Making Local Connections:  
The Development of Social Capital through Place-Based Virtual Groups  

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ABSTRACT

Over the last decade, as computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become ubiquitous, place-based virtual groups have become increasingly common in the U.S. People are using various CMC tools, such as email lists, message boards, and social network sites, to form these virtual groups in order to connect with their neighbors and learn about their neighborhoods. While our society’s relationship with the idea of neighborhood has become more complicated as our conception of community has become more liberated and less rooted in place, many Americans still want – and benefit from – relationships they form with people they live near. This thesis uses social capital as a lens to investigate whether place-based virtual groups may be supporting community and neighbor social networks in neighborhoods. It focuses on four dimensions of social capital in particular: sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation / civic engagement, and collective efficacy.

The author looked at four place-based virtual groups—three neighborhood email discussion lists and one neighborhood Facebook Group—in the San Francisco Bay Area. She interviewed members of the virtual groups and reviewed content from the groups’ archives, looking for evidence that the groups were supporting the development of social capital for the individuals who participated in them. This thesis analyzes the experiences of individuals in the groups, assesses each group with respect to how it seems to be supporting the development of social capital, and presents lessons for planners interested in increasing social capital or building community in neighborhoods. The author found evidence that each of the four place-based virtual groups did seem to support the development of sense of community, neighboring, and civic engagement, and that they had the potential to support the development of collective efficacy. However, she also found a lot of variation among the different groups, and the results raise interesting questions about what circumstances might be required to bring about place-based virtual groups that strongly encourage all dimensions of social capital.

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When neighbors feel they share something based simply on the fact that they are neighbors, they extend their sense of home into the neighborhood at large. As a result, they gain the benefits of living among those with whom they are, however weakly, communally involved. They possess the psychological security of thinking themselves surrounded by people they can trust and the real benefits of being able to draw upon neighbor ties in times of trouble or emergency. Further, they are better able to mobilize when local issues demand group action.

Carol Silverman (1986)
1.1 PREFACE

There are two pieces of my personal history that brought me to my thesis topic. One is cohousing, and the other is a social network site called Tribe.net (Tribe\(^1\)).

During and right after college, I lived in a cohousing community and was introduced to the benefits of living near a bunch of people you know: you can share resources, which means that you can save money and reduce the amount of stuff you have to acquire; you can easily get help with little favors from people you know and trust; your life is more social because you’re constantly running into people around your neighborhood. Basically, knowing all your neighbors and having lots of social capital in your neighborhood can make day-to-day life easier and friendlier.

Then in 2004 I moved to San Francisco and started using Tribe, a social network site that helped me connect to people who lived near me. Tribe wasn’t created

\(^1\) The correct way to refer to the company is tribe, without capitalization, but for the sake of clarity I’ll be capitalizing it in this thesis.

\(^2\) In contrast, for example, most place-blogs do not require participants to register as members to read the blog, they do not have an obviously defined and finite list of network participants, and they restrict
specifically to connect neighborhoods, although some neighborhoods started groups on the site; but it was set up to help people connect to people who lived near them, by creating groups that were based on both interest and proximity. “Making local connections” was the service’s tagline. While the features and arrangements of the site were mildly interesting, the thing that completely captivated my attention and stayed with me was the revolutionary experience of using online tools to meet and get to know people I would then see regularly in real life. I was extremely impressed to find that a social network site could be used to initiate and bolster in-person relationships by creating a relaxed public space where you could learn names and faces while interacting around local issues and common interests. Friends who had moved to the city before me had warned that it could take more than a year to develop a satisfying social life, but within two months I had dozens of newly developing friendships and was attending events every weekend, largely due to the way Tribe supported local connections.

Then Tribe faded into obscurity as Facebook and other sites rose in prominence; and while social network services still play a large role in my life, none of the half-dozen or so that I use on a regular basis try to connect me to the people that are physically nearby. In fact, none of the current large-scale social network sites are focusing on connecting people to others who live near them.

1.2 RESEARCH QUESTION AND FOCUS

Tribe is an example of a tool that enables place-based virtual groups (also referred to herein by the shorthand virtual groups), which can be thought of as online groups that concentrate on connecting users who live in or are interested in a specific neighborhood, generally with the explicit goal of encouraging communication among users while facilitating exchange of information about the neighborhood. Place-based virtual groups can be distinguished from other neighborhood websites because they have membership processes that dictate who can access the group’s content, they have a clearly delineated group structure with precise boundaries, and they provide the technical means for all members to participate with more or less equal voices. Other examples of tools that enable place-based virtual groups

---

2 In contrast, for example, most place-blogs do not require participants to register as members to read the blog, they do not have an obviously defined and finite list of network participants, and they restrict access to the broadcasting component of the blog to a small number of people.
include email discussion lists³, forum-style message boards, and any social network sites⁴ that allow participants to form groups.

Over the past decade, as computer-mediated communication (CMC) has become ubiquitous, place-based virtual groups have become increasingly common in the U.S. People are using various electronic communication tools to connect with their neighbors and learn about their neighborhoods. Given that society’s relationship with the idea of neighborhood seems to have become so complicated in the past several decades, as our conception of community has become less rooted in place, some might not expect Americans to be interested in seeking connection with their neighbors. But for many people—even in dense urban areas—place still matters. They still crave some sort of connection to the place they live in and the people who live nearby, whether they call it community or something else.

Social capital is a useful concept to use when talking about neighborhoods and communities and the reasons that people continue to want to connect to others who live near them. It can be defined as “connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them” (Putnam 2000), and one can use it as a lens to assess and compare communities or neighborhoods. While not an unqualified good, social capital has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as lower crime rates; improved child welfare;

³ While the word “listserv” is commonly used to refer to electronic mailing lists, LISTSERV is actually a registered trademark for a commercial product. I will therefore use the term email list to refer to generic email “discussion” lists. Also note that email “announce” lists do not fall within the parameters of the virtual groups investigated in this study because they restrict posting privileges to a small number of list members.

⁴ Social network sites are defined by boyd and Donath as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (2008). I adopt boyd and Donath’s convention of referring to the sites as “social network” sites rather than “social networking” sites.
career advancement and successful job searches, improved physical and mental health, and indices of psychological well-being such as satisfaction with life and self-esteem (Adler and Kwon 2002; Putnam 2000; Granovetter 1995; Helliwell and Putnam 2004; Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002).

In this paper, I argue that place-based virtual groups (and their associated tools) can be useful in developing social capital for the individuals who participate in them. As author Paul Resnick points out, “[i]nteraction of some kind is a necessary condition for building social capital”, and place-based virtual groups can be used to overcome barriers to neighborly interaction (2001). They are designed to encourage relationships among neighbors, facilitating free conversation on a multiplicity of topics among individuals who are each given equal voice within a coherent bounded group. In particular, I argue that these virtual groups are relevant in supporting four dimensions of social capital: sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation/civic engagement, and collective efficacy.

The question I began with was: *What are the lessons that individuals’ experiences with place-based virtual groups can offer to people who are interested in increasing social capital or building community in a given place?*

Through interviews with participants in four place-based virtual groups in the Bay Area, I found that each of the four groups was supporting the development of social capital: they contributed to overall sense of community in neighborhoods that use them, even when not all residents are part of the groups; they increased levels of neighboring behavior among group members; and they supported citizen participation and civic engagement by increasing the visibility of opportunities to participate as well as the participation of others. I also found that each of the four groups had the potential to contribute to the development of collective efficacy by making the group’s opinions more visible and providing a means for easily organizing collective action.

However, I also found a lot of variation among the different groups, and the results raise many interesting questions about what circumstances might be required to bring about place-based virtual groups that strongly encourage each dimension of social capital.

As part of my research I also spoke with leaders at companies that develop and manage tools that enable place-based virtual groups about how their companies’ tools relate to social capital and about best practices in building place-based community through CMC. The multiplicity of answers I received further complicates the findings from the participant interviews, since professionals disagree regarding the best ways to build community and develop social capital.
1.3 WHY PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS?

But why, many people have asked me, should they care about having social capital in their neighborhoods, specifically? And why would they need the internet to build social capital with people who live next door? Why, in fact, would they possibly want to be formally linked to their neighbors—people they have little in common with and oftentimes barely know—at all? Because it's so easy to run across the street to borrow an extra cake pan, and it's even easier when you saw on that neighbor's online profile that they love baking. Because it's so nice to feel secure when you're walking home late at night, and it's even nicer to know that your neighbors will post an announcement if they hear about a burglary down the street. Because of the smiles you get when people say hello as you walk down your street—smiles that become more common once your block's been exchanging messages online for a few months.

Over the last half-century, as people's settlement patterns, transportation habits, and recreation preferences have changed so dramatically, fewer and fewer American neighborhoods seem to be playing host to networks of neighbors who know each other's names, look out for each other, exchange favors, and talk about issues of local importance. To create and sustain a network of connected neighbors, a neighborhood needs methods of communication. Again, over the last half-century, Americans have changed their habits. More women work outside the home; the workweek has gotten longer for many members of the workforce; average commutes have gotten longer; and neighborhood children don't necessarily go to the same schools. All of these changes affect the amount of face-to-face in-person communication that people living in the same neighborhood are likely to experience, and face-to-face has traditionally been the primary, if not the only, way that neighbors have communicated.

Now, however, CMC methods abound, and new social media tools are being invented every day. People are increasingly using electronic means to communicate with everyone in their lives, because it's easier and more convenient than other options. CMC can make communication with neighbors easier and more convenient as well—all that's needed is a little coordination and a decision about which tool to use. Using a tool that enables place-based virtual groups, neighbors can share information, get to know each other's names, coordinate neighborhood events and projects, develop trust, and eventually get to a state of being able to depend on each other for small favors and the occasional minor emergency.
None of the conveniences that arise from place-based virtual groups are new; all of them have occurred in neighborhoods around the world for as long as humans have known how to communicate and cooperate. What’s new is the ease with which place-based virtual groups facilitate connections among neighbors who are too busy or whose lives are too geographically fragmented to permit them much time for the slow process of getting to know each other on front stoops and over fences.

These days when people talk about a place with high levels of neighborly behavior they usually treat it like a romanticized concept that is necessarily relegated to the past; but this research is not about nostalgia and it’s not about recovering something lost. People today are still part of communities and they still care about the places they live in. I’m interested in how we can use new communication tools to build a more substantial web of neighborhood connections into our increasingly global social networks, not replacing our existing geographically-dispersed communities but supplementing them with one more layer.

My hope is that the findings from this thesis can be of use to individuals interested in building place-based community in their own neighborhoods, as well as to community-based organizations interested in new tools that might be appropriate for supporting community among their constituents. I also encourage urban planners as they read this to remember the importance of communication in the planning process and to consider what opportunities—in terms of community-building and civic engagement, for example—might accompany the increased use of tools that enable the formation of place-based virtual groups.

1.4 ORGANIZATION OF THIS THESIS

The rest of this paper is divided into six sections.

Section 2, Context and Background, gives the reader background information on social capital, community, CMC, and related topics. This section incorporates a discussion of the relevant academic literature, and it will place this thesis among related research efforts.

Section 3, Research and Evaluation Methods, presents the research design for this thesis. It describes the methods used to find and select interviewees as well as the rationale for selecting four case place-based virtual groups as case studies in the San Francisco Bay Area. It also briefly explains the methods used to compare the case studies and to evaluate the content of interviews. Finally, this section includes discussion of the limitations of the research.
In Section 4, Place-Based Virtual Groups: Case Studies, the four Bay Area case studies—Acton Community, Brittany Meadows, Mission Parents, and Piedmont Ave—are presented. The section includes brief descriptions of the neighborhoods in which the case study virtual groups are based, descriptions of the groups themselves, synopses of the groups' typical content, and discussions of the relationships between the virtual groups and the neighborhoods.

Section 5, Findings from Participant Interviews, presents findings from interviews with individuals who participate in place-based virtual groups, addressing their perceptions of and opinions on whether and how the groups are encouraging the development of social capital, their motivations for participating in the groups, and the value they find in the groups. Findings regarding social capital are presented primarily in terms of the four dimensions mentioned above: sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation/civic engagement, and collective efficacy. These concepts are defined as follows:

**Sense of Community:** Sense of community can be defined as “trust in one’s neighbors” which derives from social connections, mutual concerns, and community values and which results in social support from one’s community (Perkins and Long 2002).

**Neighboring:** Neighboring behavior is “the instrumental help we provide, or get from, other community members” (Perkins et al. 2002). Examples include borrowing a cup of sugar or a hammer, watering a neighbor’s plants while she’s gone, and getting advice from a neighbor about which local attorney to call.

**Citizen Participation/Civic Engagement:** Citizen participation is defined in the community psychology literature as “involvement in any organized activity in which the individual participates without pay in order to achieve a common goal” (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988), and includes participation in grassroots organizations such as school-based associations, neighborhood associations, faith-based service groups, and self-help groups. Civic engagement comprises the concepts of citizen participation as well as less formal individual volunteerism and participation in the electoral process.

**Collective Efficacy:** The definition of collective efficacy, for the purposes of this study, is “trust in the effectiveness of organized collective action” (Perkins and Long 2002).

Section 6, Lessons and Recommendations, presents lessons from experiences with the four case studies that may be applicable to other similar virtual groups. This
section also includes suggestions for further research in this area, and it concludes with a discussion of various theories of developing place-based community through CMC tools. This final discussion was developed based on interviews with industry leaders.
2.1 COMMUNITIES, NEIGHBORHOODS, AND SOCIAL NETWORKS

2.1.1 Community: Lost, Saved, or Liberated?

Since the advent of rapid urbanization in the 19th century and through a series of technological advancements that have affected human interaction, sociologists have debated the ways in which urban and technological "progress" may affect the formation and durability of human communities (e.g., Durkheim 1993, Wirth 1938, Simmel 1950, Tonnies 1887, Gans, 1962, Jacobs 1961, Stack 1974, Wellman 1979, Sampson 2008). The crux of the debate, which has been deemed the community question: does progress lead to the loss of community, or do humans find ways of adapting to retain or recreate community?

Sociologists from the 19th century and the first half of the 20th century were primarily concerned with the phenomenon of, as Barry Wellman coined it, community lost (1979)—the idea that living in cities with additive anti-community factors such as division of labor, industrialization, commutes, cars, and telephones would dissolve
pre-existing communities and make the formation of new communities unlikely, if not impossible.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, a series of influential ethnographies revealed that despite dire warnings from classical sociology that community and cities were antithetical, community was in fact thriving in many urban neighborhoods (Gans 1962, Jacobs 1961, Stack 1974). From these and other studies came the rebuttal that came to be known as community saved (Wellman 1979), which posited that neighborhood-based communities persisted in cities due to their continuing ability to provide support, social interactions, informal social control, and a means by which to sort into homogeneous groupings, all of which functions were still valued by residents despite their urban surroundings (see Keller 1968; Suttles 1972, via Wellman 1979).

In the 1970s a third school of thought was added to the community debate—the idea of community liberated. Community liberated, also referred to as “community without propinquity” (Webber 1963), is a conception of community in which individuals’ understandings of personal community move beyond neighborhood boundaries to become non-spatial and include relationships with friends and relatives who may be located next door, across town, or on another continent (Wellman 1979; Sampson 2008). Liberated community is grounded in social network analysis and theory (see, e.g., Granovetter 1973; Fischer 1976). It is assisted by, among other factors, ubiquitous and cheap communication technology (Wellman and Leighton 1979); as the world has become more connected through information and communications technology (ICT) over time, the concept of community liberated and the idea that community has been “transformed rather than lost” (Sampson 2008) has become increasingly dominant.

2.1.2 Neighborhoods or Networks? Definitions of Community and Functions of Neighborhood Ties

But what is the definition of community in the context of the debate discussed above? The definition varies and has changed over time. One traditional definition of community, identified by Hillery in 1955, is: “networks of interpersonal ties (outside the household) which provide sociability and support to members, residence in a common locality, and solidarity sentiments and activities” (via Wellman and Leighton 1979). Notably, this definition has traditionally been associated with and
overlaid on neighborhoods\(^5\). Under the pure conception of community liberated, however, the requirement for residence in a common locality is removed. Communities then merely consist of networks of interpersonal ties—social networks—providing support and sociability as well as solidarity sentiments and activities, with no requirement that community members share an association with the same physical place.

While it seems straightforward at this point that most individuals in the U.S. experience community as liberated to some degree, relying on geographically far-flung friends and family for support rather than just relying on people who live within a mile of their homes, it also seems clear that physical proximity is still a real and important factor in how individuals structure and pursue interpersonal ties. Place-based community and social network-based community are not mutually exclusive\(^7\), and the interplay and tension between the two categories in people’s lives lies at the heart of this thesis as well as much of the research discussed below. While individuals continue to embrace the liberation of community from locality, using ICT and advances in transportation to sustain interpersonal ties across vast distances, they also still crave some sort of local feeling of community and therefore also want local interpersonal ties, including neighbor ties\(^8\).

People crave local neighborhood community and the neighbor ties that form such community because these connections have a number of advantages over networks with people who live far away: “[t]he close spatial location of neighbors makes them particularly unique to perform functions which other network members would find difficult” (Unger and Wandersman 1985). Neighbors provide personal and emotional support by being casually sociable—providing daily greetings and simple interactions that can reduce feelings of social isolation (Unger and Wandersman

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\(^5\) In this paper I use the definition of neighborhood provided by Schoenberg (1979): “common named boundaries, more than one institution identified with the area, and more than one tie of shared public space or social network”.

\(^6\) A social network, according to Barry Wellman, is “a set of people...connected by a set of socially-meaningful relationships” (1996). Social networks can be located entirely within a bounded geographic area such as a neighborhood or a city, but they can also sprawl across the globe or be untethered from physical geography completely. One can look at the social network of an individual or one can look at a social network as a group. Social networks can exist online, offline, or in both virtual and real space at the same time.

\(^7\) Nor do the two categories comprise the entirety of classifications of community. See, in particular, Brint (2001)—in his typology, communities can be categorized based on whether they exist due to geography or choice: whether people interact for the sake of activity or beliefs; whether members are dispersed or concentrated in space; and whether there is some or no face-to-face interaction.

\(^8\) Relationships with neighbors continue to be common in the U.S. A Pew Research Center study on social isolation found that approximately 40% of Americans know all or most of the names of their nearest neighbors, and another 30% knew at least a few names. That same survey found that 61% of Americans talk to neighbors face-to-face once a month or more frequently (Hamption et al. 2009).
Neighbors are a very convenient source of instrumental support in the form of exchanges of small favors or commitments and in the case of emergencies that take place at one’s home (Unger and Wandersman 1985; Wellman 1979), and they can also be a convenient source for more significant exchanges of favors or services, such as childcare, health care, or major home repairs (Wellman and Wortley 1990). Neighbors are a useful resource in preventing local crime—they can keep an eye on your house when you’re out of town, and they can act as “eyes on the street” that deter criminal behavior (Sampson and Groves 1989; Unger and Wandersman 1985; Jacobs 1961). Neighbors are likely to know more about local resources and issues than ties who live far away (Unger and Wandersman 1985). Neighborhood communities can support an individual’s attachment to place and satisfaction with where he or she lives, as well as provide an overall sense of mutual aid among residents (Unger and Wandersman 1985).

The concept of social capital, described below, has been linked to many of the benefits that can accrue from neighbors and neighborhoods, and can be a useful metric in examining the vitality of neighborhoods and place-based communities.

### 2.2 AN INTRODUCTION TO SOCIAL CAPITAL

While Jane Jacobs was not the first to use the term social capital, her mention of the idea in the now canonical *The Death and Life of Great American Cities* (1961) helped bring the concept to the attention of city planners, community developers, and sociologists. She used social capital to refer to networks of people that emerge in urban neighborhoods and provide mutual support for members of the network and to the neighborhoods overall. Since 1961, social capital has been described in a variety of ways by academics in multiple fields, but most descriptions refer to the resources that can be mobilized through social relationships (Bourdieu 1986; Coleman 1988; Putnam 1995, 2001; de Souza Briggs 1997; Lin 1999, 2001). Perhaps the most popularly recognized definition comes from Robert Putnam in his 1995 essay “Bowling Alone” and the 2000 book of the same name:

*Social capital refers to connections among individuals—social networks and the norms of reciprocity and trustworthiness that arise from them.*

Social capital can be a characteristic of any type of group with a social network, including a neighborhood, a town, or any type of online or offline community. While not an unqualified good, social capital has been linked to a variety of positive outcomes, such as lower crime rates (Adler and Kwon 2002); improved child welfare (Putnam 2000); career advancement (Burt 1997) and successful job searches (Granovetter 1995); improved physical and mental health (Helliwell and Putnam...
and indices of psychological well-being such as satisfaction with life and self-esteem (Bargh, McKenna, and Fitzsimons 2002; Helliwell and Putnam 2004).

One distinction that is particularly useful when talking about social capital is the difference between strong and weak social ties, with strong ties representing close friendships or kinship ties and weak ties representing acquaintances (Granovetter 1973; Wellman and Wortley 1990). While most people might intuitively assume that strong ties are more important in life, in 1973 Mark Granovetter pointed out “the strength of weak ties”, noting that these seemingly less vital ties could be extremely important for “getting ahead” (de Souza Briggs 1997). Weak ties are more likely to be with people with whom you have less in common socially, geographically, or professionally, and so they can sometimes provide connections to worlds that you might not otherwise come into contact with. In social capital theory, weak ties often represent bridging social capital—relationships that connect individuals from different groups—and the number of weak ties an individual creates has been linked to that individual’s ability to access bridging social capital (de Souza Briggs 1997; Putnam 2000). Strong ties, in contrast, are associated with bonding social capital, the strong in-group ties that people rely on for “getting by” on a day-to-day basis (de Souza Briggs 1997; Putnam 2000).

In the context of this thesis, it is important to note that much of my interest as I looked at place-based virtual groups was in weak ties and bridging social capital, not strong ties or bonding social capital, because of the prevalence of weak ties among neighbors. While it used to be normal for people to have several strong ties within their neighborhoods, such circumstances are no longer as common; neighbor ties are now more commonly weak ties (Wellman 1979; Fischer 1982). Additionally, studies have shown that the use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) among neighbors primarily supports the formation of weak ties rather than strong ties (Hampton 2003, 2007).

Another concept from social network analysis that is particularly valuable in the context of place-based virtual groups is the idea of latent ties. Latent ties are ties “for which a connection is available technically but that has not yet been activated by social interaction”, and latent ties have the potential to be converted into weak ties (Haythornthwaite 2002). If a neighborhood in which very few people know each other starts a place-based virtual group for residents, suddenly there are latent ties among all the members of that group, since they now have the ability to connect; and as the neighbors use the group to meet each other, the latent ties become weak ties.
As indicated above, social capital has been linked to both individual accomplishments and group characteristics, but it is important to note that there is some controversy over whether social capital is a collective or an individual (relational) asset. While many authors agree that social capital can be accessed by individuals as well as by groups, there is disagreement whether social capital can belong to individuals through their personal relationships or if it can only belong to networks of relationships. This disagreement is complicated by the fact that it is difficult to measure social capital at the group level, and thus even researchers who advocate a group-level conception of social capital are often forced to gather data at the level of the individual and extrapolate from there. In this thesis I take the approach that social capital is both a collective and an individual good, and that it can be accessed by individuals.

When assessing social capital in either groups or individuals, researchers have looked at and attempted to measure an array of concepts that they deem predictors (e.g., place attachment, communitarianism), indicators (e.g., size of social network, trust, reciprocity, volunteerism), or outcomes (e.g., feelings of safety, democratic participation) of social capital. The concepts that researchers choose often depend on their discipline—public health researchers might focus on mental and physical health outcomes; criminologists might focus on criminal behavior outcomes and social disorder indicators; and community development researchers might focus on sense of community and collective efficacy. Some specific research examples include:

- Robert Putnam famously emphasized participation in organizations and civic engagement, although he also attempted to measure social trust and informal sociability, and since 2000 he has led the Saguaro Seminar, an ongoing initiative with the goal "to improve social capital measurement" (Saguaro Seminar, 2009).

- In the United Kingdom, the Office for National Statistics has compiled the Social Capital Question Bank (a repository for survey questions used by different government agencies), and that document divides questions under five themes: participation, social engagement, commitment; control, self-efficacy; perception of community level structures or characteristics; social interactions, social networks, social support; and trust, reciprocity, social cohesion.
Social network analysts measure the size and density of social ties as part of their examinations of social capital (e.g., Wellman 2001; Safford 2009).

Douglas Perkins, Joseph Hughey, and Paul Speer, researchers from the field of community psychology, claim that social capital should be assessed simultaneously (through multi-level analysis) at the individual level—via the four dimensions of sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation, and collective efficacy—and at the community level, by analyzing all the institutions in a given community as well as the network of relationships among the institutions (2002).

2.2.2 Indicators of Social Capital: Sense of Community, Neighboring, Citizen Participation / Civic Engagement, and Collective Efficacy

In this thesis, I will be looking at social capital using the framework of four dimensions of individual-level social capital articulated by Perkins, Hughey, and Speer in their 2002 paper, “Community Psychology Perspectives on Social Capital Theory and Community Development Practice” and by Perkins and Long in their 2002 paper, “Neighborhood Sense of Community and Social Capital: A Multi-Level Analysis”. These social capital indicators are sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation (closely related to civic engagement), and collective efficacy. Below is a brief discussion of each term (see also Figure 2-1). I selected this framework to use in my assessment because it is intended for use in examining neighborhoods, in particular, and because it is focused on an individual’s experience of social capital rather than a group’s experience of social capital.

Figure 2-1: Four Dimensions of Social Capital

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Informal</th>
<th>Social Behavior</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Sense of Community</td>
<td>Neighboring</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Formally Organized</td>
<td>Citizen Participation / Civic Engagement</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

11 Perkins, Hughey, and Speer also present a conceptualization of community-level social capital, which they define as “the array of institutions or organizations in a given community and the network of relationships among them”. To measure community-level social capital, they propose mapping the presence of institutions/organizations in a community and then doing network analysis of the institutions/organizations at the community level (2002).

12 Both of these papers are from the community psychology literature.
**Sense of community.** also called “psychological sense of community”, is defined by Perkins and Long (2002) to mean the “trust in one’s neighbors” which derives from social connections, mutual concerns, and community values, and which results in social support from one’s community. In 1974 the term came to prominence as a central concept in community psychology (Sarason 1974), and the most widely influential definition was proposed in 1986: “Sense of community is a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together” (McMillan 1976, via McMillan and Chavis 1986). Sense of community has been found to be a catalyst for neighboring behavior and formal participation in communities (Chavis and Wandersman 1990), and it has been linked to collective efficacy (Chavis and Wandersman 1990; Perkins and Long 2002), community satisfaction (Perkins et al. 1990; Sampson 1991), place attachment (Perkins and Long 2002), informal social control (Perkins et al. 1990), general life satisfaction (Prezza et al., 2001), and less loneliness (Prezza et al., 2001).

