incorporation of new members that *Fishamo* and leisure-focused Facebook groups, in general, can be seen to evolve and represent avatars of the levels of recreational specialisation, as observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008)

We are presented with a dichotomy in that *Fishamo* cannot be considered a virtual place without anglers. However, any anglers seek progression within their online recreational specialization continuum, which cannot be achieved without virtual 'places' to facilitate it. This dichotomy explains in more detail the problems experienced in the early days of *Fishamo.* Many inexperienced anglers clambered to witness the arguments and disagreements that were going on within the group during its very earliest days. However, once the impetus

to join had passed and the initial attack had been overcome, there was little to keep these individuals engaged in the group. Participation declined, leaving a skeleton membership of low-level anglers who only engaged minimally. The individual participants who remained were not probably consciously aware of their recreational progression or even their desire to achieve any advancement. At this point in the group's formation, it did not matter, as advancement could not be achieved because progression along a recreational specialization continuum was stifled by the group's lack of engagement and challenge.

The dichotomy is demonstrated by viewing the larger picture of the group reflecting the evolution of *Fishamo*. In examining this graph (Figure 20), two periods of rapid growth can be seen, both demonstrating evolutionary jumps through which the group has progressed. The first jump occurred shortly after establishing the group. We could see a large influx of anglers who are primarily not as experienced as those who currently inhabit the group. This initial jump is followed by a long period of stagnation. During this time, little happened to stimulate increased membership, and interaction levels declined. Those who were already members simply participated infrequently or not at all, as they do in many groups. Others, perhaps, did not leave because they simply forgot to unsubscribe before moving on to other groups. Again, the second leap is stimulated by a change in the type of interaction within the group. This leap is not as significant but seems to be sustained better. This group of anglers are largely more experienced and are stimulated to remain involved in the group because they enjoy the element of competition involved. Involvement in the competition not only allows them to demonstrate their angling prowess in a fashion not dissimilar to that observed by Veblen ([1899], 2003) but also offers the possibility of progression through their recreational specialisation continuum as observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008).
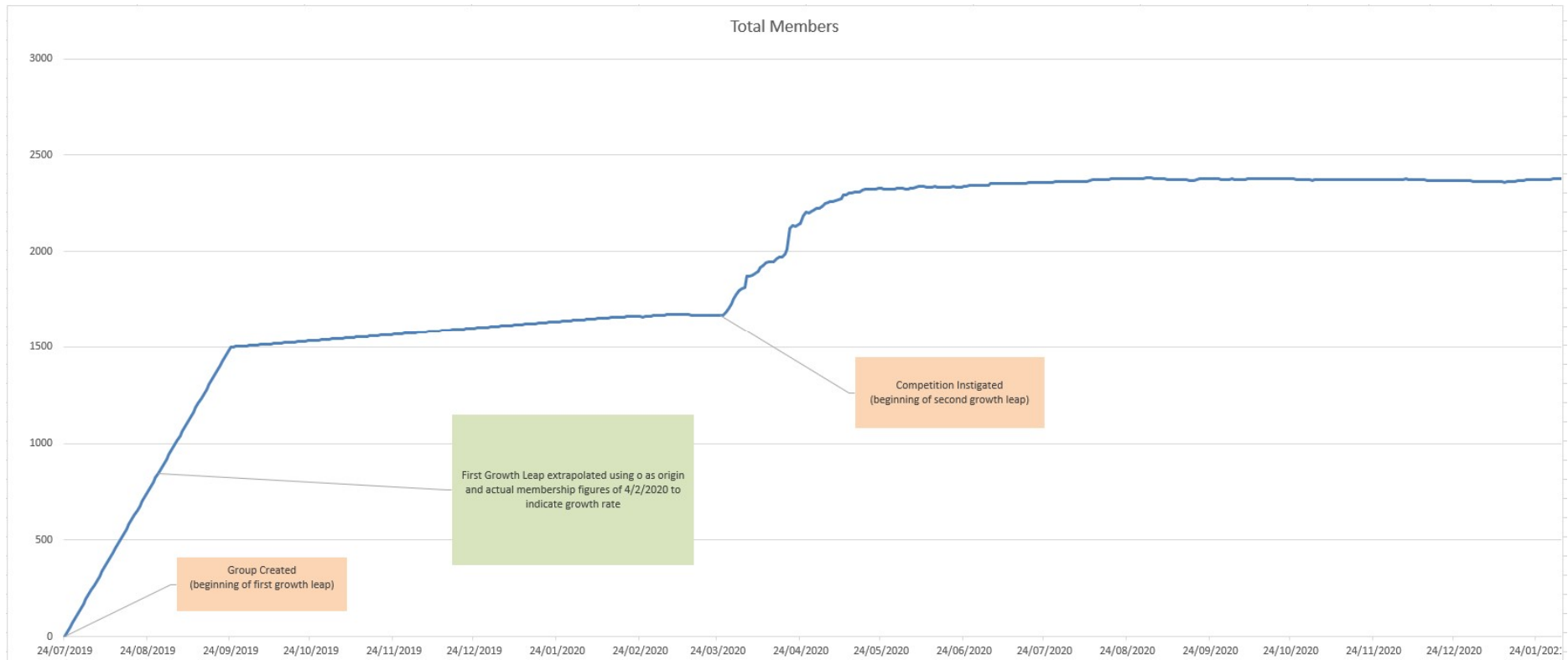
Figure 19 Overall Growth of group

It should be noted that the graph above is affected by the limited period that Facebook stores data and initial growth was not as smooth as indicated in the graph. Instead, the start point was set to 0, and the endpoint was taken from the earliest available data at the time of collection. However, by examining these two stages of rapid growth interspersed with periods of stagnation, it is possible to draw parallels between group growth and the recreational continuum observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008) (Figure 21).
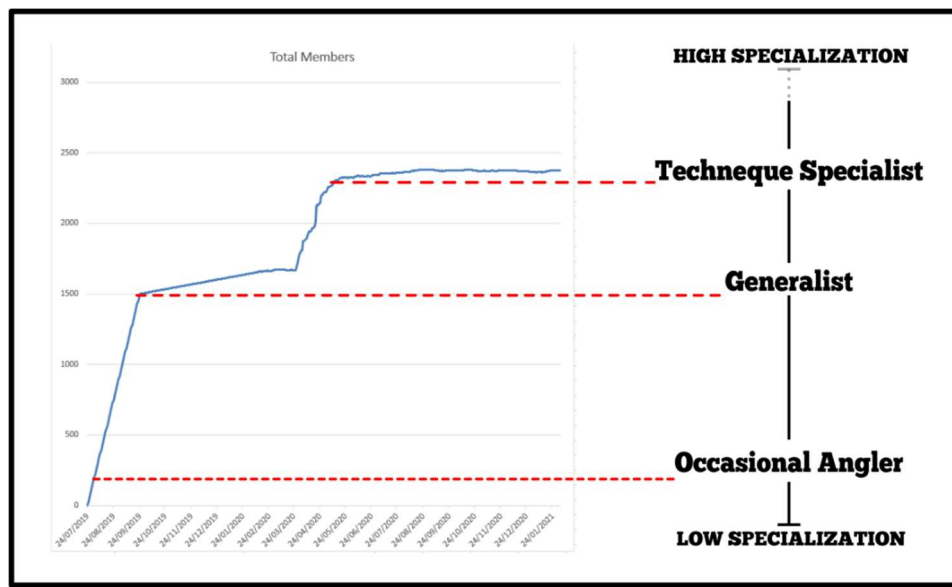

Figure 20 Comparing Bryans Model to Observed Social Media Activity to demonstrate the development of the group along a theorised recreational specialisation continuum.

It is possibly the ability to engage in recreational specialisation in the social media world that creates an avatar of the physical world online, stimulating high engagement amongst anglers in online angling activity and involvement within groups. However, equally observable from the above representation is the absence of the highest group of recreational specialization. The level which Bryan ([1979] 2008, p. 45) named 'Technique Setting Specialists'. Bryan describes this group as 'Fishing with fellow specialists (a reference group). [*Who*] may centre [*their*] lives around sport'. I would posit that the 'Valhalla Groups' I described in chapter 4 would fit the description of Technique Setting Specialists. Equally, those who spend their time creating, administrating, and moderating groups around recreational angling also seem to fit comfortably into the higher classifications of participation, setting themselves apart from the generalists by their role in creating and maintaining groups. This correlation between social media groups and the recreational specialization continuum points to the possibility that we are not studying the recreational activity itself in exploring the worlds that form around recreational angling online or any form

of recreation through social media groups. Instead, we are investigating a very different recreational activity of Facebook group creation which, in itself, requires no knowledge of angling at all. Instead, it requires an advanced grasp of the workings of the Facebook platform itself and, therefore, could be classed as a serious leisure activity in its own right.

Social media as a leisure activity

Like watching the television, listening to the radio, or chatting over the garden fence, it seems difficult to deny that social media can be consumed as casual leisure (Stebbins, 1997), that is consumed passively, only to catch up with friends or laugh at memes and posts others share. However, unlike most casual leisure activities, social media offers opportunities for those who choose to become more deeply involved in the activity. Under these circumstances, social media interaction transforms into an activity more closely resembling serious leisure, as Stebbins (1982, 2007) described. Through active interaction with the platform, the individual can find themselves in an environment that becomes all-consuming of their time. For some, this level of time consumption will reflect their involvement in whatever activity they participate in. For example, a casual angler might get pleasure from seeing or reading about the captures of others. A more serious angler might feel that they should be out catching more fish to share on their favourite social media platform or in their most often visited Facebook group. Beyond that level, social media interaction would seem to become more serious. There sometimes seems to be a drive to catch better fish for these individuals, perhaps so they can compete in a meaningless competition on *Fishamo*. To these people, justifying why they have not been fishing online is as important as demonstrating that they have been. For yet another group, they find themselves involved in the moderation of angling Facebook groups. For these people, escape from the activity becomes increasingly difficult as their choices might have consequences. For example, some might feel that their decision to no longer moderate a group could decline its quality for other participants. Then we have the group creators and administrators who have created the groups (virtual worlds) for anglers to participate. To those, giving up seems to have even more significant consequences. I might argue that there is an even higher stage, in which I count myself, that of the academic or organisational worker within angling whose involvement is so central to their life that giving up on angling social media is almost unimaginable.

Bryan ([1979] 2008, pp.59-85), in addition to angling, applied his recreational specialization continuum to a range of other recreational activities, noting that the goal of the

section was to search out articles dealing with the 'nature and variability of a range of sports and hobbies' (Bryan, [1979] 2008, p. 59). Because the work was written in pre-social media, Bryan did not consider the nature of virtual 'places'. However, given the above discussion, we can now postulate a recreational specialisation continuum of social media groups as a particular leisure activity and, more specifically, social media Angling Facebook Groups as a specific leisure activity of their own (figure 22).
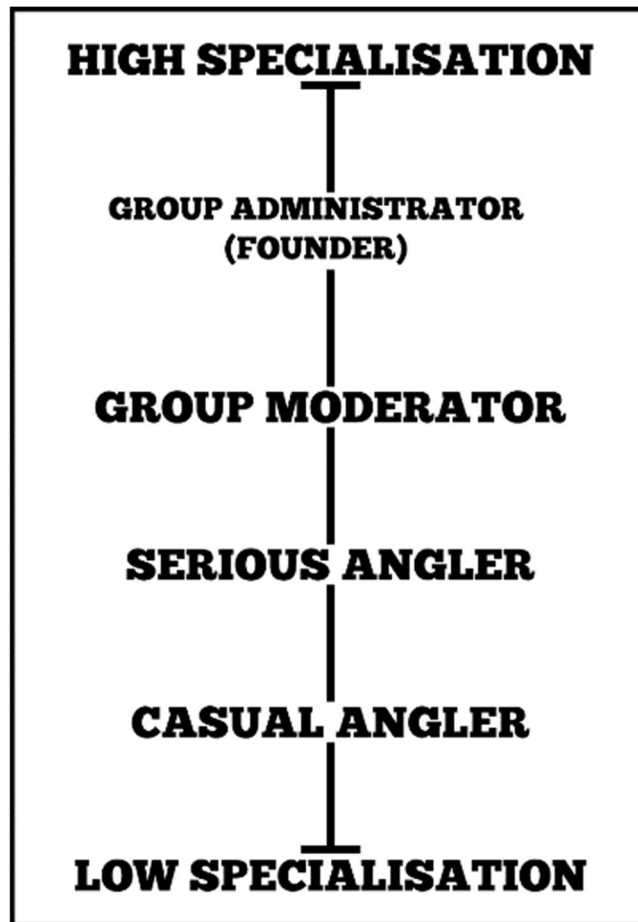
Figure 21 Conceptualisation or recreational Specialization continuum of online angling.

The above conceptual model based on the work of Bryan ([1979] 2008) seems to offer an answer to another part of my research question. 'to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in angling groups?'. Since the advent of lockdown on the 24th of March 2020, some anglers, myself included, have found their recreational angling time has been dramatically reduced. Many have since returned to angling with more enthusiasm than ever, joined, it would seem, by an army of new anglers (see Environment Agency, 2020). However, some, me included, have yet to find the time to enjoy angling again, pushing the separation between my last angling participation and today to a span of almost two years. In my case, the pressures of work have forced me to put my angling aside for the time being.

This sacrifice is familiar to many anglers. While I have always considered myself an angler, I recollect other timespans of more than two years in the past where my angling activity has virtually ceased due to outside pressures. The reasons for these breaks in angling amongst anglers are many, from career to temporary loss of interest (see Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012). The effort to attract 'lapsed anglers' to fishing has been the impetus behind schemes like 'Take a Friend Fishing' (see Angling Trust, 2020c). Nevertheless, many of these anglers remain actively involved in the online angling world, suggesting that being an angler might be as much a state of mind as an active participatory recreational activity.

As we can see from the above conceptual model (figure 22), only the lower two levels in this particular continuum require active participation in angling. The higher neither require nor preclude active participation in angling. These varying levels of physical participation mean that the online environment potentially offers a convenient 'holding' space for anglers that have lapsed or, perhaps, who have never even fished. Indeed, even the lower levels of participation, when engaged within a virtual space, do not expressly require physical world participation. For some, angling in the physical world simply becomes too much, as can be seen from this post about an angler's experiences struggling to return to angling after a period of agoraphobia taken from *Fishamo:*

Excerpt 6.12

Post: June 2020	
Aaron Rood	This fish is probably the most important special fish I've ever caught. Not because it equals my pb of 9.15 (someone doesn't want me to catch a double), but because i nearly wasn't even on the bank. My heads not been in the right place for a long time, to the point that the thought of going fishing was sending me into severe panic attacks and anxiety. Don't ask me why I couldn't tell you. I love fishing and have put off countless trips the last 2 years letting my mates and myself down. I was sat on the bed shaking, my gear was at the door ready to go but I couldn't go. I was in a state lol a text from my mate Kristopher Rostin of encouragement just about got me out the door. Once I arrived I relaxed and set about trying to catch my first Barbel in 2 years. I spent 2 hours in a swim id liked the look off without a knock then decided to fish a swim that is a bit of a pain in the backside. Over hanging trees, masses of streamer weed and snags. It was pitch black and rather than a blind cast I lowered the rig into the current letting the flow sweep it under an overhanging bush, I had about 8 inches off clear gravel between two big beds of streamer to lower it into so I

	was praying it was clear under that overhang. Rig in position, and the rod top constantly bobbing up and down from the current and weed banging against my line. I was wondering have I done the right thing?
	10 mins later it was confirmed that I had as the rod tip slammed round into the overhang, I was met with solid resistance and as i got myself up out of my chair off she took peeling line. My clutch had alerted another angler who I hadn't realised was now standing behind me, and lucky for me he was as after a good battle and now ready for netting, as i pushed my net out the pole snapped, and I watched in disbelief as my net sunk into the dark weedy waters. I called out quite loudly to try and get someone's attention when the fella who had been stood, I'm my swim all along made his presence known and rushed off to get his net. The whole time I am praying please don't come off, please don't come off.
	Landed safely and resting in the net I stood shaking but in a good way. A feeling I hadn't felt for far too long had returned. The excitement and passion for angling had returned, and looking at that fish sulking in the net, I was sure my first fish of the season was a pb.
	We got her in the sling both sure I'd got my double and when the scales settled on a pb equalling 9lb 15 I was both over the moon and a bit gutted.
	But this fish will forever be known as my pb, it gave me back something I thought I had lost forever and for that I will never forget her.
	I now look forward to catching up on all the trips I've missed and chasing down those targets I've neglected, and finally look forward to fishing rather than dreading it.
	Tight lines
Likes: 60	*Comments:* 19

The above story is shared in full because it expresses some of the passion associated with angling. It demonstrates that physical participation is unnecessary to participate in online angling groups or other forms of online recreationally focused groups, further underlining that online angling is a leisure activity entirely separate from physical angling. Aaron is not a moderator of any angling groups, nor is he an administrator or founder. While he is a knowledgeable angler, he is not at the same level as some other participants within the group.