**Neighboring** is defined by Perkins and Long as “informal mutual assistance and information sharing among neighbors”, a form of “instrumental social support” (2002). Examples include borrowing a cup of sugar or a hammer, watering a neighbor’s plants while she’s gone, and getting advice from a neighbor about which local attorney to call. Neighboring allows neighbors to get to know each other better (Unger and Wandersman 1985), and it has been linked to more successful block organizations (Unger and Wandersman 1983), participation in community organizations (Perkins and Long 1996), community satisfaction (Brown and Werner 1985), and informal social control (Perkins et al. 1990).

**Citizen participation** is defined within the community psychology literature by Zimmerman and Rappaport as “involvement in any organized activity in which the individual participates without pay in order to achieve a common goal” (1988). This definition, which I adopt for this thesis, is broader than that of Perkins and Long, which requires formal participation in grassroots organizations, but it is still quite limited compared to the concept of *civic engagement*14, a related idea that comprises

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13 Other authors also include basic social interaction among neighbors as part of their definition of neighboring (e.g., Unger and Wandersman 1985), but in this thesis I use the Perkins and Long understanding of the term.

14 While the concept of civic engagement is not one of the dimensions of social capital as named by Perkins and Long or Perkins, Hughey, and Speer, in interviews I asked about all forms of civic engagement in order to get a better sense of each interviewee’s level of participation in his or her neighborhood and community. Since informal civic engagement through volunteerism, community organizing, and political participation was generally higher than formal citizen participation, this method of inquiry led to a more nuanced sense of how much each interviewee participated in local activity.
activities that fall within the realm of citizen participation as well as individual 
volunteerism and participation in the electoral process (see Table 2-1, from Putnam 
2000). Civic engagement, the decrease of which was the primary concern of Robert 
Putnam in his assessment of America’s social capital in Bowling Alone (2000), can 
be defined as “individual and collective actions designed to identify and address 
issues of public concern” (American Psychological Association 2012).

Citizen participation has been linked to increased sense of sense of community 
(Chavis and Wandersman 1990; Perkins and Long 2002), greater collective efficacy 
(Perkins et al. 2002), increased community satisfaction (Perkins et al. 1990), and 
more neighboring behavior (Unger and Wandersman 1985; Perkins et al. 2002). It 
has also been shown to help individuals “feel more competent and less alienated” 
(Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988). Increased civic engagement, according to 
Putnam, has been linked to positive outcomes when dealing with education, 

Table 2-1: Political and Community Participation (from Putnam 2000)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Activity</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>served as an officer of some club or organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>worked for a political party</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>served on a committee for some local organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attended a public meeting on town or school affairs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>attended a political rally or speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>made a speech</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrote a congressperson or senator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>signed a petition</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>was a member of some “better government” group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>held or ran for political office</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrote a letter to the paper</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>wrote an article for a magazine or newspaper*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*A more modern version of this list might also include writing a blog post and submitting 
comments to a local blog or newspaper website.

Collective efficacy is defined by Perkins and Long as “empowerment” or as “trust in 
the effectiveness of organized collective action” (2002); and Perkins, Hughey, and 
Speer clarify that “empowerment is about the development of a sense of…control 
over the institutions that affect one’s life”, wherein institutions may include 
neighborhoods (2002). (It is important to note that this is quite different from the 
more common definition from Sampson, Raudenbush, and Earls: “social cohesion 
among neighbors combined with their willingness to intervene on behalf of the 
common good” [1997].) Collective efficacy, as defined here, has been found to
predict participation and to be important for sustaining participation (Perkins et al. 1990, 2002; Florin and Wandersman 1984) (and participation, as alluded to above, is thought to indirectly predict collective efficacy [Saegert and Winkel 1996]).

2.3 SOCIAL CAPITAL IN A CIVIC AND NEIGHBORHOOD CONTEXT

In his 1995 article “Bowling Alone” and 2000 book of the same name, Robert Putnam claimed that social capital was in decline in communities across the U.S., and that this decline had the potential to negatively impact education, child welfare, neighborhood safety, economic prosperity, health, happiness, and democracy. He based his conclusion on evidence of declines in civic engagement, political participation, civic participation, religious participation, workplace connections, informal social connections, volunteering, philanthropy, altruism, reciprocity, honesty, and trust. His publications created a flurry of controversy in academia as well as widespread interest in the media and among members of the public who read pop sociology.

Concern about a loss of sense of community and an increase in isolation in American neighborhoods was nothing new in 1995, of course. In addition to the sociologists from the “community lost” school of thought mentioned above, journalists, historians, novelists, and creators of all manner of popular media have a long tradition of feeding the debate over the community question, encouraging nostalgia for neighborhoods where everyone knows everyone, children are safe, and people leave their doors unlocked (see, e.g., Ehrenhalt 1995; the comic strip Blondie; the television show Leave it to Beaver; the film It’s a Wonderful Life; the art of Norman Rockwell); and while the original demons were industrialization and crowded cities, by the end of the 20th century suburban form and lifestyle were also vilified as contributing to the erosion of community and causing people to feel more isolated (see, e.g., the film Subdivided [2007]; Duany, Plater-Zyberk, and Speck 2001; the novel Revolutionary Road [Yates 1961]; Aaron 2011).

However, Putnam’s publications prompted new interest in the subject of social capital. In the popular media and other non-academic settings, Putnam became famous15, influencing many (including several of the developers of place-based network services interviewed for this thesis, including Scott Heiferman of Meetup,

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15 As noted in an article in The Atlantic (Lemann 1996), Putnam was invited to meet with President Clinton at Camp David; his 1995 piece was prominently reviewed in the New York Times Book Review; and he was profiled in People magazine in September of 1995 (Day).
Vivek Hutheesing of rBlock, Nirav Tolia of Nextdoor, and Michael Wood-Lewis of Front Porch Forum [pers. comm.s.], and social capital became a popular topic.

Putnam’s work also garnered much attention—positive and negative—in academia. His findings were disputed—some of the notable criticisms included concerns about statistical errors and problematic data sets (Fischer 2001; Paxton 1999; Lin 2001); objections to the broad claim that all kinds of membership in civic organizations were declining (Paxton 1999; Costa and Kahn 2001; Fischer 2001); objections to the use of membership in organizations as the primary metric for measuring social capital (Lin 2001); charges that “social connectedness has changed rather than declined” (Fischer 2001, emphasis in original), suggesting further that the metrics Putnam used were not the most appropriate with which to assess social capital; and suggestions that Putnam’s assignment of blame for the decline was missing some factors and overvaluing others (Nye 1997; Alesina and La Ferrera 2000; Costa and Kahn 2001; Fischer 2001). His claims about the high importance of social capital were controversial, with many researchers noting that Putnam did not address the complexity of social capital as an asset in disadvantaged communities (e.g., DeFilippis 2001; Saegert, Thompson, and Warren [eds.] 2001).

Starting in the mid-1990s and the period of controversy triggered by Putnam, the literature on social capital has proliferated; and while there is no consensus on the subject of whether social capital is declining, rising, changing, or staying the same, there does seem to be consensus that paying attention to social capital is important in many contexts. Investigations on, and conversations about, social capital in a variety of contexts, including international and economic development (Knack and Keefer 1997; Woolcock and Narayan 1999; Portes and Landolt 2000), urban planning (de Souza Briggs 1997; Saegert, Thompson, and Warren [eds.] 2001), public health (Lomas 1998; Baum 1999), and criminology (Rose and Clear 1998; Rosenfeld et al. 2001), among others, all point back to Putnam.

Some researchers looked at the relationship between social capital and neighborhoods, specifically. Temkin and Rohe found social capital to be a factor in maintaining or increasing neighborhood stability (1998). De Souza Briggs looked at

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16 In particular, Fischer (2001) and Nye (1997) pointed out the potential importance of accounting for informal and/or non-traditional types of organizations, and Lin (2001) argued that social capital was increasing through “cybernetworks”, or networks in virtual space.

17 For example, researchers claimed Putnam should have placed more emphasis on women’s movement into the labor force (Fischer 2001), more emphasis on the impact of widening inequalities among Americans (Costa and Kahn 2001), and more emphasis on disenchantment with politics (Nye 1997).
the question of when and whether a change of neighborhood could increase or decrease both bonding and bridging social capital (1998). Leyden saw a link between neighborhood form and social capital—he found that people who lived in walkable mixed-use neighborhoods had levels of social capital that were higher than people living in car-oriented suburbs (2003). Various authors in the collection Social Capital and Poor Communities focused on how neighborhood context and neighborhood institutions can affect social capital development (Saegert, Thompson, and Warren [eds.] 2001). Neighborhoods can be particularly rich places in which to develop social capital because they can provide people with a natural supply of latent ties—living proximate to someone is generally thought of as sufficient reason to learn the other’s name and develop some sort of interpersonal tie, and groups of people living in the same place can benefit from having shared norms and trust.

In general, developing social capital in neighborhoods can be seen as important because some types of social support can be provided most easily or most effectively by people who live near you—Wellman and Wortley, for example, found that small exchanges of favors and services were likely to occur with people to whom you had frequent physical access (i.e., neighbors) (1990). Others point out that neighbors are frequently the most easily accessible people to turn to in the case of an emergency that takes place at or near your home (Hampton et al. 2009). Developing social capital in neighborhoods can also be seen as important because some of the potential benefits of social capital only accrue when many people living in a place are connected to each other. Jane Jacobs’ crime- and disorder-averting “eyes on the street” in neighborhoods, as well as efforts at collective action in neighborhoods that needed to band together, resulted from social capital among neighbors (1961).

The debates about social capital have become more complicated as methods of communication have radically changed and proliferated over the last several decades. The next subsection looks at how CMC is affecting social capital in neighborhoods.

2.4 NEIGHBORHOODS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL IN THE AGE OF COMPUTER-MEDIATED COMMUNICATION

The community question is now being debated anew in a different arena. This time the form of progress that is being accused of destroying community is the internet. Will the presence of cyberspace destroy community in real space and lead to a pandemic of loneliness? Or will CMC lead to a utopia of international communions that span race and class divisions? So far, as one would expect, the answer seems to lie somewhere in the middle.
Since the early 1990s, concerns have been voiced that the internet has the potential to make people isolated and reclusive, to weaken real-world ties (strong ties in particular) at the expense of virtual ties, and to damage people’s ability to communicate when face-to-face—in short, to erode relationships and in the process undermine community and social capital see, e.g., Kraut et al. 1998; Slouka 1995; Nie 2001; Turkle 1995; Putnam 2000; Stoll 1995. In the context of neighborhoods, in particular, there have been concerns that use of CMC could lead to negative repercussions such as decreased neighbor-to-neighbor contact and decreased interest in local community (Nie 2001).

However, most of these negative prognostications have so far proven, as one research summary noted, “more deductive than supported by evidence” (Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004; see also: Tufekci 2012; Klinenberg 2012; Kraut et al. 2002); and although there continue to be naysayers (e.g., Turkle 2011; Deresiewicz 2009; Marche 2012), the bulk of the empirical research on CMC continues to show that many CMC can support the development of indicators of community, in particular social capital, in various ways under many circumstances, and that it complements real-world ties rather than degrading them (for an overview see Wellman et al. 2001; Quan-Haase and Wellman 2004; Boase and Wellman 2004; see also, e.g., Shah et al. 2002; Lin 2001; Hampton et al. 2011).

This rest of this subsection looks at the use of some specific CMC tools and concepts that have direct bearing on the question of whether place-based virtual groups can support the development of social capital in neighborhoods18. In looking for illustrative research I was particularly interested in work that discussed how CMC concepts and tools have impacted both the formation of weak ties and the four dimensions of social capital as described by Perkins et al.: sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation/civic engagement, and collective efficacy.

2.4.1 How Do Neighbors Use Computer-Mediated Communication?

In the past several decades, as most homes and businesses in the U.S. have been brought online, easy access to the internet and to CMC has led to interesting developments in social networks19 and the ways that people relate to each other, to

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18 Readers interested in a deeper read on CMC and social capital should look to the fields of community informatics, urban planning, media studies, sociology, and information studies.

19 Social networks and networked communities have become subjects of widespread interest in the past two decades, and researchers are writing quickly and prolifically to keep up with the ways that CMC seems to be affecting society (see, e.g., Castells 1996; Benkler 2006; Shirky 2008). Social network analysis is being used to help planners and community developers figure out how online social ties and networks play out in real space (Dempwolf and Lyles 2011).
distance, and to place-based community\textsuperscript{20}. CMC has lowered communication transaction costs, made long-distance and asynchronous conversations much more convenient, allowed for interactions to happen in a person’s periphery rather than taking the user’s full attention, and generally made it easier for people to maintain all sorts of personal ties across varying distances (see Table 2-2) (Resnick 2001; Wellman 2001).

\textbf{Table 2-2: “How technology can remove barriers to interaction” (from Resnick 2001)}

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Affordance</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Distant communication</td>
<td>The sender and receiver need not be co-located.</td>
<td>Video conferencing, email, instant messaging, webcam</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asynchronous communication</td>
<td>The recipient of communication accesses it at a later time.</td>
<td>Voice mail, email, text messaging</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Peripheral presentation</td>
<td>An interaction need not take the user’s full attention, and may not come to the attention of other people who are co-present.</td>
<td>Vibrating beeper, headphones, heads-up display in automobile, headsets, text messaging, smartphones</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Table taken from "Beyond Bowling Together: SocioTechnical Capital", by Paul Resnick (2001). Text in italics is mine, not Resnick’s.

Many CMC tools are used by neighbors to connect to each other and to their neighborhoods. What follows is a brief discussion of a few of the most common tools.

Email has become a dominant form of communication in many spheres\textsuperscript{21}, and it is gradually being used more to communicate with neighbors. In late 2009, a Pew Research Project survey found that 9% of American adults (13% of adult email users) had communicated with their neighbors via email about community issues at

\textsuperscript{20} For interested readers, the field of community informatics focuses primarily on interactions among local communities and information and communication technology (ICT) (Williams and Durrance 2010). See also the Journal of Community Informatics at http://ci-journal.net/.

\textsuperscript{21} 2010 surveys by Pew found that 79% of American adults are online (Zickuhr 2010) and 92% of online adults use email (Purcell 2011).
least once in the preceding 12 months (Smith 2010). (See Table 2-3 for a complete list of statistics from the Pew Research Center’s Neighbors Online report.) The rise of email is making it easier for busy neighbors to exchange messages when they might previously have relied upon face-to-face communication. It has also enabled groups of neighbors to communicate together through email lists, as discussed further below.

Table 2-3: Findings from the Pew Research Center’s 2010 Report, Neighbors Online

A poll administered by the Pew Research Center in November and December of 2009 found the following statistics, each referring to online behavior from the twelve months preceding the date of the survey:

- 22% of all adults (representing 28% of internet users) signed up to receive alerts about local issues (such as traffic, school events, weather warnings or crime alerts) via email or text messaging.
- 20% of all adults (27% of internet users) used digital tools to talk to their neighbors and keep informed about community issues.
- 46% of Americans talked face-to-face with neighbors about community issues.
- 21% discussed community issues over the telephone.
- 11% read a blog dealing with community issues.
- 9% exchanged emails with neighbors about community issues.
- 5% say they belong to a community email listserv.
- 4% communicated with neighbors by text messaging on cell phones.
- 4% joined a social network site group connected to community issues.
- 2% followed neighbors using Twitter.

Taken from the Pew Research Center report Neighbors Online (Smith 2010).

Large social network sites\(^{22}\), such as Facebook and Twitter, provide new channels for people to use to learn about what’s happening in their neighborhoods and connect with their neighbors. These sites, while not designed specifically to inform users about their neighborhoods, are nonetheless commonly used to announce local events, make local recommendations for businesses, and share local news. Facebook can also be used to form place-based virtual groups, as discussed below.

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\(^{22}\) Social network sites are defined by boyd and Ellison as “web-based services that allow individuals to (1) construct a public or semi-public profile within a bounded system, (2) articulate a list of other users with whom they share a connection, and (3) view and traverse their list of connections and those made by others within the system” (2008).
In addition to large and commonly known social network sites, there also exist numerous small social network services that were designed specifically to connect neighbors to each other and to their place. Some examples include Nextdoor^23, i-Neighbors^24, rBlock^25, Blockboard^26, and the regional site Front Porch Forum^27.

**Place-blogs** have also made it easier for people to keep track of what’s going on in their neighborhoods and cities. These are blogs for which content, such as local news, related opinions, or interesting local history, is loosely or narrowly focused on a specific location. As noted in Table 2-3, in 2009 11% of Americans read a blog that concerned “community issues”, and 4% joined a group on a social network site that was related to community issues (Smith 2010)^28.

Other tools that are used in the context of connecting neighbors and neighborhoods include wikis, where neighbors can collaboratively create a website about their neighborhood; forums (also known as message boards), where neighbors can participate in threaded discussions about local topics; and local information aggregators, which collate feeds on data such as crime reports, real estate listings, published news stories, and business reviews for a given neighborhood.

As more people in a neighborhood use CMC tools to focus on their locality, information about the neighborhood can become common knowledge and support a shared sense of place.

Use of CMC tools has also made it easier for people to organize face-to-face gatherings near where they live, since the media reduce the transaction costs of communication while also making it extremely easy to organize in groups (Shirky 2008). Two interesting examples include:

- **Meetup^29**, a site that hosts approximately 102,750 meetup groups^30 that plan and host face-to-face gatherings (pers. comm. Au). According to Meetup’s website, these groups combined host an average of 280,000 in-person meetups every month in approximately 45,000 cities worldwide (Meetup 2012).

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^23 https://nextdoor.com/
^24 http://www.i-neighbors.org/
^25 https://www.rblock.com/
^26 http://blockboard.org/
^27 http://frontporchforum.com/
^28 Note, however, that a different Pew study from 2009 found that users of social network services were 30% less likely than non-users to know at least some of their neighbors (Hampton et al. 2009).
^29 http://www.meetup.com/
^30 As of an April 24, 2012, email from Meetup data analyst Randy Au, Meetup was hosting 102,753 groups worldwide and had 14,564,329 site members. That same email notes that at that time there were 1,871 groups that self-identified as being associated with the City of San Francisco, 235 groups associated with the City of Berkeley, and 332 groups associated with the City of Oakland.
• Ravelry, a social network site centered on knitting and crocheting, is used by members to form and/or find local “stitch ‘n bitch” groups. As of May 26, 2012, there were 92 local stitch ‘n bitch groups within about 70 miles of San Francisco31 (Ravelry 2012).

These examples have led to new relationships and regular offline group meetings among neighbors and near-neighbors, supporting local community ties.

While most CMC tools have a variety of uses, for the purposes of this thesis we are most interested in how neighbors use these tools to form virtual (online) communities to connect with their neighbors and neighborhoods.

### 2.4.2 Social Capital in Online Communities

Virtual communities, also known as online communities, were defined by Howard Rheingold as “computer-mediated social groups” (1993). The term has become a vast catch-all for a wide variety of groups and networks that employ email lists, social network sites, message boards, virtual realities, online video games, and/or other CMC tools to communicate (Baym 2010)32.

Participation in online communities has been found to support social capital in a variety of ways. The focus of much of the research has been on the types and characteristics of the interpersonal ties that form online. Online communities let users maintain weak ties more cheaply and easily than they otherwise could (Donath and boyd 2004), and the weak ties generated in online communities seem to be linked to users’ perceptions of their own bridging social capital (Ellison et al. 2007; Steinfield et al. 2008). Online communities also add means and opportunity for cheap and easy communication among users who previously would not have a way to connect. In other words, they create latent ties, defined by Haythornthwaite as “[ties] that exist technically but have not yet been activated” (2002, 2005).

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31 A search for “only local stitch ‘n bitch groups” near San Francisco zip code 94110 turned up 92 “local groups with members near San Francisco, CA 94110”, and the farthest groups seemed to be from Santa Cruz, approximately 70 miles south of San Francisco, and Healdsburg, approximately 70 miles north of San Francisco.

32 For the purposes of this thesis, I use the term as it is used in common parlance, rightly or wrongly, to encompass all online groups and online networks that might be considered by their members, by observers, or by a marketing firm to be “communities”. I do not take into consideration whether the groups or networks have developed any traits (such as shared sense of identity or feelings of belonging) that would grant them status as a community. The terms virtual community and online community (used interchangeably) in this case therefore encompass social network sites, corporate websites designed to attract fans of a brand, readers of a particular blog, and the collection of account-holders on Youtube, in addition to more traditional examples such as email lists and message boards. For a more careful examination of the distinctions between online communities, online groups, and online social networks, see Baym (2010) and Blanchard (2004).
ties, which usually comprise two people who haven’t yet met, can easily be transformed into weak ties through participation in online communities, feeding again into bridging social capital (Ellison et al. 2011). Studies have also found evidence to contradict concerns that use of CMC erodes strong ties; in fact, researchers are finding correlations between use of online communities and bonding social capital (Ellison et al. 2007, 2011; see also Vitak et al. 2011), which is presumably related to the fact that many online communities (social network sites, in particular) now primarily support relationships that were formed offline (Ellison et al. 2007; boyd and Ellison 2008; Virtanen and Malinen 2008).

Other research has focused on whether online communities demonstrate the same characteristics as offline communities. Online communities have been found to support generalized reciprocity of social support, an important component of social capital (Wellman and Gulia 1999; Walther 1994). Use of some online communities has also been linked positively to users’ levels of civic engagement and social trust (Valenzuela et al. 2009). A number of researchers have been interested in the idea of whether and how online communities experience a sense of virtual community akin to the traditional sense of community, and have explored what components contribute to sense of virtual community (Blanchard and Markus 2004; Blanchard 2008; Abfalter et al. 2012).

While online communities are often thought of as being separate from offline communities and untethered to any specific geographic place, it is in fact fairly common to find place-based online communities—online communities that are bounded to a specific geographic area and consist of people who are associated with that physical space in some way. In fact, online communities are commonly used to reinforce offline communities, while offline meetups are also regularly used as a tool to bolster online communities (Sessions 2010; Matzat 2010). As Craig Calhoun notes,

> The reality... seems to be that the Internet matters much more as a supplement to face-to-face community organization... than as a substitute for it. ... CMC can supplement face-to-face contact and encourage organizing around common agendas for action. It can provide a powerful new channel for connections among people already linked by residence or engagement in a common organizational framework (1998).

The interplay between online and offline interactions within a single community is an area that is ripe for additional study. In 2005 a researcher coined the term alloy social capital to describe social capital that develops based on both online and offline interactions with the same person or persons (Sander), but there seems to
have been little investigation into the potential social capital outcomes that offline communities could achieve by using online interactions to supplement offline interactions.

The next subsections look at several categories of place-based online communities that use neighborhoods as their geographical frame of reference and delve more carefully into the social capital implications of these arrangements. Note that the terminology in this field is still developing and the categories often overlap, so that what follows is just one scholar’s attempt to categorize a diverse and complicated array of concepts, networks, and groups.

2.4.2.1 COMMUNITY NETWORKS AND NEIGHBORHOOD WEBSITES

Community networks started to emerge in U.S. neighborhoods in the 1980s and 1990s as the technologies enabling networked computers became more common around the country. A community network is a socio-technical infrastructure that typically consists of physical network components (hardware) that have been installed to connect most or all people within a defined geographic location to each other and to the internet, plus software (including software for tools such as email lists, social network sites, portals for local websites and information, and video chat) that facilitates communication among network members (Carroll and Rosson 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Button and Partridge 2007).

Community networks can trace their roots back to community activism in the 1970s—the first was initiated in Berkeley, California, in the mid-1970s as a tool to strengthen community—and many were created in the hopes that they would support neighborhood cohesion, advance community-based social goals, and provide support to disadvantaged communities (Schuler 1994, 1996; Button and Partridge 2007). The implementation and use of community networks has been associated with weak tie formation (Hampton and Wellman 2003), increased neighborhood sense of community (Pinkett and O’Bryant 2003; O’Bryant 2003), increased neighboring behavior (Hampton and Wellman 2003), increased citizen participation and civic engagement (Kavenaugh et al. 2005a, 2005b; Hampton 2003), and an increased perception of neighborhood collective efficacy (Carroll et al. 2009).

Two notable examples of community networks in the context of a discussion of social capital include the Blacksburg Electronic Village in Virginia (Carroll and

33 Another interesting example of a place-based online community would be a company that uses a social network site like Yammer (https://www.yammer.com) to create an online community for its employees that overlays the physical office or set of offices used by the employees.
Rosson 1996; Kavanaugh et al. 2005a; Kavanaugh et al. 2005b) and Camfield Estates in Massachusetts (Pinkett 2002; Pinkett & O’Bryant 2003; O’Bryant 2003). (A third example, Netville, is discussed later in this section [Hampton and Wellman 1999, 2003; Hampton 2003].)

**Camfield Estates-MIT Creating Community Connections Project.** The Camfield Estates-MIT Creating Community Connections Project was a community network implemented by the Massachusetts Institute of Technology and the Camfield Tenants Association in the Boston, Massachusetts, neighborhood of Roxbury in a predominantly African-American, low- to moderate-income housing development (Pinkett 2002; Pinkett and O’Bryant 2003; O’Bryant 2003). The housing development had recently been demolished and reconstructed as part of a U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development program, and when the project began in 2000 the residents had just moved back into the newly-constructed 102 units of town houses. The Project consisted of the implementation of 1) a physical network of computers, software, and high-speed internet connections for all residents who were willing to go through the participation requirements; 2) a community technology center (located on-site in the development’s community center); and 3) a community-based web system, which included a community intranet and extranet and provided participants with access to resident profiles, a community calendar, community discussion forums, community email lists, community chat rooms, news and announcements, a database and map of local organizations and businesses, personal home pages, online resumes, and more. The Project partners were interested in exploring the synergies between community technology and community building, with an emphasis on empowerment and self-sufficiency as components of a strong community, in the context of concerns about the digital divide in the U.S.—the gap between Americans who do versus those who do not benefit from access to new technologies. The community-based web system, according to researchers, was “designed to establish and strengthen relationship between community residents, local businesses, and neighborhood institutions and organizations” (Pinkett and O’Bryant 2003).

The studies resulting from the Project found that, over the course of the first year of implementation, participants (consisting largely of single, female, African-American and Hispanic heads-of-household) had: strengthened and expanded local ties, become better informed about community resources and local goings-on, and experienced improved communication and information flows among neighbors. Researchers also found positive correlations between participants’ frequency of internet use and their sense that they were part of the Camfield community (Pinkett and O’Bryant 2003; O’Bryant 2003). While the research did
not attempt to isolate the influence of the community-based web system, which is
the component that is of most interest in the context of this thesis, the
aforementioned results suggest that the presence of a network for local
communication and information-sharing was useful to the residents.