However, he had been present within the group for some time and still participated in online angling discussions even though he did not go fishing. More importantly, perhaps, Aaron decides to participate even though angling in the physical world is challenging. This choice would illustrate further the observations of Scott and Shafer (2001) (Chapter 2), who noted that the recreational specialisation continuum is not an inevitable progression that all recreationalist will make. Instead, some will never pass a certain point, and others, like Aaron, might even regress at certain points in their career.

Conclusion:

In this chapter, I have examined the interaction in the *Fishamo* Facebook Group during an unprecedented time in the history of angling. Not since its first emergence in the UK sometime during the 14th century has angling been forbidden. At the outset of restrictions forced by the COVID-19 pandemic, there was no way to predict the effects of a temporary ban on the activity. However, we did not see a reduction in interest amongst anglers or a decline in participation. Instead, participation in online interaction was boosted by anglers who were now forced to turn to their computers to obtain their angling 'fix' and group creators who innovated in response to a foreseen issue that never came to fruition.

Furthermore, the change in prevailing rules and the restrictions enforced by the national lockdown in the United Kingdom and around the world demonstrated that the actual physical act of angling is not a factor in online angling participation. Whilst many anglers use their current angling activity to interact within virtual space. Many others use reminiscence as the primary motivation for their involvement in online angling. Other anglers, perhaps rendered unable to go fishing, interact with online angling as a form of recreational release very similar to 'casual leisure' as observed by Stebbins (1997). This observation adds to the work of Bryan ([1979] 2008), who studied recreation as a physical world activity. In the above, I have demonstrated that physical participation is just one aspect of a leisure activity like angling.

All of this demonstrates sharp, observable differences between the physical world of angling and the online world of angling, demonstrating that online angling and physical world angling are linked only by the concept bridge as described in chapter 1 and are, otherwise, virtually independent of each other. This realisation has enabled me to take Bryan's ([1979] 2008) concept of recreational specialisation further to create a recreational specialisation that relates, specifically, to the recreational activity of online angling. Furthermore, it has enabled

the realisation of a further layer of complexity. The physically based recreational world observed by Bryan ([1979] 2008) consisted of recreationalist moving through fixed social worlds defined by physical space and equipment. We can now show online recreationalists moving through fluid social worlds that are themselves in a state of evolution and flux. In effect, these are two careers in the form of the group's progression through its recreational continuum and the members who participate in these groups to facilitate their recreation career progression. These dual career progressions have resulted in highly advanced recreational groups congregating to form 'Valhalla' groups and a type of mini-celebrity in the form of top anglers who interact, mainly online.

We can then observe these online anglers interacting increasingly with the physical world angling activity and becoming drivers of angling to complete the loop. This observation is essential for this Thesis as part of the goal defined at the outset was to create work that would assist those charged with promoting angling to future generations. It is, of course, possible that this understanding of the interrelationship between the physical world and virtual world angling can be exploited to reach more potential anglers than had previously been conceived as possible. However, like all things, COVID-19 will also, one day, pass. When writing this chapter (end of April 2021), significant outbreaks continue to occur worldwide. In the United Kingdom, we have begun our "Cautious but irreversible" journey out of lockdown (see McGuiness, 2021), and angling has been allowed for some time already.

The next chapter will explore the 'new normal' that angling emerges into post-COVID-19. Whilst, on the face of it, angling had emerged from the lockdown even stronger than when it began, journalists have long been aware of peaks in angling activity after periods of recession (*e.g.,* see Outdoor Industry Association, 2012). However, these peaks in attention might be temporary and may fail to give the long-term boost that angling needs.

Chapter 7: A 'New Normal': Propaganda and Angling Online in the Post-Pandemic world.

The conscious and intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses is an important element in democratic society. Those who manipulate this unseen mechanism of society constitute an invisible government which is the true ruling power of our country.

(Bernays, [1928] 2004, p.37)

In Chapter 6, I discussed how gamification seems to have drawn the members of *Fishamo* together. However, gamification was not the only way the angling world capitalised upon societal changes during the pandemic to increase the exposure of angling. In this Thesis, I had already demonstrated an aggressive propaganda-like (defined below) approach used (see Chapter 4) when an invading, disruptive group attacked *Fishamo* by generating a degree of disdain for the group amongst its members. In that incident, *Fishamo* was labelled discriminatory or even racist amongst the members of an opposing group which drove their members to launch attacks disguised as 'Banter' within *Fishamo*. If continued, this tactic could have had severely damaging consequences for *Fishamo*. This chapter examines this tactic more closely and argues that angling's governing body, the Angling Trust, also used a similar, propaganda-like approach during the pandemic. However, in the case of the Angling Trust, the employment of this tactic was to achieve positive outcomes for angling. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the Angling Trust mastered the application of positive propaganda. I will also showcase how the organisation (re)developed their traditional approaches to deliver positive and beneficial outcomes for the angling community and the future of angling online.

After the COVID-19 pandemic, a new lexicon of words emerged. For example, terms like 'unprecedented' and 'new normal' seem to have become ubiquitous in daily conversation, along with terms such as 'social distancing' (dictionary.com, 2020). The term 'new normal' has been used frequently in the press (*e.g.,* Harper, 2020; Patel-Carstairs and Burgess, 2020; Stewart, 2020) and in the academic world alike (*e.g.,* Corpuz, 2021; Lauchlan, 2021) since the country, and the world, has begun to adapt to the changes that a post-pandemic world has caused to our collective lives. Rieger, Frischlich and Bente (2017)

suggest that extreme situations, such as existential threats and psychological uncertainty, can predispose individuals to external influences such as radical groups and propaganda, and Broniatowski *et al.* (2020) suggest that COVID-19 may have been used as a vector to spread misinformation and disinformation for political purposes under some circumstances. The angling world has not been immune to such discourses.

In light of the final part of my research question: To what extent does participation in online groups reflect the physical world of angling?" It seems pertinent to consider how changes in the definitions of 'normal' affect angling participation within the virtual and physical world and how and why some organisations may have used propaganda-like rhetoric to capitalise upon the uncertainty caused by the COVID-19 pandemic.

In this chapter, I look closely at the activity of the main angling governing body within the U.K. and consider how they have used social the increased social media activity of anglers to their benefit through the creation and sharing of posts. To facilitate this, I examine some of the Angling Trust's publicly available Facebook posts before the COVID-19 pandemic, subsequent lockdown, and temporary cessation of fishing. In so doing, I move from a micro view of how anglers use social media to engage with their activity to a broader, overarching consideration of how angling governance engages with their angling public and broader audiences. I use the concept of what Bernays ([1928] 2004) termed 'peacetime propaganda', which has later come to be called Public Relations (PR). This perspective aids consideration of a broader view of how angling has used social media to capitalise on the marked change in interest levels that have accompanied the current pandemic (Chapter 5).

It is essential to note that the word 'propaganda' does not infer any ill intent on the Angling Trust's part. Indeed, Bernays ([1928] 2004) used the word in a positive way as a tool for effective marketing rather than world domination[51] . Bernays also coined the term 'Public Relations' as an aspect of propaganda, which eventually developed into what we know today as PR (Public Relations). However, I have chosen to use the word 'Propaganda' to explore and explain intent in the pandemic angling context. Therefore, 'Propaganda' in this context means 'propaganda-like'. Propaganda-like communication uses many methods and strategies of propaganda but is presumed not to be intentionally malicious or divisive. In using the word in this way, I will cover areas where, through a process of propaganda, angling organisations

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[51] Perhaps some would see effective marketing as an alternative form of world domination. (*e.g.*, see Amazon)

might begin to impose a level of authoritarian control over the angling community, even if that community has not chosen them to represent it.

By focusing on the Angling Trust in this chapter, I refer to the workings of an organisation attempting to claim governance over a recreational group that spans both the physical and online worlds. But what of everyone else? What of *Fishamo* itself? Is propaganda not what we are all dealing with when we post online? I would argue that it is. Because every post that the angler posts in an online angling group, every selfie, every picture of a big or impressive fish, every piece of advice or opinion is a form of propaganda-like communication. Propaganda-like communication relies on the displacement and/or obfuscation of truth to be effective. Propaganda is employed each time an angler overstates their catches weight, 'touches up' his angling photo or over exaggerates their angling skill (all anglers do it from time to time). Perhaps, we could call it personal propaganda-like communication. Still, it is propaganda-like communication because, each time we post, we indulge in communication intended to garner the attention of the masses. To make us, as individuals, or in the case of the Angling Trust, as an organisation, look better, more knowledgeable, or to achieve a higher status. In this chapter, I will demonstrate how the Angling Trust became masters at applying positive propaganda. Developing and evolving their traditional approaches to deliver positive and beneficial outcomes for the angling community and the future of angling.

Propaganda: A Conceptual Framework

Propaganda is a form of communication that is used to influence the attitudes, beliefs, and behaviours of a group of people (Cunic, 2022). The conceptual framework of propaganda typically includes the following elements:

1. A message: the core content of the propaganda, which can be delivered through various media such as print, audio, or video.
2. A target audience: the group of people that the propaganda is intended to influence;
3. A goal: to change the attitudes, beliefs, or behaviours of the target audience in a way that is favourable to the propagandist;
4. Techniques: to influence the target audience, such as emotional appeals, repetition, and the use of symbols and slogans;
5. A source: the entity or group that is responsible for creating and disseminating the message;
6. Control of information: Information management in propaganda often involves strategic control or alteration to advance the objectives of the propagandist..

Considering Propaganda

As we will see later in this chapter, the concept of propaganda should not always be considered with the negative overtones that we connect to it in contemporary parlance. Indeed, propaganda and public relations began as the same thing (Orlanky, 1984) and it was not until WWII and its increased use in relation to wartime investigations into the communicative techniques of fascist regimes that the word began to take on the negative connotations (Moloney, 2016).

Propaganda has been often linked with negative connotations, being associated with the manipulation and control of information by undemocratic regimes. As a result, many associate propaganda with the intention to withhold or distort the truth. However, propaganda can also be viewed in a more positive light, as a deliberate and systematic attempt to shape perceptions, manipulate cognitions, and direct behaviour for the benefit of society. This definition of propaganda, put forth by Jowett and O'Donnell (2014), highlights the purpose behind propaganda and does not implicate it as a negative force.

In fact, there are numerous examples of propaganda being used for the greater good. For instance, the UK government's "Think!" campaign (Think, 2009) aimed at raising awareness about road safety, can be considered as a form of beneficial propaganda. This campaign sought to influence the attitudes and behaviour of drivers towards safer driving practices and has likely contributed to reducing road accidents.

Therefore, it is important to acknowledge that propaganda can be a powerful tool to bring about positive change, and it should not be solely associated with negative or unethical practices.

Traditionally, access to mass communication media was a privilege limited to only a select few organizations with significant financial resources. This created a significant barrier to entry for smaller organizations and limited the ability of organizations to communicate with their stakeholders. The advent of the internet, however, has dramatically altered this landscape, making it possible for a much larger number of organizations to benefit from the advantages of mass communication.

The internet has become an indispensable tool for communication and information exchange, and the increased affordability of internet access has been a key factor in enabling this transformation (Goel, 2011). Although the cost of accessing the internet has decreased, it

is important to note that it still requires an internet-enabled device and an internet connection, which are not free. Organizations need to make an investment in these tools to be able to effectively communicate with their stakeholders.

This shift has also transformed the way organizations communicate with their stakeholders, making it possible for organizations to reach wider audiences and communicate more effectively with their stakeholders. In this chapter, I examine the impact of the internet on communication and explore the ways in which organizations can use it to navigate complex and uncertain times (Stephens, Mandhana, et. al. 2017). By understanding the changing nature of communication, organizations can better understand the opportunities and challenges they face and develop effective strategies to reach their target audiences.

One key aspect of this change is the ability of organizations to use propaganda, not in a negative sense, but as a positive tactic to reach their target audiences. The internet has made it possible for organizations to use propaganda as a tool for shaping public opinion and mobilizing support. The ability to use propaganda in this way is a significant advantage, particularly in complex and uncertain times, and organizations that understand the power of propaganda can use it to their advantage.

The New Angling Propaganda

The above opening quote of this chapter in which Bernays refers to mass media seems to imply a dark side to media through contemporary eyes when taken out of context. The quote is the opening paragraph from Edward Bernays's ([1928] 2004) book 'Propaganda'. However, biographers do not see Bernays as some evil dictator or warmonger (Lye, 2002). Instead, he is exalted as the 'father of public relations and leader in opinion-making.' (New York Times, 1995).

Since Bernays began his journey into peacetime propaganda, the term 'propaganda' itself has taken on a much darker meaning than its original intent when Pope Gregory XV coined it in 1622 (Miller, 2018). Examples of propaganda can be seen throughout history (*e.g.,* Whitlark, 2012; Shorland, 2020). However, since the First World War, the art of propaganda has been successfully weaponised by governments and organisations worldwide to garner support for whatever agendas are considered essential to advance at the time. The effectiveness of propaganda in manipulating public opinion has made it one of the most disruptive weapons available to governments. It is no surprise that a watered-down version of

propaganda, under the guise of marketing, advertising or public relations, which Bernays ([1928] 2004) linked in his 1928 book, has become a powerful tool for industry, leisure, and recreation marketing.

Bernays ([1928] 2004) intended to use the word in its more benign sense, contemplating how peacetime propaganda could advance good causes or as a tool for marketing products and individuals. However, given the number of times we have seen governments and other organisations use the media to represent their intentions, it is difficult to read the above-quoted paragraph without feeling a sense of anxiety that such concepts as the 'manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses' could be considered positive[52]. In line with the concept of using a propaganda-like approach to forwarding the interests of good causes, it is conceivable that angling would have been influenced by propaganda also during its long history. Indeed, Parenteau (2004) discusses the critical role that propaganda played in the Canadian Atlantic Salmon conservation efforts of the late 19th century when the Canadian government was locked in a battle with up-river communities to conserve Atlantic Salmon stocks primarily for sporting reasons. In Figure 23, we can see the use of a reward poster from that period. This poster can be seen as a form of propaganda as it is as much a message to the rest of the populace about the dangers of becoming involved with poaching as it is a practical reward poster. A similar approach is frequently adopted today by the Angling Trust to serve the multiple purposes of gaining the support of licenced anglers, warning anglers who would flout the law, and demonstrating its authority by expounding their form of unofficial enforcement[53] (Figure 24). Hence, the idea of using propaganda is by no means new to the angling world.

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[52] Recent examples can be seen in the use of propaganda in the tense political situation in Ukraine. Present even before the beginning of the 2022 conflict (*e.g.* Boyte, 2017)

[53] The VBS (volunteer bailiff service) organises patrols of fishing waters to ensure all anglers are licenced. They have no legal powers and can only report back to the Environment Agency anything they find.

Figure 22 A wanted poster offering a reward for fish poachers (Parenteau, 2004)
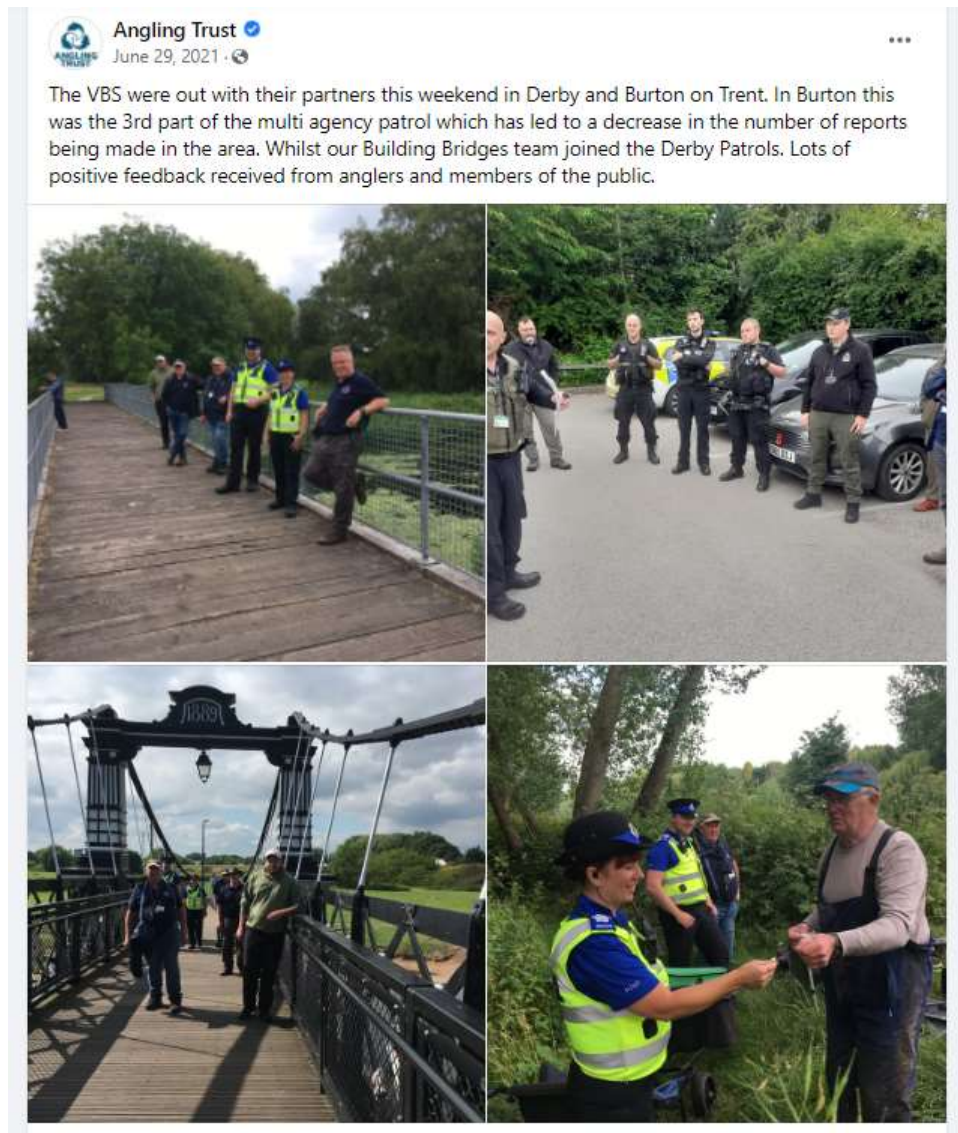
Figure 23 Angling Trust Post Promoting VBS activity.

This research shows propaganda, and the use of rhetoric, in the interactions between the Angling Trust and the angling community online. Bernays ([1928] 2004, p.47) explains: 'Propaganda is the executive arm of invisible government'[54]. In more contemporary times, little has changed except for the mode of propaganda delivery becoming increasingly digital, a phenomenon that has been observed since the early days of the world wide web (*e.g.,* see Farkas and Neumayer, 2020). However, angling seems to have been inconsistent with applying the power of peacetime propaganda (which could otherwise be referred to as Public Relations (Bernays, [1928] 2004)) until the recent pandemic and rapidly changing society it

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[54] In using the work 'Government' hear, Bernays does not refer to government in a strictly political sense but to influence imposed on the masses in the broader sense.

produced. These changes offered opportunities for angling governance to capitalise on changing attitudes, widespread fears and uncertainties.

The field of angling governance has undergone drastic changes over recent years. Several organisations merged to create one governing body in 2009 (Angling Trust, 2020b), forming a single organisation for anglers who had become accustomed to a multi-organisational governance system for many years. During the pandemic, after some years of sustained decline following its initial formation (Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012b; Brown, 2019b), the Trust adopted a form of propaganda to help achieve its organisational goals. Whilst the Trust did not immediately turn to any form of organised persuasive communication, their recognition of the potential issues that the lockdown might cause to angling was quick, as these posts from the Angling Trust, and supporting blog, attest to:

Excerpt 7.1

Post: *March 2020*	
Angling Trust	Is your angling business eligible for support through the package of measures announced by the government to support businesses through the disruption caused by COVID-19?

Post: *April 2020*	
Angling Trust	Is your angling club having issues caused by the current Coronavirus outbreak? Do you need advice and help? We have a dedicated Covid-19 Angling Support Hub online with FAQs and the latest updates, and staff on the end of the phone ready to try to help. Angling Support Hub | Angling Trust & Fish Legal Membership https://joinanglingtrust.net/covid19-support-hub/

Post: *May 6 (2020)*	
Angling Trust	Covid-19 and the restrictions it has placed on businesses, organisations, individuals and families has changed all of our lives. What support can you receive from the Angling Trust as a Club, Fishery or Individual Angler ? (Link to AT Blog article) (Angling Trust, 2020a)

However, in retrospect, it would seem that the lockdown served to bring new potential participants into the angling fold (Environment Agency, 2020) whilst simultaneously

encouraging lapsed anglers to consider their activity with a renewed admiration and nostalgia[55].

Excerpt 7.2

Post: *June 2020*	
Angling Trust	Restrictions on other sports and the long period of good weather have seen large numbers of new and returning anglers on the bank. In the long term this is great news for fishing, but occasionally it can cause issues as new anglers struggle with the rules and sometimes fish when and where they shouldn't. To help clarify things for people new to the sport we have produced a simple guide to fishing legally in the UK. If you have mates who might be going out fishing, if you are a fishing club or if you would just like to help, please share the link below so that we can help make sure that everyone is enjoying our wonderful sport without causing issues.

Post: *August 2020*	
Angling Trust	With so many new anglers out on the banks, it's essential that everyone know about fishing licences and permits so that we are all fishing legally. Check out and share our handy guide! Once you've clicked the link, Scroll down and this guide is also available in Polish, Lithuanian and Romanian. How do I go fishing legally? https://linesonthewater.anglingtrust.net/.../how-do-i-go.../

In the above posts, the Angling Trust seems to attempt to establish itself as the authority in the angling community by defining itself as the creator of, and authority on, the 'rules' of angling. In reality, this is not the case. As a cultural practice and recreation with environmental consequences and impacts on living creatures, the rules and regulations are laid down in law by the UK Government and enforced by the Environment Agency, a government department (Government, 2021). In conjunction with this attempt by the Angling Trust to affirm its authority, stereotyping is employed (Dimitrov et al., 2021, p. 4) to underline prejudices among anglers. The Trust seems to single out international anglers and

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[55] Demonstrating, perhaps, the power of propaganda and rhetoric in achieving desired outcomes.

suggests that these anglers may not abide by rules (Chapter 3) or that new anglers may also flout the law and need to be 'taught' by the Angling Trust how to fish legally.

Furthermore, below, the Trust seems to be employing a 'Glittering generality' (Dimitrov et al., 2021, p. 5) to draw attention to its success in promoting angling. In Excerpt 7.3, the Angling Trust draws attention to the 'surge in licence sales', implying their work caused it. In fact, the lockdown itself and the desire to participate in outdoor activity are generally credited with this surge in angling popularity (Environment Agency, 2020).

Excerpt 7.3

Post: *December 2021*	
Angling Trust	After the post-lockdown surge in licence sales last year, where are we now? Join us later this evening for a Virtual Fisheries Forum on the subject.

Still, no one could foresee a resurgence of angling at the outset. Therefore, the concerns surrounding lockdown's effects on angling, broadcast by the Angling Trust online, seem to have created new impetus for angling governance and the angling industry, which has also been in a state of flux and decline for some years (Anglers' Mail, 2018; Brown, 2019a; Government, 2020), to reconsider how they use digital media to interact with their members and customers.

During the first national lockdown, the enactment of angling restrictions encouraged many anglers to turn to the Angling Trust for advice through digital means such as email or social media messaging. This recourse to digital media for advice has ultimately influenced social media groups such as *Fishamo* and the Angling Trust to reconsider how it uses social media to interact with the public. The Angling Trust (2020a), in referring to the impact of the lockdown on angling and their efforts to help, noted:

> We've never had a volume of calls and emails quite like it!" Angling Development Officer Dave Evans, reports. "It's been unbelievable, but we're keen to help in any way we can.
>
> ...
>
> With fishing still off limits to anglers everywhere, we've also been trying to help keep everyone entertained and up to date with the latest news. This is where our recently launched website www.fishingbuzz.co.uk has also been a

great success to give anglers their daily fishing fix! The site gathers the best angling articles, videos blogs and much more from far and wide.

Despite the Angling Trusts' efforts to reassure anglers and make valuable resources available, the Angling Trust found itself the target of doubt and mistrust in the earliest days of the national lockdown.

Not Trusting the Trust

Since its establishment, the Angling Trust's remit has grown. One of the most significant developments occurred in 2012 when the Angling Trust merged with the Angling Development Board and began promoting angling for the government (Angling Trust, 2020d). Since then, the Angling Trust has become the single governing body for angling and gained the support of many high-profile anglers who support the organisation seemingly without financial incentive[56]. However, whilst full contemporary details such as membership numbers and age demographics are not available to me[57], personal experience gained through time spent working for the Angling Trust indicates that support amongst anglers has not been easy to acquire. Social media interactions support my experience, as can be seen from the response to this Facebook post and promotional video and a selection of the comments by the well-known angling figure Keith Arthur which the Trust posted in their public feed in February 2018:

Excerpt 7.4

Post: *February 2018*	
Angling Trust (Represented by Keith Arthur)	Keith Arthur tells you why you need to join the Angling Trust! In this short video, Angling Trust ambassador Keith Arthur explains why more members = more influence for the National Governing Body.
	Likes: 69 *Comments:*100

Comment 1:	
Mark Thorpe	Keith Arthur you deserve massive respect for everything you've given to Angling over the best part of 50 years. It's

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[56] Although the exposure to the angling community, similar to that gained by high profile anglers online, might serve as payment in the absence of financial incentive.
[57] Despite multiple unanswered requests for this information.

	easier to criticise than do actually do something. Well done mate 👍 👍 👍
Likes: 1	*Replies:* 28

Comment 3:	
Esther English	Totally agree with you Keith, i am a member of the AT x
Likes: 1	*Replies:* 28

During my analysis of available content, I focused on using language to ascertain if a post was propaganda-like in its intent. These words might imply some given authority over the angling domain, or they may use seemingly militant phrases. For example, in the above, the short phrase 'More members = more influence' is used in a way reminiscent of trade union recruitment propaganda of the early 20th century (Figure 25). Both the trade union movement and the Angling Trust seek the power of numbers to exercise influence over government decision making. In Excerpt 7.4, the Angling Trusts makes an early attempt at propaganda by eliciting respected angler and journalist Keith Arthur's services to promote their message. Here, I argue that the message put forward is distinct from the usual 'marketing' type message by its content. The message is intensely politicised, where marketing might expound on the positives of choosing a particular course of action. It focuses more on the negatives, or consequences, of not taking action, emphasising the political influence of the angling community and why the Angling Trust are the right choice for leadership. The Trust, and Keith, seem to use strong, politically motivated wording in their efforts, using phrases such as 'more members = more influence' and emphasising their status as the National Governing Body.

Figure 24 trade union recruitment poster from the 1930s.

However, the response to this post is highly critical in its tone and forces the Trust into a defensive position to justify its claims.

Excerpt 7.5

Comment 9:	
Jeremiah Low	Lining his own pockets
	Likes: 1 *Replies:* 28

Reply 1:	
Keith Arthur	Jeremiah Low please explain how. I could do with a few quid. 🤡
	*Likes:*1

Reply 2:	
Jeremiah Low	Keith Arthur everyone can always do with more money. I'd like to know why you think we all live in cuckoo land with

	mermaids and unicorns because we don't support the Angling Trust.?
	Likes:1

Reply 5:	
Keith Arthur	Jeremiah Low when you tell me how this is making me money (I gave up a day of my time, my travel costs to get to the venue...as I have done dozens of times) I'll take you seriously.

Reply 7:	
Jeremiah Low	You're an Ambassador for the Angling Trust is not promoting them your job?

> *Comments descend into a back-and-forth tussle between Jeremiah Low, Keith Arthur, and other Angling Trust & public representatives.*

Comment 10:		
Clinton Wood	The Angling Trust needs representation at all political levels with a participant M.P. who can bring influence. Those of yesteryear are old news and without real influence- until then few anglers will join with the AT	
	Likes: 3	*Replies:* 7

Reply 1:	
Keith Arthur	until you know a few facts, I'd be quiet mate. *(gives a link to further information)*(HM Government, 2015)
	Likes: 1

> *Comments descend into a back-and-forth tussle between Jeremiah Low, Keith Arthur, and other Angling Trust & public representatives.*

Comment 20:		
Jason Butler	8 years and nothing has got any better, abstraction, sewage, otters, cormorants, destroying our chalk streams![58]	
	Likes: 4	*Replies:* 1

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[58] There have been repeated calls for Otter culls which have been resisted by the Angling Trust (Yorkshire Evening Post, 2018). However, increased culls on Cormorants and Goosander have found some, controversial, support with the Angling Trust (BirdGuides, 2018). In each case, the argument seems to have been to cull one species in preference of species of interest to anglers for the benefit of angling.

Reply 1:	
Peter Brook	Jason Butler so true mate, sick of the shite they [*The Angling Trust*] spout out 😡 😡 😡 😡
	Likes: 1

I selected this Facebook post to demonstrate typical responses to Angling Trust promotional posts before lockdown: mistrust and a seeming assumption that some hidden agenda (perhaps financial gain) was at play in the Angling Trusts' efforts. While some of the responses to Keith Arthur's post were positive, one must question why the Trust would allow an argument of this kind to break out on their social media channel. Huang (2015) suggests that such attempts at propaganda, even when the public is critical of the message, may represent a form of signalling. The propagandist aims to demonstrate an organisation's strength in maintaining control over a domain. This signalling works to deter others from challenging the organisation's authority, even if the propaganda does not produce a supportive attitude amongst its intended audience. This signalling might explain the Angling Trust's motivation for engaging in this exchange but may also say as much about the Angling Trust's social media management skills at the time as it does about public opinion of the Trust. However, criticisms like these, and the exposure caused by such posts, may have contributed to the Trust turning to propaganda when the opportunity arose.

A Public Image Problem

When the pandemic struck, the Angling Trust had many issues regarding angler recruitment (Brown, 2019a). These issues included the ageing angling population, changing views of human-animal interaction and new forms of recreational activity such as computer games which caught the younger audience's attention better than angling. After the Trust's formation, angling participation, measured in fishing licence sales, peaked in 2010. However, it declined rapidly after that (Anglers Mail, 2018). Perhaps, this decline mirrors the enthusiasm for the Angling Trust's marketing approaches and techniques, which struggled due to available funding (Brown, 2019b). Alternatively, it may point to a lack of support for the Angling Trust as a newly formed governing body. Whilst contemporary accounts from 2009 are not available, the fallout from the formation and the feelings of some influential anglers can still be seen online (Excerpt 7.6):

Excerpt 7.6

Post: January 2021	
Harris Carpenter	This is the public face of our National Governing Body, it's disgraceful. I've never been a supporter of the Trust, saw too much in the formative days and I'm sure even those who championed the idea didn't foresee it becoming a government quango twenty years down the line. I will never join while it is set up as it is.
	Likes: 52 *Comments:75*

Comments like the above can be found more prevalently on some private angling groups[59] where anglers, sometimes those new to the activity, come into contact with anti-Angling Trust sentiment. One of the problems facing the Angling Trust is the nature of news sharing in a web 2.0 era. Ceron (2015, p. 494) notes: 'the consumption of news from social media strongly enhances the likelihood that users bump into antipolitical, antisystem information, with potential negative effects on their trust in political institutions.' This tendency to spend more time online and the associated likelihood of encountering negative views like Harris Carpenter's post above (Excerpt 7.6) may have caused some of the online angling community to distrust the integrity of the Angling Trust. This distrust could have been exasperated by the Angling Trust's reliance on external government funding from UK government departments (*i.e.,* the Environment Agency (EA)) to operate and the associated conspiracy theories detailed below (see Harris Carpenter's post). As demonstrated above, anglers have been openly questioning the Angling Trust's motivations and often bring into question their relationship with the government funding sources. Often, a matter of particular contention is the relationship between the Angling Trust and the EA, which some anglers believe represents a conflict of interest. One of the most recent examples of this issue raised questions over the EA's possible failings in fishing licence enforcement (Angling Times, 2021a) which caused accusations of the Angling Trust failing to challenge the EA about these failings due to financial dependence. This accusation caused a response amongst anglers on social media, as seen in the following post (Excerpt 7.7). The post was initially shared on the private group 'Barbel Talk With The Barbel Society' before being shared widely by the

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[59] Outside the remit of this research to access.

original poster (an eminent individual within the Barbel angling community) on many public groups and pages, reproduced, here, in snippets in the interests of brevity:

Excerpt 7.7

Post: January 2021	
Harris Carpenter	The hard-hitting interview with the respected ****** in this week's Angling Times is a serious indictment on both the Environment Agency and the Angling Trust. This just confirms what many have believed for a long time, the Trust is beholden to the E.A., the very organisation that as anglers we often have to take to task. ... A visit to the Angling Trust Facebook page gives some idea of how they are embracing the populist approach. There are a fair few idiots to be found on there. Some of the posts on their beggar belief yet I managed to achieve the dubious honour of having a post removed!
	*Likes:*52 *Comments:*76

Comment 1:	
John Brunger	AT and E.A. to cosied up in my view, "We must not say too much for the sake of working Relations "... No not my cup of tea, hence my resignation and Chris our area Manager... To me it's down to .. E.A. Enforcement is unfit and failed to fund ... and the AT has refused to challenge... Which goes to show almost, what a Big part and How reliant on the E.A. they have become

> *Comments descend into a running attack on Angling Trust and the organisation's value. (as this version was shared on the public-facing pages of the Barbel society, there was no defence of the AT in the comments)*

The above illustrates some of the Angling Trust's challenges with descent amongst some particularly outspoken anglers and a lack of support within the angling community. However, as England, at least, emerges from the restrictions imposed as a result of the unprecedented COVID-19 pandemic and anglers return, increasingly, to their favoured physical-world activity of recreational fishing, a question remains as to what the potential effects of COVID-19 on the hobby of recreational angling might be.