The Blacksburg Electronic Village. The Blacksburg Electronic Village (BEV) began as a partnership among the Virginia Polytechnic Institute and State University (Virginia Tech); the Town of Blacksburg, Virginia; and Bell Atlantic, the local utility company. The partnership was formed, in the words of one researcher, to “explore the future of telecommunications” by improving community networking services in Blacksburg (Carroll 2003). The goal of the BEV was “to offer Internet access to every citizen in town” (Blacksburg Electronic Village 2012), in order to “increase access to and participation in community life” (Carroll and Rosson 1996). The BEV began in October 1993, and by 1996 the network was estimated to serve over 17,000 community members, with more than 45% of the population of Blacksburg able to access the BEV either at work or at home (Carroll and Rosson 1996). In 1998 provision of local internet service was turned over entirely to the private sector, but Blacksburg continues to have extremely high rates of internet access and at-home broadband service (Blacksburg Electronic Village 2012). In addition to facilitating access to the internet, the BEV has hosted a large amount of local content and managed a variety of local community-oriented services, including several tools that could facilitate neighbor-to-neighbor communication: Usenet Groups, email lists, local directories, and forums on various civic topics (Kavanaugh et al. 2005a).

Although a number of papers and books have been published regarding various aspects of the BEV, only a small portion of the publications address how the community network may have affected aspects or indicators of social capital in Blacksburg (see, e.g., Cohill and Kavanaugh 2000; Carroll 2003). Findings from two 2005 studies support the stance that use of a community network can strengthen community attachment (an attribute closely related to sense of community) and social contact (Kavanaugh et al. 2005a), as well as citizen participation and civic engagement (Kavanaugh et al. 2005a, Kavanaugh et al. 2005b). Another 2009 study found a link between residents’ beliefs about collective efficacy and residents’ social and civic use of the internet via a community network, but the study did not delve into what aspects of the internet these residents were using (Carroll et al. 2009). One 1996 article claimed that the BEV made it easier for residents to access local information and participate in

34 http://www.bev.net/
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community life. No data was presented, but the authors explain that local town departments, the public library, and local schools all initiated online projects that made their activities more available to the public, and this seems to have led to more citizen participation. It also claims that the use of the BEV’s resources (e.g., webpages and email lists) has helped civic and religious associations in the town to flourish by improving both their outreach communication and their internal communication. The same article notes in passing that the authors have observed a heartening amount of “mutual help and education”, an aspect of neighboring, among users in many areas of the BEV (Carroll and Rosson 1996).

Community networks in the traditional sense, entities that provide hardware, software, and internet access to community residents, have become less common in the U.S. as more and more homes have signed up for internet service through commercial providers and as free software has become more readily available to everyone with access to the internet, but communities and neighborhoods have continued to seek and form virtual presences on the web through neighborhood websites.

The term neighborhood websites has been used by a few researchers to refer to websites, online networks, and virtual groups that cater to specific neighborhoods or other place-based communities (Button and Partridge 2007; Flouch and Harris 2010). Neighborhood websites can be thought of as a more contemporary cousin of community networks—they are still focused on connecting neighbors and facilitating neighborhood communication, but they lack the physical installation of hardware and the provision of access to internet service that community networks traditionally include. In fact, the term neighborhood website can be used to refer to the communication component of community networks (e.g., a community network’s email list, local resources directory, or message board), but the term also includes sites, groups, and networks that don’t have a locally-based physical hardware component, such as a town’s place-blog run on WordPress or a neighborhood’s Google Group.

Neighborhood websites vary widely based on what type of tool they use, what their purpose is, and who runs them. A neighborhood website could utilize an email list, message board, blog, wiki, social network site, or another CMC tool to share information and provide a forum for administrators, members, and visitors to

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35 The terminology for the socio-technical structures formed by and/or for place-based communities is still being refined. See Button and Partridge (2007) for a thorough discussion of the terminology dilemma, and see the Networked Neighbourhoods Group (2010) for a proposed definition and typology of neighborhood websites. Note that many researchers simply classify all neighborhood-related websites and groups as community networks.
Table 2-4 shows a typology of neighborhood websites. Some of the more commonly encountered examples are place-blogs, hyperlocal news sites (such as Patch, which is owned by AOL), and neighborhood-based Meetup, Facebook, Yahoo!, and Google Groups. Less well-known but more carefully tailored for forming neighborhood websites are platforms that allow for the creation of private civic social network sites, such as Nextdoor and i-Neighbors, which were created specifically to connect people to their neighbors.

Neighborhood websites originate from many sources. Creators and sponsors include: local government agencies interested in soliciting community feedback, media companies interested in local markets, professional or citizen journalists, social software companies, and non-profit community-based organizations. Many neighborhood websites, though, are self-organized by one or more residents who simply want to improve or increase communication among a group of people who live near each other.

Data regarding the number of neighborhood websites that currently exist is not available, but it is reasonable to assume that there are tens of thousands currently being used across the U.S. The Pew Research Center survey found that 5% of American adults (7% of online adults) belong to a "group email list, listserv or online discussion forum for their neighborhood" (Smith 2010).

Three studies that surveyed neighborhood websites are presented here in more detail. In the next subsection I will also look in more depth at the social capital implications of a subset of neighborhood websites—place-based virtual groups.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Site, Tool, or Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>place-blogs and blogazines</td>
<td>blogs and online magazines that solely or primarily contain content about a single locality</td>
<td>Neighborhood, Burrito Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hyperlocal news sites</td>
<td>news websites (often commercial) that contain news about a single locality</td>
<td>Patch, Mission Loc@l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community directories</td>
<td>listings of local businesses, services, and events</td>
<td>Blacksburg Electronic Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share / barter sites</td>
<td>facilitate local sharing of resources or exchange of goods and services</td>
<td>Neighbors, Snap Goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place-based wikis</td>
<td>collaboratively created repositories of local information</td>
<td>localwiki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>placed-based information aggregators</td>
<td>aggregate feeds of local information and statistics (e.g., crime incidents, 311 reports, real estate listings, business recommendations)</td>
<td>Everyblock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussion lists and static notice boards</td>
<td>email discussion lists and corresponding websites that allow postings by members; all content can be seen by all members, content typically cannot be seen by non-members, and content is not categorized by topic</td>
<td>Google Groups, Yahoo! Groups, Front Porch Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forums / message boards</td>
<td>websites that facilitate threaded conversations among members; content is organized by topic or category; all content can be seen by all members and content typically cannot be seen by non-members</td>
<td>e-Democracy,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups within general-interest social network sites</td>
<td>pages that have a local focus but are hosted by a general-interest social network site; may include message boards, forums, photo galleries, or other tools; content may be private, semi-private, or public</td>
<td>Facebook, tribe, Meetup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic social networks on social network hosting platforms</td>
<td>private specialized social networks for use by neighbors, hosted by a company that provides a generic social network site platform; designs vary but most provide member profiles, discussion forums, and a handful of other typical social network site amenities; content cannot be seen by non-members</td>
<td>Ning, Big Tent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic social network sites</td>
<td>social network sites designed specifically to connect neighbors and neighborhoods; each site hosts civic social networks for neighborhoods; designs vary but most provide member profiles, discussion forums, and a handful of other typical social network site amenities; content cannot be seen by non-members, and most content is private so that you only see content related to your neighborhood</td>
<td>i-Neighbors, Nextdoor, eNeighbors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic discussion platforms</td>
<td>websites set up by governments or companies in order to facilitate semi-structured discussions and solicit feedback about local civic issues</td>
<td>MindMixer, Neighborland, Common Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(other civic-focused CMC tools and websites)</td>
<td>other tools and websites that were designed specifically to connect neighbors and/or support neighborhoods; may be web-based or mobile phone application-based</td>
<td>rBlock, Blockboard, Hey Neighbor, Jabberwocky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
Survey of the Websites of 40 Community Networks. In 2001, a study was released that considered the neighborhood websites associated with a sample of 40 community networks in the U.S. The researchers were interested in whether the community networks were providing virtual great good places—public places where people can gather to spend time and interact (Oldenburg 1999)—as part of their neighborhood websites. They theorized that the provision of great good places online as part of neighborhood websites could facilitate conversation among citizens, causing social bonds to form and stimulating more civic engagement (Tonn et al. 2001). After examining the 40 neighborhood websites, the researchers concluded that very few were fostering social interactions, encouraging community identity, or providing information to support citizenship or civic engagement (Tonn et al. 2001). While at first glance this may seem discouraging, it is important to note that the websites under review were primarily just broadcasting basic community information, with few or no interactive components to bring residents into the conversation or give site visitors any agency in influencing content. These websites bore little resemblance to contemporary place-blogs or hyperlocal news sites—they were often just a collection of links to other web pages with local information—so the conclusion that they did nothing to foster new interpersonal ties or provide a quasi-public space for discussion is not surprising.

Survey of 12 Neighborhood Websites. A 2007 study by Button and Partridge reviewed 12 (primarily American) neighborhood websites—5 “news / citizen journalism” sites; 2 “business directory” sites; 4 “community networking” sites (including Front Porch Forum and i-Neighbors); and 1 site with mixed functions. The researchers were interested in whether current neighborhood websites were being used to their potential in terms of encouraging civic engagement and facilitating meaningful social interactions among members of place-based communities. They examined the websites, focusing on what sort of content they offered or facilitated, what sort of technological tools they included, and what sort of social interactions they were capable of facilitating; they did not have any contact with users of the websites.

The study was exploratory and the resulting publication was mostly descriptive of website features and affordances, but the authors included a few noteworthy observations related to social capital: they noted that the sites overall could be

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38 The authors use the term “community networks” rather than “neighborhood websites”, but the study only addresses websites, CMC tools associated these websites, and affordances of these websites; the study does not address hardware or access to the internet. Therefore I am discussing this study in the context of neighborhood websites.
doing more to support social interaction, in particular to encourage offline meetups, such as providing printable invitation flyer templates or a system for RSVPs; that more sites could include features to encourage collective action, such as forms that let users send emails or faxes to local political representatives; that the presence of calendars and event invitation distribution systems was useful both for encouraging social interaction and for encouraging participation and engagement in offline activities; and that neighborhood websites had the potential to be good forums for people to exchange useful day-to-day information (neighboring) provided the website gave participants the right technological tools (Button and Partridge 2007). While the authors did not call out distinctions among the different types of neighborhood websites, their data seemed to indicate that “news/citizen journalism” or “business directory” websites included fewer social interaction and relationship management features than the “community networking” websites. For example, all of the community networking websites facilitated the formation of place-based virtual groups via either a web tool or an email list, whereas only one of the remaining websites allowed for the formation of groups (Button and Partridge 2007, Table 3).

**The Online Neighbourhood Networks Study.** In 2010, the Networked Neighbourhoods Group (a consultancy in the United Kingdom) found that there were approximately 160 neighborhood websites in the greater London area (Flouch and Harris). The Networked Neighbourhoods Group defined neighborhood websites as sites that “have been established and are run by local residents; [for which] most of their content relates to local issues or interests; [and that] are open to discussion and contributions from anyone living in the area or with an interest in the area” (Flouch and Harris 2010). Their *Online Neighbourhood Networks Study*, which was published online as a technical report, focused on three neighborhood websites out of the 160 they initially found—one place-blog, one forum (i.e., message board), and one civic social network site run on Ning39. Among other methods, the Networked Neighbourhoods Group administered an online survey of participants from the three websites, and Table 2-5 presents their findings regarding social capital, based on 510 survey responses.

Although the Study was set in Great Britain, not in North America, it is noteworthy that the Networked Neighbourhoods Group found such a large number of neighborhood websites in one metropolitan area; and although the survey of participants was administered in such a way as to make its validity and generalizability unknown, it is also noteworthy that the results of the survey

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indicate that the three websites under observation were perceived to increase neighbor ties, increase sense of community (via sense of belonging), increase neighboring behavior, and increase collective efficacy in the neighborhoods.

Table 2-5: Results of the Online Neighbourhood Networks Study Survey  
(text from Flouch and Harris 2010)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Social Capital Indicator</th>
<th>Survey Response</th>
</tr>
</thead>
</table>
| Interpersonal Ties      | ✓ 42% of respondents say they have met someone in their neighbourhood as a direct consequence of using the website.  
                         | ✓ 25% of respondents say they are more likely to see someone they recognize as a result of participating on their site. |
| Sense of Community      | ✓ A number of respondents suggested that the sites could make more effort to be inclusive. Given their potential to have influence and to mobilise people, this perceived lack of representativeness could become an issue.  
                         | ✓ Some 91% of respondents agreed that through their site, people express pride in their area.  
                         | ✓ Respondents to this survey began from high levels of attachment. Overall, 83% agreed strongly or very strongly that they belong to their neighbourhood. Nonetheless, 69% felt that participation on the local site had strengthened their sense of belonging. |
| Neighboring             | ✓ Some 44% felt that people in their neighbourhood are more likely to lend things or exchange favours with one another as a result of participating on the website.  
                         | ✓ 95% say that they feel more informed about their neighbourhood as a consequence of using their site.  
                         | ✓ 92% agree that people are helpful if someone seeks advice on their website. |
| Collective Efficacy     | ✓ 75% of respondents felt that participation on the local site had had a positive effect on whether or not people pull together to make improvements.  
                         | ✓ 79% agreed that people on their site show support for one another.  
                         | ✓ Overall, 68% of respondents felt a little more or much more able to influence decisions locally as a result of participation on their local site. |

All content from the right-hand column of this table is quoted from the Online Neighbourhood Networks Study by Hugh Flouch and Kevin Harris (2010). British spellings are used for some words.
2.4.2.2 PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS

Place-based virtual groups is a term that was adopted for the purposes of this thesis to describe a subset of neighborhood websites. As defined in Section 1, these are online groups that concentrate on connecting users who live in or are interested in a specific neighborhood, generally with the explicit goal of encouraging communication among users while facilitating exchange of information about the neighborhood. Place-based virtual groups are different from other neighborhood websites, such as place-blogs, local data aggregators, hyperlocal news sites, and community directories, because they have membership processes that dictate who can access the group’s content, they have a clearly delineated group structure with precise boundaries, and they provide the technical means for all members to participate with more or less equal voices. Many examples of tools that enable place-based virtual groups have already been mentioned in this section, but the list includes email discussion lists (including Yahoo! and Google Groups), message boards / forums, large social network sites that allow for the formation of groups within their platform (such as Facebook and Tribe), and specialized platforms that host private groups, such as Meetup, Ning, Big Tent, i-Neighbors, Nextdoor, and Front Porch Forum. Anecdotally, it appears that unlike other types of neighborhood websites, which are often started or run by corporations, governments, citizen-journalists, or community-based organizations, place-based virtual groups are more commonly initiated and moderated by one or several local residents (with a platform administered by a third party, such as Yahoo!, Facebook, or Meetup).

While place-based virtual groups are numerous and widely used, they have so far primarily been studied in the context of community networks, lumped in with hardware and software improvements, or in the context of neighborhood websites, lumped in with one-to-many or few-to-many CMC broadcasting tools (e.g., place-blogs, hyperlocal news sites, and local resource directories). This is unfortunate, because place-based virtual groups are a completely distinct phenomenon from physical hardware networks, strikingly different from broadcasting websites like place-blog, and have features that could potentially make them a wonderful means to support social capital in neighborhoods. Like most forms of CMC (as discussed

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40 In contrast, for example, most place-blogs do not require participants to register as members to read the blog, they do not have an obviously defined and finite list of network participants, and they restrict access to the broadcasting component of the blog to a small number of people.

41 Note that email “announce” lists do not fall within the parameters of place-based virtual groups because they restrict posting privileges to a small number of list members. Also note that, as stated in Section 1, while the word “listserv” is commonly used to refer to electronic mailing lists, LISTSERV is actually a registered trademark for a commercial product. I will therefore use the term email list rather than listserv to refer to generic email discussion lists.
above), place-based virtual groups allow members to communicate asynchronously, which removes spatial and timing-related barriers to communication, and they reduce the costs of communication by allowing members to communicate without traveling and to communicate at times with low opportunity costs; and eased communication makes it easier to form or strengthen ties, to engage in neighboring behavior, to share sentiments that contribute to sense of community, to learn about opportunities for civic engagement, and to organize as a group. Eased one-to-many and many-to-many communication, in particular, allows neighbors to have conversations as a group that would previously have required scheduling a meeting that worked for everyone, finding a venue for the meeting, and creating a meeting experience that allowed everyone in the neighborhood to speak whenever they wanted for as long as they wished.

Place-based virtual groups also provide less common features that could support the development of social capital. The facts that they have membership processes and that each member is tied to an email address or profile may lead members to experience more trust (one of the important positive manifestations of social capital) and feel safer communicating than in a public forum, since bad actors can easily be barred from the group. (Additionally, in many virtual groups there are few enough members that every individual in the group has interacted one-on-one with every other individual, and in small neighborhoods there may not be any anonymity or pseudonymity associated with place-based virtual groups.)

The fact that all postings from all members in a virtual group are weighted with equal priority by the CMC tool being used, in stark contrast to something like a place-blog or hyperlocal news site, may support the development of social capital by increasing the number of neighbors whose names, personalities, and traits are known. The egalitarian posting weighting system may also empower neighbors whose voices would otherwise be marginalized.

The fact that every message that is posted will potentially be read by every member of the group, combined with the circumstances of heightened trust, means that place-based virtual groups are likely fertile locales for accessing latent ties and activating weak ties. Every member of the group has a latent tie with every other member of the group, and a posting requesting assistance or information could lead to interactions among people who otherwise would not have met.

Use of place-based virtual groups has been associated with increases in participants’ weak ties (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Mesch and Levanon 2003), increased neighborhood sense of community (Mesch and Talmud 2010), increased neighboring behavior (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Hampton 2007), increased citizen
participation and civic engagement (Hampton 2003; Hampton and Wellman 2003; Mesech and Talmud 2010), and increased perception of neighborhood collective efficacy (Hampton 2010). Below are four of the most prominent cases in which researchers investigated the implications that place-based virtual groups could have in terms of developing social capital.

**Netville.** In the case of Netville, Hampton and Wellman looked at a community network that was created in 1996 for a newly-built middle-class suburban neighborhood of 109 detached single-family homes near Toronto, Canada (Hampton and Wellman 2003; Hampton 2003). The community network included a place-based virtual group in the form of an email list. The researchers were interested in the formation of neighborhood interpersonal ties, and theorized that if neighbors were given more ways through which to access each other, and in particular if neighbors could access each other through the internet and CMC, then those neighbors would be more likely to form ties. Through participant-observation and through surveys of the residents, including both residents who participated in the community network and residents who didn’t participate in the community network, the researchers found that internet use was indeed associated with more recognition of neighbors and larger networks of neighbors—in other words, more weak ties. They also found that internet use was associated with participation in the public realm and with increased frequency of both online and offline communication with neighbors, and they coincidentally were able to note the positive role of CMC in facilitating collective action, since near the end of the study the neighborhood used the email list to coordinate a protest action.

Of particular significance in the context of this thesis, Hampton and Wellman suggested that much of the success of this community network was likely attributable to the use of the neighborhood’s email discussion list (a place-based virtual group), noting that the availability of asynchronous communication channels and a quasi-public discussion forum likely contributed to weak tie formation, to neighboring behavior in the form of information sharing, and to the neighbors’ collective action efforts. With respect to collective action, Hampton observed that the email list:

> provided a visibility of participation that encouraged individual contributions, overcame high thresholds to participation, supported the appearance of group solidarity, and prevented the loss of individual involvement (2003).
This set of affordances seems to point to the Netville email list contributing to civic engagement, citizen participation, and possibly collective efficacy (if the appearance of group solidarity led to a sense of neighborhood empowerment).

**Israeli Suburbs Email Lists.** Researchers in Israel performed two studies on the use of place-based virtual groups in two suburban neighborhoods outside of the city of Jerusalem (Mesch and Levanon 2003; Mesch and Talmud 2010). These two neighborhoods were both built in the early 1990s, and in 1995 residents of both neighborhoods created email discussion lists (with discussion board functionality, similar to Yahoo! or Google Groups) to allow residents to share information, including information about local businesses and community services. At the time of the baseline data collection for the 2003 study, both lists were fairly high-traffic, each producing around 20 messages per day (Mesch and Levanon).

The 2003 study inquired into whether membership on the email lists encouraged social involvement and/or civic engagement, either at the immediate neighborhood level or at the level of the “greater community”, by which they presumably meant the municipality (Mesch and Levanon). It also looked into whether relationships established online via the email list turned into face-to-face relationships. After doing a content analysis of the email lists and administering a survey of email list participants, the researchers concluded that email list membership increased both social interactions and civic participation/engagement, but that these effects were only found at the level of the greater community—email list participation did not impact the number of interactions or participation at the neighborhood level. While this contradicts findings from studies that took place in the U.S. and Canada, the authors note that this is not surprising given that Israeli neighborhoods already tend to be strong and important units for social and support purposes; with that in mind the findings are still encouraging in terms of the social capital benefits place-based virtual groups can provide. In the 2003 study researchers also found that online relationships created through the email lists with members of the community were likely to morph into face-to-face relationships. Additionally, they noted that the email lists were commonly used for the provision of mutual help among residents and frequently used for the exchange of information among residents (i.e., for neighboring behavior).

For the later study (Mesch and Talmud 2010), researchers performed a longitudinal study based on two data sets—interviews with both email list participants and non-participants from 2005 and 2007. In addition to showing changes over time, this methodology allowed them to control for internet
connectivity. Mesch and Talmud theorized that participation in the place-based virtual groups would affect civic engagement and community attachment (an attribute closely related to sense of community), and that merely having access to the internet would be less strongly correlated with these two characteristics. Their results verified their suspicions—neither access to the internet nor attitudes toward technology were found to be correlated with membership in local organizations, whereas participation in the email list was—list participants reported more membership in local community organizations. List participants were also found to have higher levels of community attachment than residents who weren’t on the lists.

**Neighborhoods in the Network Society: The e-Neighbors Study.** The e-Neighbors Study (Hampton 2007) was an experiment performed to study the results of implementing neighborhood websites with place-based virtual groups in middle-class Boston, Massachusetts, neighborhoods. Three neighborhoods—one apartment building, one gated community, and one non-gated suburban neighborhood of single-family detached homes—were each provided with a neighborhood email list and a neighborhood website, while a fourth neighborhood—a second non-gated suburban neighborhood of single-family detached homes—was studied as a control group. Residents of each neighborhood were surveyed in 2002, in 2003, and in 2004 regarding their social networks. Before initiating the experiment, Hampton hypothesized that internet use was increasingly being embedded into neighborhood social networks, and that he would find that residents who used the email list and neighborhood website would experience a) increases in their numbers of weak interpersonal ties and b) increases in their frequencies of interactions with their neighbors in person, over the phone, and via the internet. He further predicted that the email list would be adopted by more residents than the neighborhood website features, and that he would see a difference in adoption of technology based on neighborhood demographics (with “residential stability, a large proportion of children, a preexisting heightened sense of community, and a desire for additional contact with neighbors” leading to greater adoption).

Regarding these last predictions, Hampton was correct; none of the three neighborhoods used the websites more than minimally, and the only neighborhood that adopted the email list for more than a handful of messages was the neighborhood that had high residential stability, lots of children, and a desire for more contact with neighbors—the suburban neighborhood. The suburban neighborhood, however, handsomely adopted the email list, with 42 residents sending 155 messages in the first year (including in particular one large flurry of messages at the end of the year) and then 49 residents sending 271
messages in the second year. The list was used for discussion of local issues, local politics, local services, and collective action. Thus the presence of the email list facilitated some neighboring behavior in the form of information exchange.

Although residents who didn’t actively participate in the email list\textsuperscript{42} did not see a gain in interpersonal ties, residents who \textit{did} actively participate in the list experienced an average increase of 4.36 weak ties during each year of the study (no change in strong ties). The hypothesis that participants in the email list would experience an increase in in-person and phone interactions with neighbors was not borne out, but participants did experience a slight increase in the number of email interactions they had with neighbors (Hampton 2007).

\textit{i-Neighbors}.

Hampton (2010, 2011) has also published findings from a 3-year naturalistic experiment involving i-Neighbors, a website that was created through a university research project. i-Neighbors (a site that still exists) at that time provided any and all interested physical neighborhoods in the U.S. and Canada with a free “digital neighborhood” that included various online features as well as a neighborhood email discussion list. Hampton looked at the 50 most active American neighborhoods on i-Neighbors, all of which had chosen to create place-based virtual groups on i-Neighbors without any solicitation or intervention. The sample ended up including 36 middle-class neighborhoods as well as 14 neighborhoods that were located in the top 20\textsuperscript{th} percentile for areas in the U.S. with the highest concentration of disadvantage (the inclusion of disadvantaged neighborhoods is uncommon and therefore noteworthy within this field of investigation).

i-Neighbors, mentioned repeatedly earlier in this section, is a website and free service\textsuperscript{43} that grew out of the aforementioned e-Neighbors study. The site provides the tools for any neighborhood in the U.S. or Canada to create its own civic social network site with an accompanying email list. From 2004 through 2012, the site was run by students and faculty at first MIT and then the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania. The site is now run by i-Neighbors Inc., a social enterprise company led by Keith Hampton. In 2010 Hampton published the results of a three-year naturalistic experiment in which he ran i-Neighbors without any manipulation; he did not solicit participants or advertise the site, but instead let any interested individuals

\textsuperscript{42}“Active participation” is defined as sending one or more email to the list.

\textsuperscript{43}In 2012 i-Neighbors began offering a premium paid service for groups interested in receiving additional features. For details see \url{http://www.i-neighbors.org/}.  

\[\text{\textsuperscript{42}}\text{\textsuperscript{43}}\]
and neighborhoods find and employ the site without interference. After 3 years Hampton looked in detail at the 50 most active neighborhoods on the site. In a 2010 article, he confirmed that i-Neighbors was supporting social cohesion and collective efficacy in participating neighborhoods. He also found that i-Neighbors was supporting these community traits at the same rates in disadvantaged neighborhoods as in more advantaged areas, and that the rate of adoption of i-Neighbors by disadvantaged communities was higher than would be expected. Hampton theorizes that the reduced transaction costs of CMC are working against long-existing constraints on collective action in the context of concentrated disadvantage, and that these reduced transaction costs and corresponding changes in the communication ecology may be supporting social cohesion, collective efficacy, and efforts at collective action in disadvantaged neighborhoods as well as middle-class neighborhoods (see also Hampton 2011). While this study is primarily of interest in the context of concerns about the digital divide, the finding that place-based virtual groups were supporting social cohesion and collective efficacy in neighborhoods "that are otherwise unlikely contexts for collective efficacy" is strong evidence in favor of the argument that these groups can lead to the development of social capital.

Table 2-6: Results of a Survey on Americans Use of the Internet
(text from Hampton et al. 2009)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>The Pew Internet and American Life Project's report, Social Isolation and New Technology, found that of those who use an “online neighborhood discussion forum”...</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>✓ 60% know “all or most” of their neighbors, compared to 40% of other Americans.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ 79% talk with neighbors in person at least once a month, compared to 61% of the general population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ 43% talk to neighbors on the telephone at least once a month, compared to the average of 25%.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ 70% had listened to a neighbor’s problems in the previous six months, and 63% received similar support from neighbors, compared with 49% who had given and 38% who had received this support in the general population.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ 65% had helped a neighbor with household chores or loaned a household item in the previous six months, and 54% had received this support, compared to the average 41% who had given and 31% who had received.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The content in the body of this table is quoted from the report Social Isolation and New Technology by Keith Hampton, Lauren Sessions, Eun Ja Her, and Lee Rainie (2009).