Bandwagons and Newfound Authority?

We emerge into a world of uncertainty with a heightened sense of social anxiety (*e.g.,* see, Lennon, 2021) in every aspect of our daily lives. Alon, Farrell and Shaomin (2020, p. 158) consider potential regimen changes that the COVID-19 pandemic could bring about in countries around the world and, in their work, reflect the degree of uncertainty felt by all noting:

> The COVID-19 crisis is a truly pivotal moment in modern history. The economic and health consequences are far-reaching, but it also represents a possible shift in the world order that will potentially be in favour of authoritarianism.'

When writing this Thesis, not enough time has passed to suggest that the new glut of anglers bought about by the COVID-19 pandemic will remain with the hobby. The newfound interest of many in angling may be simply the result of wanting to do something, anything, outdoors during the months when we were confined almost exclusively to our homes. Indeed, even now, as people return to 'normality, much confusion remains over what normality is.

For an organisation that has shown signs of struggling to maintain its authority over an activity for which it has been governance, turning to propaganda framed as PR in times of uncertainty might serve to cement its authority in the 'new normal' into which we will emerge. The pandemic has given the Angling Trust a second chance to establish authority within the angling community. While Alon, Farrell and Shaomin (2020) conceptualise authoritarianism, perhaps, on a grander, world scale, it seems plausible that other organisations, particularly those that take on the title of 'governing body', should also seek to capitalise on the newfound importance they hold in the changing world. This change caused by the advent of the pandemic might have wide-reaching and, yet unknown effects on every aspect of our social life, not least, our leisure and recreational lives.

For the Angling Trust, the lockdown and the need to comply with government directives seemed to offer an opportunity to reframe this compliance and claim allegiance with the UK government to exert their authority over the angling community whom they claim to represent:

Excerpt 7.8[60]

Post: *March 2020*	
Angling Trust	LET'S BE CLEAR. THE LOCKDOWN MEANS NO FISHING. WE WILL SEEK CLARIFICATION AS TO WHETHER FISHING IS AN ALLOWED FORM OF EXERCISE AS SOON AS POSSIBLE, BUT FOR NOW, WE CAN'T LEAVE OUR HOMES FOR ANYTHING OTHER THAN THE REASONS STATED BELOW. STAY SAFE People in the U.K. will only be allowed to leave their homes for the following purposes: Shopping for basic necessities, as infrequently as possible One form of exercise a day – for example, a run, walk, or cycle – alone or with members of your household Any medical need, to provide care or to help a vulnerable person Travelling to and from work, but only where this is absolutely necessary and cannot be done from home Police will have the power to enforce the rules, including through fines and dispersing gatherings. To ensure compliance with the instruction to stay at home, the government will: Close all shops selling non-essential goods, including clothing and electronic stores and other premises including libraries, playgrounds and outdoor gyms, and places of worship Stop all gatherings of more than two people in public – excluding people you live with Stop all social events, including weddings, baptisms and other ceremonies, but excluding funerals Parks will remain open for exercise, but gatherings will be dispersed.
	Likes: 385 *Comments:* 1k

An authoritarian tone seems out of place here because, whilst they are recognised by Sports England as the governing body of angling, the Angling Trust has no absolute authority within the angling world, with all authority remaining in the hands of the EA and law enforcement. The organisation has a membership of under 20% of anglers in the U.K. However, the poster would appear to be applying the 'Bandwagon effect' by aligning with the State message to multiple ends. This approach allowed the Trust to avoid criticism from both

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[60] Repeated from chapter 6 for clarity.

the public and their state sponsors, demonstrate the power of their organisation in the form of social responsibility, and garner the support of a wider public. The upturn in interest in angling during the pandemic (Environment Agency, 2020) suggests that this approach seems to have worked to some extent. The bandwagon effect uses the general premise that success breeds success. By associating oneself with a popular opinion[61], it is possible to demonstrate unity with the broader populace (see Schmitt-Beck, 2015). During the early days of the lockdown and discussions around whether angling should be allowed or not, many anglers may have struggled to find support for their point of view. Here, the Angling Trust has appealed to the majority opinion to stay at home and gained the contrasting views of many anglers, which included:

Excerpt 7.9

Comment 5:	
Jane Westwood	So, people can walk run ride a bike a person on a peg on their own cant why is this it's good for mental health as long as you isolated to your own peg mmm anyone answer my question
	*Likes:*23 *Comments:*19

Comment 6:	
Zayden Kane	Angling Trust.....you have no power or remit to tell anyone what to do........you are a trust, that's all. Be very careful Angling Trust , myself and I suspect many thousands of other members , have been considering our membership options for a while now.
	*Likes:*5 *Comments:*8

Comment 6:	
Logan Waite	I think there is a very sound argument that for the mental wellbeing of people being deprived of work and with uncertain times ahead, fishing would prove beneficial....if you represent anglers...clarify and campaign for it.........NOW ! Anglers regularly practice self-isolation and beaches and lake sides are perfect places to keep away from contact. Drive there in your car...fish on your own...drive home.
	*Likes:*23 *Comments:*19

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[61] The opinion that we should all abide by the governments guidelines on self isolation and limiting interaction.

These critical comments might have been averse to the Angling Trust. However, like *Fishamo* in its early days, the negative comments enabled the Facebook algorithm to rate the Angling Trusts post highly (*i.e.,* see Orlowski, 2020) and reach a greater audience.

We can see here that, regardless of the intent behind this post by the Angling Trust (above), the post was instrumental in creating the momentum that led to increased interest in angling amongst social media users and gained the Angling Trust increased public exposure, particularly in the online space. This example demonstrates what Bernays ([1928] 2004) called 'peacetime propaganda' or the 'intelligent manipulation of the organised habits and opinions of the masses' (Bernays, [1928] 2004, p. 37). However, it is created in digital space and facilitated by the Facebook algorithm itself in this instance (see Orlowski, 2020).

Facebook's involvement in the popularity of this post demonstrates a contemporary change in persuasive communication. Historically, propaganda would have required the propagandist to access the popular press, TV or some other means of distribution. The intentional gaining of this access would suggest that the propagandist had intent when creating the propaganda piece. However, we can see that the post's popularity has increased its spread exponentially, generating a far greater response than any of the Angling Trusts' previous social media messages. This aspect makes the type of propaganda described in this chapter fundamentally different to that used during the wars. The Angling Trust has posted what they might feel is a public service announcement. However, the post has generated interest beyond its initial intent, which the poster then capitalised upon retrospectively. This same effect happened during the early stages of *Fishamo* (see Chapter 4). Once this happens, it then becomes the original poster's decision and responsibility to capitalise upon an unexpected success or, equally, manage negative consequences.

However, this fundamental difference between wartime and contemporary peacetime propaganda did not prevent some from comparing the pandemic with the wars. Neither did it stop those who sought to capitalise upon unexpected success from utilising populist language in their message. Some went as far as to compare the situation to the social upheaval caused by the first and second world wars.

As Bad as the Wars?

The popular media have compared the pandemic to the hardships faced during wartime. While many writers remain uncomfortable with this comparison (*i.e.,* see Carbonaro,

2020), there are media parallels within the angling community during this time. For example, some Angling Trust posts sometimes used militant or populist language similar to wartime propaganda-like discourse. In this Facebook post, for example, words like 'stronger' and 'fight' are used in a context that seems out of place given the circumstances:

Excerpt 7.10

Post: *May 2020*	
Angling Trust	United we are stronger The Angling community is working together like it hasn't done before, let's continue to unite. Become a member and help give us a louder voice to fight for everything important to our sport. Get behind us and we can achieve more. It's 56p/week and includes a joining gift and membership benefits such as discounts on tackle and gear. Jamie Cook Angling Trust CEO
	*Likes:*236 *Comments:*95

For most anglers who visit and use the Angling Trusts Facebook page, the claims were valued and welcomed. Excerpt 7.11 is such an example:

Excerpt 7.11

Comment 1:	
Andre Austin	Well done Angling Trust. Without your work and representations to government, I doubt we would have the rapid clarity for all members, clubs and even the anglers who do nothing but complain. Now for all the incoming wisecracks and insults.
	*Likes:*13 *Replies:*

Conversely, for other anglers, such claims caused anger and raised many questions, as can be seen, particularly in Jerome Curling's response to the above post:

Excerpt 7.12

Comment 8:	
Jerome Curling	So pay membership for what. You haven't done anything. No one has seen the letters you are meant to have sent, you act like your part of the government and aren't. You tell everyone they can go fishing but like I said at the start, they can't. You haven't got a clue what's going on and have been telling people what they can do before the government even tell anyone 😂
	Likes: 1 *Comments:* 8

Reply 1:	
George Brewer	Jerome Curling, mate have you been living under a rock this past week or something? 🤔 Not a single thing has been posted against government advice, an entire petition was provided by the AT to the government on our behalf, they got pretty much every big name in angling behind the petition and guess what, as a result of it all you can get the rods out again on Wednesday... 😂
	Likes: 1

Reply 2:	
Willie Crouch	George Brewer Spot on, thank you. It's a shame some seem to have a historic axe to grind with the Trust which clouds their view.
	Likes: 1

Reply 3:	
Jerome Curling	George Brewer has it not. So for the last 2 days, they haven't been telling everyone you can go fishing and night fish? Also, it's now coming out you can only fish if you can get to the lake, res river without the use of a car. I'd say a lot has been said. It's in fact you who's been under a rock. And don't forget the speech love AT did at 6 pm yesterday, a whole hour before the government had even confirmed anything. It's a joke
	Laugh: 1

Reply 4:	
Jerome Curling	Willie Crouch not historic, it's still the same old AT

Reply 5:	
Willie Crouch	Jerome Curling What are you talking about? I think you're confusing Wales with England on car use. Shame you heard what you wanted to on night fishing, try listening again at 18.50. Finally, the government's 50-page document came out well before 6 pm. 0 out of 3, want to try again.
	Likes:1

Reply 6:	
George Brewer	Jerome Curling where on earth have you come up with half of that message? You're fine to use a car (but by all means feel free to walk, none of us will stop you 😄) the AT never once said to go fishing before Wednesday, and to top it off, every grey area, like night fishing, has been carefully handled and quickly chased up to make sure we have all the facts before we do anything to jeopardise this. Give it a rest man 🤦
	Likes: 1

| Reply 8:	
Jerome Curling	George Brewer, really, it was categorically stated no camping of any kind meanwhile at was still telling people night fishing is OK. Open your eyes, fella and come out the hole 🤣

In the above exchange, Jerome finds himself isolated from most other anglers who, for their part, are supporting the Angling Trust. This isolation of Jerome is because those who support the Angling Trust and are most likely to follow the Angling Trust page believed they worked hard to fight for their interests. This belief might be partly in response to Angling Trust propaganda-like messaging but also due to the nature of the internet itself.

As anglers gather around a specific page or Facebook group, they are likely to frequently meet the opinions of a limited group of thought leaders or influencers who also gather around that page or group. This frequent contact results in discussion in the form of shares and comments amongst a reasonably well-defined number of individuals. Burnstein and Vinokur's (1975, p. 422) 'persuasive-argument theory' holds that:

> 'Knowledge of others' choices is neither necessary nor sufficient for the occurrence of shifts in preference. Rather, shifts are due to the sharing of arguments for a particular course of action during group discussion, arguments which were only partially available to members prior to said discussion.'

So, through their group discussion and opinion, the Angling Trust supporters have developed an almost unquestioning opinion that the Angling Trust has been doing good work. As a result, less supportive individuals, like Jerome Curling, seem to have worked much harder to defend their standpoint. However, Jerome is not entirely alone in his criticism of the Angling Trust. One reply to the Angling Trusts original post appears to have successfully taken another tactic, as can be seen in the following comment:

Excerpt 7.13
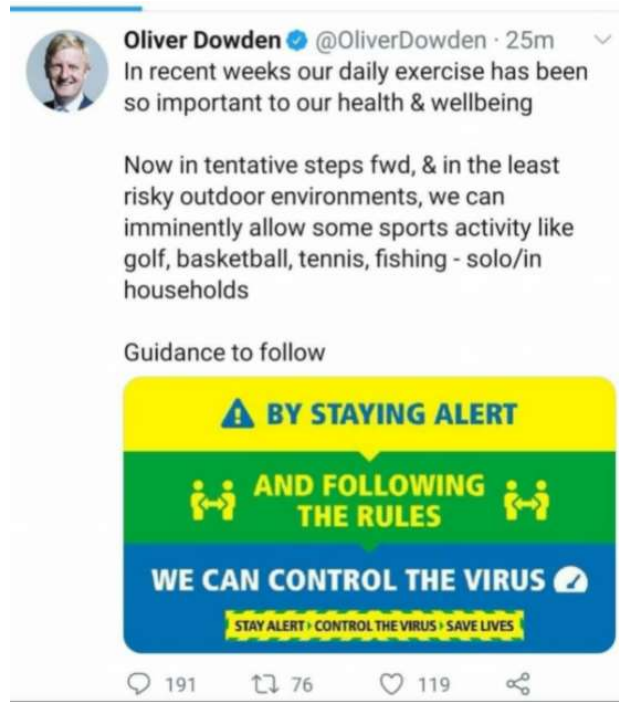
Figure 25 Tweet from Oliver Dowden Posted on Twitter 7:44pm 10th May 2020

Comment 24:	
Ralph Garner	Have you actually spoken to anyone or just going off this like everyone else
	*Likes:*1

Here, Ralph Garner draws the Angling Trusts' claims into question by using a sarcastic tone to question the Angling Trust's claims of direct contact with the government, citing a Twitter post by Oliver Dowden (Co-Chairman of the Conservative Party) as a potential alternative source of information.

Lockdown 2... Now with Added Fishing!

Following the first period of COVID-19 lockdown, it became apparent that cases were rising exponentially, and, again, similar claims to being the saviours of angling were made by the Angling Trust:

Excerpt 7.14

Post: November 2020	
Angling Trust	Angling Trust staff have been working hard over the weekend to ensure that angling in England can continue during the forthcoming lockdown. Unlike golf and tennis, the government have not asked fisheries to close and their announcement and guidance makes clear that outdoor recreation at 'parks and gardens' and at 'beaches and in the 'countryside' is to be deemed a legitimate reason for leaving home from November 5. The travel guidance was updated yesterday and it seems that short journeys from home for these purposes are to be permitted. There are a number of other issues on which we are seeking clarification and a copy of our letter to the Secretary of State at DCMS can be downloaded via the link below for those wanting to see more. We are hearing that the final regulations will not now be published until Wednesday but we will update everybody the moment we know more. We remain confident that we will still be fishing from Thursday so please be patient! PLEASE SHARE
	Likes: 665 *Comments:* 332

This time, the news saw almost universal support, with only one or two comments questioning the timing of the announcement from the Angling Trust:

Excerpt 7.15

Comment 27:	
Jeremiah White	Jesus, talk about jumping the gun. "short journey's will be allowed" isn't permission to go driving around to fish, in fact, I'd have thought such an important organisation would be cautious of providing misinformation until it's finalised on Wednesday.
	Likes: 3 *Replies:* 5

Reply 1:	
Roy Chapman	Jeremiah White, there is no proposed prohibition on travelling, it's all guidance. Agree wait for the full details, but they're hardly 'jumping the gun'...😖
	Likes: 2

Reply 2:	
Jeremiah White	Roy Chapman definitely wait for clear guidance. In the meantime, there are a lot of people on here taking the A.T.s wording as gospel...and then praising them for it. I'd hate to be the one who ends up in hot water by

	travelling to fish. Wednesday should make it a lot clearer, but having said that up to now Boris has been as clear as mud.

Reply 3:	
Roy Chapman	Jeremiah White, that's the problem it will never be unambiguously clear. But guidance is only ever that, unless it changes to become law (like Wales and Scotland had done with black and white limits).

Reply 5:	
Adrian Butler	Jason Taylor, well said. let's wait and see. After AT last undeserved self-back slapping I'd far rather hear it from the horse's mouth I'm now of the opinion the AT are also similar to politicians when spin doctoring is all the rage
	Likes: 1

The above exchange seems to indicate that, whilst some anglers still challenged the Angling Trust's messages, the majority decided the Angling Trust was a force for good and was working towards enabling the continuation of angling, for example:

Excerpt 7.16

Comment 7:		
Donna Weaver	Very well thought out and written. Thank you for supporting us so heavily. X	
	Likes: 1	*Replies*: 0

..Or..

Excerpt 7.17

Comment 25:		
Harlan Grainger	Thank you to all at Angling Trust for all the work you are and have put into this keep safe guys and girls	
	Likes: 4	*Replies*: 0

Some continued to question the claims of the Trust concerning their involvement with the facilitating of continued angling. Interestingly, the Angling Trust attempts to prove its position as the force for good within a seemingly imagined battle by expounding its excellent work with a blog post (Salter, 2021). This approach might further demonstrate the concept of

propaganda as a form of signalling (Huang, 2015), giving the Angling Trust, again, the opportunity to establish its authority and prove its part in easing COVID-19 restrictions for anglers even in the face of a level of disapproval from the angling public. The blog itself was promoted through public social media channels.:

Excerpt 7.18

Post: January 2021	
Angling Trust	Angling Trust Chief Policy Advisor Martin Salter tells it how it is about fishing during the Covid Lockdown in England and tells the inside story of how angling was banned and then the decision was reversed.
	Likes: 264 Comments: 100

However, this blog was written by an employee of the Angling Trust and published through an Angling Trust-owned blog, demonstrating another tool of propaganda, control of media production, and social media for the construction of reality (*i.e.,* Till, 2021). The blog does not explicitly claim the Angling Trust's hand overturning any possible ban on angling during the second lockdown. Instead, it seems preoccupied with convincing the reader that there was, in fact, a ban that was, in fact, revoked by the government in an attempt to prove that 'the Angling Trust [*did not*] simply invent[ed] the whole thing.' (Salter, 2021). Despite the seemingly strange motivation, however, the article received almost unanimous support from those who commented on the post, with only one highlighting the possible problematic undertones of the post and accompanying article:

Excerpt 7.19

Comment 27:	
Jerry Ratcliff	I posted 1 hour before the Angling Trust announced that we got fishing back. "The Government are yet to confirm what the new lockdown means for fishing. However, fishing hasn't previously stopped during previous lockdowns. Unlike other outdoor recreational activities, including golf and tennis, the government never asked fisheries to close." In fact if it was not for me waking the Angling Trust up you probably would not be fishing. Do I get any thanks ???
	Likes:4 Replies:16

Reply 1:	
Willie Crouch	And with a conspiracy theorist ignoring the government emails the AT published, my prediction is complete. I call bingo, what have I won?

Reply 8:	
Martin Salter (Angling Trust Employee and blog author)	I think you may be suffering a bit of delusional issues here. Trust me I was at the centre of the AT campaign and I can absolutely confirm we didn't need any waking up. And as for your suggestion that the angling ban wasn't real take a look at these crystal clear confirmations from three government departments: (link to blogpost)

It would appear that Jerry Ratcliff is mistaken in his beliefs about the circumstances surrounding the second lockdown. There did, indeed, appear to be a planned cessation of angling that was later revoked. The ferocity of the response to his suggestion that the truth may not be as stated in Martin Salters's article is apparent. It indicates a frequently defensive stance that seems to be taken by the Angling Trust.

The evident effectiveness of what appears to be a propaganda-like approach to marketing for the Angling Trust is apparent from the above exchanges. As demonstrated at the beginning of this chapter, most posts seeking to market the Trust before lockdown were met with criticism, suspicion, and in some cases, ridicule. However, the Angling Trust's support seems to have exponentially increased during and after the lockdown. By this time, the angling community's opinion seems to have swayed somewhat towards the Angling Trust. Post-lockdown posts seem to primarily enjoy the support and loyalty of anglers for an organisation that has been striving to garner the help of the angling community, seemingly unsuccessfully, for more than ten years:

Excerpt 7.20

Post: *January 2022*	
Angling Trust	"The Angling Trust deserves the support of all anglers." - Paul Whitehouse. As well as being one of our unpaid Ambassadors, Paul Whitehouse pays his membership each year to support our work. If you love Gone Fishing, be like Paul and join the Angling Trust and help us continue to work to keep us all fishing and protect the environment. PLUS bag a whole load of benefits too....including £10m of public liability cover for all your angling activities worldwide and personal accident cover. Amazing discounts at a wide range of angling retailers and a copy of our fantastic annual publication, The Angler. JOIN NOW ! Membership https://anglingtrust.net/membership/
	Likes: 665 *Comments:* 332

Comment 1:	
Adrian Firth	Joined at the start of COVID as I realised they were my voice to government for my beloved sport!
	*Likes:*21 *Replies:*1

Comment 3:	
Caspian Richardson	Both our fishing club and myself are members of Angling Trust. They do a brilliant job 👍 🎣
	*Likes:*5 *Replies:*0

Comment 3:	
Quentin Fox	Proud to be a member they done us proud in the lock down.
	*Likes:*5 *Replies:*0

This change in attitude may have caused individuals to convince themselves of the Angling Trust's authority by considering and trying to reason the beliefs of others in the community. As noted by (Burnstein and Vinokur, 1975), the opinions of multiple individuals can cause others to question and, potentially, alter their own opinions.

For the Angling Trust and angling in general, the UK government's laws and regulations for England and the restrictions they were forced to impose did the work of propaganda that the Angling Trust only capitalised upon by adopting words like 'strength' and 'fight'. This opportunistic approach allowed the Angling Trust to distinguish itself as an

independent organisation rather than allowing itself to continue being painted as a powerless organisation under the thumb of an all-controlling EA, as suggested by some (*e.g.,* Harris Carpenter's comments above). Lasswell (1927, p. 630) sums up an overall strategy with the idea of 'Stimulus-Response'. In short, the strategy for the propagandist is to carefully select the appropriate stimuli from which to elicit a response. Through the employment of emotive words, the Angling Trust introduces an imagined enemy to the angling world in the form of a ban from fishing activity in general. This caused a break in the links between the Angling Trust and the Environment Agency. They then established themselves as having direct links to the government. They did this by asserting their position as equally, if not more important, than the environment agency in an angling context. This assertion can be seen from the Angling Trusts post (Excerpt 7.10) and also from the Angling Trust blogs penned by Martin Salter (2021), himself an ex-politician, which the Angling Trust promoted through their social media outlets (Excerpt 7.18).

Their claiming of authority also allowed them a unique capacity to yield power within a complicated social situation, essentially setting themselves up as the only possible opponent to this imagined threat. The predictable response from many anglers who may have felt concerned or anxious about the imminent risk to their activity (see responses to Angling Trust post (Excerpt 7.10)) was to comply with calls to join the organisation, seek strength in numbers and help fight the restrictions imposed on angling by the lockdown[62]. However, the success of propaganda seems to be a two-way street. Whilst the Angling Trust has benefited from the rise in interest in angling during the lockdown, angling itself and, ultimately, the Angling Trust finds itself in a paradox. While the Angling Trust and, arguably, the activity needs more anglers to maintain the sport in England, anglers are often cautious of more inexperienced anglers joining the sport. This caution has forced the Angling Trust to adopt a more balanced tone in its communication following the pandemic, which applauds the increase in angling numbers but equally acknowledges potential issues associated with an influx of new anglers.

unfortunately, a few undesirables

This acknowledgement is seen in Excerpt 7.2 (above). The tone of this post hints at the Angling Trust's success in their propaganda-like campaign and a realisation of a need for caution in the execution of their unexpected success. To understand the reason behind this

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[62] Note, imposed by the LOCKDOWN, not imposed by the Government.

wariness of success, we can reconsider Bryan's work ([1979] 2008, p.2), who noted, 'as the popularity of outdoor recreation increases, conflicts among recreationalists may become the primary problem of outdoor management'. With a history, already, of conflict between some users of the waterways and anglers (*e.g.,* see Wedgbury, 2019; Hughes, 2020), the Angling Trust may become a victim of its own success in the 'new normal' as demand for outdoor resources seems to increase as our freedoms are restored. Further anecdotal evidence of the possible effects of post-crisis upsurges on the angling community is seen in some angling books of the post-WWII period, when some authors echo similar observations. They lament the ever-increasing numbers of anglers and water users who continue to flock to the once peaceful river banks, as can be seen from this quote from David Carl Forbes (1966, p. ix):

> Every year new recruits swell the already huge army of anglers...
>
> At one time, angling as a pastime meant solitude on some quiet lake or river. Now the water-skier and the powerboat, streaking through the angler's swim, have become more occupational hazards, so far have we departed on many of our waterways from the conventional idea of angling.

> A similar surge in popularity seems to be observable following the COVID-19

pandemic (Environment Agency, 2020). If this surge in popularity sustains itself,[63] this conflict will be just one of the challenges that organisations like the Angling Trust will face in the 'new normal' of a late-pandemic world. This challenge could lead to more divisions within the online Angling community. Already we can observe a subtle but growing level of discomfort amongst established anglers when addressing the incoming new generation of anglers brought to the sport due to the pandemic. An example of this can be seen in the following post (Excerpt 7.22) made in a public group where the angling group seems to refer to some new anglers simply as 'Undesirables':

Excerpt 7.22

Post: *June 2020*	
A. Fishing Club	... As always we are on the lookout for people to get involved with the club. This year has been very trying with not being able to hold work parties (not that many people turn up!) a new influx of inexperienced anglers (everyone has to start somewhere) **and unfortunately, a few undesirables.**[64] We've been working hard behind the scenes to make the best we can

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[63] At the time of writing inadequate evidence is available to access if the increase in popularity is just a temporary blip or a long-term trend.
[64] Made bold for emphasis.

with limited time and resources, while also trying to sort out our own personal, covid-19 induced problems.	
*Likes:*20	*Comments:* 5

Whilst the above post seems positive, the use of the word 'undesirables' without clarifying what is undesirable makes this post feel unwelcoming. Other posts are less subtle and could be seen almost as discriminatory towards new anglers by introducing rules that seem to preclude the possibility of new anglers who do not already know experienced anglers from participating:

Excerpt 7.23

Post: *June 2020*	
A.N. Other Fishing Club	We are now allowing spectators and visitors! so yes that means you can sit on the same peg as your child, wife or nan. inexperienced anglers INCLUDING ADULTS (not just children under the age of 14) are to be accompanied by an experienced adult angler AT ALL TIMES. Strictly ONE ROD per peg.
	Likes: 64 ‖ *Comments:*22

Comment 1:	
Jonathan Stevenson	So if I was to be sat with my 9yr old son (on the same peg) we could only have one rod in the water between the two of us? Why couldn't we have a rod each? as I would always be their if he needed help
	*Likes:*0 ‖ *Replies:*1

Conclusion

In this chapter, I have presented what may appear to be a somewhat uncertain representation of the 'new normal' in terms of what the future might hold, particularly for angling, in a post-COVID-19 world. I have repeatedly used the word 'propaganda' and 'propaganda-like' to describe the dialogue used during social media communication by the Angling Trust during the COVID-19 pandemic. Some might see the use of this word as somehow nefarious or unfair of me, considering our contemporary connotations with the word.

This chapter may invariably be perceived as overly critical of the Angling Trust. After all, the Trust is trying to execute the responsibilities claimed initially for themselves but,

ultimately, expected of them from a growing angling community and government agencies who provide their funding. However, this is not the intent of the chapter. Instead, this chapter intended to demonstrate the power of propaganda-like communication strategies in online angling communities and draw attention to some of the changes in online communication that the COVID-19 pandemic has triggered. It also examines how recreational communities respond to and interact with this approach to promotion and the implications this might have for uniting or dividing the community in the future. Furthermore, its aim was to demonstrate that, as we emerge from our homes, squinting in the light of a 'new' world, we do so into a world that will be very different for angling both online and in the physical world.

This chapter has demonstrated that the changing world has created opportunities and challenges for angling and angling governance that did not exist in the 'old normal'. Equally, it has created opportunities for angling online. The 'old normal' was a world where angling, initially boosted by the limitations on life that WWII bought about (Locker, 2018), was beginning again to fade.

Over a little less than ten years, angling had lost many participants. The estimated number lost was similar to that of the entire population of a medium-sized city like Worcester. Since COVID-19 restrictions were first put in place, the number of anglers in the U.K. has been bolstered by over 100,000 (Environment Agency, 2020) thanks to a kind of propaganda expressed in the same way that Bernays ([1928] 2004) intended it, as a positive force for good. However, it remains too early to judge whether this represents a turnaround in the popularity of angling or if the increase is a temporary anomaly caused by unusual and extreme circumstances. Whatever the long term implications, what seems to have become clear is that the COVID-19 pandemic and its effects on physical-world angling seem to have somewhat united the online angling world. This unity can be seen through the engagement with *Fishamo* during this time and, perhaps in a different way, through engagement with the Angling Trust. Regardless of the side that anglers chose during the pandemic[65] , anglers adamantly expounded their views and united over them. This united voice demonstrates the 'positive' aspect of peacetime propaganda. It proved an effective tool in encouraging discussion around a fading sport.

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[65] Be they indifferent, supportive or critical of the Angling Trust's message.

Chapter 8: Conclusion

In this Thesis, I examined the under-researched field of recreational angling, with a specific focus on the online activity of recreational anglers. It initially asked: "In what ways does social media facilitate engagement in the social world of angling and influence Angler's worldviews?". However, during the research process, the world was hit by the COVID-19 pandemic, which forced unprecedented changes in how we live our lives and created new challenges and opportunities for this research project. As a result of strict restrictions on movement imposed by the government, angling found itself temporarily banned as a leisure activity. This ban restricted angling for the first time in a history of more than four hundred years in the UK. The pandemic-related circumstances forced a reconsidering and re-phrasing of the research question. They added to the research project by enabling me to investigate an aspect of leisure participation, that of engagement with an activity, even in its absence, that had not been possible before. Like the anglers themselves, this research adapted to the new environment. I adjusted the primary question to: "How does angling knowledge facilitate participation within social media groups that form around recreational angling, and to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in such groups?".

Consequently, I turned to an established but struggling Facebook group (*Fishamo*) that I had created to facilitate my own interaction with angling. In the subsequent months, *Fishamo* grew into a thriving Facebook group. It became inhabited by highly proficient and, in some cases, very well-known anglers, including British Record holders, bloggers, and other anglers who were at the top of their game as far as angling and online angling interactions were concerned. I discovered that the diversity amongst the participation level of anglers within Facebook groups like *Fishamo* facilitates the progression of groups from a generalist group to, potentially, the status of 'Valhalla Groups' (see Chapter 5). The interaction between these anglers demonstrated a mechanism consisting of what I term 'Concept Bridges' (see Chapter 4) and 'Valhalla Groups' (see Chapter 5). It also revealed a reasoning for angling interaction online (see Chapter 5) that has not previously been studied in its entirety and offered the possibility for answering the revised research question.

In this concluding chapter, I review the research aims, address the research question directly, discuss the implications of this research and discuss the limitations I faced. Finally, I consider some of the possible future directions.

Research aims.

This research aimed to understand how recreational anglers used social media to engage in their chosen angling activity. The results suggest that anglers turn to social media to create, or maintain, circles of friendship outside their immediate physical world friends and family in what can be a solitary activity. The findings indicate that the recourse to social media serves, for some, as a replacement to the traditional settings in which anglers socialised in the early development of angling, which mainly focused on pub or working men's clubs (Locker, 2014). However, the online environment seems to have created a unique form of recreational activity similar but not identical to the physical world, where angling becomes the sharing of photographs and stories (see Chapter 4).

Therefore, it became my goal to understand the mechanics of participation within recreationally focused Facebook groups. For example, what are the motivations for participation within online recreationally focused Facebook groups and does a recreational career progression exist within this space? In considering this question, I aimed to understand how anglers can maintain their interest and participation in the angling activity in online spaces.

Furthermore, it had been noted from the outset that the complementary theories of Serious Leisure (Stebbins, 1982, 2001, 2007) and Recreational Specialisation (Bryan, [1979] 2008) might be helpful in examining the online angling environment (see Chapter 2 & 3). Indeed, these theories were of value in helping me understand the formalities/seriousness of the online space as a leisure site. These concepts posit a recreational career through which the individual recreationalist progresses during their involvement with their activity. Therefore, a further aim was to understand the mechanics of this career progression within a digitally mediated space, which I observed to be linked to an individual's progression through participation in increasingly specialised Facebook groups (see Chapter 5).

Answering the Question

In this research project, I set out to answer the question: "How does angling knowledge facilitate participation within social media groups which form around recreational angling, and to what extent does actual physical angling participation matter in such groups?". I have done this through examining interaction, both amongst anglers and the organisation that represents the angling community (The Angling Trust) in England. I have covered all aspects of the question in the following chapters:

Chapter 4: Banter, Rivalry, and Concept Bridges

In this chapter, I delve into the concepts of banter and intergroup rivalry to give a deeper insight into the character of the online angling community, specifically the *Fishamo* community. Despite criticism of the angling community as being negative (*e.g.,* Knight, 2016), my research showed that in the early days of *Fishamo*, there was a strong underlying positivity within the community. This was an unexpected result and indicates that the positivity of the *Fishamo* community was able to counteract any negative perceptions from other groups within the broader angling community.