Prior studies (Hampton 2007; Hampton 2010) had found that the adoption of CMC by middle-class suburban neighborhoods had led to social cohesion, collective action, and collective efficacy.
2.5 POSITIONING THIS THESIS IN THE LITERATURE

While a few studies have been done looking at the use of place-based virtual groups in neighborhoods, much more research is needed to get a clear sense of how these groups are being used, how they could be used, and what the implications are for the community question and for social capital in neighborhoods. This thesis was undertaken in an attempt to add to the body of knowledge regarding these groups and their potential effects, and in particular to expand our understanding of the variation among different types of place-based virtual groups. Most previous studies on place-based virtual groups have looked at a single CMC tool or a single neighborhood in depth, and many of the virtual groups they looked at were imposed on a neighborhood as part of the study. This thesis was designed with the idea that it is as important to investigate where and how these groups are being implemented as it is to study their potential implications. While the focus of this research was on the social capital implications of only four groups, three of which utilize the same type of CMC tool, the process of finding and selecting those groups (discussed in Section 3 and Appendix A) resulted in new information regarding the frequency with which place-based virtual groups occur and the types of place-based virtual groups that exist.
The three main sources of data for this study were:

- Interviews with participants in place-based virtual groups;
- Review of the content in the archives of place-based virtual groups; and
- Interviews with leadership from companies that operate electronic communication tools.

The methods used to collect and evaluate data are described briefly below. For a more detailed description of the methodology for selecting interviewees and case studies, please see Appendix A, Expanded Methodology. For lists of all the place-based virtual groups, neighborhood websites, and related CMC tools and organizations that were discovered during data collection, please see Appendix B, Place-Based Virtual Groups and Other Neighborhood Websites in the Bay Area.

### 3.1 Interviews with Participants

By opting to use interviews as the primary means of data collection, I was able to explore a number of personal experiences in depth, providing rich information on how people see place-based virtual groups as influencing their lives.
My primary goal in interviewing participants in place-based virtual groups was to discover whether the participants experienced or saw evidence of indicators of social capital in their neighborhoods, and whether participants thought that the virtual groups were contributing to the presence of these social capital indicators.

I asked about four indicators of social capital—sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation/civic engagement, and collective efficacy (see Section 2 for full descriptions of these concepts). Each of these indicators can be conceived of and measured at the level of the individual and/or at the level of the neighborhood (Perkins and Long 2002; Perkins et al. 2002). I asked interviewees whether a) they personally had experienced these indicator qualities differently after beginning to use the virtual group and/or b) they had seen noticed a difference in these qualities at the neighborhood level that they attributed to the virtual group. (Unfortunately, due to the way the conversations progressed, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether interviewees were referring to observations of indicators at the level of the individual, the block, the neighborhood, or whatever they conceived of as “the community”.)

I also asked participants about their use of place-based virtual groups, their use of other online social network services and computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools, their feelings about neighborhoods and communities, and their current and

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METHODS AT A GLANCE

- Geographical focus: San Francisco Bay Area
- Initial inquiries uncovered over 100 place-based virtual groups, neighborhood websites, and related organizations and CMC tools
- 28 interviews of place-based virtual group participants using a snowball sample
- Semi-structured open-ended interviews
- Selected 4 case studies: 3 email groups, 1 Facebook Group
- Short online demographics survey for all participants
- 9 interviews with leadership from organizations that operate electronic communication tools

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45 Level of analysis is a controversial subject in the social capital literature, with different researchers arguing that social capital can be conceived of and/or measured only at the individual level, only at the group level, or equally at both levels. Perkins and Long, from whose work I take my four social capital indicators, favor multi-level analysis (using quantitative methods to assess individual-level data as well as group climate variables compiled from aggregate individual perceptions). Due to time and resource constraints I was unable to perform a quantitative multi-level analysis for this study.
preferred relationships with their neighbors and their neighborhoods. I used the following questions to guide the interviews:

- Why do the interviewees use place-based virtual groups?
- Do place-based virtual groups affect the development of social capital at the neighborhood and individual levels?
- How do the interviewees see place-based virtual groups as being related to the concept of community?
- Are there individual characteristics that may help explain the variation of interviewees' valuation and perceptions of a) place-based virtual groups and/or b) neighborhood-based community?
- What do interviewees think are the appropriate roles (and associated best tools) for CMC within neighborhoods?

In addition to speaking with participants in place-based virtual groups, I also interviewed leadership at a variety of non-profit and for-profit organizations that operate electronic communication tools. These interviewees consisted of entrepreneurs, researchers, and developers from Blockboard, Burning Man, Front Porch Forum, i-Neighbors, Meetup, Microsoft Research, Nextdoor, rBlock, and Tribe. I asked these interviewees about their organizations' origins, founding philosophies, and current trajectories, as well as their professional opinions about the best ways to build community through CMC.

All interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions in an attempt to allow interviewees to spend more time talking about the topics they were more interested in and to make cross-topic connections more likely. Interviewees also were asked to fill out a short survey with questions regarding their use of the internet and various personal demographics.

### 3.2 FINDING AND SELECTING PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWEES

I selected the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area as my geographic region of focus, both because of my familiarity with the region and because I expected that the Bay Area would be a region in the U.S. with relatively high levels of use of CMC tools. To find interviewees I sent out a request to my acquaintances via email and
Facebook\textsuperscript{46}. I hoped to discover place-based virtual groups that were using specialized civic social network sites like Nextdoor and i-Neighbors and that were inclusive of all residents living within the bounds of the neighborhood (i.e., not just parents). I received suggestions to investigate 93 groups, websites, and organizations. None of the suggestions connected me groups that were both using specialized civic social network sites \textit{and} being inclusive of all neighbors, but there were still many interesting potential case studies. I narrowed the list of suggestions down to include only place-based virtual groups, which included email discussion lists, discussion sites, and groups on social network sites\textsuperscript{47}, then weeded out groups that covered a geographic area larger than a neighborhood, groups that covered a geographic area smaller than a block, groups that did not formally employ a CMC tool, groups that limited their content only to discussion of neighborhood crime, and groups whose representatives didn't respond to my emails. I ended up interviewing nine representatives from various place-based virtual groups in January 2012. Based on those initial interviews I selected four groups to focus on (see Section 3.3). From the initial interviewees I did a snowball sample to find 19 additional interviewees. I ended up conducting interviews with 24 participants from the 4 case studies—4 from one, 5 from another, 7 from another, and 8 from another—plus 4 additional interviews with participants from other groups.

As mentioned above, I also solicited interviews with leadership at a variety of non-profit and for-profit organizations, including Meetup, Nextdoor, i-neighbors, Tribe, rBlock, Blockboard, and Microsoft Research (see Table A-1 in Appendix A for a complete list of these interviewees).

\textbf{3.3 SELECTING SAMPLE GROUPS}

By the end of the first round of interviews I had spoken to people about their involvement in approximately 40 place-based virtual groups, most of which consisted of email discussion lists. There was a wide range of topics, and some groups generated much more communication and electronic contact than others. I decided that it would be interesting to try to tease out differences among some of the

\textsuperscript{46} I sent emails to approximately 500 individuals, although approximately 15 addresses failed to work. As of December 5, 2011, the day of the posting, I had approximately 1,300 Facebook friends that could potentially have seen my posting.

\textsuperscript{47} As stated in Section 1, I am interested in virtual groups because they seem particularly well-positioned to support social capital due to the fact that they are designed to encourage relationships among neighbors, facilitating free conversation on a multiplicity of topics among individuals who are each given equal voice within a coherent and bounded group. By choosing to focus on virtual groups I excluded place-based blogs, hyperlocal news sites, local wikis, and several place-based mobile apps.
more prominent and high-traffic groups, and I opted to pick three to five representative groups to focus on as I moved forward.

In selecting the three to five place-based virtual groups to focus on I considered the following factors:

- Whether there was sufficient interest from members to garner at least four interviewees;
- What type of tool was being used (with the goal of including at least two types of tool);
- Whether the group was exclusively focused on a subset of residents, all official residents, and/or all persons interested in the neighborhood;
- How frequently people posted to the group;
- What municipality the group was located in (with the goal of diversity);
- Whether the site of the group was urban or suburban (with the goal of diversity);
- The geographic size of the neighborhood that the group covered; and
- The likely population demographics of the neighborhood (with the goal of diversity of residents' ages, housing tenure status, and number of children).

My goal was to pick groups that were different enough that they covered some range in terms of size of neighborhood, level of urbanness, characteristics of residents, and type of communication tool. I ended up selecting four groups to focus on: Acton Community, a Google Group for a few blocks in a quiet residential portion of the City of Berkeley; Brittany Meadows, a Facebook group in a small neighborhood in the suburban City of Santa Rosa; Mission Parents, a Yahoo! Group for parents in a large very urban neighborhood/district in the City and County of San Francisco; and PiedmontAve, a Yahoo! Group for a large urban neighborhood in the City of Oakland.

As noted above, Appendix B contains lists of the virtual groups, neighborhood websites, and related organizations and CMC tools that I discovered but chose not to focus on during my research.

### 3.4 Comparison of Place-Based Virtual Groups

For each of the four main place-based virtual groups of interest, I gathered enough information to give the reader a sense of the physical setting for each group, the demographics of the residents, and the characteristics of the group. I prepared the following (located in Section 4):
• Brief history and physical description of the neighborhood;
• Summary of neighborhood demographics at the census tract level (from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and the 2010 Census);
• Synopsis of electronic content based on interviews of participants and a three-month sample of the group’s electronic archives;
• Description of the distinguishing features of each group, based on interviewees’ perceptions and my personal observations; and
• Discussion of how the virtual group seems to relate to the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain demographics for the members of each group for the sake of comparison to the demographics of the neighborhood overall, because I did not have the resources to administer an additional survey for each virtual group.

3.5 LIMITATIONS AND STRENGTHS OF THE RESEARCH

This study is not intended to be a survey of all types of users and uses of placed-based virtual groups in the Bay Area or even present a comprehensive look at the current uses of such groups in the four case study neighborhoods. There exist no lists of placed-based virtual groups in the Bay Area\(^\text{48}\) nor any lists of individuals who use these groups in the Bay Area, so selecting a representative sample from all placed-based virtual groups or all group users was not possible. Participants for this study were found using a snowball sample that originated with my personal acquaintances, and was therefore biased toward certain demographics. While interviews and case studies were initially sought with an attempt to achieve some level of diversity along the variables of age, gender, level of education, marital status, number of children, length of time in current neighborhood, and type of urban setting, I was limited by the fact that most interviewees were volunteers and not personally solicited.

Table 3-1 shows the demographics of the interviewees as a group as well as a breakdown by case study. Most interviewees were employed, most were married or living with a partner, most were Caucasian, and most were homeowners. Most interviewees were also female. Two-thirds of interviewees had advanced degrees.

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\(^{48}\)Neither Yahoo! Groups, Google Groups, nor Facebook allow users to search for groups based on location. Meetup allows for searches based on proximity to a target zip code. As of May 4, 2012, the number of Meetup groups located within 50 miles of San Francisco was 2,911. Meetup groups write their own descriptions and choose their own category tags, so it is difficult to determine how many Meetup groups in the Bay Area are actually used to connect neighbors and support neighborhoods. A search for groups using the word “neighborhoods” on May 5, 2012, resulted in 49 groups, though only 26 were reported to actually employ in-person meetups.
and all had at least some college education. About half of the interviewees had children under the age of 18 living in their homes, and most of these children were under the age of five. All interviewees were over the age of 30, all but 3 were under the age of 60, and most were under the age of 50. Finally, most interviewees lived in urban areas and the rest lived in suburban areas.

The following demographics are therefore overrepresented in the sample: women, homeowners, parents of children under the age of five, Caucasians, thirty-somethings, individuals who were married or living with a partner, and individuals with advanced degrees. These overrepresentations are very likely to bias the results of this study. Research from the Pew Center and other sources has discovered the following correlations that may be relevant when considering the external validity of my findings:

- **Women are more likely to know their neighbors than men are** (Hampton et al. 2009), and **Caucasian Americans are more likely than those of other races to know at least some of their neighbors** (Hampton et al. 2009). Most of my interviewees were women and most of my interviewees were Caucasian, which means that my interviewees may have been more likely to know their neighbors than an average resident.

- **Homeowners have been found to have higher place attachment for their neighborhoods, while Caucasians have been found to have lower place attachment for their neighborhoods than people of color** (Brown et al. 2003). Place attachment is closely linked to sense of community. Since these two correlations work against each other, it is unclear whether my interviewees may have been more or less likely to experience sense of community than an average resident, but it is interesting to note that demographics may be correlated with different positions on this indicator of social capital.

- **Women, college graduates, urbanites, and Caucasians are all more likely to belong to “online neighborhood groups” than an average American** (Smith 2010). Most of my interviewees were women, college graduates, urban dwellers, and Caucasian, so they may have been more likely than an average resident to belong to several online neighborhood groups.

- **People who are married or living with a partner tend to value relationships with neighbors more than unmarried people** (Michelson 1977, via Hampton et al. 2009). Most of my interviewees were married, so they may have been more likely than an average resident to value relationships with their neighbors.
Table 3-1: Interviewee Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All (24 interviewees)</th>
<th>Acton Community (5)</th>
<th>Brittany Meadows (4)</th>
<th>Mission Parents (8*)</th>
<th>Piedmont Ave (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Average length of residency</td>
<td>8.5 years</td>
<td>6.6 years</td>
<td>16.1 years</td>
<td>6.6 years</td>
<td>7.3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Gender</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Age</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Marital status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married or living with a partner</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Children under 18 living at home?</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homeowner?</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Education</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor's degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced degree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Race and ethnicity</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian / Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian / Pacific Islander and White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something else</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline to state</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employment status</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Experience with online community?</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that one interviewee from the Mission Parents list did not complete the demographic survey and therefore some tallies in this portion of the table do not sum to eight.*
The results of the study are not intended to be generalizable to all residents of the Bay Area, although they may be generalizable to similar types of people in other urban and suburban environments. This thesis is intended to serve as an introductory and descriptive discussion of individuals' experiences with place-based virtual groups and social capital in their neighborhoods.

It should also be noted that residents of the Bay Area, due to their proximity to Silicon Valley and a thriving technology start-up culture, may be more likely than other Americans to be aware of small, new, or niche social network services, social media tools, and other options for CMC. Similarly, residents of the Bay Area may also be more likely to be early adopters of new technologies. (In fact, several of the services I discovered were being piloted first in Silicon Valley or in San Francisco.) This means that the average interviewee in this study may be engaging in or aware of more CMC methods than a typical American. However, if this is indeed the case, it seems reasonable to assume that the Bay Area residents are an early-adopting population for technologies that will eventually become widespread throughout the U.S.; so again, while the results of this study are not intended to be generalizable to all residents of the U.S., they may be generalizable to similar types of people in other urban and suburban environments around the country, either now or in the near future.
Place-based virtual groups, as stated in Section 1, are defined as online groups that concentrate on connecting users who live in or are interested in a specific neighborhood, generally with the explicit goal of encouraging communication among users while facilitating exchange of information about the neighborhood. Place-based virtual groups have membership processes that dictate who can access the group’s content, they have a clearly delineated group structure with precise boundaries, and they provide the technical means for all members to participate with more or less equal voices.

This section describes the four place-based virtual groups selected as case studies. These four case studies—three email discussion lists and one Facebook Group—were representative of the more dominant types of place-based virtual groups that I found. Appendix B lists all additional virtual groups and other neighborhood websites discovered during the data collection process. Note that the terms place-based virtual group, virtual group, email list, and list are all used to refer to the three place-based virtual groups that were enabled by email discussion lists, and the terms place-based virtual group, virtual group, Facebook Group, and group are all used to refer to the placed-based virtual group that was enabled through a Facebook Group.
For each of the four case studies, I gathered enough information to give the reader a sense of the physical setting for each group, the demographics of the residents\textsuperscript{49}, and the characteristics of the virtual group. I prepared the following:

- Brief history and physical description of the neighborhood;
- Summary of neighborhood demographics at the census tract level (from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and the 2010 Census);
- Synopsis of electronic content based on interviews of participants and a three-month sample of the group’s electronic archives;
- Description of the distinguishing features of each virtual group, based on interviewees’ perceptions and my personal observations; and
- Discussion of how the virtual group seems to relate to the neighborhood, including whether residents think of the virtual group as a tool or if they think of it as a representation of part or all of the neighborhood or of a community.

Table 4-1 presents an overview of some of the characteristics of the virtual groups.

\textsuperscript{49} I was not able to obtain demographics for the members of each group for the sake of comparison to the demographics of the neighborhood overall, because that would have required administering an additional survey for each virtual group.
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acton Community</th>
<th>Brittany Meadows</th>
<th>Mission Parents</th>
<th>Piedmont Ave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>number of members</strong></td>
<td>71 members</td>
<td>42 members</td>
<td>972 members</td>
<td>3f5 members</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>basis for virtual group</strong></td>
<td>place-based</td>
<td>place-based</td>
<td>interest- and  place-based</td>
<td>place-based</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>type of tool used</strong></td>
<td>discussion list (email)</td>
<td>social network site (Facebook Group)</td>
<td>discussion list (email)</td>
<td>discussion list (email)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>location</strong></td>
<td>Berkeley (urban, residential)</td>
<td>Santa Rosa (suburban, residential)</td>
<td>San Francisco (very urban, mixed residential/co mmercial)</td>
<td>Oakland (urban, residential with single commercial corridor)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>geographic scope</strong></td>
<td>5 or 6 blocks of single-family homes</td>
<td>2 blocks of single-family homes</td>
<td>14 blocks of Mission Street x 10 blocks wide</td>
<td>15 blocks of Piedmont Avenue x 10 blocks wide</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>traffic over a 3-month period</strong></td>
<td>142 posts</td>
<td>22 posts</td>
<td>688 posts</td>
<td>90 posts</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.1 ACTON COMMUNITY

case study: Acton Community

| Type: Google Group (email discussion list) |
| Created: March 2011 |
| Members: 71 |
| Location: Southwest Berkeley |
| Geographic Boundaries: originally encompassed Acton Street between Ward and Oregon, but now also includes residents on Dohr, Ward, and Oregon (see Figure 4-1) |
| Description: Neighborhood email group for the Acton Street Neighborhood group (including Ward, Oregon and Dohr) |
| Rules or Guidelines: none |
| Frequency of Postings: 51 posts in February 2012; 54 posts in March 2012; 37 posts in April 2012 |
| Typical Content: social gatherings; crime and safety; local recommendations; neighborhood issues |
| Overlapping Electronic Groups and Sites: Berkeley Parents Network |
| Overlapping Online News Sites: Berkeley Patch |
| Overlapping Offline Organizations and Resources: San Pablo Park Group (neighborhood association), Francis Allbriar Community Center, San Pablo Park, Berkeley tool-lending library |

Information updated May 1, 2012.

4.1.1 Neighborhood Description

Acton Community is located in Southwest Berkeley, just east of San Pablo Park, a few blocks north of Ashby Avenue and a few blocks east of San Pablo Avenue. The neighborhood started out defining itself as the block of Acton Street between Ward and Oregon Streets, which comprises 33 homes, but has spread south down Acton toward Russell, north up Acton toward Derby, and now also includes some homes on Dohr and Park (see Figure 4-1). The neighborhood is uniformly residential, flat and walkable with calm traffic patterns. The closest commercial uses are two blocks east on Sacramento Street, a wide thoroughfare with sparse commercial development, and five or six blocks west on San Pablo Avenue, another wide thoroughfare with slightly more commercial development. While San Pablo and Sacramento both act as pedestrian- or recreation-oriented commercial corridors at various points in Berkeley and nearby cities, the stretches immediately adjacent to Acton Community do not contain a large number of pedestrian-oriented uses. While there are a number of restaurants, coffee shops, and other amenities within a ten-minute walk of the neighborhood on San Pablo Avenue, the width and high traffic volumes of that
arterial seem to prevent it from being much used as a pedestrian destination or corridor.

San Pablo Park is adjacent to the neighborhood. The park is home to the Francis Albrier Community Center, and it also includes baseball fields, soccer practice fields, basketball courts, tennis courts, a playground, and picnic areas. The closest public elementary school is Malcolm X Elementary School, but children in the City of Berkeley public school system are not automatically placed in the school closest to their homes.

Over 40% of the homes in Southwest Berkeley (zip code 94702) were built before 1940, and another 30% were built before 1960, and the housing stock in the case study neighborhood consists mostly of small detached homes. Home prices in the area tend to be higher than the California average (see Table 4-2). Approximately 55% of the population lives in owner-occupied housing units, while 45% live in renter-occupied housing units (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b).

The census tract that contains Acton Community is 42% white, 34% African-American, 9% Asian, 7% “two or more races”, and 14% Hispanic or Latino (of any race). 78% of residents speak English at home, while 9% speak Spanish. 28% of households include children under the age of 18. The median age is 40 years, and 15% of the population is 65 or older. Of the population that is 25 years or older, 94% are high school graduates, 48% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 23% have a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a, 2011b).

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Figure 4-1: Map of the Acton Community Neighborhood, Berkeley, California
### Table 4-2: Housing Values and Pricing

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>California State Average</th>
<th>Acton Community&lt;sup&gt;1&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Brittany Meadows&lt;sup&gt;2&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Mission Parents&lt;sup&gt;3&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
<th>Piedmont Ave&lt;sup&gt;4&lt;/sup&gt;</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median value of housing units with mortgages, 2010</strong></td>
<td>$417,800</td>
<td>$580,021</td>
<td>$525,994</td>
<td>$790,997</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median value of housing units with no mortgage, 2010</strong></td>
<td>$367,700</td>
<td>$500,990</td>
<td>$417,071</td>
<td>$781,995</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Median price asked for vacant for-sale houses and condos, 2010</strong></td>
<td>$401,873</td>
<td>$463,333</td>
<td>$347,456</td>
<td>$876,562</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean price of detached houses, 2010</strong></td>
<td>$541,000 (approximate)</td>
<td>$648,948</td>
<td>$671,009</td>
<td>$806,910</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mean price of attached units, 2010</strong></td>
<td>$453,500 (approximate)</td>
<td>$818,705</td>
<td>$425,971</td>
<td>$802,520</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

<sup>1</sup> Zip code 94702 in Berkeley.
<sup>2</sup> Zip code 95404 in Santa Rosa.
<sup>3</sup> Zip code 94110 in San Francisco.
<sup>4</sup> Zip code 94611 in Oakland and Piedmont.


#### 4.1.2 Origins of the Virtual Group

About five years ago, resident Mikko Jokela began organizing monthly block-wide gatherings for the 33 homes on the block of Acton Street between Ward and Oregon. He initially advertised using flyers distributed to each home. Around that same time Mikko was working on street-tree planting, figuring out which neighbors wanted...
trees and coordinating with the City of Berkeley to get the trees planted. In the process of that organizing effort Mikko ended up with a bunch of the residents’ email addresses, and he started using the email addresses to send notes about the monthly neighborhood gatherings, supplementing the door-to-door flyering. When he met new residents, Mikko would let them know that they sometimes used email to communicate, and he would collect the new addresses. When Mikko sent emails, he didn’t use an email mailing list—he sent emails to all the addresses in the ‘to’ or ‘cc’ field. In the meantime, the monthly block-wide gatherings continued, usually garnering 20-40 attendees, and over time neighbors from other nearby blocks began to be invited. In March, 2011, Jenny Strauss, a resident of an adjacent block of Acton, offered to take the collection of individual email addresses and turn it into an email discussion list, of which she became the moderator. There were 42 email addresses on the original list as created on March 6, 2011; as of May 1, 2012, there were 71 email addresses on the list.

### 4.1.3 Observed Group Uses and Characteristics

During February, March, and April, 2012, the content on the list primarily consisted of: posts about crime and safety, including reports of nearby incidents and concerns about suspicious activity in the neighborhood; requests and offers of local recommendations; announcements and RSVPs for neighborhood gatherings; and announcements from the City of Berkeley and the Berkeley Police Department about services or upcoming events. There were also postings concerning introductions of new neighbors, a lost cat, an apology for construction-related noise, and a request for a spare room for some out-of-town guests.

This list is fairly low-traffic, with 51 posts in February, 54 posts in March, and 37 posts in April of this year. During those three months, posts were made from 33 different email addresses (out of a total of 72 list members), and approximately half of the 54 threads during these three months drew at least one reply-all. One resident described the list as primarily used for announcements and notifications, and used less for conversation or discourse about local issues; this assessment seems accurate. Most reply-all responses seem to be either thank-you’s or statements of support for the information posted, additional information to add to the original post, or, in the case of the crime-related threads, personal stories to add to the topic. The list does not seem to be used to express opinions or discuss controversial subjects. The group has no posted rules or guidelines for tone or content.

The genesis of this list was closely tied to the habit of using email to announce monthly neighborhood gatherings that one resident had been organizing for a number of years, and that fact combined with the repeated in-person gatherings themselves
led me to assume that the list would include some level of friendly and familiar chatter, as if among a group of friendly acquaintances. While the list’s tone is friendly and a number of threads include reply-all responses with non-utilitarian content (an indicator that list members likely feel comfortable posting just to be social), the list still feels fairly formal and carefully polite, and I did not observe any social banter or exchange of emails for individual or group entertainment.

There is no obvious commercial center near Acton Street, and there are no local businesses, and it is interesting to consider whether the presence of local businesses would affect the content of the list or the frequency of posts (i.e., more nearby businesses might lead to more postings about those businesses’ goings-on, about use permit processes, and about events at the businesses).

4.1.4 Reported Group Uses

Acton Community participants reported that they used their list for coordinating monthly neighborhood gatherings, for communicating about nearby crime incidents, and to give miscellaneous notices and updates about things happening around the neighborhood.

Several of the Acton interviewees talked about using their list as a way to get a general feel for what was going on around them. While they didn’t seem to use the list to strengthen individual relationships or develop friendships, they did seem to use the list to accumulate small bits of information about individual neighbors and to get a better sense of what sort of people lived nearby. “It’s made me aware that there’s a lot of new families, people have a lot of different jobs, and there’s no real stereotype for everyone”, as one woman said.

One resident noted that there weren’t a lot of strong opinions expressed on the list, and that she herself tried to stay neutral when posting to avoid controversy. She further explained that while she was a very open person, both online and in person, she had chosen not to send some of her more personal online writing and art to the Acton Community list because it didn’t feel like the appropriate forum. As she frankly explained, “Sometimes you don’t want to know someone’s politics because then you’ll just hate them! And I don’t want to hate my neighbors.”