At this early stage in *Fishamo*'s development, it seemed that angling knowledge was not particularly pivotal to online angling participation, and it became clear that many of those participants who first disrupted *Fishamo* in the early days were not particularly knowledgeable about angling. We saw that those active anglers who made up the membership of *Fishamo* in the early stages were of a low level of skill which seems to indicate that angling communities grow around low level participants and that angling seemed to act as a concept bridge for those who were more interested in the 'banter' aspects of angling. However, as the research progressed, we saw that these anglers were gradually replaced by increasingly experienced anglers who, in turn, facilitate the gradual progression of the group along a 'group wide' recreational specialisation continuum, ultimately attracting increasingly skilled anglers to participate in the community.

Chapter 5: An Online Angling Career, Recreational Specialisation in the Online Space

In chapter five, I closely investigated the angling career and its association with online angling groups on Facebook. Here, I discovered that an angling career within online space exists and that it is not essential for participants to be active in physical world angling. Furthermore, I demonstrated the mechanism by which angling groups form and develop overtime in a similar way to the career of individual anglers. To do this, I employed the recreational specialisation continuum as described by Bryan (1979 [2008]), demonstrating Bryan's model as a valuable tool in understanding, not only, recreational groups in the physical world but also those which grow within online recreational environments.

Through this investigation, it was possible to theorise the existence of groups which I have termed 'Valhalla Groups'. These groups are formed through the input of experienced

anglers who use these groups to enhance their personal careers and attain higher levels of status and prestige. As the groups progress, angling knowledge and expertise become key factors for involvement and participation in these online angling groups.

Chapter 6: Nostalgia games and dangerous times

In this chapter, I discuss the methodologies through which anglers chose to engage in *Fishamo* and the methodologies that we implemented to encourage engagement within the community. During the early stages of the pandemic, it became apparent that *Fishamo* offered a safe space for sharing nostalgia with family and friends. This tendency towards nostalgia seemed to act as an avatar of fishing during a period when angling was not possible. During this period, whilst physical world angling was suspended, a degree of angling knowledge or, at least, experience was vital to successful participation. Of course, this experience could be, and often was, the result of angling knowledge gained many years before interaction within *Fishamo*. This would seem to demonstrate that continuous angling participation was not necessary for successful participation within the online angling communities, but a degree of knowledge and prior experience does help to facilitate conversations which are often based on nostalgia and leisure-specific know-how.

Observation of this form of participation also allowed for an online gamification of angling for participants in the *Fishamo* community. A concept bridge was constructed that allowed us to gamify online angling through the competitive sharing of photographs. This demonstrated that it was possible for anglers to compete in a form of online angling which, itself, did not require any current engagement in angling. However, this type of angling was dependent on past abilities and was not directly accessible by completely inexperienced anglers.

Chapter 7: A 'New Normal': Propaganda and Angling Online in the Post-Pandemic world.

In the UK, angling is strictly governed and the Environment Agency has primary responsibility for the management and maintenance of the UK's freshwater fisheries. In addition, the angling community has a governing body for the sport itself. The Angling Trust is the governing body for angling in the UK and represents both the sporting rights of anglers

and their environmental concerns. As such, the Angling Trust itself can be seen as an important participant in the online angling world and deserves to be studied.

In chapter seven, I investigate the Angling Trust and critique the methods it has used to communicate with the wider angling community through online, social media, interaction. To do this, I discuss the historical distrust that seems to have formed between the Angling Trust and much of the angling community before demonstrating how the Angling Trust seems to have creatively used the pandemic as a tool to improve their relationship and increased their support within the online angling community.

To improve communication and garner the support of the community, the Angling Trust seems to have implemented a propaganda like approach which allowed them, not only to gain an increased level of support from the angling community, but also, for a short time, contribute to a sharp upturn in the popularity of angling. The groups that grew around the Angling Trust at this time demonstrate that propaganda might be another seed from which angling communities grow. The potential for angling communities to grow in this way demonstrates that those negative communities that occasionally form in the online angling world could be the result of individual propaganda like approaches and are not necessarily a reflection of endemic negative aspects within the community itself.

This chapter has shown that angling communities often form because individuals desire to become active in the community. This could be due to feelings of personal isolation, a desire to discuss a specific aspect of angling, or simply a desire to communicate with a group of peers where angling serves as a mechanism, or a concept bridge, for conversation.

The Research Project

The research commenced with a reflective exercise looking at my own history of interacting with both computing and angling (see Chapter 4). In it, I laid down some groundwork demonstrating that angling has a long history and close association with the lives of many of its participants. There were close links between financial hardship and angling for many anglers of my generation (Generation X), but the rapid development of technology later supplanted these times. As such, Generation X was the first to enjoy access to the internet and the associated opportunities for some to benefit from the access to knowledge.

The internet introduced new ways of thinking about the activity for many anglers. Firstly, by opening a world of information about the activity practised in seemingly exotic

locations worldwide. Later, our horizons were broadened even further with the advent of WEB 2.0 (O'Reilly, 2013). Those fortunate enough to have access to the internet could join an active conversation about recreational activities. This period was responsible for what might have appeared to the outside world as a decline in angling (Webster, 2020).

In many cases, anglers either added to or shifted their modality of communication and socialisation about the activity from pubs and working men's clubs to online forums like Facebook (see Chapter 4). However, the move from the largely regulated environment of public spaces like pubs to the largely unregulated (during the early 21st century) online space environments seemed to bring both advantages and disadvantages. The advantages could be seen in the development of potential for engagement in vastly more extensive groups of participants, but the disadvantages included the emergence of cyber-bullying and new demands on anglers to 'fit in' to these new, virtual environments (Knight and Collett, 2012; Knight, 2016; Angling Times, 2020b)(see Chapter 4).

Working within this online space, my research consisted of an extended period of involvement within an online angling group of my own creation (see Chapter 3). As I established the group, it was not my initial intention to focus on it for my research. However, given the unexpected social circumstances brought on by COVID-related social measures, *Fishamo's* became my primary research site and a rich resource for data. The advantages of using *Fishamo* included the opportunity to observe a group's development during its early stages. In the case of *Fishamo*, this included a period of conflict in which group growth was rapidly enhanced by high engagement with a period of negative postings, which seems to have been facilitated by the Facebook algorithm (Orlowski, 2020) to increase awareness of the group to the wider angling community. Despite the limitations brought on by the pandemic, the social restrictions allowed me to study online activities revolving around the angling activity, even in the absence of physical world angling (see Chapter 6).

Because I created *Fishamo*, there have been certain challenges associated with the research, not least the potential of researcher bias. I attempted to mitigate this bias by taking a step back from participation in group management during the research. However, to facilitate this 'stepping back', it was necessary to put in place a group moderation team that I felt could maintain the group. The moderation team, whilst composed of volunteers from within the group, was ultimately selected by me, and therefore, arguably, my influence on the group continued.

I attempted to further mitigate this aspect of selection by aiming to choose a cross-section of the group as moderators, and, as a result, *Fishamo* features a diverse moderation group. However, some concerns remain. For instance, there is still limited female participation within the group. While I consciously chose to include two female moderators, they seem to have taken marginal roles within the group. This male domination has resulted in a male-centric group[66] that further developed as *Fishamo* progressed. Furthermore, I had hoped to make an angling group of diverse participatory typologies, consisting of anglers who specialise in the three major disciplines of the activity[67]. However, most participants came from the coarse fishing community, which means this research has centred on this community.

Additionally, efforts were made to create diversity in the form of race and ethnicity. However, participation from the Black, Asian, and minority ethnic groups (BAME) has been minimal. In addition, the age diversity of active participants was relatively narrow, limiting the pool of potential volunteers (Figure 27). The challenges associated with ensuring a diverse moderator group seem to reflect some of the observations of the angling community. The community is generally dominated by white, middle-aged men (Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012a). This domination reflects some of the concerns that have been historically reported about the activity (*e.g.,* Leapman, 2006).
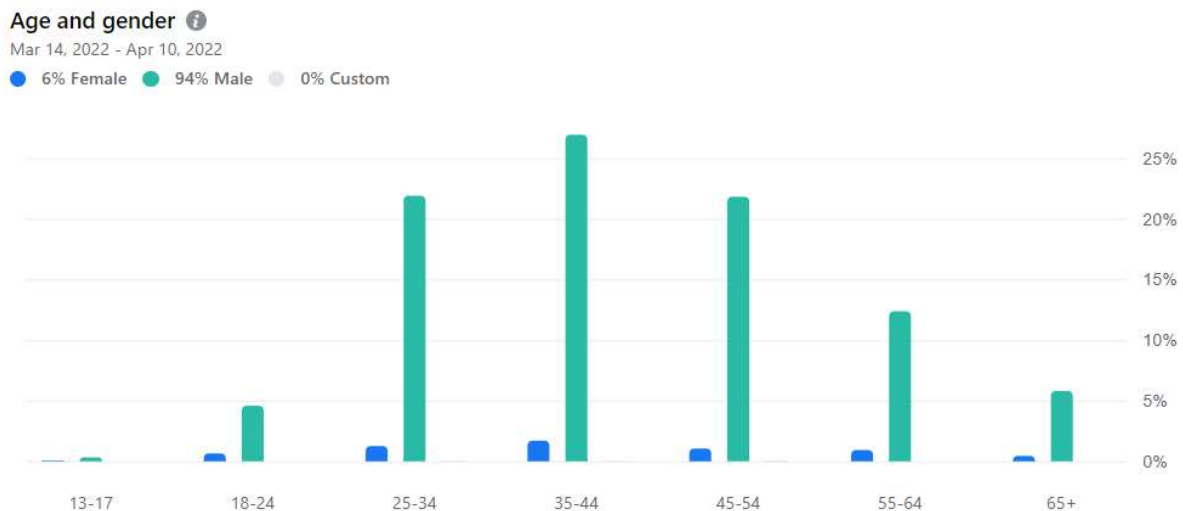

Figure 26 Fishamo age diversity.

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[66] Mail-centricity is common within the angling world (Stolk, 2009; Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012b; Brown, 2019b)

[67] Coarse, Game & Sea Fishing

Nonetheless, as I held no close relationship other than acquaintance online with any moderators, the group remained reasonably autonomous during the research period (see Chapters 3 & 4). My participation was reduced to that of a participant and facilitator of the competitions within the group during data collection.

Once established, the group seemed to run smoothly, and participation was maintained at a relatively high level during the research period. Anglers were informed that data collection was taking place, and data was taken from the general group conversation. Because *Fishamo* is a private group, it had to be assumed that it was possible that some anglers did not want any posts they made in the group used for research and, for this reason, it was decided at the outset that any anglers who expressed concern about the research could opt-out of the research. However, no angler opted out, and many anglers welcomed that the group was used as a research site.

A standard[68] database application was used for storage and processing when data was collected. The ever-changing nature of the social media environment means that this database could not be updated with any new comments by participants passed the completion of this research project, with only an anonymised version retained for future use. However, the data remains on the Facebook platform, and group conversations and updates remain preserved by the platform's archive system.

What does this research tell us about angling online?

Primarily, my research finding exposes an initial motivation for angler engagement within the online angling community (see Chapters 3 & 4). The formation of connections in an online space requires the individual to engage and participate in the online conversation. However, engagement in this conversation can pose risks when choosing our personal lives as our subject matter (see Chapter 3). Therefore, there remains a need for a safe subject matter. To facilitate this, many turn instead to their hobbies and pastimes. These hobbies and pastimes allow us to form a 'concept bridge' (see Chapter 3) to build contacts with new people online without sharing potentially sensitive information about ourselves or our personal lives. My research suggests that angling is an excellent concept bridge[69] because it

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[68] Microsoft Access
[69] That is a link between the physical world and virtual world which transforms an activity that has no literal equivalent online into an avatar of the original activity significantly enough to allow for online participation.

revolves around a highly varied activity and is often practised in isolation. Individuals who participate in the activity often share ample stories and experiences (see Chapter 4).

Anglers' desire for a platform to share these stories demonstrates that this particular created version of social media has become, for some individuals, an essential part of recreational angling (see Chapters 3 & 6). It provides a space where anglers can share photos of their catch and demonstrate their prowess as anglers. Social media also provides a site of essential social interaction. Perhaps more importantly than this, however, social media has provided anglers with an arena to compete for status by advancing an online recreational career enacted subconsciously through participation in recreational groups (see Chapters 5 & 6). The groups that facilitate such interaction may be considered a form of cyber-culture and may even be compared to a cyber-organism by how they form and change (see Chapter 4) (Figure 23).

Leisure activities, like fishing, are challenging to translate entirely into online spaces. General conversations about the activity are possible within virtual space. However, for those who want to engage more deeply in online communities that evolve around their activity and those who see online interaction about their real-world activity as a 'serious leisure' interest in itself, there is a need for the activity to evolve somewhat (see Chapter 4 & 5). For instance, whilst one might be able to participate in simulations and games focused on fishing in a virtual world, this is not what most recreational anglers would view as fishing. Such activities as playing games or simulations and more deeply involved interaction on social media are examples of what I have called, throughout this Thesis, a 'concept bridge'.

Concept bridges are the well-trodden path between the physical world we inhabit and understand and the virtual world. Their secret is that once an individual crosses the concept bridge, they no longer participate in the same activity they were participating in in the real world. Instead, it is now replaced by an avatar of the activity (see Chapters 4, 5 & 6). The bridge is a mechanism by which we can take real-world activities, like fishing, which cannot be directly translated into the virtual world and continue participating in them. Computer games and simulations are examples of intentionally formed concept bridges in that they are intentionally created to mirror a real-world environment. However, concept bridges that form online recreational cultures do so in a more organic way in that they are formed by necessity rather than desire. The concept bridge I have encountered during this Thesis has emerged out of a desire by anglers to discuss and participate in their activity within a particular type of

online space offered by the Facebook platform. In this space, sharing real-world captures, both new and old, advice and expertise about angling have superseded the act of catching fish. None of these factors requires the participant actually to go fishing. Even in the case of photo-sharing, we demonstrated that photo-sharing continues when the opportunity to fish is taken away (By the COVID-19 pandemic)(see Chapter 6). Online anglers simply change their sharing methodology and are just as content to share past captures as they were to share photos of fish caught only yesterday.

Once anglers gain entry to the online angling world through the angling concept bridge, findings indicate that anglers use social media to promote their position within the online community (see Chapter 5). They do this through informal competition and sharing images and advice. Through sharing successful captures, advice and expertise, anglers, my research suggests, embark on an online angling career similar to that described by Stebbins (Stebbins, 2007), in which their online activity becomes as significant as their physical world angling. This carer would seem to mirror the recreational specialisation continuum Bryan ([1979] 2008) proposed, where recreationalists progress from general to specific activity participation along a predictable career progression facilitated by equipment used (*i.e.,* Angling method followed) and setting preference (*i.e.,* locations). However, in the social media world, where participants lack a physical presence, the progression observed takes the form of a progression through various Facebook groups rather than through physical space (see Chapter 5). The equipment used would seem to be the photographs[70] and expertise exhibited by the anglers. As a result, the findings of this research would seem to demonstrate a form of physical immateriality to the successful execution of online recreational careers, which is replaced by a form of virtual materiality. It remains a Veblenesque mechanism in that there is still a need for a type of conspicuous consumption and leisure to facilitate it. However, conspicuous consumption does not come entirely from physical world interpretations of wealth and is supplemented, or even replaced, by wealth earned in expertise and online reputation[71].

Once individuals find themselves engaged in a recreational career online, they rarely limit themselves to a single group. Instead, they tend to seek out other groups[72] to participate

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[70] Both in the form of fish captures and the equipment, fishing rods and various trapping of the physical world, used to capture the fish.

[71] Social capitol.

[72] Groups are a, largely Facebook specific term but similar concepts exist within all major social media platforms.

within. Groups facilitate new online friendships and are virtual places where users with matching interests can easily be found. In the case of the Facebook platform, some groups are labelled 'public', and these are the most accessible groups, as one needs only to click a button to join such groups. These groups are nurseries for more advanced interaction within the community. Here, early contacts are made with other community participants, and online friendships are formed. These friendships enable some anglers to elevate their standing within the online world, ultimately increasing their exposure to anglers of higher standing within the online community and attracting invites to other groups that facilitate the online angling recreational career (see Chapter 4).

The next type of group is labelled 'private'. Private groups can only be joined by invited participants or those who request to join and are approved by a current member. Depending on the acceptance levels, these groups can become highly exclusive 'Valhalla groups', which are open entirely, or mainly, only to experienced and skilled anglers (see Chapter 4). The groups can be seen almost as independent entities (Figure 28) within an undefined conceptual cyber-space growing and diversifying like cells within an organism, gradually shaping and defining online angling as a recreational activity. Some of these groups become 'Valhalla' groups. They are communities that some anglers aspire to become part of, either because of the reputation, knowledge or influence upon the rest of the online angling world itself. Others will remain in lower-level groups where some new anglers will develop the skills to progress within their chosen recreational activity. In these low-level groups, some other anglers will also content themselves with this lower level of participation, similar to the observations of Scott and Shafer (2001) in the physical world (see Chapter 5). Continued engagement between influential anglers is essential for the Facebook algorithm to recommend groups to other users of similar interests (Orlowski, 2020). Therefore, the continued survival of the groups requires this constant flow-through of active participants, preferably with influential standing, to survive. Periods of low quality, in terms of posts and interactions, engagement can, at worst, result in the group's decline and, at best, mean a prolonged period of group stagnation (see Chapter 6).

New groups can form due to the division of an existing group when anglers become dissatisfied with the current groups they are participating in or spontaneously when anglers simply feel that they would like to form a new group. When these groups form, they might go through a formation stage in which the social capital of their founder might dictate the group's chances of survival. Alternatively, in the case of Facebook, a group's survival might

result from the activity within the group itself, where high engagement causes the Facebook algorithm to suggest the group to other members of the Facebook platform (see Orlowski, 2020)(see Chapter 3). This formative process is helpful to groups progressing to the status of 'Valhalla group' but not essential. 'Valhalla groups' are defined by their exclusivity and the desire of others to participate. Therefore, an exclusive group formed by an angler with high social capital in which many anglers aspire to participate might bypass the formative process and instantly attain the 'Valhalla group' status.
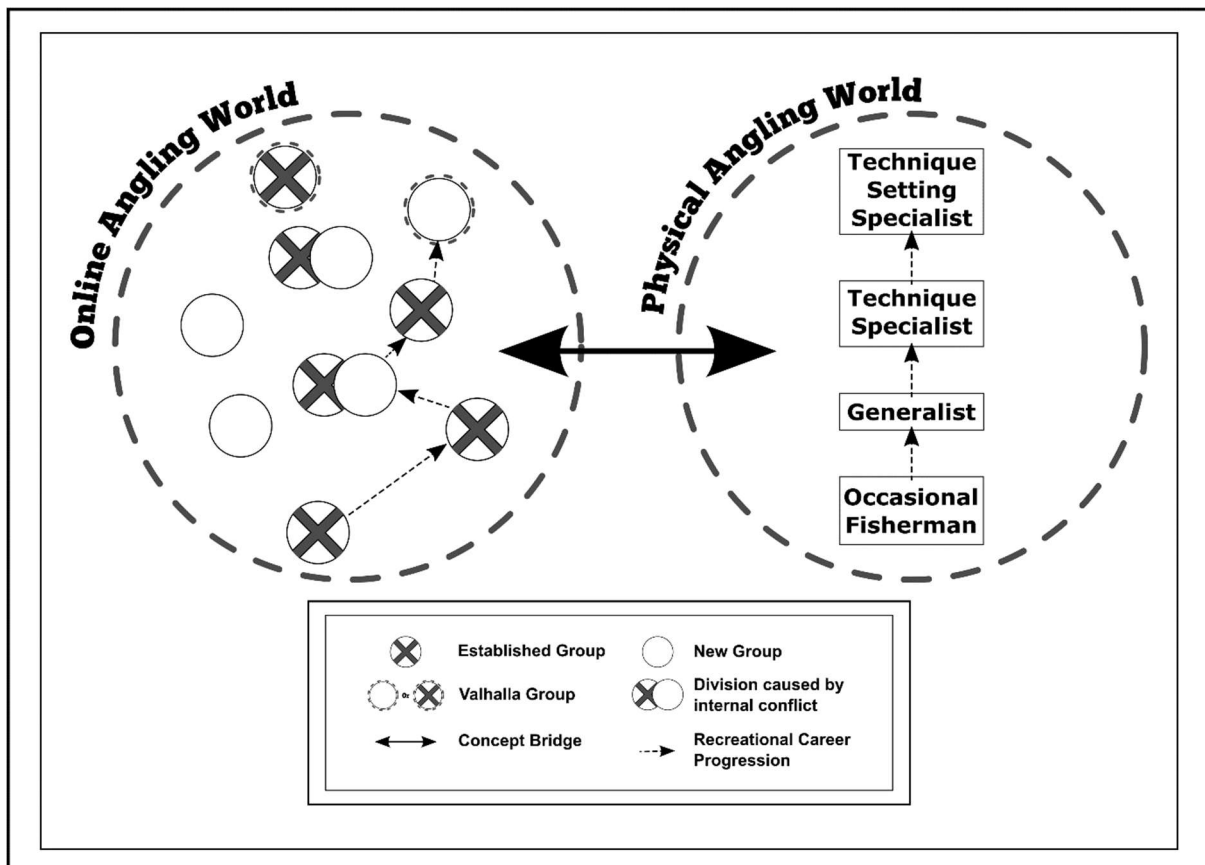

Figure 27 Comparison between recreational specialisation continuum in the fluid online world and Bryan's rigid physical world model.

Unlike physical world angling, where anglers might be invited to go fishing with friends or family as part of their participation and socialisation, this research has found that physical world participation is not mandatory for successful participation in the online world of angling. Those anglers who have not fished for some time through either circumstance or physical hindrance are accepted and can participate equally within the online angling community if they wish. Often, this form of participation would require some past angling experience, at least enough to have built up a reserve of photographs and images to share nostalgically online. However, anglers could, hypothetically, still participate in the online

angling community even if they had never fished in the physical world. This type of participation would require the participant to ask questions of more experienced anglers, join in the conversation, share memes, or even comment on the angling political situation. Of course, anglers who have not had angling experience could not attain the level of a successful angler that is widely accepted as an expert within the community. However, they could be accepted into the community as a knowledgeable individual and, in this way, attain some small level of success that would be entirely based on their online interaction only.

Therefore, anglers, and those interested in angling, use social media as a critical part of their engagement and socialisation in the online space. The activity nurtures friendships between experienced, sometimes relatively famous, anglers and the wider angling community. However, the online world offers more. For those who wish it, the online world offers progression opportunities and increased exposure to the community of anglers (see Chapter 5), which can sometimes spill out into the physical world (Figure 29). Furthermore, angling offers another recreational outlet for anglers who might become actively involved in the moderation or foundation of new angling groups.

Figure 28 Magazine Cover featuring regular Fishamo participant.

Limiting Factors

This research has not been without its challenges. The decision to use a Facebook group of my own making remains both a powerful initiative and a limiting factor. The choice to concentrate on one newly emerging and self-created Facebook group means that there remains some possibility for researcher bias. However, the approach was taken in the spirit of forming a 'focus group'. If this were not an online research project and I had chosen to form a focus group, there would also be a degree of sampling. I attempted to mitigate the researcher bias in this research (see Chapter 3), and my efforts in this respect were successful as far as they could be. Nonetheless, the participants within the group were still aware that it was my

group[73] and that I was conducting research within the group. This knowledge may have influenced how the participants interacted within the group[74].

A further limitation comes from my standing within the online angling community. I have developed some social capital within the angling community prior to my research during my professional involvement in angling social media and grew that social capital somewhat during my research. However, my status has never reached the heights of some, and, therefore, I was only able to hypothesise the existence of my' Valhalla Groups'[75]. The lack of opportunity to access Valhalla groups to see them working from inside was frustrating. If research into online recreational groups continues, particularly on the Facebook platform, then some of the ethical and practical issues will need to be addressed in future work, and stronger connections will need to be forged with anglers that can access groups of higher recreational specialisation.

The focus on Facebook may have also been a limiting factor of this research. It was decided early in the research that Facebook would be my focus, mainly because of personal, professional experience and the consensus that Facebook is the platform where anglers generally gather to discuss their activity (Knight and Collett, 2012; Knight, 2016). This preference for Facebook as a place of social media communication might, in part, be thanks to the Facebook demographic itself (see Chapter 3). Facebook's demographic is older than on many other platforms, and the angling demographic itself tends to consist of more mature individuals (Brown, Djohari and Stolk, 2012a). However, like all technology, social media is not static, and communities have developed on alternative platforms such as Instagram, Twitter and others. However, the mechanics of these platforms make for a very different research environment because they do not have 'groups' in the same sense as Facebook. Instead, communities form around hashtags, and key phrases and are much more dispersed in nature. Therefore, the Facebook platform fit most comfortably within my research methodology in this instance (see Chapter 3).

The COVID-19 pandemic offered ample opportunity for extending this research and approaching questions that I had not previously considered possible to explore, for example, the nature of online angling activity in the absence of angling. However, it also offered considerable challenges to this research. Like many others, I was not immune to the stresses

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[73] Facebook displays the name of the group founder below the main image on the page.
[74] Although I detected no indication of this during my research.
[75] Although the existence of Valhalla groups was, somewhat, verified by other anglers.

caused by the rapid change in social norms. The changing social environment increased social media activity and had exceptionally limiting effects on my productivity due to the nature of lockdown and the difficulties of trying to work in a high-pressured domestic setting where everyone was essentially trapped in one building for prolonged periods. This situation caused domestic stresses, which were not always conducive to ongoing research activities.

Considering these limitations, this research gives a good overview of interaction mechanics of the online angling community and the processes that drive them. This Thesis opens new avenues for researchers in a hitherto under-researched field to tackle some of my challenges.

Research Implications

The main reason for this research was to develop a broader understanding of the online activities of recreationalists with a specific focus on the online angling community. However, there are multiple recreational communities online and many groups that serve the participants in these recreational activities. This Thesis adds to the conversation about what it is to be an online recreationalist which may be vital to the marketing and promotion of recreational activities in an increasingly digital world.

Furthermore, this research raises the question of differing modalities of participation between the online and physical world. It has raised the possibility of related but fundamentally different recreations linked by a concept bridge between the physical and online worlds. This link is equivalent to discovering a new raft of recreational activities previously unknown to us and beginning the work required to understand these recreational activities, their roles, and their meaning within participants' lives.

Finally, this research has pioneered ways of investigating these complex worlds. Formally, access to the private groups of recreationalists proved challenging from an ethical standpoint. It is not easy to know if the participants grant permission to use their content in a research context in a private group. It is not always as simple as simply asking, as some participants may participate only once before effectively vanishing or may feel pressured or even insulted when asked. The researcher can face strong resistance from members who rightly feel that their privacy should be protected (see Johnson, Lawson and Ames, 2018).

For this reason, many previous research projects have focused almost exclusively on public forums or open networks, with only one or two notable exceptions to the rule (*e.g.,*

Lizzo and Liechty, 2020). By adapting my own group to conduct my research, I bypassed many of the problems associated with private groups, such as gatekeepers and limited access. Instead, I was able to gain unprecedented access to a group of two and a half thousand people and, in so doing, was able to observe the establishment and growth of a new Facebook group in real-time. This enhanced visibility added to my understanding of successful Facebook group engagement (see Chapter 6).

From a practical point of view, this research has opened the potential for governing bodies and organisations to promote better the activities for which they take responsibility. The research suggests that it may be worth targeting audiences that go far beyond their traditional target group and that individuals who participate in the online avatar of their activity are not always active participants in the physical world. This observation was demonstrated in the Angling Trust's success, which adopted new forms of social media communication during the lockdown to engage and gain support, or at least engagement, of more anglers and the general public than it had been able to previously (see Chapter 7). Despite this 'virtual' participation, these individuals might still hold high levels of interest in the activity to be interested in further supporting the work of a governing body or may even be capable of contributing to funding efforts.

Contrary to Putnam's (2000) hypothesis that civic engagement, voluntary involvement in societal organisations, is declining, this research supports the opposite argument advanced by Skoric, Ying and Ng (2009). Many individuals are migrating online to create independent and, in many instances, far larger groups of individuals who have a vested interest in a particular activity and a desire to share this interest with wider audiences.

Contributions

In conducting this research, I have contributed to understanding serious leisure (Stebbins, 1992, 1997, 2001, 2009) by observing that serious leisure is active in online spaces just as it is in the physical world. This work has also drawn into question the sharp divisions between 'casual leisure' and 'serious leisure' outlined by Stebbins (1982, 1997, 2007). I have observed that the mechanism by which some recreationalists engage in 'serious leisure' (*i.e.,* angling) is through the engagement in 'casual leisure' activities (*i.e.,* social media). This observation suggests that these two concepts, casual and serious leisure, are merging as computer-mediated communication (CMC) advances. This advancement of CMC is allowing

for deeper interactive involvement with the virtual world and, in so doing, facilitates new emergent forms of leisure absent in the times of Stebins's works.

The research also advances the work of Bryan (]1979] 2007). He proposed a recreational specialisation continuum and showed that recreationalists progress through a recreational career from general to specific based on setting and technique preference. In social media recreational activity, I found a similar mechanism. However, progression within the fluid online space takes on another level of complexity that Bryan, who was working in a pre-social media era, could not have considered. Whilst technique preference, that is, angling method or species of fish pursued, remains a constant in online angler progression. I have observed the 'setting', in the form of Facebook groups, being prone to its own development. This development allows for an infinite variety of potential career paths for online anglers, which may not exist in the real world and may account, to some extent, for the popularity of engaging in conversations about recreational angling online.

To facilitate this progression, however, there is a need for a mechanism by which transition takes place. Here, I found the work of Veblen ([1899] 1994) helpful. Through a process of conspicuous consumption in the form of equipment used and conspicuous leisure in the form of time spent fishing, anglers can progress their standing and, therefore, recreational careers by displaying these dual aspects of the new leisure class online through social media posts. This discovery has added to the understanding of Veblen's' Theory of the Leisure Class by demonstrating its transition and newfound utility in understanding interaction within groups that form online.

None of these theorists, in isolation, could provide answers to the workings of online communities or individually answer my research question. The theoretical synthesis of Stebbins, Bryan and Veblen's work has allowed me to work through the complicated interactions that I found when I first ventured into online angling worlds. Whilst, at the outset, I was aware of some of the complicated online situations, it was thanks to Stebbins and his theories of serious leisure that I was first able to understand the importance that the participants in these spaces put upon their interaction in virtual space, the concepts of serious leisure helped in first defining what occurred in angling groups. What might have appeared as innocuous chit-chat soon revealed itself to not quite fit with Stebbins' definition of serious leisure or the theory of Casual leisure. Online angling appeared to be more complex, a hybrid which demonstrated the possibility of the emergence of new forms of recreation online, thus

far, unconsidered. While Stebbins's work helped me understand the 'what', Bryan's work helped untangle the 'why'. Using Bryan's recreational specialisation continuum, I observed a clearly emerging scale within the virtual space similar to that described by Brian in physical space. Finally, with Veblen's 'Theory of the Leisure Class, with influences of the work of Bourdieu, I managed to explain the 'how'. I observed that through a process of conspicuous consumption and conspicuous leisure, anglers facilitated their progression along the online recreational specialisation continuum. Therefore, the overarching contribution of this thesis is the synthesis of these multithreaded theories into a new social model for online leisure environments scaffolded by my theories of concept bridge and Valhalla group mechanics.

In short, this research's primary contribution is an advanced understanding of recreational groups in an online space, I have demonstrated the link from 'Concept Bridge' to 'Valhalla group' in a new online continuum which will facilitate future research and in-depth understanding of recreational groups which emerge in online spaces.

Future Research

The interactive online world has emerged only in the early part of the 21st century and has proliferated. Whether an individual or group has access to the internet or not, online interaction and digitally mediated communication have a powerful influence on the lives of every human being on the planet. Today, many political battles and essential decisions are made in virtual spaces or based on the opinions expressed by users of virtual spaces (*e.g.,* Cagé, Hervé and Mazoyer, 2020). This research has shown how this influence can be seen in one aspect of our lives, our recreation.

This research has observed a complex community of online recreationalists. Whilst it has been possible to observe the more 'fluid' nature of the recreational specialisation continuum within online space, some aspects of the mechanics remain to be understood. For example, what are the internal workings of 'Valhalla' groups? For such research to be conducted successfully, the researcher would require access to multiple groups over an extended period, which was not possible in light of this research project's noted limitations.

Furthermore, it must be noted that this research has focused on a single recreational activity, angling. It can be assumed that all recreational activities have the potential to generate dedicated groups of participants who use their own forms of concept bridge to translate their real-world activities to the online environment. This assumption allows for

extensive future research into these groups and their particular methodologies, approaches and challenges in communicating in an online space. As observed in this research (see Chapter 3), physical-world activities do not always translate directly into virtual worlds, suggesting that there might still be undefined recreational methodologies within online space that require further exploration.

Future research into social media groups and virtual cultures with very different concept bridges would also be valuable. An example of this kind of group might be found in those groups that form around 'alternative' interest areas like Cryptozoology, Ufology and the paranormal. Such interests seem to be deeply embedded in popular culture and existed prior to the advent of the internet. However, interest in such created mythologies seems to have proliferated since the advent of the internet and social media seems to have played a key part in the spread of information about these popular myths (Wibawa *et al.*, 2021). Other areas on digital culture, equally, offer the opportunity for future investigation using a recreational specialisation methodology. Gaming and esports, for example, have proliferated since the Covid-19 pandemic, becoming a major contributor to the UK and worldwide economies. The field is expected to experience further rapid growth and industry statistics show that this will result in a market worth over $33.77 billion by 2026. As a result, communities that engage in gaming and esports culture proliferate on their own social media platforms such as Discord. Investigations into these platforms and an exploration of if the concept bridge theory holds for these types of communities will be valuable as the gaming and esports industries mature and become vital to worldwide economies. Research into how these forms of communities transitioned onto the social media world and why they proliferated there would be valuable to develop a deeper understanding of the increased merging of serious and casual leisure, the nature of mythmaking in online space and its effects on wider society.