While they said they didn’t use the list to “make friends” with their neighbors, per se, several participants said that they had met people through the list, and several said that the list helped them keep track of the names of neighbors that they met in person. One noted that the list had frequently acted as a nice excuse to introduce herself in person to new neighbors who were just moving in: “It gives you a reason to engage; it’s almost like a little welcome wagon.”
Some examples of posts that interviewees mentioned included: a household offering free lemons from the tree in their backyard; a man asking for (and receiving) help signing for a package delivery while he was away from home; a woman asking for (and receiving) help hooking up her new TV; and a woman asking for help looking for her lost cat.

A few uses were notably absent from Acton Community. The members didn’t tend to use the list to announce nearby public events, perhaps because the list and neighborhood are small, and/or because the neighborhood isn’t adjacent to any major commercial strips that would host public events. The members also didn’t tend to use the list for commerce. One resident noted that he would feel impolite posting to the list about personal items he was selling, instead preferring eBay or Craigslist, and another resident said that it would be seen as rude to use the list for professional self-promotion.

**4.1.5 How Does the Acton Community Virtual Group Relate to the Acton Street Neighborhood?**

The Acton Community does not have formal boundaries, and the list seems to have spread semi-haphazardly over time. Thus, while the list may have initially comprised people from a small area who mostly had met in person at least once, it has grown to include people who haven’t met and who may live several blocks from each other. According to one resident, about 20-40 people (including children) attend the monthly neighborhood gatherings, while the list includes 71 members\(^51\). Based on interviews, it seems that the expansion of the list membership to people outside of the initial block seems to have led residents to have a slightly broader conception of who their neighbors are and to be more likely to say hello or smile at people beyond their immediate neighbors, knowing that they might both be part of the same email list.

The monthly gatherings seem to have retained primacy in terms of how residents conceive of their neighborhood community, rather than being supplanted by the email list. The list, as one resident put it, “supplements the live group but I don’t think it replaces it.” She contrasted the Acton Community list with another neighborhood email list located nearby, noting that the other list occasionally resulted in meetups but instead was much more centered around email conversations.

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\(^{51}\) I do not know what portion of the list members have attended in-person gatherings or what portion of the gathering attendees belong to the list. I also do not know what portion of the list members are under 18, but I assume that few children are members of the list.
Several interviewees spoke frankly of gentrification trends in the neighborhood and expressed concern because they didn’t feel that list membership was representative of the diversity of race, economic status, and life stage of the area’s residents. Specifically, interviewees mentioned that list membership and participation were higher among residents who have moved in during the last 10-15 years, a subset of residents who tended to be white, Asian, or mixed-race and often had young children, while list membership and participation seemed to be low among residents with more seniority in the neighborhood, a subset who tended to be black. One interviewee, after expressing some frustration that the list was not representative of local diversity, said she thought that a significant number of the residents who didn’t participate on the list were lacking either the technology access or media literacy required to take part. (In attempts to remedy this issue of representation and participation on the list, one interviewee still distributes flyers door-to-door to all residents for some of the monthly gatherings, and another interviewee has made a concerted effort to recruit residents with more neighborhood seniority onto the email list through personal outreach.)
4.2 BRITTANY MEADOWS

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>case study: Brittany Meadows</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Type:</strong> closed Facebook Group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Created:</strong> August 19, 2011</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Members:</strong> 42</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location:</strong> adjacent to the Lomita Heights neighborhood in the northeastern portion of Santa Rosa</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic Boundaries:</strong> primarily Gunther Lane and Andy Way, with some members from neighboring streets (see Figure 4-2)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Rules:</strong> none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Moderation Guidelines:</strong> none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of Postings:</strong> 72 text posts (22 initial postings plus 52 comments) and 16 “likes” since August 2011; 0 threads in February, 3 threads in March, 2 threads in April</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typical Content:</strong> neighborhood events, personal announcements, neighborhood news, thank-yous</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlapping Electronic Groups and Sites:</strong> none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlapping Online News Sites:</strong> none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlapping Offline Organizations:</strong> none</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Information updated May 1, 2012

4.2.1 Neighborhood Description

Brittany Meadows is a small and relatively new neighborhood located up a hill on the outskirts of an older and much larger neighborhood (Lomita Heights) in the City of Santa Rosa (see Figure 4-2). Santa Rosa is a medium-sized city (167,815 people in the 2010 Census [U.S. Census Bureau 2011b]) located in Sonoma County, approximately an hour’s drive north of San Francisco. The city has qualities of suburbia while retaining a strong downtown core and still showing signs of its agricultural roots.

All 21 houses in Brittany Meadows were built at the same time, and the first group of residents moved in in 1994. The houses, which are arranged on two short streets, are moderately-sized detached single-family homes surrounded by front and back yards.

In the section of Santa Rosa that contains Brittany Meadows, home prices in tend to be higher than the California average (see Table 4-2). Approximately 80% of the population in this census tract lives in owner-occupied housing units, while 19% live in renter-occupied housing units (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b).
Figure 4-2: Map of the Brittany Meadows Neighborhood, Santa Rosa, California

Brittany Meadows is surrounded by other older residential development to the north and west, by undeveloped scrubland to the east, and by medical buildings and facilities, including parking lots and a hospital, to the south. Aside from any commercial services incidental to the medical development, there are no commercial land uses near the neighborhood. The closest cluster of commercial services is 0.9 miles away. While Brittany Meadows itself has sidewalks, the curving street leading sharply uphill to Brittany Meadows does not have sidewalks; so while a Santa Rosa Transit bus route runs along a nearby arterial, with the closest bus stop approximately 0.4 mile from Brittany Meadows, the lack of sidewalks, steep gradient, and sharp curves of the street leading to Brittany Meadows means that the neighborhood is inconvenient to access without a car.
The census tract that contains Brittany Meadows is 86% white, 1% African-American, 7% Asian, 3% "two or more races", and 7% Hispanic or Latino (of any race). 92% of residents speak English at home, while 2% speak Spanish. 26% of households include children under the age of 18. The median age is 50 years, and 23% of the population is 65 or older. Of the population that is 25 years or older, 98% have graduated high school, 57% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 24% have a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a, 2011b).

4.2.2 Origins of the Virtual Group

In 1994, construction of the new neighborhood of Brittany Meadows had been completed and residents were moving into the new homes. The real estate agent who had sold the homes facilitated an initial block party for the new residents because, as she is reported to have said, "they all seemed like they would get along really well". The real estate agent was correct, in that the initial gathering was a success, the residents all exchanged phone numbers, and current residents recall a spirit of camaraderie that stemmed from all moving in at the same time and starting a new neighborhood together. That first block party seems to have set the tone for a large amount of socializing and friendliness among neighbors, and following the initial gathering the residents continued to self-organize neighborhood block parties and holiday parties every year. At some point the residents exchanged email addresses (as well as phone numbers), and by sometime in the 2000s residents were supplementing the use of hand-delivered paper flyers with email messages to communicate about upcoming parties in the neighborhood. Email has also been used for several years by the neighborhood’s earthquake preparedness team to distribute and collect information, and a member of that team maintains an neighborhood directory. (The emails are not managed in list format—all addresses are cc’d when a message is sent—and the neighborhood directory is stored privately, offline, with a revised version periodically sent to all residents.) In 2011 resident Maggie Brothers noticed that residents were occasionally complaining that they weren’t hearing about events that were happening around the neighborhood. She went around and solicited input on whether it would be a good idea to start a neighborhood Facebook group to either supplant or supplement email as the primary means of communication. While not all residents agreed to participate, the majority expressed interest and Maggie started the group.
4.2.3 Observed Group Uses and Characteristics

The group currently has 42 members, including a handful of former residents, and it is open to everyone who currently lives in Brittany Meadows, to anyone who has lived in Brittany Meadows in the past, and to the handful of adjacent neighbors who live outside of Brittany Meadows but participate in Brittany Meadows block parties.

Of the 42 members, 9 have initiated threads on the group's page, while 27 members have posted or “liked” posts (as of April 20, 2012). Since August 2011 there have only been 21 thread-starting posts (plus one formal event post), but these 21 posts have elicited 52 comments and 25 “likes” (again as of April 20, 2012). The group is so far entirely focused on things happening within the boundaries of the neighborhood that involve residents, as opposed to municipal news or more impersonal neighborhood issues.

The first 6 of the total 21 posts were in reference to the act of starting the group and to the type of content members expected the group contain. The first post from the group’s moderator read as follows:

I created this neighborhood group to share neighborhood "news", including info on BBQs, earthquake preparedness, etc. I "friended" some more people in the neighborhood today, so hopefully will have them added to the group soon (I believe that any group member can also add others to the group). We will, of course, still use other methods of communication for those who don't use facebook, or don't check it regularly.

Since those first few posts, the bulk of the content (11 posts) has indeed been neighborhood news, including announcements for meetings and block parties but also personal announcements (e.g., moves out of the neighborhood, deaths) and notices about things going on around the neighborhood (e.g., parties that are noisy or creating a parking scarcity). The remaining content consisted of two notes of thanks (one for support of a lemonade stand and one to the hosts of a block party), one note requesting input in the planning of a neighborhood party, and one posting of an old photo of a group of residents on a camping trip.

The group seems to be used primarily to make it easier for people to notice and response to announcements without the cumbersomeness of email, plus the enjoyment of getting to have group conversations without cluttering inboxes. There is also an interest in keeping in touch with the neighborhood’s diaspora.

The tone of the group is quite positive, friendly, and supportive. All but 3 of the 21 threads had “likes” and/or were commented on. The group has no posted rules or guidelines for tone or content.
4.2.4 Reported Group Uses

In response to questions about how they used the group, interviewees pointed to specific examples more than patterns, probably because the Brittany Meadows Facebook group, which began in August 2011, had only generated 21 threads with 52 comments as of April 2012. (Each of the three interviewees who were part of the Facebook group had started at least one thread and participated in at least two threads.) Interviewees pointed out that they had used the group to find out about neighborhood events, to find out when people were moving in or out of the neighborhood, and to stay informed about little things that were happening around the neighborhood. Examples mentioned included a man posting in real time to apologize for his daughter’s noisy slumber party, a woman posting to look for a lost dog, a couple posting to warn that parking spots would be scarce during an upcoming party, and a child posting a thank-you for support for her lemonade stand.

Interviewees said that they wanted to see the Facebook group used more in the future for quick updates of neighborhood goings-on, for personal announcements, to generate participation and enthusiasm for upcoming events, to inform residents about the neighborhood earthquake preparedness program, and to share neighborhood memories, especially via photographs.

4.2.5 How Does the Brittany Meadows Virtual Group Relate to the Brittany Meadows Neighborhood?

Brittany Meadows is a very different type of neighborhood than those in the other three cases. It is located in a suburban area, far from commercial land uses, with relatively low crime, little controversy, and few local issues of concern. It has also been inhabited by a strongly social and cohesive group of residents since it was occupied in 1994. The make-up of this neighborhood over time has so far been relatively homogeneous—middle-class and upper-middle-class white-collar families with children.

The interviewee who started the Facebook group gave the impression that most residents had decided to join the group, and that the ones who had not joined had made that decision because of their feelings about Facebook as a communication medium, not because of issues of digital access or feelings of exclusion. Two interviewees mentioned that there were people of all ages in the Facebook group, including elderly residents and children in middle school.

Despite relatively high participation and inclusion, however, not enough residents were in the group to cause the interviewees to feel like the group was a virtual
representation of the entire community. On the other hand, due to the fact that so many former residents were still considered part of the Brittany Meadows community, there isn’t a geographically cogent representation of the entire community either. So while the Facebook group isn’t comprehensive of all community members, it serves an important function in bridging between current and past residents.

4.3 MISSION PARENTS

case study: Mission Parents

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type:</th>
<th>Yahoo! Group (email discussion list)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Created:</td>
<td>March 17, 2005</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Members:</td>
<td>972</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Location:</td>
<td>the Mission District, San Francisco</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Geographic Boundaries:</td>
<td>approximate boundaries are 13th Street to the north, Highway 101 to the east, Cesar Chavez Street to the south, and Dolores Street to the west (see Figure 4-3)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Description:</td>
<td>The Mission is for families. The Mission Parents Group brings together parents, neighbors, and friends committed to making the Mission a healthy and fun place to raise kids. Our group has no formal meeting times. Please use the group to form new parent groups, meet-ups or neighborhood happy hours. New members are always welcome: Simply email <a href="mailto:missionparents@yahooogroups.com">missionparents@yahooogroups.com</a>. Also - many Mission Parents members are also members of the Bernal Heights Parents Club. You can email <a href="mailto:bernalheightsparents@yahooogroups.com">bernalheightsparents@yahooogroups.com</a>. Welcome!!</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Rules:</td>
<td>none</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Frequency of Postings:</td>
<td>193 posts in February 2012; 236 posts in March 2012; 259 posts in April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Typical Content:</td>
<td>Most of the content is related to parenting or children; types of content include requesting and receiving recommendations, finding and disposing of used objects, requesting and receiving advice and information, local issues and politics</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
4.3.1 Neighborhood Description

The Mission District, more commonly known just as the Mission, is a large and densely-populated neighborhood with approximately 53,400 residents located in the eastern half of the City and County of San Francisco (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b). The neighborhood is generally thought of as bounded by 13th Street to the north, Highway 101 to the east, Cesar Chavez Street to the south, and Dolores Street to the west (see Figure 4-3). It consists of mixed residential and commercial development, with two main pedestrian-oriented commercial corridors—Mission Street and Valencia Street; two shorter commercial and transit corridors—16th Street and 24th Street; and several additional streets with high levels of commercial development. Most houses in the neighborhood are within one to three blocks of a corner store or restaurant. All of the east-west streets except for 16th Street are two-lane roadways, while most of the north-west streets are four-lane roadways. Several bus lines run through the neighborhood, and the City’s subway system, BART, has two stops in the Mission. Pedestrians and cyclists are very common throughout the neighborhood, and the area includes a number of parks and schools.

Over 58% of the homes in the zip code that encompasses the Mission (zip code 94110) were built before 1940, many in the second half of the 19th century, and the housing stock in the Mission consists largely of old row houses subdivided into 2 to
4 units\textsuperscript{52}. Home prices in the area tend to be much higher than the California average (see Table 4-2). Approximately 24% of the population lives in owner-occupied housing units, while 69% live in renter-occupied housing units (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b).

Figure 4-3: Map of the Mission District, San Francisco, California

In the 13 census tracts that make up the Mission District, the population is 59% white, 4% African-American, 13% Asian, 6% “two or more races”, and 39% Hispanic or Latino (of any race). 49% of residents speak English at home, while 35% speak Spanish at home (the neighborhood includes two public elementary schools with Spanish-language dual immersion programs). 18% of households include children under the age of 19% of the population is 65 or older. Of the population that is 25 years or older, 81% are high school graduates, 48% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 18% have a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a, 2011b).

The Mission District has been a residential neighborhood since the second half of the 19th century. In the middle of the 20th century the neighborhood experienced an influx of Central American immigrants, and since then the area has been home to a large number of Hispanic residents and is known as a thriving Latin American commercial and cultural district. In the last couple of decades, however, many sections of the Mission (in particular the northern and western edges) have been experiencing gentrification, and increasing rents are a current issue of concern. In addition to being known as a center of Latin American subcultures, the Mission is known for the large number of colorful murals on neighborhood buildings and, more recently, for hosting hipster nightlife.

### 4.3.2 Origins of the Virtual Group

This Mission Parents list was started in 2005 a parent in the Mission who was interested in connecting with other parents in the neighborhood. At that time the Mission District was already a well-established, vibrant, and extremely diverse neighborhood. The Mission District is a very large neighborhood that contains a population of approximately 53,400 people, with approximately 3,870 households that include individuals under the age of 18 (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b). The Mission has traditionally been a neighborhood with a large Latino population, and is perceived as a very diverse and multi-cultural neighborhood within San Francisco.

A search for place-based Google and Yahoo! Groups in the Mission results in a couple dozen small groups that are mostly focused on a single block of residents or a very specific common interest (such as a specific type of cultural event). It is interesting to note that the Mission Parents list is the only list I could find that

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encompasses the entirety of the Mission and caters to a variety of topics\textsuperscript{54}. While the list is focused on parenting issues and children, it is also used for many general topics that would be of interest to a large number of non-parent Mission residents. Several members of the list observed that although they had been Mission residents for several years before having children, the Mission Parents list was the first neighborhood email list they had been on and that the list had enabled them to become exposed to many non-parent-related aspects of their long-time neighborhood.

\subsection*{4.3.3 Observed Group Uses and Characteristics}

The Mission Parents list is a large list with a relatively high amount of traffic; in April 2012 there were 259 posts and the list included 972 email addresses (although for reference note that the nearby Bernal Heights Parents Club, another Yahoo! Group, had approximately 2,240 members and 955 postings in April 2012\textsuperscript{55}). Posting to the list does not seem to be dominated by a small group of members—a quick glance through a sample of 120 posts saw only a handful of email addresses repeated.

The list was created to be a resource to, and means of communication for, parents, especially new parents or parents of young children, in the Mission District or nearby areas. The list has a wide variety of common uses, but some of the most dominant include: requesting and providing recommendations for businesses and services; freecyling kid-related objects; discussing nanny, day care, and school options; requesting and providing parenting advice; announcing local events and classes; and discussing local issues, parent-related and otherwise. While the majority of content is related to parenting, there are also frequent postings about non-kid-related subjects. In particular, the list is an open forum for any local civic or political issue that affects

\textsuperscript{54} It does seem, however, that the hyperlocal news site Mission Loc@l (http://missionlocal.org/) serves as a widely-read neighborhood website that is monitored by a broad spectrum of residents. While this is not a place-based virtual group, it does allow residents some amount of communication and virtual participation regarding local issues.

\textsuperscript{55} During my research I encountered a number of parents' groups and lists around the Bay Area. Mission Parents seemed to be about average in terms of size of list and amount of traffic. The Bay Area-wide Berkeley Parents Network, with over 30,000 members, seems to be the largest of the parents' groups (Berkeley Parents Network 2011). Golden Gate Mothers Group, which in 2011 had over 4,400 members and more than 47,000 postings in their “Parenting Questions” forum (Golden Gate Mothers Group 2012), is also large and quite prominent. The nearby Potrero Hill Parents list, on the other hand, has fewer than 100 members and averages only a handful of postings per month.
the Mission, and the list is frequently used as a tool to support organizing efforts around local goals.

Mission Parents is a very different type of email list than Acton Community. Mission Parents interviewees described the list as being low-drama, the list has no posted rules, and one of the moderators noted that very few threads have to be killed due to heated or rude exchanges. In the context of Acton Community or Brittany Meadows, it seems likely that even a single thread that needed intercession from the moderator would probably be a significant event and likely would dramatically color people’s experiences of the list. In the case of the Mission Parents, despite the moderator’s implication that there has been some heated discussion and that some conversations have had to be stopped, none of the eight interviewees mentioned any drama or negative experiences with the list. Presumably this difference in attitude is related to the fact that compared to the other two previously discussed virtual groups, the Mission Parents list is very large, both in terms of membership and geography, and thus list members probably feel somewhat more anonymous and less like they are in conversation with people they’re apt to run into on the street the next day, so that if they see a negative flare-up it doesn’t seem as connected to their immediate neighbors as it might in a smaller neighborhood.

Far from being concerned with negative experiences, in fact, Mission Parents interviewees had very positive opinions of the list. (One interviewee, in fact, liked the list but wanted more willingness to engage in controversial discussions.)

The tone of the Mission Parents list is friendly, familiar, and polite but as a whole slightly less formal than Acton Community or Brittany Meadows. One said that, in comparison to the several other parenting lists she was on, this one felt the most “like a friend”. Several interviewees told stories of receiving generous help and support from the list (see inset box in Section 5.1.2), and all interviewees seemed to feel fairly comfortable posting to the list. The friendly feeling and the generosity of the list are, of course, part of the reason why place-based virtual groups are so

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56 Different parents’ groups have different reputations, different tones, and slightly different profiles in terms of content. I was told by interviewees, most of whom had experience with at least one or two other parents’ groups, that Mission Parents had less traffic and therefore fewer opportunities for resource sharing and less fast-paced back-and-forth discussion of parenting than some of the larger lists—Bernal Heights Parents Club in particular, but by the same token, the lower-traffic nature of the Mission Parents list made it feel to several interviewees like a friendlier and less overwhelming resource. Most interviewees also appreciated that the Mission Parents list was geared specifically toward resources in the Mission, which has fewer families than some San Francisco neighborhoods, and several interviewees said that they appreciated the Mission Parents list because it seemed to embrace and understand both the challenges and the benefits of raising children in a diverse and somewhat gritty urban neighborhood.
interesting and seem to have so much potential in developing social capital. Inquiries into why this list seemed to be friendlier and more generous than others is beyond the scope of this thesis, but see the conclusion of Section 5.1.2 for a discussion of the differences among the virtual groups in terms of neighboring behavior.

The less formal tone may be due in part to the frequency of posting on the list, which makes each individual posting feel less scrutinized; the nature of the content on the list, which involves a lot of giving and receiving of assistance as well as a lot of quick back-and-forth exchanges; and the fact that most list members are likely to be college-educated thirty- or forty-somethings who are fairly comfortable with computer-mediated communication (CMC).

The list does not appear to be advertised anywhere, and the participants I spoke with had heard about it through word of mouth. (Several said that they wished they had known about it sooner.)

### 4.3.4 Reported Group Uses

More than one of the Mission Parents interviewees responded to my inquiry about how they used the email list with the exclamation “for everything!” By that they meant that they used the list to get rid of objects they were done with; to acquire objects they needed (both for free and in exchange for payment); to borrow objects temporarily; to find out about events and classes; to learn about day care, nanny, and school options; to find babysitters; to get parenting advice; to find play group companions; to get recommendations; and to talk about local issues.

While most posts on the list related to parenting or children in some way, almost all the parents noted that they also use the lists for non-kid-related recommendations and requests as well. One woman sought and found a red wig for a costume (for herself) that she was assembling. Another woman told me she’d found a great mechanic, and yet another said she’d found a cleaning lady and a landscape architect. Most interviewees told me about at least one or two list conversations that related to local neighborhood issues, such as parking meters, vandalism, or crime.

Additional examples of posts that interviewees spoke of in highly favorable terms included: a parent offering a special birthday cake pan that ended up getting passed around to five or six different families in a row; a family initiating a self-organized soccer league for toddlers; and a woman asking to borrow maternity evening wear and having three or four expensive gowns offered to her, to keep, for free.

The most incredible story I was told about this list involved a mom who had been diagnosed with cancer. She posted to the list simply requesting advice on how to talk
to her toddler about her diagnosis, but then in addition to advice she received an outpouring of verbal support and offers of assistance. Other survivors of the same type of cancer emailed her with all sorts of medical and mental health tips; acquaintances from different parts of her routine around the neighborhood helped simplify her life by doing small favors; and total strangers came over to her house to help with childcare.

While many of the interviewees had met other parents and even made friends directly or indirectly through the Mission Parents list, hardly any of them said that meeting local parents or making local friends was one of their reasons for using the list, especially after their child was more than a year old. As several parents explained, new parents, especially stay-at-home parents, would sometimes use the list to find other stay-at-home parents with similar-aged children and form play groups, largely to have other adults to talk to on a regular basis. Once their children were old enough to be involved in structured daily activities such as preschool, however, the value of the list in facilitating parent-to-parent contact diminished since parents would meet other parents through preschool and other structured activities and, simultaneously, would have less unstructured parenting time in which they would want to seek out other adults.

On a related note, one interviewee pointed out that asynchronous communication methods such as email conversations can be particularly welcome, if not vital, for new parents, both because their free time is now dictated by a child’s habits and because they are often awake (and online) when others are asleep.

### 4.3.5 How Does the Mission Parents Virtual Group Relate to the Mission District Neighborhood?

As mentioned above, the Mission District is a very large neighborhood with a diverse population of approximately 53,400, while the Mission Parents list has fewer than 1,000 members. In a neighborhood with a majority Hispanic population and an ongoing controversy around gentrification, the question of which residents are actually part of the virtual group becomes particularly important. While the Mission Parents Yahoo! Group home page presents the introductory language for the list in both English and Spanish, I did not encounter any emails in Spanish in my perusal of list content. Interviewees from the Mission Parents list seem to perceive that the list consists primarily of white and Asian middle-class or upper-middle-class parents of children under the age of five. Assuming that the interviewees’ perceptions are approximately accurate, this list is not representative of the neighborhood population. However, interviewees seemed to think that the list was representative of
the demographic it catered to, and thus can be seen more as representing one interest group among many in the Mission.

While in the case of Acton Community and Brittany Meadows the virtual groups seemed to be thought of as shadows of the in-person neighborhood communities, the fact that the Mission Parents list feels like it represents an interest group also means it can feel like it is a complete community, albeit only one of many within a single neighborhood; and indeed it seemed that most interviewees perceived the list to be a community of some sort, a kind of hybrid physical/virtual community of English-speaking parents of children under 5 within the Mission District. The list was more than just a tool for finding resources—more than a service like Craigslist or Freeecyle or Yelp, for example.\(^\text{57}\)

Note, however, that the Mission Parents interviewees’ conceptions of community were extremely diverse, and compared to the other virtual groups studied, the participants were a) less likely to link the concept of community to their neighborhood and b) less likely to equate the boundaries of the virtual group to the physical boundaries of their neighborhood.\(^\text{58}\). Mission Parents, then, seems to be less of a neighborhood-based group than Acton Community, Brittany Meadows, or Piedmont Ave. (The interplay between interest-based virtual groups and physical boundaries promises to be a fruitful area for further investigation.)

\(^{57}\) Of course, Craigslist and Yelp can act as “more than just tools” as well, since both Craigslist and Yelp can support online community among super-users. Primarily, though, interviewees referred to Craigslist and Yelp as tools that they interacted with purely to accomplish specific tasks rather than as online communities.