Furthermore, such research could help conceptualise the multidirectional nature of the concept bridge and illustrate how, just as the concept bridge facilitates physical-world activities into virtual space, it can also translate online activity into physical world experiences. Such research could add to the discussion around phenomena such as the 'slender man'. This fictitious paranormal character seems to have migrated somewhat into the physical world beliefs of some (Marie Boyer, 2013). This duality of the concept bridge has not been considered in this current work because of time constraints and limiting factors imposed on the work by the COVID-19 pandemic.

Returning to the world of recreational fishing, there remains much to be learned about this most ancient of sports and the ways anglers engage with their recreational activity. This research has touched, very lightly, upon the possibility of a spiritual aspect to the recreational activity of angling. Some researchers have already gone some way to consider this (*e.g.,* Snyder, 2007). However, this area of work has not been well developed. It has failed to consider the digital aspects of spirituality that have been lightly touched upon in other contexts by other researchers (*e.g.,* Helland, 2005).

Closing Remarks

In an academic work of this type, a quote from popular culture may slightly feel out of place. However, a quote from the 2014 re-release of the famous Godzilla (Edwards, 2014) movie might be of as much relevance to the online world as it is to the physical world. In the movie, the character Dr Ishiro Seriwaza says, 'The arrogance of man is thinking nature is in our control, and not the other way around.'. I would argue that this, too, is true of social media and the online world. We are still in the early days of human interactions with the digital world. In planetary terms, we have not even come to the primordial soup stage, and yet, in our arrogance, because we created it, we appear to tend to assume that we understand and control it. However, as this research has demonstrated, humans have only created an environment where new forms of society can evolve. Concept Bridges and Valhalla Groups were not pre-programmed into social media software. They have emerged through necessity as a tool to help us interact with virtual spaces. Through the lens of recreational activity, particularly through the lens of recreational angling, this research has shown how little control we can exercise over the direction of social media interaction and the responsibilities we have to continue to strive to understand more.

Overall, this research has shown the utility of applying established sociological and leisure studies ideas to the virtual world of online recreational participation. Much work remains to be done, and, in reality, we may never be able to keep up with the rapidly evolving online space of social media and digitally mediated communication. However, the suggestion that the complexity of the task is so great that it may not be worth trying is as absurd as the suggestion that the universe is not worth considering because it is too vast. This Thesis has demonstrated that this is a burgeoning field for future research where many discoveries remain to be made.

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Appendix 1

Group rules from the admins

1. No Hate Speech Or Bullying.

Make sure everyone feels safe. Bullying of any kind is not allowed, and degrading comments about race, religion, culture, sexual orientation, gender or identity will not be tolerated.

2. Be Kind and Courteous.

We are all in this together to create a welcoming environment. Let us treat everyone with respect. Healthy debates are natural, but kindness is required. Let us keep angling politics out of this group!

4. No Promotions or Spam.

Give more than you take to this group. Self-promotion, spam and irrelevant links are not allowed. Advertising is kept to a minimum and can ONLY be arranged with Admin. It is about fishing, not selling!

3. Respect Everyone's Privacy.

Being part of this group requires mutual trust. Authentic, expressive discussions make groups great but may also be sensitive and private. What is shared in the group should stay in the group.

5. Educate, Do not Berate.

Some people in this group will not be as experienced as you... those are the people we want! If you see someone doing something wrong, kindly educate, and make suggestions..HELP them do it right!

Appendix 2

Brief email exchange with Professor R Stebbins concerning serious leisure, occupational devotion and my conceptualization of links between sociology and leisure studies which, ultimately, became Figure 4 in this work.

On 12/19/2019 at 6:45 AM, Andrew Wedgbury wrote:

Dear Professor Stebbins,

Firstly, please allow me to introduce myself. My name is Andrew Wedgbury. I am currently studying for my PhD at the University of Worcester (UK). My interest is in the ways that anglers use social media to communicate about their hobby. I am particularly interested in the ways that anglers negotiate their level of skill through virtual interaction.

Obviously, your work on serious leisure is pivotal to my work and I have spent some time recently trying to relate your work along with Bryans work on recreational specialization into a conceptual framework, linking it with some work of classical sociologists.

Namely, I have seen linkages between your work and the work of both Marx and Veblen. Whilst I could spend time trying to explain and justify these links, I have no doubt that your time is precious, so I have taken the liberty of putting my thoughts into an extremely simplified graph form which I have attached.

I was wondering, I appreciate this is very presumptuous of me, if you could take a brief look at the attached graph and see if you would concur with the links I am formulating? Your help would be very much appreciated and invaluable in my research.

Andrew Wedgbury

Andrew Wedgbury Ba(Hon.), Ma.

PhD Student

University of Worcester

Institute of Sport & Exercise Science

From: Robert A. Stebbins <stebbins@ucalgary.ca>

Sent: 19 December 2019 17:36:05

To: Andrew Wedgbury

Subject: Re: Serious Leisure

Dear Andrew,

Nice diagram! It portrays well some of the relevant streams of thought in social theory. But, as an aside, serious leisure as a concept actually emerged inductively from qualitative field research (ie, without thoughts of Marx or Bryan). That said, our colleagues in leisure studies and sociology generally spend very little time linking leisure with the larger social scientific streams of thought. Thus your ideas are most welcome.

My incorporation of Bryan and rec. spec. into serious leisure is set out in Stebbins, Careers in serious leisure: From dabbler to devotee in search of fulfillment. Basingstoke, UK: Palgrave Macmillan, 2014, pp. 33-35.

Keep me posted on your doctoral work. I will want to list the finished product in www.seriousleisure.net

The Serious Leisure Perspective (SLP)

The serious leisure perspective (SLP) is a way of looking at leisure activities and how people experience them. This website contains a page describing the basic concepts and propositions of the...

www.seriousleisure.net

as well as subsequent publications.

Cheers,

Bob Stebbins

On 12/20/2019 at 3:35 AM, Andrew Wedgbury wrote:

Dear Prof. Stebbins.

Thank you so much for taking the time to get back to me. I will, of course, keep you updated about my work. What you have pointed out is that I may have got my diagram upside down. The intent was not to suggest that Marx or Veblen influenced you, as I know, both yours and Bryan's ideas were developed independently. What I actually hoped to indicate was the link between your work and previous work as a form of, I suppose, evidence. So, as I am sure you know, Veblen (and many theorists since) gave us the complementary concepts of Conspicuous Leisure and Conspicuous Consumption. Your work, because of the independent way that it emerged a) demonstrates that there is such a thing of Conspicuous Leisure even in contemporary societies and b) gives us a framework to more deeply understand Conspicuous Leisure. Conversely, Bryan's work, because of it's focus on areas such as 'equipment preference' demonstrates Conspicuous Consumption (Both in terms of equipment and resources) within leisure and gives us a great tool to help us understand exactly how it works within a leisure setting. My aim was to differentiate between the two constructs which, in my

opinion are all too often just lumped together and puzzled over rather than being defined and considered in terms of what we can actually learn from each.

If I could be rude enough to ask just one more question? How important do you see the concept of amateurism as an aspect of Serious Leisure being? For example, does an angler who receives sponsorship for his activity and, therefore, derives the major part of his income from the activity still class as an individual engaged in serious leisure? Alternatively, as I rather expect, does this represent a shift towards Marx's realm of necessity because there are no longer solely personal benefits to be derived from the activity.

Thanks again,

Andy.

Andrew Wedgbury <a.wedgbury@worc.ac.uk>

Fri 20/12/2019 17:06

From: Robert A. Stebbins

Sent: 20 December 2019 17:06:18 (UTC+00:00) Dublin, Edinburgh, Lisbon, London

To: Andrew Wedgbury

Subject: Re: Serious Leisure

Hi Andy,

You need to look at my book: Stebbins, R. A. (2004/2014). Between work and leisure: The common ground of two separate worlds. New Brunswick, NJ: Transaction/New York: Routledge, 2017 (paperback edition with new Preface, 2014). It explains occupational devotion or devotee work, which is serious leisure from which some people make a living. I have no e-copy to send you, but if you must buy one, try Google Books. Referenced in that book is Dan Yoder's article on the commodity element in the hobby of bass fishing, showing thereby that some of these fishers are occupational devotees and thus not pure hobbyists.

Cheers,

Bob S

Appendix 3

Initial announcement declaring my intention to conduct research in the *Fishamo* Facebook Group:

Post	
Andrew Wedgbury	Many of you will not know that I am a PhD candidate with the University of Worcester where I am conducting my doctoral research into how Anglers engage with their hobby through the use of social media. I am now about to embark on the exciting part of my research, data collection! I will be collecting data in the form of posts and images shared on social media, and because of its success, my data collection will focus on *Fishamo*. Under General Data Protection Regulation 2016, I am required to justify (what is called a "legal basis") to collect such information. The legal basis for this project is "task carried out in the public interest". You have the right to decline this permission. You will not be penalised in any way from participating in the *Fishamo* Facebook group if you choose not to give your permission to use your posts. This study aims to understand the motivations behind social media interaction between anglers and investigate if this interaction affects the opinions of less experienced anglers about fishing or on members of the general public's decision to take up fishing. Your information will help us understand why anglers participate in online discussions and debates about angling and establish if this affects angling participation. Ultimately, this research might contribute to how angling is promoted to the broader community in the future and help ensure angling survives for future generations to enjoy. It will also develop a deeper understanding of recreation online. During the research, all data that you provide will be anonymised. This means that you will not be identifiable in any way due to taking part in this research. In fairness to all *Fishamo* participants, I will repeat this notice regularly at various times over the coming weeks! You are welcome to contact me here about any concerns or if you expressly do not want to participate.
	Likes: 17 *Comments:* 6

Comment 1	
Erik Mitchell	Fire away.
	*Likes:*1 *Comments:* 0

Comment 2	
Raymond Arthur	You have my permission to use anything i post at any time Andrew, no need to ask mate. Not that i can see any of it being usefull 😂

	Likes:2	Comments: 0

Comment 3	
Tanner Kavanagh	No need to ask me Andrew 👍 👍

	Likes:1	Comments: 0

Comment 4	
Andrew Wedgbury	Thanks guys it's great to have your support!

	Likes:1	Comments: 0

Comment 5	
Brady Alexander	You can have my permission too

	Likes:1	Comments: 0

Comment 5	
Ayden Underwood	As a fellow UoW graduate I say go for it.

	Likes:1	Comments: 0

Throughout the research project, the support from the *Fishamo* was universal, with no participants requestion their data be removed, despite regular updates offering the members the opportunity to do so.

Appendix 4

An example of racially biased communication within the online space, the conversation was shared publicly but has been anonymised.

> Yes two bags took mate 👍

> How do you know they were polish?

> Yeah I like put all fish bk for nxt tym

> My friend was beside them fishing

> My friend was beside them fishing

> He knows Polish?

> Yeah y not   lol I can't tell by looking at Polish

> Can

> Mate

> There's a lot of nationalities that look similar and speak similar language

> No u can tell m

By what though?

Voice

That's the problem, everyone jumps to blame polish people

Looks way dress

You must be joking 🤣

That's the most ridiculous thing I've heard

😆

Am from here ino

Thats y ppl won't say were they fish

Why ?

Because you assume they're Polish

Mate, I can't even tell if someone is Polish

Until I hear them speak my language

So how can you tell? That's just makes no sense

Cuz they clean the place out pearch roch 6 inches there away home wif them fish don't stand a chance

Ok

But answer me how do you know they're Polish

I've heard that a lot of Lithuanians take the fish

Polish people follow the rules and shit on others who don't

So how do you know they're Polish ?

Cuz I no mate not stupid

That doesn't answer my question. I just told you, I can't always tell someone is Polish and I often spoke Polish to someone thinking they're Polish and it turned out they were not, so how can you tell that those two guys were Polish ?

Language thst answer u

Language, do you speak it ?

Sum ppl not botton up the back theses ppl are trained in that to catch des ppl fishing wif out paying and think they have rights to kill baby fish   shud be kicked into the water and left

Irish yes

Do you speak Polish?

No am irish mate

↓

Exactly

So you can't say someone was Polish by looking at them or by the voice.

They were

Because a lot of Polish anglers suffer discrimination and isn't able to join certain angling clubs because of people like yourself.

Listen was no polish here during 70s 80s   ??? Explan y now

?

Because we came to do work others couldn't be bothered to do.

My point is, not only Polish people go fishing. There are other nationalities (Eastern European) that take fish home (and law allows certain amount and size).

Yeah y wud we want them don't pay kill all round them no thanks ppl from here pay money for sum tool to trun up not even from dis county hasn't payed and can fish no no no

Not happen

Sud be fucked in to the water no pay swim away

Okay , I'm struggling to decipher what you're saying. But anyway, you seem targeted at Polish people and you come across racist, so let's end this conversation, sir.

Appendix 5

Showing the procedure and format taken when recording a Facebook post (names removed)

#	Responding to	Post Content	Likes	Comments
1	Initial Post	As lockdown legends is near it's end for the year I just want to thank everyone who has taken part. Thank you Andrew Wedgbury for organising the comp. I have made a few new friends during this comp and made a great new friends with **** *****. Discussing our predictions, sharing our catches and generally being a top bloke. Thank you everyone for taken part. ***** ****** and **** ***** have give me a run for my money in this comp and have provided some epic pics that I could only dream of catching. Thank you everyone who has backed me so far in the comp. Been blown away by your support Also **** ********** has giving me a laugh with his many zander hybrids! And a massive, massive thank you all of you for brightening my day while stuck in lockdown. The lockdown has been tough on me struggling with my anxiety, not seeing my family and working in a supermarket that's stressful in times and worst of all no fishing! But you lot have helped me get through the day, seeing your catches. Watching the poll and looking through all my old photos bring back memories so a massive thank you! Soon the lockdown will be over but the lockdown legends and the friends I've made will last much longer Many thanks ****** 🤘	31	23
2	1	Well said [1]	2	
3	AW	Thanks Jordan Jenkinson! It's good to know we have done a good thing here, bought a few anglers together, demonstrated some of the solidarity which should ALWAYS have been part of angling AND of course, taken a crappy situation and turned it into something we can all look forward to every year! Let's use this as a lesson! It has shown us what a world without fishing would be like and, sadly, we	4	

		are closer to a world without fishing than many anglers realise.... hopefully, this little friendly competition will have bought some people together to try and ensure that never happens!		
4	1	Nice one pal!!! 👏 🎣	2	
5	1	Good one [1]	2	
6	1	Well done jordan 👏 👏	1	2
7	6	[6] cheers pal, you've been fantastic as well! Loved some of your epic catches	1	
8	6	[1] thanks mate 👍	1	
9	1	[4][5]youse two have been amazing lads keep up the good work 🤘	2	1
10	9	[9] cheers mate, proper good bunch of lads!! 👌 🎣 🎣		
11	1	Next year I need to make sure I gave zander and catfish under my belt 🤣	3	2
12	11	[11] youve paid for a days guiding so thats still on the list mate 👍 🎣 🐟 🐟 😁	1	
13	11	Mark Powell-Bevan can't wait	1	
14	1	Been a pleasure talking predictions and which pictures to choose with ya mate, we've had a good laugh lol, which im sure will continue into chase the Ace no doubt lol. Once this is over get out there and catch yourself some monsters for next year, you said you wanted to and i have no doubt your more than capable! 😁	2	7
15	14	[14] been a top bloke through this whole thing! Made a real friend for life even though we've been rivels through the comp so far 🤣 thank you so much mate really appreciate keeping me occupied during lockdown	1	
16	14	[14] you better stay in touch!	1	
17	14	[16] i can assure you, I will be definitely be keeping in touch mate! Once lockdowns over and i finally get a chance to target some zander, you will be the very first person to see the first fish i catch. Chatting to you the other night has seriously got me quite excited for the zander fishing this year. Its been just the slightest things that could change it all for me!	1	
18	14	I like to think the *Fishamo* facebook page will continue and we will all keep posting catches, entering competitiond and having an overall good laugh when the lockdowns over.	1	
19	14	[18] it has been a pleasure to help you 👍 this page will help all us anglers to be more	2	

		competant at every level and most important, enjoy it more 👍		
20	14	[19] Your 100% right mate, this page will continue long after lockdown and we will all learn things off of each other as time goes by! As i said the other day on here, this is the first page in a long long time ive enjoyed being involved in... and i shall continue being involved as long as it carries on the way it is.	2	
21	14	[20] spot on mate		
22	1	[14] He obviously dont know you that well [14] lol	1	2
23	22	[22] cheers mate! Has he hired you to jeopardise my chances tomorrow??? 😂		
24	22	[23] lol never		