\(^{58}\) There could be many reasons for this, including the fact that Mission Parents interviewees were on average younger than residents in the other case study neighborhoods and the fact that the Mission District is such a large and diverse neighborhood.
4.4 PIEDMONTAVE

### case study: PiedmontAve

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th><strong>Type:</strong></th>
<th>Yahoo! Group (email discussion list)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Created:</strong></td>
<td>February 20, 2006</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Members:</strong></td>
<td>365</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Location:</strong></td>
<td>Piedmont Avenue neighborhood in Oakland</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Geographic Boundaries:</strong></td>
<td>the blocks surrounding Piedmont Avenue between MacArthur Boulevard to the south, Oakland Avenue and the City of Piedmont to the east, Mountain View Cemetery to the north, and Broadway to the west (see Figure 4-4)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Description:</strong></td>
<td>An email list for the residents of Oakland's Piedmont Ave. neighborhood, dedicated to keeping our community informed about news, crime and information relevant to all who live here.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Frequency of Postings:</strong></td>
<td>45 posts in February 2012; 32 posts in March 2012; 13 posts in April 2012</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Typical Content:</strong></td>
<td>local issues and politics, local events, crime notifications, recommendations requested/given</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlapping Electronic Groups and Sites (incomplete list):</strong></td>
<td>Piedmont Ave., Oakland neighbors Facebook Group (open), Oakland Moms, Issues (store email list), John Street Neighbors List, Rare Bird (store email list), Gilbert Street List</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlapping Online News Sites:</strong></td>
<td>Piedmont Patch, Oakland MoFo, Oakland Local, Living in the O</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Overlapping Offline Organizations:</strong></td>
<td>Piedmont Avenue Neighborhood Improvement League (PANIL), Piedmont Avenue Merchants Association, Oakland tool-lending library, National Night Out</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Information updated May 1, 2012*

### 4.4.1 Neighborhood Description

Piedmont Avenue neighborhood is located in the north portion of the City of Oakland. It is bounded by MacArthur Boulevard to the south, Oakland Avenue to the east, Mountain View Cemetery to the north, and Broadway on the west (see Figure 4-4). (The City of Piedmont, which despite the neighborhood’s name does not overlap with the neighborhood, lies to the east.) The area that makes up the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood was annexed into Oakland in 1897 (although the opening of the neighborhood’s famous Fenton’s Ice Cream Parlor predated that event by three years), and a few existing buildings date back to the 1910s.\(^{59}\) Approximately 32% of

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\(^{59}\) Source: [http://panil.org/history/notes_1990_1.html](http://panil.org/history/notes_1990_1.html)
the homes in zip code 94611, the zip code that encompasses most of Piedmont Avenue, were built before 1940, and an additional 53% were build between 1940 and 1980. The neighborhood seems to have a proud sense of history and a strong neighborhood identity, along with an active Piedmont Avenue Neighborhood Improvement League (PANIL).

The neighborhood is centered on the commercial corridor of Piedmont Avenue, a two-lane street that also hosts a bus line and heavy pedestrian traffic. The area includes several elementary schools, a hospital, the aforementioned cemetery, and Glen Echo Creek and Park. Commercial activity is primarily limited to Piedmont Avenue. The area is so large that although Piedmont Avenue unites all the residents as their primary shopping and entertainment corridor, the area is considered by some to be more like eight or nine neighborhoods under the guise of a single name.

The housing stock in the neighborhood includes detached single-family homes, apartment buildings of varying sizes, and former single-family homes split into two to four apartments. Home prices in the area tend to be higher than the California average (see Table 4-2). Approximately 30% of the population lives in owner-occupied housing units, while 68% live in renter-occupied housing units (U.S. Census Bureau 2011b).

In the three census tracts that encompass the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood, the population is 69% white, 10% African-American, 12% Asian, 6% “two or more races”, and 9% Hispanic or Latino (of any race). 82% of residents speak English at home, while 9% speak Spanish. 10% of households include children under the age of 18. 17% of the population is 65 or older. Of the population that is 25 years or older, 96% are high school graduates, 67% have a bachelor’s degree or higher, and 28% have a graduate or professional degree (U.S. Census Bureau 2011a, 2011b).

Source: http://www.city-data.com/zips/94611.html. This website does not differentiate construction prior to 1940, so it is possible that much of the “pre-1940” housing is actually from much earlier. Anecdotally, one resident noted that most of her acquaintances in the neighborhood lived in homes that were built before 1920.

http://panil.org/
Figure 4-4: Map of the PiedmontAve Neighborhood, Oakland, California
4.4.2 Origins of the Virtual Group

The Piedmont Ave list was started in 2006 by a resident after hearing about recent crimes in the area. The original moderator distributed flyers around the neighborhood, put notices on residents’ doors, and also worked with the Piedmont Avenue Merchants Association\(^62\) and the Oakland Police Department to advertise the list’s existence. At that time Piedmont Avenue had already been a thriving and vibrant dominant commercial corridor for over 100 years. The list was started as a way to communicate about crime and local announcements throughout the whole neighborhood. In his first email to the group, the original moderator acknowledged that there were other small lists in the area, but suggested that this whole-neighborhood list be used to coordinate at a broader scale: “I realize that there are a number of lists in the neighborhood that cover a street or cluster of homes. This will supplement those lists by giving the entire area a way to communicate” (email sent February 22, 2006). The traffic for the list was highest for the first three full months of its existence, with over 100 posts each month, and then traffic dropped down to more like 30-50 posts per month, with some months having even less traffic.

4.4.3 Observed Group Uses and Characteristics

During February (45 posts), March (32 posts), and April (13 posts) of 2012 the content on the Piedmont Ave list primarily consisted of: requests and offers of local recommendations; announcements for local events, including meetings of PANIL; notifications of and questions about local crimes; announcements about local businesses; and announcements about local politics and City of Oakland issues.

There were also postings concerning a lost pet, an estate sale, free kids’ mountain bikes, a free sand-blaster, and a possible change to a local stoplight. The political conversations seemed to be relatively frequent, and a few interviewees complained that they were too frequent, sometimes too long, and tended to come from the same list members over and over again. The list did not seem, from my perusal or from interviewees’ information, to be used for neighborhood-wide coordination or conversation. People seem to generally try to post sparingly and keep chatter to a minimum, and most threads consist of a single posting, usually an announcement.

The list had no posted rules, and according to one resident the list no longer has a moderator. The tone of the list was polite and fairly formal during the months of observation, but the same resident recounted that the founder and original moderator of the list had left because he was unhappy with it, possibly due to flaming and the content of posts.

\(^62\) [http://piedmontavenue.org/](http://piedmontavenue.org/)
Unlike the Mission Parents list, PiedmontAve had many repeat postings by the same people during the three-month sample I examined. Four individuals each posted eight or more times, and at least five or six individuals posted several times each.

Interviewees found out about the list in a variety of ways: one had seen a flyer at a local business, one heard about it from her real estate agent, several heard about it from friends or neighbors in the area, and several had found it by searching for local neighborhood groups in Yahoo! Groups.

### 4.4.4 Reported Group Uses

Interviewees used the PiedmontAve list primarily as a source of information about local news, politics, crime, events, and civic activity (e.g., public meetings). There were few anecdotes about noteworthy posts or interesting local connections facilitated through the list. One woman noted that she used the list to find people willing to donate plants for urban food foraging.

It was perhaps more interesting to hear what sorts of things interviewees didn’t do with the list: one woman decided not to post to PiedmontAve to look for running buddies; the same woman said that she preferred Freecycle to PiedmontAve for getting rid of unwanted objects; another went to Yelp instead of PiedmontAve for local recommendations; a third interviewee didn’t feel comfortable using PiedmontAve to ask to borrow things from her neighbors; and a fourth said she wouldn’t post to the list unless she had a yard sale or some large thing to sell.

Various interviewees said that they wished the list included more updates about local merchants, more information from the local neighborhood association, more City of Oakland involvement, more suggestions for in-person meetups, more notices about garage sales, and more important personal announcements (such as obituaries and births).

### 4.4.5 How Does the PiedmontAve Virtual Group Relate to the Piedmont Avenue Neighborhood?

As noted above, Piedmont Avenue covers a large area and the commercial corridor acts as a catch-basin and neighborhood anchor for a large population, comprising a number of sub-neighborhoods and more than 8,000 people. The PiedmontAve list, on the other hand, had only 365 members as of May 1, 2012. I did not get a sense of the demographic composition of the list relative to the demographic composition of the neighborhood, although one interviewee noted that they thought the list skewed toward newer and younger residents.
Despite the large area and population of their neighborhood, participants expressed a very strong sense of identity as members of the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood. PiedmontAve interviewees tended to think of the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood as a thriving community, and as their community. Several talked about the layout and land uses of the neighborhood as being important to the sense of community, mentioning the sense of commonality they got from sharing a vibrant commercial corridor. The PiedmontAve list, however, was not thought of as a community, and the interviewees didn’t have a lot to say about how the list contributed to their conception of community, neighborhood or otherwise. PiedmontAve was a communication tool only.

Some of the interviewees who were new additions to the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood wanted PiedmontAve to feel more like an all-purpose neighborhood list and do more to support the neighborhood’s sense of community, but the origins of the list (as a channel for communication about crime), its relatively low amount of traffic over time, its small number of members relative to the total neighborhood population, and its high number of super-posters lead me to suspect the list will not become more active or robust without a strong infusion of energy and leadership.

Interestingly, each of the seven interviewees from PiedmontAve had experience with at least two other neighborhood websites, and the majority of these were place-based virtual groups in the form of email lists. A number of the interviewees were part of place-based virtual groups that covered just a few square blocks. Participants generally found these smaller place-based virtual groups to be linked closely with their conception of community at the block level, and several pointed out that PiedmontAve failed to do on an area-wide scale what the smaller groups were doing at the scale of the block to build community.

63 While this circumstance is undoubtedly to some extent due to people who are interested in these groups self-selecting into the study, it was still surprising to find such a variety of place-based virtual groups in a single “neighborhood”.

97
In this chapter I present findings from the interviews I did with participants in place-based virtual groups. As noted earlier, my primary goal in interviewing participants in virtual groups was to discover whether the participants experience or see evidence of indicators of social capital in their neighborhoods, and whether participants think that the virtual groups are contributing to the presence of these social capital indicators. In addition to inquiring directly about the four indicators of social capital, I also talked to interviewees about the topics of community and neighborhood. I asked about their interpersonal ties with their neighbors, and I asked them generally about their use of the virtual groups. As in Section 4, the terms place-based virtual group, virtual group, email list, and list are all used to refer to the three place-based virtual groups that were enabled by email discussion lists, and the terms place-based virtual group, virtual group, Facebook Group, and group are all used to refer to the placed-based virtual group that was enabled through a Facebook Group.
5.1 DO PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS AFFECT THE DEVELOPMENT OF NEIGHBORHOOD SOCIAL CAPITAL?

For the sake of this study I assumed that four dimensions—sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation/civic engagement, and collective efficacy—act as indicators of social capital. As discussed in Section 2, each of these indicators can be conceived of and measured at the level of the individual and/or at the level of the neighborhood (Perkins and Long 2002; Perkins et al. 2002). I asked interviewees whether a) they personally had experienced these indicator qualities differently after beginning to use the place-based virtual groups and/or b) they had seen or noticed a difference in these qualities at the neighborhood level that they attributed to the virtual groups. Unfortunately, due to the way the conversations progressed, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether interviewees were referring to observations of indicators at the level of the individual, the block, the neighborhood, or whatever they conceived of as “the community”.

As explained in Section 2, these four indicators of social capital have been found to be closely related. Sense of community has been found to lead to increases in neighboring behavior and increased collective efficacy. Participants in organizations have been found to have greater sense of collective efficacy, greater sense of community, and more neighboring (Perkins and Long 2002; Perkins et al. 2002).

Table 5-1 presents a simple matrix showing the degree to which each of the four case study groups seemed to be contributing to the presence of each of the four social capital indicators. (Note that this table does not refer to absolute levels of the four indicators within the case study neighborhoods, since some neighborhoods seem to have very high levels of some indicators but these levels do not seem to be related to the virtual group. Also note that this table’s primary intention is to give a sense of the relative strengths of each case study group with respect to each aspect of social capital as well as the relative degrees to which each aspect of social capital is being supported by place-based virtual groups overall.)

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64 Level of analysis is a controversial subject in the social capital literature, with different researchers arguing that social capital can be conceived of and/or measured only at the individual level, only at the group level, or equally at both levels. Perkins and Long, from whose work I take my four social capital indicators, favor multi-level analysis (using quantitative methods to assess individual-level data as well as group climate variables compiled from aggregate individual perceptions). Due to time and resource constraints I was unable to perform a quantitative multi-level analysis for this study.
Table 5-1: Four Dimensions of Social Capital by Case Study

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Acton Community</th>
<th>Brittany Meadows</th>
<th>Mission Parents</th>
<th>Piedmont Ave</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>sense of community</td>
<td>+++ (already existed)</td>
<td>++ (already strongly existed)</td>
<td>+ for the Mission District; +++ for the group members</td>
<td>++ (already existed; only supports slightly)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>neighboring</td>
<td>+++ recommendations, information, support</td>
<td>++ support, information (already strongly existed)</td>
<td>+++ recommendations, donations, information, support, sharing</td>
<td>++ information, donations, recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic engagement</td>
<td>++ neighborhood gatherings</td>
<td>++ neighborhood gatherings and projects</td>
<td>+++ neighborhood events, projects, member gatherings, public meetings, local activism</td>
<td>++ neighborhood events, public meetings, local activism</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>collective efficacy</td>
<td>++ (already existed)</td>
<td>+ (already existed)</td>
<td>+++</td>
<td>+</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

The number of + symbols indicates the degree to which the case study group seemed to be contributing to the presence of the social capital indicator, with more + symbols indicating more of a contribution.

5.1.1 Do Place-Based Virtual Groups Seem to Contribute to the Sense of Community in Neighborhoods?

As will be described below, the vast majority of interviewees agreed that virtual groups contributed in some way to neighborhood sense of community; however, it is important to note that the common understanding of the concept “sense of community” may vary, and it is unlikely to correspond precisely with the definitions commonly used in the community psychology and social capital literature. As explained in Sections 1 and 2, sense of community for the purposes of this paper is defined as “trust in one’s neighbors” which derives from social connections, mutual concerns, and community values and which results in social support from one’s community (Perkins and Long 2002).

During interviews for this study the terms “community” and “neighborhood” were deliberately left undefined, even when the interviewee asked for definitions, in attempts to get interviewees to speak about their typical conceptions of the subjects and to capture the range of perceptions among residents who lived proximate to one another.
The vast majority of interviewees agreed that place-based virtual groups contributed in some way to the sense of community in their neighborhoods. But the ways in which people saw the virtual groups contributing were different in different neighborhoods. Interviewees in the existing close-knit neighborhood (Brittany Meadows) and the neighborhood that regularly met in person (Acton Community) stressed that the virtual groups were supplemental to in-person interactions. Interviewees on the impersonal email list in the large cohesive neighborhood community (Piedmont Ave) were interested in having a virtual group that could bring a vibrant and personal-feeling online component to a place that they already felt was a community, and were therefore disappointed in the list that they had. Interviewees from the personal-feeling email list in the extremely diverse neighborhood (Mission Parents) appreciated that their virtual group gave them a sense of community in a neighborhood that tended to be sprawling, and they were content with being connected as an interest group rather than wanting to be tied to every individual in the whole neighborhood. Below are details on each case study, followed by observations of some common themes.

While four of the Acton Community interviewees expressed that for them the neighborhood had a fairly strong sense of community, they were all quick to attribute much of that feeling to the monthly in-person gatherings that had been happening in the neighborhood for many years prior to the start of the email list. The list, several of them said, was decidedly supplemental to the in-person meetings when it came to building a sense of community. Several interviewees also pointed out that the list, as mentioned in Section 4.1.5, does not represent the diversity in the neighborhood and thus is limited in terms of how inclusive a sense of community it can provide or encourage. However, they did seem to feel that the list supported sense of community to some extent despite these limitations, and that something would be lost if the list was removed. One resident who otherwise expressed strong caution against giving too much credit to the list as a replacement for in-person interaction did acknowledge that if the list was removed,

\[I\]t would be much harder to reach out to everybody to know who’s in the community, because the community’s expanded beyond the original boundaries. Or if \[t\]he person who organizes the monthly gatherings \[m\]oved away tomorrow the list could continue; the list could help keep us going. And so I think it’s very useful and important.

Another resident, a woman who just recently moved into the neighborhood and who has been happy with both the in-person gatherings and the list so far, observed that even trivia on the list contributed to her feeling of community:
SECTION 5: PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL | 103

If the list has some noise in addition to the signal, the noise can still be the
nodding head. “Hi, I’m here!”...It’s just sort of indicators, lights going on
that other people like you are here. So if nobody posted to the Acton list I
would feel no sense of community. If people post looking for a contractor and
they’re nice to each other, then even if I’m not looking for a contractor I
know that my neighbors are nice to each other.

Since Brittany Meadows has been, by all accounts, a very tight-knit neighborhood
community since it was first inhabited in 1994, I was particularly interested to
discover whether the interviewees felt that the Facebook group added anything to the
sense of community in the neighborhood. While interviewees were quick to point out
that the Facebook group was only supporting existing community—it wasn’t
creating anything new and so far it hasn’t led to any additional events or collective
actions—they also felt strongly that the group was positively contributing to the
sense of place for Brittany Meadows and the cohesiveness among current and past
residents. They said that the Facebook group was reinforcing the neighborhood sense
of community. Interviewees pointed to more visible enthusiasm for participation in
events and meetings, to the recent posting of a photograph from the neighborhood’s
past, and to their perceptions that Facebook encouraged neighbors to get a better
sense of each other’s lives outside of the neighborhood. The neighborhood’s
presence on Facebook seems to give some formality and tangibility to the existence
of the community; now they have an official group on the internet, and this creates
“more of a sense of belonging to something”, as one woman noted.

That same interviewee noted that she felt the Facebook group provided more
connections and continuity among old and new residents who might be too busy to
have as many in-person conversations as they would like. She mentioned the recent
posting of the old photograph of a group of neighbors:

In that case it provided a sense of history to this neighborhood that was a
great reminder to somebody like me but probably was really lovely for other
people who’re newer to the community, to say “Wow! I’m part of something
that has been strong for a long time.” And that’s pretty special and maybe
even motivating for them to carry the torch, if you will, or to reach out to
their neighbors and realize that it’s a safe good neighborhood to be more
open with and more sharing of themselves.

Also, one interviewee pointed out that the group made it easier for elderly residents
and children to stay connected to the neighborhood goings-on and participate in
social interactions that might otherwise be hard for them to access due to physical
constraints or societal norms.
The *Mission Parents* list, if we assume that most of its participants live in the Mission District, covers an area approximately 13 blocks long and 10 blocks wide. That area included approximately 53,400 people as of the 2010 census. There were only 972 email addresses signed up to the Mission Parents list as of May 1, 2012, and yet most interviewees answered yes when asked whether the list contributes to the sense of community in their neighborhood. People understood the question in different ways, and further discussion usually led to clarification that the list mostly contributed to their personally experienced sense of community rather than necessarily the overall sense of community in the Mission; but in several conversations interviewees confirmed that in their opinions the Mission Parents list, despite only containing 1.8% of the population of the Mission, did contribute in some way to the overall sense of community in the Mission, along with all other place-based virtual groups, neighborhood websites, and civic associations that overlay the area. As one participant articulated:

*The Mission as a community is really many communities that overlap in physical space. To the extent that [the Mission Parents list] allows people who are part of one specific community, which is specifically Anglos that have kids under five, it’s great! It definitely connects that community. To the extent that [the Mission Parents list] forms connective tissue through the broader community... I mean it must, just to the extent that it’s connecting people throughout the neighborhood. ... I can’t say how it fits in at the level of the entire community because there’s so many groups like this. [But] I think the bigger picture is that there [are] lots and lots of connective tissue like this, which connects in overlapping ways, which in some way makes the community work.*

Phrased differently, the Mission Parents list provides some amount of benefit to people who aren’t even on the list because it’s one of the many groups and networks—that knit the Mission together into a neighborhood with a coherent identity and set of shared characteristics, the idea being that every layer of a community contributes to the whole of the community. (To be clear, not all interviewees bought into the idea of a single sense of community.

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65 The Mission Parents place-based virtual group seemed to contribute to interviewees’ conceptions of community in a few ways. Some interviewees identified strongly with parenting as their basis for community, and in those cases the Mission Parents list seemed to help delineate the members of their community, although they were likely to include parents from outside the Mission in their definitions of community as well. Other interviewees considered parts or all of the Mission District to be their community, and in those cases the Mission Parents list may not have included enough non-parents (or enough non-white parents) to feel representative of their community. Most interviewees, however, didn’t define their community as consisting solely of parents or as being limited to the Mission, and the most common response fit more into a model of being part of many dispersed and several place-based communities, some of which overlapped.
in the Mission; but again they all felt that the Mission Parents list contributed in some way to community feelings in the neighborhood.

Most interviewees thought that at a minimum the list contributed to a sense of community among English-speaking parents of children under the age of six or seven, and that even that was an accomplishment in such a large and diverse neighborhood. As one participant noted:

«It includes parents from the whole range of the Mission, which is a pretty large and diverse area. Their concerns are really different from mine. [But] I feel closer to them because of the list. I feel like I know more about what’s going on in their lives.»

Another interviewee also felt like the list helped in her understanding of parents throughout the Mission:

«Because of how people contribute you get to learn more about who lives there and some of their point of views, and so you feel like you understand some of the similarities of people who choose to live in that community. [It] makes me feel like I understand at least parents who choose to live there.»

A third interviewee pointed out the solidarity that the list could engender in the midst of a very diverse neighborhood:

«Within that kind of diversity, we have a group [where] there’s something that’s common between all of us—it’s our kids... And our concerns and our goals for the neighborhood are going to be different from someone who’s 20. ...[O]ur wish lists for what we want to see in the neighborhood are going to differ. It’s nice to have a group of people who’re in your same boat, who’re going to have your same...priorities for the neighborhood for what I want to see. This group provides me that community of people.»

A fourth interviewee starkly compared her experiences of the Mission before and after joining the list:

«I’ve lived in the Mission longer than I’ve been a parent, and I only got on the list when I became a parent. For me, I feel a difference about the Mission community from before and after I joined the list. After I joined the list I definitely felt more like there are people that are invested in the Mission. Not that there weren’t before but it just felt more...transient. ... I wasn’t aware that there was such a large group of people that had been there for a long time or raising their families there, [who] were really invested in the neighborhood parks and schools. I like to know that there are other people out there who care about protecting the community’s property.»
This last quote points out that the Mission Parents list made a few things visible to the list members, and this visibility seemed important. The list made it visible that there were a group of people around the Mission that were invested in the neighborhood, that cared about the physical resources of the community, and that were willing to take action on the neighborhood’s behalf.

Finally, whatever their definition of community, the interviewees had very positive things to say about how the list supported them within the neighborhood and how the list acted as a community in and of itself. Two observations follow:

The sense of community and trust within [these parent lists, including the Mission Parents list] is something I’ve never really seen anywhere else because... no one’s benefitting from it. And the amount of people who actually go out of their way to help you on those lists is absolutely mind-boggling to me. ... Also just from the point of view of feeling that you’re not alone in certain things—you have the feeling that other people out there are going through the same things. And they’re people with names and faces, not just somebody on a website—you know that they’re real people and they probably live just down the road.

I don’t think I would feel as connected to the neighborhood if it weren’t for this group. I don’t think I would have the same level of understanding, the sense of community that I have without the parents group. I know my neighbors across the street and the neighbors next to me, but I still kind of encompass my neighbors as being all of the other parents and families that are on this list. I can’t say enough good things about it.

The PiedmontAve list only had 365 members as of May 1, 2012, a small fraction of the overall population of the area (approximately 8,000). When asked whether the PiedmontAve list contributed to a sense of community in the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood, interviewees were often hesitant or lukewarm in their responses. Most eventually said that PiedmontAve contributed something to the overall sense of community, since it was a good way to stay informed about things going on all over the neighborhood as opposed to just hearing about things that happened on one’s block, and some people felt connection to other members of the list after seeing them post repeatedly over time; but people didn’t really seem to think of the list as providing characteristics that enhanced sense of community in the neighborhood. As one woman explained, “[the list is] not something that I feel drawn to really connect with people or to bond with them over”; and interviewees consistently reported that the list generated a poor facsimile of the type of community camaraderie and sense of belonging that they got when they physically spent time in the Piedmont Avenue commercial corridor.
Several mentioned that, in contrast, the smaller block-level groups that they were part of did a better job of building sense of community.

However, all interviewees did appreciate the presence of the PiedmontAve list to some extent, and all did agree that something would be lost if the list was removed (although two interviewees agreed with some reservations).

**Common Themes.** One common theme across the neighborhoods was the feeling that the virtual groups contributed to a sense of cohesiveness in the neighborhood despite not actually representing the whole neighborhood, that creating an online group that included even a fraction of residents did something to strengthen the sense that the whole neighborhood was connected. People mentioned that virtual groups contributed to a sense of shared identity, to feelings of solidarity from realizing that people shared common interests, to reduced anonymity, and to a more concrete understanding of who comprises a community.

Another topic that came up in each neighborhood was the subject of inclusiveness. In some neighborhoods participants emphasized that online groups can amplify voices that might otherwise not be heard by bringing children, the elderly, commuters, and former residents into neighborhood conversations; in other neighborhoods participants were more interested in whether virtual groups were causing exclusion or exacerbating divisions if portions of the neighborhood were missing from the online conversation.

Note, however, that there were differences in interviewee responses from the neighborhoods that were dealing with issues of inclusiveness. Aeton Community interviewees perceived a single divide between old residents and new residents and were very worried about exclusion. Mission Parents interviewees were very aware that their list didn't reflect the diversity of their neighborhood, but they seemed less concerned that people were being excluded because it seemed to feel obvious to them that they were just one of many competing interest groups in the area. The PiedmontAve interviewee who was worried that the list ignored older voices seemed more concerned about the email list having blinders on than excluding people. All this is to say that failure to be universally inclusive has different implications in different situations. If the virtual group is relatively weak like PiedmontAve then it might not matter so much to the people who aren't part of the group; and if the list is one of many strong factions then it might not matter as long as the excluded people are included in a different faction (depending on the strength of the other pluralities); whereas if the group is strong and located in a neighborhood where the non-participating neighbors don't seem to be organized or speaking up, there may be more cause for concern.
An additional observation that applied throughout three of the virtual groups was that despite the fact that social connections lead to increased sense of community, very few interviewees were interested in using place-based virtual groups to “make friends”. Several people, especially on the Mission Parents list, said flatly that they had enough friends and weren’t looking for more. A more common sentiment, however, was that interviewees didn’t want to try to force friendships based purely on shared location. They would be happy if they became friends with someone through one of the virtual groups, but they weren’t engaging in the groups with the intent to find people to socialize with. One exception to this trend was the participant from Acton Community who organized monthly in-person gatherings, although even he put more emphasis on knowing his neighbors than on befriending his neighbors. The other obvious exception was the cluster of long-time residents (and friends) in Brittany Meadows, a subset of interviewees that were older than the average participant, had lived in their neighborhood for much longer than the average participant, and were living in a suburban subdivision, a very different setting from the other three more urban neighborhoods.

The question of whether interviewees wanted to meet their neighbors—to learn more names and faces—was more complicated and may also be a better indicator of interviewees’ interest in building local social connections in the service of sense of community. Interviewees in the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood didn’t use PiedmontAve to meet their neighbors—it was too large of a group over too much geographic space—but they did join smaller place-based virtual groups for the purpose of learning the names and faces of the people living nearby. Similarly, interviewees from the Mission District didn’t tend to join the Mission Parents list in order to meet their neighbors (although some had been interested in finding other parents for play groups), but they were often members of smaller place-based virtual groups and met their immediate neighbors through that means. Interviewees from Acton Community, on the other hand, generally joined the group with the intent to get to know their neighbors and be able to say hello when they met on the street. It should be noted here that this makes intuitive sense—Acton Community list was closer in membership and geographic scale to many of the aforementioned smaller place-based virtual groups in the Mission and in Oakland.

Finally, one caution that was repeated by participants in a few neighborhoods was a disclaimer that the interviewees were speaking from personal experience and were not confident that people other than themselves got a deepened sense of community
from the place-based virtual groups\textsuperscript{66}. In future research, this will be an important question to pursue, especially in the light of concerns about inclusion and exclusion.

5.1.2 Do Place-Based Virtual Groups Seem to Contribute to the Presence of Neighboring Behavior in Neighborhoods?

As noted in Sections 1 and 2, neighboring is a term that describes helping or being helped by one's neighbor. Common examples include lending and borrowing resources, providing assistance in emergencies, and exchanging favors. The concept also encompasses verbal and emotional exchanges of advice and support, as well as discussions about local issues.

While neighboring is usually thought of as a positive activity because it builds trust and makes people's lives easier, it can also be negative, such as if an individual feels imposed upon by having to provide repeated assistance, sacrifice privacy, or participate in gossipy conversations.

During interviews I focused most closely on neighboring that required some offline action and in-person trust, such as borrowing, lending, and exchanges of other favors. (This category of neighboring is also known in popular literature as “sharing.”) I was less interested in discussing emailed information about local issues or recommendations for local businesses and services because this type of neighboring seemed self-evident from looking at the content of the lists. I also was careful to ask about and distinguish between freecycling unwanted items and lending wanted items, because while both require some amount of goodwill, lending items requires more trust than giving away things that one no longer needs.

All four of the place-based virtual groups of focus, plus most of the other place-based virtual groups that interviewees told me about, facilitated neighboring behavior that otherwise would not have occurred or would have had to be done by individually contacting specific neighbors one at a time. Access to helpful information that one might not otherwise encounter, including obscure event announcements, unsolicited recommendations for new businesses and services, crime alerts, and news about local issues, seems to be one of the major benefits of participating in place-based virtual groups. Exchanges of favors that required in-person interaction, however, varied across groups.

\textsuperscript{66} Note too that interviewees, most of whom self-selected to participate in this study, may be more likely than other list members or neighborhood residents to feel strongly about community and sense of community.
The *Acton Community* list hasn’t been used too frequently to request or offer favors. There were examples of list postings mentioned by each resident, and several of them explained that they engaged in that sort of neighboring behavior regularly with their immediate neighbors, but most said that they didn’t really think of the list as a forum for borrowing things or asking for help. One resident said that she preferred to know people personally before asking for favors, and says people on the list don’t know each other well enough yet. Another resident agreed that list members needed to know each other better, but said that he personally was willing to offer shared resources, including a spare room, and was only holding off on offering them to the list because he didn’t want to make people uncomfortable by being too open. A third resident seemed less concerned about knowing people personally as long as there was an accountability mechanism in place if something went wrong, and he thought the list was sufficient in that respect.

*Brittany Meadows* interviewees said that exchanging favors in their neighborhood was very common and happened frequently, but that the Facebook group wasn’t the venue where it was taking place, possibly because people already had neighboring habits in place before the Facebook group began. One woman also noted that the Facebook group wouldn’t necessarily be a comfortable place to ask for favors that require sharing sensitive information in the process of the request—such as a call for someone to take care of her house while she’s out of town.

*Piedmont Ave* interviewees similarly reported that there were very few requests for favors or help on their list. They noted that most list members didn’t know each other, which might have made people (including themselves) shy about asking for favors and hesitant to lend things out. However, as in the previously mentioned neighborhoods, several interviewees explained that they engaged in neighboring behavior with their immediate neighbors, and they were interested in fostering neighboring on the smaller neighborhood lists that they were part of. In particular, two residents were part of a Nextdoor group that one of them had recently initiated, and one of the explicit goals in starting that group was to encourage more sharing of resources among neighbors.

Overall, however, while interviewees from these three groups only had minimal personal experience with exchanging in-person favors through the lists, most said that the lists must have increased the likelihood that such behavior could happen, even if it only happened slightly more often.

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67 Nextdoor is an online service that hosts place-based virtual groups.
**Mission Parents** was used very frequently by each interviewee for freecycling kid-related stuff; requesting and providing local recommendations for all sorts of businesses, services, and outings; requesting and providing parenting advice; and requesting and offering information about local issues, parent-related and otherwise. Most Mission Parents interviewees also had at least one interesting story to tell about how the list had facilitated in-person exchanges of favors that had benefited them personally, and most of the interviewees—long-time list members in particular—felt that the list in general encouraged frequent exchanges of favors. While a few noted that there were decidedly fewer incidents of lending and borrowing than there were incidents of one-way gifts of used objects (which in other place-based virtual groups seemed to indicate a hesitancy to trust strangers with borrowing items), one long-time list member thought that this had to do with the logistical difficulties of arranging pick-ups and drop-offs, and that it was not an indication that there was a lack of trust among the neighbors.

**Common Themes.** One interesting phenomenon that came up in each neighborhood was that the groups facilitated types of neighboring that might otherwise have occurred on a much smaller scale, such as condolences on the occasion of a death or fire, congratulations on the occasion of a birth or marriage, well-wishes on the occasion of a move, and group brainstorming on one individual’s personal dilemma. This phenomenon has two aspects to consider—the first is that more people are able to send support to the person experiencing the event in question, and the second is that the support can easily be given publically, which may add to group feelings of camaraderie and trust.

One issue that came up repeatedly when talking to participants about neighboring was a reluctance to be the one to ask for favors. Many interviewees (more than one from each neighborhood) said without being prompted that while they would be perfectly happy to help a neighbor themselves, usually even if the neighbor was otherwise a complete stranger, they would prefer not to ask someone else for help because they didn’t want to impose. (Usually this admission would be followed by a bemused rhetorical “I don’t know why!”) One woman articulated the dilemma as follows:

> Asking people for favors requires an ability to pay back and contribute, and so with... the people I know in real life, my direct neighbors, I know they’ll feel comfortable borrowing things from me—they bought me some paper towels and I got them a book at Christmas—and then it’s fine because I know that we’re in sort of an equal relationship and we’re giving and taking. But the problem with neighbors further away is that...I just don’t have real relationships with them beyond gathering with them every couple months.
A number of interviewees on the Mission Parents list had been willing to ask for help (or had extended help themselves), and they had wonderful stories to tell (see inset this page). Their stories together demonstrate that when virtual groups are used to request help, they have the ability through force of numbers to return much more impressive results than if someone had just asked a couple next-door neighbors.

The Mission Parents list, with its collection of stories about neighbors generously sharing with neighbors they’d never met before, is a very interesting case. Interviewees on Acton Community and PiedmontAve said that they wanted to know people before lending things and that they weren’t comfortable asking for help from strangers, but Mission Parents list members don’t know each other any better than the members of those two lists. What seems to be unique about the Mission Parents list members is that they’re going through a part of their lives when things are different and possibly quite difficult—they’re dealing with having new or young children, and they’re doing it in an urban city center not known for idyllic child-rearing conditions. It seems likely that Mission Parents list members would be more willing to ask for and offer support because of the challenging situation they are in. It might also be the case that they feel solidarity as a collection of individuals with

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### Mission Parents Neighboring Stories

#### The Cake Pan Incident
One member of the email list posted that he or she was giving away a cake pan shaped as the number ‘1’. Six or seven people responded, and they coordinated to pass the cake pan around to each family in turn. This enabled all of these families to do something fun for their child’s first birthday while preventing the waste of purchasing objects that would otherwise only have been used once, saving each family money, and introducing neighbors to each other.

#### Cancer Support
One mom on the list who had just been diagnosed with cancer posted a note asking for advice on how to tell her child about her illness. She was overwhelmed by the supportive response and offers of assistance—not just advice—from list members. Strangers offered to help with child care and chores, and acquaintances took on small parts of her daily routine, such as picking her child up from school. The mom also noted that the list provided an relieving way to tell acquaintances about her illness without having to talk to everyone individually.

#### Coop Preschool
A few parents on the list started talking about the idea of a coop-run preschool. They found enough other interested parents on the list and decided to put a preschool together themselves. The school was a success.

#### Spare Room
Upon seeing a note on the list that someone’s relative was going to be in town and needed a place to sleep, one couple offered to host the visitor in their spare room, sight-unseen. They have remained friends with the visitor since then.

#### Fancy Maternity Clothes
One woman related how she had posted in two different parents’ groups looking for a maternity dress to wear to a fancy event. On one list she heard from a couple people who were willing to sell her dresses; on Mission Parents she heard back from several list members with offers to give her very nice dresses for free.
something in common in the midst of a dense and diverse neighborhood, and therefore be more open to looking to each other for help.

Is there anything that the Mission Parents list can teach about the right conditions for strong neighboring behavior? Do you have to be parents of newborns, or are there conditions under which this sort of situation can develop?

The big difficulty with encouraging neighboring, as Front Porch Forum founder Michael Wood Lewis stated, is that you “can’t explain people into it”. Once they experience it, he said, they immediately see the value; but the trick is getting them into a position where they’re forced to experience it. A virtual group for new urban parents seems like it might be the right sort of scenario to use as the trick. This demographic needs help more than most, and they might also be more willing to ask for and accept it. Put them in a place-based virtual group, and it seems likely that they’ll catch on to the value of sharing resources pretty quickly. Unfortunately, other possible tricks that come to mind are typically negative—natural disasters and crime waves bring neighbors together out of necessity and/or fear, and chronic illness also leads people to look for mutually supportive groups. In my research for this study I did not run across a place-based virtual group—other than Mission Parents—that experienced a positive trick to start strong neighboring behavior.

One Acton Community resident had a slightly modified idea for encouraging neighboring, suggesting that it might be sufficient just to see the behavior with a few determined list members:

\[ I \text{ think people just don’t understand it’s possible—they’re not used to being online...I think you just need a few people to model it, and once they start doing that then it’ll happen more.} \]

Since not all place-based virtual groups are going to consist of desperate new parents or people in post-disaster zones, this tactic of modeling seems useful to keep in mind. Discussion with interviewees for this thesis, however, suggest that more than just “a few” neighbors are needed to jumpstart sharing behavior, and that they need to be persistent if they want to overcome people’s hesitancy in asking for help.
5.1.3 Do Place-Based Virtual Groups Seem to Stimulate Citizen Participation / Civic Engagement in Neighborhoods?

As noted in Sections 1 and 2, for the purposes of this study citizen participation is defined as “involvement in any organized activity in which the individual participates without pay in order to achieve a common goal” (Zimmerman and Rappaport 1988), and civic engagement comprises the concept of citizen participation as well as less formal individual volunteerism and participation in the electoral process, such as attending public meetings, writing letters to officials, writing blog posts, and organizing local meetups and projects. During interviews the terms citizen participation and civic engagement were both used.1

Most interviewees from all four neighborhoods thought that their place-based virtual groups had the potential to increase individual participation in a variety of forms, including attendance at meetings, attendance at events, and help with local projects. Whether they thought that the groups were currently being used to encourage participation, however, differed across the board.

The Acton Community list interviewees didn’t have strong opinions on this subject, possibly because the list doesn’t tend to be used to request participation in projects or activities very often. One resident said that she hadn’t yet seen list postings result in increased participation or action by individuals. It is interesting to note that the Acton list has actually likely influenced one type of participation at least—attendance at the monthly neighborhood gatherings. The list is the primary means through which these gatherings are advertised, and 10-40 people regularly show up each month. No interviewees mentioned this as a form of participation, but this may have been because the concept of “participation” was left open for the interviewees to interpret, and perhaps they didn’t think that attendance at informal neighborhood parties counted as participation in civic life.

Brittany Meadows interviewees had not yet seen much evidence of the Facebook group being used to stimulate individual participation, although two of them suspected the event reminders on Facebook made it more likely that people would attend meetings and events. One pointed out that the group was likely to be used

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While the concept of civic engagement was not one of the Perkins, Hughey, and Speer dimensions of social capital, in interviews I asked about all forms of civic engagement in order to get a better sense of each interviewee’s level of participation in his or her neighborhood and community. Since informal civic engagement through volunteerism, community organizing, and political participation was generally higher than formal citizen participation, this method of inquiry led to a more nuanced sense of how much each interviewee participated in local activity.
more for this in the future. Another described how in their neighborhood, Facebook postings were better than emails at generating enthusiasm about participating in upcoming events:

*We have a number of people in the neighborhood who...will respond enthusiastically, which will then prompt someone else to respond enthusiastically. And in Facebook while you can respond to one person, typically it’s out there for the whole group to see, whereas a lot of times with email people will just hit reply to the sender and so you don’t see the energy building around something.*

Interviewees from *Mission Parents* were as a whole very confident that the list led to increased participation by members. Most of the Mission Parents interviewees related anecdotes in which a posting on the list had led them or someone else on the list to attend a meeting or an event, or to participate in a project or campaign. As one woman explained,

*If there's a group of people who feel strongly and I agree with them and they're all going to participate in this meeting, then I'll think 'oh, I should go too!'*

*Piedmont Ave* interviewees were split on the subject of whether that list led individuals to get involved in local projects and causes and attend local events. One woman cautioned that these lists could give an illusion of being heard and influencing list members when in fact no one actually takes action. She gave an example of a post she sent to the list requesting support, from which she received no replies. Two other interviewees were also hesitant to say that the list led to more individual actions, having not seen any evidence themselves. Two women, though, reported that they had each been influenced by list postings to attend events that they otherwise would have skipped.

**Common Themes.** Interviewees often mentioned that increased participation stemmed from the fact that the lists raised the visibility of events and projects, thus increasing awareness and education and making it more likely that people would take action. On a related note, people also observed that the virtual groups made them more likely to participate in activities (and actions of protest, in particular) because the lists allowed for visibility of—and sometimes even triggered—local displays of solidarity, making it easy for list members to see that they would have company if they chose to attend an event or send a letter to a local politician. Putting these ideas together, others noted that it can be hard sometimes to tell when you reach a tipping point for participating in a particular organization or project, and that repeated exposure to information about an opportunity, plus shows of support from your neighbors (such as via an email list), might eventually lead you to decide to
participate whereas a single flyer posted on a telephone pole, for example, would not have impacted your behavior.

However, interviewees frequently seemed to gloss over the distinctions between increased awareness, increased education, and increased participation; and while the three may be closely related they should not be conflated. It is important to keep in mind that the prevailing confidence that these groups lead to participation is not based on quantitative evidence, and none of the interviewees talked about what proportion of requests for participation they thought had actually resulted in participation that would not have otherwise happened.

Finally, a few interviewees pointed out that posting messages to a place-based virtual group and responding to messages posted on a place-based virtual group could itself be seen as a form of participation. Participation in discussion threads could be seen as analogous to speaking at a community meeting, for example; and starting a thread about a new issue could be seen as analogous to calling an in-person meeting if people start a conversation in response. As one woman from Mission Parents explained, in the case of that list you have such a large audience that even a single email has the potential to result in extensive ripple effects:

I think that even just being active within the list is a form of participation too. Because so many people read it, right? Especially a distribution list that’s as large as the Mission Parents list.

### 5.1.4 Do Place-Based Virtual Groups Seem to Contribute to Collective Efficacy in Neighborhoods?

The definition of collective efficacy, for the purposes of this study, can be defined as “trust in the effectiveness of organized collective action” or, more simply, “empowerment”. Interviewee perceptions of this concept proved difficult to ascertain. In most interviews I said that I was interested in collective efficacy, which could be thought of as a group’s ability to be effective together in collective action, and then asked a question: “Do you think the presence of the place-based virtual group affects the likelihood that the community will accomplish projects or defeat unwanted policy proposals?” 69 (In most interviews I asked the question

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69 I modified this question from an item in a survey on collective efficacy and social capital shown in Perkins and Long (2002): “Indicate whether you think it is very likely, somewhat likely, or not likely that the association on your block can accomplish [the following goals]: 1. Improve physical conditions on the block like cleanliness or housing upkeep. 2. Persuade the city to provide better services to people on the block. 3. Get people on the block to help each other more. 4. Reduce crime on the block. 5. Get people who live on the block to know each other better. 6. Get information to residents about where to go for services they need.”
without mentioning collective efficacy.) The interviewee and I would brainstorm a real or hypothetical goal that felt relevant to the neighborhood in question and then he or she would give an opinion as to whether the existence of the place-based virtual group might make a difference in accomplishing the goal.

Several problems came up repeatedly in this line of inquiry. First, in the cases of Brittany Meadows and Acton Community, interviewees tended to have some difficulty thinking of goals that the neighborhood might want to accomplish. More significantly, in all four groups interviewees tended to conflate the ability to accomplish goals with increased participation, awareness, and education, claiming that the place-based virtual groups seemed to make it more likely that the neighborhood could succeed in collective action because the groups resulted in more individual participation and awareness. As noted in Section 2, collective efficacy is thought to both lead to citizen participation and result from citizen participation, and the relationship between the two concepts is complicated, so the responses from interviewees weren’t necessarily off-base; but I was unable to get information on the topic of collective efficacy that felt as rich as some of the other responses. For future efforts, I recommend asking a question that gets more directly at the concept of community empowerment.

While discussions on the subject of collective efficacy were less fruitful than some other portions of the interviews, it was nonetheless possible to get a sense of the interviewees’ impressions. Overall, people seemed to think that the place-based virtual groups would be important as tools to enable and empower the groups, making it easy for them to see that there were others nearby who were willing to co-invest in a cause, but that prolonged leadership and organization would be needed to translate group enthusiasm into collective action. One interviewee, a woman who has supervised community discussion lists in a variety of contexts for many years, said, “I would call [these lists] a force multiplier and an accelerator”.

Another interviewee referred to her community’s list as communications groundwork that had been laid and was waiting to be tested by an emergency—but that it was insufficient without motivated leadership to take on extra work to turn interest into action.

As noted above, interviewees from Acton Community and Brittany Meadows could not recall any occasions that had necessitated collective action on the part of the neighborhood to achieve a goal, but they all said that if such an occasion were to arise the groups would likely be used. One interviewee from Brittany Meadows speculated that the Facebook group might “create more momentum that has the capability of helping us accomplish goals”, primarily by easing communication.
Very few *PiedmontAve* interviewees gave opinions on the subject of collective efficacy, presumably in part because, as noted above, the PiedmontAve list was the place-based virtual group least touted for helping support a sense of community ("trust in one’s neighbors") in the neighborhood overall, and collective efficacy is closely linked to trust in the collective. The participants interviewed didn’t tend to use the list to participate in group discussions or coordinate with neighbors as a group. Also, as a couple interviewees pointed out, the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood already seemed to be pretty good at working together offline, throwing block parties and mobilizing to save the local library—they surmised that the list wasn’t needed to help with collective efficacy in the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood. One interviewee, a woman who had tended to be apprehensive of what she perceived as a tendency to inflate the value of PiedmontAve, gave a good cautious maybe, saying that “educating people is always valuable” in leading to action, but that she didn’t see any leadership coming from the list and was therefore not very hopeful.

*Mission Parents* interviewees generally thought that their email list would be a helpful factor if a subset of the group tried to accomplish a goal in the neighborhood. They pointed out that increased awareness of local issues (via the list) made it more likely that people would take action and work together; they pointed out that the list made it much easier for organizers to find supporters; and they pointed out that people felt empowered to act on the community’s behalf because of online displays of solidarity.

Unlike the discussions of participation, wherein Mission Parents interviewees sometimes conflated increased awareness, education, and participation, in discussions of collective efficacy Mission Parents participants were careful to point out that shows of support on the email list didn’t necessarily translate into collective action or goal accomplishment. Again, several people mentioned that persistent leadership was necessary to transform enthusiasm on the list into action. One participant explained:

> I don’t think by itself this list is going to get anything accomplished, unless there’s somebody behind it organizing and sort of pushing the agenda. But it’s a GREAT way of rallying the troops. And it’s a good way of saying “is this an issue people care about? Is this not an issue?” it’s a great way of getting information and also a great way of motivating people and also sort of gathering the support you would need for a particular cause.

Or, as another woman phrased it, “It definitely makes [people] feel like they’re not crazy for wanting to stand up for something.”
5.2 DO PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS AFFECT INTERPERSONAL TIES IN A NEIGHBORHOOD?

As discussed in Section 2, the formation of interpersonal ties is intrinsic to the development of social capital. While I did not include social network analysis in my methods for this thesis, I did ask interviewees to describe the extent of their ties with neighbors and to tell me whether they considered any of their neighbors to be personal friends.

As discussed above in the context of sense of community, I found that very few interviewees had joined place-based virtual groups because they were interested in making friends (i.e., strong ties), and only a portion of participants were actively interested in meeting their neighbors and getting to know more names and faces.

However, overall interviewees definitely used the groups to form and support weak ties and to access latent ties. Participants from Acton Community seemed to use their list to form new weak ties, to support preexisting weak ties, and to access latent ties; participants from Mission Parents seemed to use their list both to form new weak ties and to access latent ties; and participants from Piedmont Ave seemed to use their list primarily to access latent ties. Participants from Brittany Meadows, the close-knit neighborhood where friendships among neighbors are common, seemed to use their Facebook group to support pre-existing strong ties as well as strengthen weak ties and transform latent ties into weak ties.

The significance of latent ties in the context of CMC and place-based virtual groups has not yet been extensively studied, and an in-depth discussion of the subject is beyond the scope of this thesis, but I found that participants seemed to be more interested in using their neighborhood virtual groups to access latent ties than to form weak ties. While accessing latent ties sometimes led to the formation of a lasting weak tie, in other cases it did not result in any lasting connection between two individuals.

My findings regarding interpersonal ties also allude to the significance of alloy social capital in the context of place-based virtual groups, another topic that has not yet been extensively studied. Participants from Acton Community and Brittany Meadows, in particular, used their virtual groups to support relationships that had an offline component to them.

These findings indicates that additional research is needed regarding the importance of both latent ties and alloy social capital in the context of neighborhood place-based
virtual groups. See Section 6.2 for brief discussion of these two topics as areas for further study.

5.3 DO PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS TO GAIN ACCESS TO SOCIAL CAPITAL?

As demonstrated above, there is evidence that place-based virtual groups are contributing to the development of four dimensions of social capital, and numerous interviewees praised the groups for doing so. But to what extent were the interviewees aware of these four dimensions of social capital before the interviews, and to what extent, if any, were any of these dimensions part of what they appreciated about the groups? Also, if gaining access to social capital wasn’t what brought them to the lists, what was it that drew them in and what other sorts of value do they find in being part of the groups?

While the social capital literature on place-based virtual groups doesn’t speak to whether participants are consciously motivated to pursue aspects of social capital or whether participants actively value aspects of social capital, I ended up finding connections between interviewees’ motivations and values and interviewees’ opinions on social capital.

The question of why people use place-based virtual groups can be broken into two slightly different sub-questions: What motivations do people have for participating in place-based virtual groups? What value do people see in having place-based virtual groups?70 Below I address both of these questions for each case; following that I present general observations on motivations and values; and finally I present an overview of how the motivations and values relate to sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation / civic engagement, and collective efficacy.

Interviewees from Acton Community were generally motivated to participate in the place-based virtual group because it was a way to gain a sense of what sort of people they lived near, it made them feel like they were part of a neighborhood community, and it gave them a way to communicate and coordinate around crime and safety issues. All of the people I talked to from this neighborhood were homeowners, all but one plan to live in the neighborhood for the foreseeable future, and several

70 The question that was asked in interviews, “What value, if any, do you find in this list/group?”, usually seemed to be interpreted as a question about personal value rather than value to the neighborhood or value to the community.
indicated that these circumstances made them want to invest some time and attention in neighborhood goings-on.

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>WHY DO PEOPLE PARTICIPATE IN PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS?</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Acton Community Google Group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Gives people a place to express and discuss concerns rather than letting them bottle up</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Gives a sense of who lives nearby and makes neighborhood feel more personal</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Makes people feel less isolated through providing camaraderie and cohesion</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Steady list traffic provides sense that the neighborhood is a supportive group</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Helps provide more nurturing environment for neighborhood children</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Brittany Meadows Facebook Group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Asynchronous conversations without email inbox clutter</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Inclusion of children, elderly, and former neighbors in group conversations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Makes it easier to coordinate events and plan projects</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Informal group getting-to-know-you conversations and announcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Easier to find out about upcoming events</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ More participants per conversation</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ More sharing through written exchanges</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Deeper relationships through Facebook profile interactions</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Mission Parents Yahoo! Group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Information about day care, nannies, and school options</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Physical resources exchange network (hand-me-down clothes and gently used objects)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Advice about parenting</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Information about local kid-related businesses and outings</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Following the rhythm and pace of parenting in San Francisco and the Mission District</td>
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<tr>
<td>✓ Updates on Mission District neighborhood issues</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>PiedmontAve Yahoo! Group</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Oakland politics updates</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Local commerce announcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Neighborhood news</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Local event announcements</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>✓ Civic participation opportunities</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

All participants seemed to value what the list contributed in terms of supporting a sense of camaraderie and cohesion among neighbors—a sense of community. The list helped them feel more connected to the people around them, as one resident explained:

*I've gotten a sense of who might be behind the doors and windows when I walk by, and it doesn't feel like as chilling an experience as of not knowing. It might be somebody who just sent a note yesterday in the group—I may not
Another resident, one who has only posted once or twice in the year he’s been on the list and who hasn’t met very many of his neighbors, noted that even just skimming the list postings had value to him because it was nice just to know that people around him were communicating as a group in a way that felt supportive of each other.

In Brittany Meadows, where all the interviewees already had very positive and relatively close relationships with their neighbors, a strong sense of neighborhood cohesion, and pre-established group communication methods, the motivations for starting the Facebook group had to do with making it easier to coordinate events and plan projects (e.g., a neighborhood watch program) together. Once they started, however, the participants found much more to appreciate.

One woman said that while she didn’t think they were necessarily having more conversations or sharing news about more things than they would’ve done in person, since they had already been a very friendly and communicative neighborhood, she did think that the number of people participating in each conversation or hearing about each piece of news was decidedly higher, and she saw that as valuable.

Another interviewee spoke on the ways that Facebook contributed to more sharing and deeper relationships among neighbors:

> You learn things about people that you didn’t really know. I think writing things down always is interesting—you learn things about people’s perspectives. In Facebook [someone] may post her opinion and because of the nature of it she may need to clarify things a little bit to show where she stands on an issue. ...To be able to create a conversation among a group of people that is in an open environment—meaning a page where we’re all sharing that conversation but closed to the rest of the world—there’s something very intimate about that in a lot of ways. ...I think the medium is very very powerful.

Since many place-based virtual groups seem to form around concerns, crime, or projects, I was interested in seeing whether a group formed purely to ease social interaction and basic utilitarian announcements would be used or embraced. I was also interested in seeing whether a group that already had strong friendships among neighbors would gain many benefits from an online group. I found that the Facebook group, while not used as frequently as the lists in the other cases, was used regularly and that each post elicited several responses, indicating that group members paid attention to the group and were willing to participate in group conversations online. I also found that Facebook group members appreciated the way the group
supplemented their in-person relationships, that they found it to be a notable addition to their relationships rather than redundant, and that they felt the group was positively contributing to the sense of place for Brittany Meadows and the sense of community among current and past residents.

As one might guess, the interviewees from the Mission Parents list were motivated to sign up because they wanted a resource to support them as parents. Most of them were primarily interested in either a) learning about day care, nanny share, and school options for their children or b) being part of a circle of physical resource exchange (e.g., hand-me-down clothes, used cribs, and gently used toys). While the interviewees who recommended the list to other parents touted these two benefits in their spiels, though, they also explained a slightly broader motivation: new parents should join the Mission Parents list so that they can follow the rhythm and pace of parenting in the Mission. As one woman put it, it’s helped her to “keep on track with the demographic” and learn all the unofficial rules associated with raising children in San Francisco.

Every participant on the Mission Parents list found the group to be extremely valuable as a resource for information and as a resource for free or cheap baby-related paraphernalia. A number of interviewees mentioned that the list was essential in helping them decipher the baffling new realms of day care, preschool, and elementary school, all of which they claimed were particularly confusing in San Francisco; and several parents told me that they recommend the list widely, even to parents who lived outside the Mission, because it was such a great help in navigating the first few years of being a parent. Interviewees also found the list valuable as a way to stay engaged with general neighborhood issues around the Mission District.

It seemed that all of the PiedmontAve interviewees were motivated to join the list because they were interested in finding out about news and events along the Piedmont Avenue corridor and having, as one woman put it, a “finger on the pulse” of the Piedmont Avenue neighborhood at the macro level (as opposed to the micro level of small block-scale place-based virtual groups). Four of the seven interviewees were homeowners, and two mentioned that characteristic in describing why they were on the list—as homeowners invested in the neighborhood they wanted to be aware of and stay current on local issues.

Note that I only interviewed three list members, which is a very small sample, and one of these had recently moved out of the neighborhood, making him potentially more interested in maintaining an online connection to the community he had just moved away from. However, as noted in Section 4, 27 of the 42 members of the group have posted or liked postings since the group began, indicating a high level of participation.
Of the four place-based virtual groups closely examined in this thesis, PiedmontAve seemed to generate the least enthusiastic reviews from interviewees. All participants found some value in subscribing to PiedmontAve because of the macro-scale neighborhood news it provided and planned to stay on the list for the foreseeable future, but most expressed some level of disappointment with the list. They had a variety of wishes in terms of more and broader content, and many were inclined to go to other tools (e.g., Yelp, Craigslist, Freecycle, Piedmont Patch) for a number of typical place-based virtual group uses.

One interviewee had a particularly incisive critique of the list. She was concerned that in balance the list may actually be detrimental to the overall wellbeing of the neighborhood. She noted that people had left the list because of unpleasant dialogue. She also pointed out that the list had low representation of older residents, many of whom had a long history with the neighborhood and could have provided a useful perspective on current issues and their connection to the past. She called out the problem of low follow-through from people who offered to take on projects, and she noted that commuting residents—residents who didn’t spend a lot of time in the neighborhood—seemed over-represented on the list. These factors led her to a concern that PiedmontAve provided an illusion of community for list members without bringing much benefit to the neighborhood as a whole.

Common Themes. Interviewees signed up for and participated in place-based virtual groups (including but not limited to the four main place-based virtual groups of interest) for a wide variety of reasons. While many were discussed above, a few overall themes bear highlighting.

Although they were only infrequently mentioned as a strong motivation for participation, two of the most common secondary or indirect motivators for participating in place-based virtual groups seemed to be an interest in feeling safer in one’s neighborhood and a related wish to stay informed about nearby crime patterns. While these motivations applied to participation in Acton Community (as mentioned above), Mission Parents, and PiedmontAve lists specifically to some extent, they came up more clearly as interviewees talked about their overall place-based virtual group membership patterns. Many interviewees in the Mission and Oakland belonged to smaller several-block email lists that were formed either in response to incidences of local crime or as a precaution due to crime in an adjacent area. These lists, while usually infrequently used, were intended to provide members with a sense of security similar to that of a Neighborhood Watch (some included actual Neighborhood Watch programs), and several interviewees noted that the mere presence of a list, even an unused list, made them feel like they had people they could turn to in the case of an emergency.
A related use of the smaller place-based virtual groups was disaster preparedness. The Acton Community interviewees, the Brittany Meadows interviewees, and interviewees who were part of smaller place-based virtual groups in the Mission and Oakland frequently mentioned neighborhood-wide disaster preparedness planning and coordination as either an existing or desired use of their groups.

Despite the avid interest many interviewees had in using place-based virtual groups to feel safe in their homes, postings about local crime on place-based virtual groups tended to be a controversial subject. Acton Street, the Mission District, and Piedmont Avenue are all located in urban settings where muggings, house break-ins, and car break-ins occur with some frequency, and residents in those neighborhoods commonly complained in interviews that they would prefer not to hear about all of the incidents because it was unnerving. Some didn’t want to hear about local crime at all; others only wanted to hear about incidents within a couple blocks of their house; and others admitted that they wanted to know about all of it but still didn’t want it popping up in their inboxes so often.

One motivation was noticeable in its absence. As discussed above in the context of sense of community, I found that very few interviewees had joined place-based virtual groups because they were interested in making friends, and only a portion of participants were actively interested in meeting their neighbors and getting to know more names and faces. When people were interested in meeting their neighbors, it was often tied at least somewhat to their desire to feel safer and more secure in their neighborhoods.

Interestingly, people absolutely saw value in the place-based virtual groups existing even when a) they seemed to be underused or b) they were only used for things that weren’t of much value to the interviewee. In the case of (a), interviewees saw value in online virtual groups as potential emergency broadcast systems, as mentioned above in the context of Neighborhood Watch-type groups, as networks of latent ties waiting for the right sorts of projects to come along, and as ways for people to feel like part of a group/place. In the case of (b), people who rarely read or used the lists still thought that they had value because of the occasional useful emails and/or because they had the potential to be used for useful communication. (The significance of latent ties in neighborhoods is beyond the scope of this thesis, but see Section 6.2.1 for a brief discussion of this topic as an area for further study.)

\[^{72}\] This finding is consistent with studies that have found that increased interaction among neighbors may in some cases lead to heightened fear of neighborhood crime (Greenberg, Rohe, and Williams 1982; Greenberg et al. 1984; Newman and Frank 1980; Unger and Wandersman 1985).
**Relationship Between Motivations, Values, and Social Capital.** Interviewees in Acton Community, Brittany Meadows, and Piedmont Ave all seemed to use their place-based virtual groups deliberately to increase their own sense of community in their neighborhoods. They cited social cohesion, having a better understanding of the people around them, and being part of the community flow of activity as important reasons for participating in the place-based virtual groups.

Interviewees in all four groups, but in particular the Mission Parents list, were motivated to use the groups for neighboring. They all liked the advantages they received through getting questions answered and requests for recommendations satisfied, as well as by hearing about upcoming events. Mission Parents list members found a large amount of value in the freecycling component of their group, saving money and reducing consumption by sharing goods with their neighbors. Brittany Meadows Facebook group members found value in the new forum for sharing personal announcements and for giving and receiving public support among their neighbors.

Interviewees in three of the groups mentioned participation or civic engagement as a motivation for using the groups. Mission Parents and Piedmont Ave interviewees claimed to be motivated by a wish for civic engagement and participation in large-scale public events, while Brittany Meadows interviewees were motivated to use the Facebook group to better keep track of upcoming neighborhood events that they wanted to participate in. Only Acton Community interviewees didn’t mention participation as a motivation or value (although several of them used the list to find out about upcoming neighborhood gatherings).

Interviewees did not explicitly express that collective efficacy or group empowerment were motivations for joining the groups. However, several mentioned that they valued being part of latent emergency communication networks, mentioning the importance these tools could have in the case of disaster.

Finally, while interviewees were frequently ambivalent regarding whether they wished to meet people or make friends through the groups, they were motivated to use the groups to access and activate latent ties. (Again, see Section 6.2.1 for a brief discussion of the significance of latent ties in neighborhoods.)
5.4 ARE THERE INDIVIDUAL CHARACTERISTICS THAT MAY HELP EXPLAIN VARIATION OF VALUATION AND PERCEPTIONS OF PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS AND SOCIAL CAPITAL?

While this study was not designed to rigorously examine correlation among variable characteristics of interviewees, I did gather basic demographics and some information on a few other concepts that are related to community and neighborhood. (Table 3-1 presents a summary of these characteristics and Section 3.5 discusses the possible implications that these characteristics might have in terms of bias.)

As stated in Section 3.5, most interviewees were employed, most were married or living with a partner, most were Caucasian, and most were homeowners. Most interviewees were also female. Two-thirds of interviewees had advanced degrees, and all had at least some college education. About half of the interviewees had children under the age of 18 living in their homes, and most of these children were under the age of five. All interviewees were over the age of 30, all but 3 were under the age of 60, and most were under the age of 50. Finally, most interviewees lived in urban areas and the rest lived in suburban areas.

In the course of investigation for this study, a number of interviewees mentioned personal circumstances that they felt had led them to be particularly interested in place-based virtual groups.

Interviewees with children commonly said that they became much more interested in their neighborhoods when they had children, for a variety of reasons that included: wanting their children to have a sense of place and/or community, wanting to be able to do all shopping and recreating within walking distance from their homes, needing to know where to purchase kid-related goods and services, and wanting their neighborhood to be safe and clean enough for kids. As one mother said,

*I know when I was pregnant that I really had that light bulb go off—I need to know what’s going on in this neighborhood; I need to pay attention to the school board... It [had] never really occurred to me.*

Several interviewees mentioned that when they became homeowners they started taking more of an interest in local issues, including local politics, crime, local businesses, infrastructure, and availability of community services. (This is consistent with findings that neighborhood place attachment is higher among homeowners [Brown, Perkins, and Brown 2003, e.g.].)
As mentioned above, interviewees' perceptions of crime and safety in their neighborhoods came up repeatedly as motivations for participating in place-based virtual groups. The motivation seemed to be less important in Brittany Meadows, the neighborhood with the lowest levels of crime and the highest perceptions of safety.

A number of the interviewees who were most enthusiastic about community told me about very positive experiences with community from their pasts. People with strong prior experience of community — both offline and online — wanted to have those experiences again and were interested in using place-based virtual groups in some way to promote their desires for community.

Interviewees who had very positive experiences with online communities in their past advocated a wide variety of approaches to building local community through place-based virtual groups, with no obvious similarities, but they all had strong preferences and they all seemed to draw heavily on their experiences with online community as they talked about their preferences.

Interviewees who had limited or no experiences with online communities in their past overall expressed less strong opinions on how best to use technology in neighborhoods.
In this paper, I argued that place-based virtual groups (and the associated tools that enable them) can be useful in developing social capital for the individuals who participate in them because they are designed to encourage relationships among neighbors, facilitating free conversation on a multiplicity of topics among individuals who are each given equal voice within a coherent and bounded group. In particular, I argued that place-based virtual groups are relevant in supporting four dimensions of social capital: sense of community, neighboring, civic engagement, and collective efficacy.

The question I began with was: What are the lessons that individuals' experiences with place-based virtual groups can offer to people who are interested in increasing social capital or building community in a given place?

6.1 HOW DO PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS FACILITATE SOCIAL CAPITAL?

Through interviews with participants in four place-based virtual groups in the Bay Area, I found that each of the four virtual groups was supporting the development of social capital. The virtual groups contributed to overall sense of community in
neighborhoods that used them, even when not all residents were part of the groups; they increased levels of neighboring behavior among group members; they supported citizen participation and civic engagement by increasing the visibility of opportunities to participate as well as highlighting the participation of others; and they contributed to collective efficacy by making the group’s opinions more visible and providing a means for easily organizing collective action. One segment of interviewees was motivated to participate in the virtual groups in order to improve their own experience of social capital, and another segment of interviewees called out components of social capital when describing what value they derived from participation in the groups.

However, I also found a great deal of variation among the different groups, and the results elicit numerous questions about what circumstances might be required to bring about place-based virtual groups that strongly encourage each dimension of social capital.

In the course of my research I came to the following conclusions, which may be interpreted as lessons based on individuals’ experiences with place-based virtual groups in the San Francisco Bay Area.

Note that, as previously stated, these findings were based on a biased sample that included overrepresentation of women, homeowners, parents of children under the age of five, Caucasians, thirty-somethings, individuals who were married or living with a partner, and individuals with advanced degrees. The results of the study are not intended to be generalizable to all residents of the Bay Area or of the United States, although they may be generalizable to similar types of people in the Bay Area and elsewhere.

### 6.1.1 Lessons Regarding Sense of Community

*I don’t think I would feel as connected to the neighborhood if it weren’t for this group. I don’t think I would have the same level of understanding, the sense of community that I have without the parents group. I know my neighbors across the street and the neighbors next to me, but I still kind of encompass my neighbors as being all of the other parents and families that are on this list. I can’t say enough good things about it.*

- Mission Parents interviewee

The place-based virtual groups investigated in this study were perceived by the vast majority of interviewees to be associated with sense of community in their associated neighborhoods.
Additional lessons that may be applicable in similar cases include:

- Place-based virtual groups may contribute to a sense of shared identity, to feelings of solidarity, to reduced anonymity, and to a more concrete understanding of who comprises a community. A neighborhood presence on a social network site can give some formality and tangibility to the existence of the neighborhood community, creating more of a sense of belonging among neighbors.

- In any neighborhood, place-based virtual groups can improve sense of community by giving the impression that people across the neighborhood are more closely connected, even when not everyone in the neighborhood is part of the virtual group.

- However, the size of the neighborhood, the number of members, the type of content, and the number of members who post may all be factors in determining a place-based virtual group’s effect on sense of community.

- In a large and diverse neighborhood, an interest-based group may help build a strong sense of community for the demographic that uses the virtual group while only resulting in marginal additional sense of community for the neighborhood overall. However, building sense of community within just a small segment of the total population that would otherwise be unconnected may be seen as highly beneficial to virtual group participants; and such a virtual group may still enhance overall neighborhood sense of community by contributing to the system of interlocking groups and networks that overlays the neighborhood.

- The signal-to-noise ratio does not necessarily need to be high for place-based virtual groups to provide value. In some cases the frequency of content in a virtual group may be as important as the type and quality of content, since “noise” in a group can act as a reassuring reminder that a community exists.

- Place-based virtual groups may amplify voices within the neighborhood or community that might otherwise be less prominent or unheard, such as the voices of children, the elderly, commuters, renters, and former residents.

- On the other hand, place-based virtual groups may unintentionally exclude voices within the neighborhood or community due to digital access issues; language or digital literacy barriers; a lack of publicity regarding the group’s existence; or perceptions of exclusivity, uncivil discourse, or irrelevant
discourse; and they may intentionally exclude voices within the neighborhood or community by implementing criteria for membership, such as being a parent, living within a certain boundary, or being a homeowner.

### 6.1.2 Lessons regarding Neighboring

*The amount of people who actually go out of their way to help you on those lists is absolutely mind-boggling to me.*

- Mission Parents interviewee

The place-based virtual groups investigated in this study seemed to facilitate neighboring behavior among members of the group and enable types of neighboring behavior that might not otherwise have occurred. All four of the virtual groups of focus, plus most of the other virtual groups that interviewees had knowledge of, were used to facilitate neighboring behavior that otherwise would not have occurred or would only have occurred via individuals contacting specific neighbors.

Additional lessons that may be applicable in similar cases include:

- Neighboring seems to be one of the major benefits people realize from participating in place-based virtual groups.

- Some forms of neighboring, such as sharing information about local news, providing recommendations, announcing events, and freecycling, seem to be very common in place-based virtual groups and are likely more common with the presence of virtual groups than they would be otherwise. Other forms of neighboring, such as sharing physical resources and exchanging favors in person, may be less common in place-based virtual groups but are still likely to be slightly more common with the presence of the group than they would be otherwise.

- Place-based virtual groups may make it easier, in particular, for people to receive neighboring support from groups (e.g., crowd-sourced advice for one individual), to receive neighboring support from many neighbors rather than just a few (e.g., well-wishes or condolences), and to receive neighboring support publically, which may add to an individual’s feeling of self-worth as well as to the group’s feelings of camaraderie and trust.

- When place-based virtual groups are used to request help, they have the ability through force of numbers to return more help and support (including
public support that may not have otherwise occurred) than if the person in need has asked just one or two neighbors.

- In neighborhoods where residents don’t know each other well, people may be reluctant to ask for help, and yet be happy to offer help to acquaintances or strangers.

- Actively encouraging more neighboring that involves physical sharing or exchanges of favors may be difficult, because it is hard to explain the value of neighboring to people and it is hard to convince people to increase their requests for help.

- In-person neighboring may be more likely within place-based virtual groups that are composed of people who are dealing with dramatic changes or who are going through times of intense need for support.

### 6.1.3 Lessons Regarding Participation and Civic Engagement

We have a number of people in the neighborhood who...will respond enthusiastically, which will then prompt someone else to respond enthusiastically. And in Facebook while you can respond to one person, typically it’s out there for the whole group to see, whereas a lot of times [when we use email for event announcements] people will just hit reply to the sender and so you don’t see the energy building around something.

- Brittany Meadows interviewee

The place-based virtual groups investigated in this study were perceived to be facilitating increased participation through increasing visibility of participation options and making it easier to show displays of solidarity. Most interviewees thought that their place-based virtual groups had the potential to increase individual participation in a variety of forms, including attendance at meetings and events as well as help with local projects. Whether the virtual groups were currently being used to encourage participation, however, differed from group to group.

Additional lessons that may be applicable in similar cases include:

- Place-based virtual groups in neighborhoods with vibrant commercial areas and large total footprints may be more likely to generate calls for participation and civic engagement than virtual groups in small neighborhoods that are far from commercial land uses.

- Postings in place-based virtual groups can be useful in generating enthusiasm for upcoming events or participation opportunities.
POSTINGS IN PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS MAY BE USEFUL IN ENCOURAGING PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY RAISING THE VISIBILITY OF OPPORTUNITIES, GENERATING ENTHUSIASM, AND ALLOWING PEOPLE TO SEE HOW MANY OTHERS ARE PLANNING TO PARTICIPATE AND HOW MANY OTHERS ARE IN SOLIDARITY.

FREQUENT ANNOUNCEMENTS OF PARTICIPATION OPPORTUNITIES IN PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS MAY, HOWEVER, GIVE MEMBERS A FALSE SENSE THAT PEOPLE ARE ACTUALLY PARTICIPATING IN THE ADVERTISED EVENTS, AND BEING ABLE TO POST AN ANNOUNCEMENT OF AN OPPORTUNITY MAY GIVE THE POSTER A FALSE SENSE THAT THEIR ANNOUNCEMENT HAS BEEN READ BY MANY PEOPLE.

PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS MAY BE MORE LIKELY TO INCREASE AWARENESS AND EDUCATION THAN TO ACTUALLY INCREASE PARTICIPATION OR CIVIC ENGAGEMENTS.

PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS COULD BE INTERPRETED AS CONTRIBUTING TO PARTICIPATION AND CIVIC ENGAGEMENT BY VIRTUE OF ENCOURAGING INDIVIDUALS TO VOICE THEIR OPINIONS AS PART OF AN ASSOCIATION (THE VIRTUAL GROUP) IN A FORMAL WAY (VIA EMAIL), ESPECIALLY WHEN THE GROUP IS ENGAGED IN DISCUSSION OF CIVIC ISSUES OR WHEN THE GROUP IS VERY LARGE AND WIDELY READ.

6.1.4 LESSONS REGARDING COLLECTIVE EFFICACY

I WOULD CALL [THOSE LISTS] A FORCE MULTIPLIER AND AN ACCELERATOR

- ACTON COMMUNITY INTERVIEWEE

THE PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS INVESTIGATED IN THIS STUDY WERE PERCEIVED TO HAVE THE POTENTIAL TO SUPPORT COLLECTIVE EFFICACY FOR THE NEIGHBORHOODS THEY’RE A PART OF, BUT NO EVIDENCE OF THEIR EFFECTIVENESS HAD YET BEEN SEEN.

ADDITIONAL LESSONS THAT MAY BE APPLICABLE IN SIMILAR CASES INCLUDE:

- PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS CAN INCREASE THE VISIBILITY OF VARIOUS OPINIONS AND OPINIONATED INDIVIDUALS, THEREFORE MAKING IT EASIER FOR NEIGHBORHOODS TO ASSESS HOW MUCH TOTAL SUPPORT EXISTS FOR VARIOUS PROJECTS OR CAUSES, AND POSSIBLY LEADING TO FEELINGS OF EMPOWERMENT AMONG MEMBERS AS THEY SEE THAT OTHERS SHARE THEIR VIEWS AND MAY BE WILLING TO CO-INVEST IN A PROJECT OR CAUSE.

- PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS MAY NOT BE SUFFICIENT TO ENCOURAGE COLLECTIVE ACTION UNLESS LEADERS EMERGE WHO ARE WILLING TO COORDINATE OR CHANNEL ENTHUSIASM.
• Place-based virtual groups can be thought of as latent emergency communications systems that have the potential to facilitate collective action.

• Place-based virtual groups can be used to magnify and accelerate opinions and enthusiasm.

• However, shows of support in virtual groups do not necessarily translate into collective action or goal accomplishment.

### 6.1.5 Lessons Regarding Interpersonal Ties

*Interviewees used the place-based virtual groups investigated in this study to form and support weak ties and to access latent ties.* The following are additional lessons regarding interpersonal ties:

• Participants from a close-knit neighborhood where friendships among neighbors are common may also use place-based virtual groups to support pre-existing strong ties. In particular, social network site tools can encourage neighbors who are already friendly to get a better sense of each others’ lives outside of the neighborhood.

• Place-based virtual group members may be interested in getting to know the names and faces of their neighbors through the use of the group, but not all members will be equally interested and some may be reluctant to put more than minimal effort into this activity.

• Participants may be more interested in using place-based virtual groups to access latent ties than to form weak ties.

• Different types of place-based virtual groups will be more or less likely to facilitate neighbors getting to know each others’ names, faces, and personalities. Virtual groups that cover large neighborhoods or have large numbers of members may be less likely to facilitate introductions, while virtual groups that cover small neighborhoods or have small numbers of members may be more likely to facilitate introductions and increased familiarity among participants.
6.1.6 Lessons Regarding Motivations And Value

To be able to create a conversation among a group of people that is in an open environment—meaning a page where we’re all sharing that conversation but closed to the rest of the world—there’s something very intimate about that in a lot of ways. ... I think the medium is very very powerful.

- Brittany Meadows interviewee

In the place-based virtual groups investigated in this study, some people were motivated to join virtual groups to increase sense of community, improve their access to neighboring, become more informed about opportunities to participate in local activities, and be more able to achieve goals as part of a group, but those were not necessarily their sole or primary motivations. People also found value in sense of community, in increased access to neighboring behavior, in having more information about participation opportunities, and in group empowerment, but these were not necessarily the primary or only values they found. People’s motivations and perceptions of value were multi-faceted and changed over time.

Additional lessons that may be applicable in similar cases include:

- Individuals’ initial motivations for participating in place-based virtual groups may differ from the values they find in the groups after joining.

- People may consider the possibility of increased sense of community to be sufficient motivation to join a place-based virtual group.

- People may also consider neighboring behavior, especially freecyling and exchanges of advice and recommendations, to be sufficient motivation to join a place-based virtual group.

- People may be motivated to join a place-based virtual group in order to increase their opportunities to attend local events and hear about local meetings, but they will likely also have additional motivations.

- Neither wishes for increased collective efficacy and empowerment nor interest in collective action seem to be likely motivations for joining a general-purpose place-based virtual group, but interest in increased collective efficacy and collective action may be a common reason for creating project-specific or cause-specific place-based virtual groups.
• Individuals may also be particularly motivated to join place-based virtual groups by an interest in feeling safe and secure in their neighborhoods.

• A neighborhood that already has strong friendships among neighbors may still find value in a place-based virtual group.

• Individuals may find value in place-based virtual groups even when they generate few or no messages, since they can still be used as emergency broadcast systems. On a related note, individuals may also find value in passively belonging to place-based virtual groups without reading or visiting the stream of messages because the group has the potential to be useful once in a while.

6.1.7 Additional Lessons Taken From Participant Interviews

In the course of investigation for this study, interviewees discussed their impressions of how the place-based virtual groups they were a part of related to their conceptions of their neighborhoods and their communities. Lessons that may be drawn from their observations follow:

• Place-based virtual groups may not be perceived as standing in for an entire neighborhood’s population.

• Interest-based virtual groups, however, may be perceived as standing in for an entire interest group within a neighborhood.

• Interest-based virtual groups may be more likely than place-based virtual groups to be thought of as online communities.

Finally, a number of interviewees mentioned personal circumstances that they felt had led them to be particularly interested in place-based virtual groups. Lessons that may be drawn from their observations include:

• Individuals with children and individuals that are homeowners may be more likely to be interested in participating in place-based virtual groups.

• Individuals that perceive their neighborhoods to have high levels of crime may be more likely to be interested in participating in place-based virtual groups.

• Individuals with strong prior experiences of positive community, either offline or online, may be more likely to be interested in participating in place-based virtual groups.
6.2 SUGGESTIONS FOR FURTHER STUDY

As evidenced by the large number of fledgling companies I found in the course of my research, place-based virtual groups and the tools that enable them are a topic of great interest in technology right now. This is a nascent field, and many companies are coming into the space with a lot of theory and a wealth of innovative ideas for how to better connect neighbors and encourage local social capital.

Planners interested in building community and thriving urban places should pay particular attention to this area of communication and technology. The community question continues to be important to anyone interested in planning urban spaces, and the current debate around the community question is centered on the growing importance of CMC. As one pair of authors warns, “planners must be increasingly aware of rapidly changing social dynamics when planning physical spaces and other systems that are subject to spatial and social distances” (Dempwolf and Lyles 2011). Planners need to be aware of how place-based virtual groups and the associated enabling tools are being used, what they are being used for, when they seem to be succeeding, and how they can be useful in building community and developing social capital.

Several areas that may be of particular interest to researchers are described below.

6.2.1 The Strength of Latent Ties

More research is needed on how place-based virtual groups create latent ties and have the potential to transform latent ties into weak ties or otherwise leverage latent ties. Thus far, research has focused on whether place-based virtual groups create new weak ties among neighbors (e.g., Hampton and Wellman 2003; Mesch and Levanon 2003) while ignoring the possibility that the creation of new latent ties may be just as important, if not more so (Haythornthwaite 2002).

In the case of an emergency, a member of a place-based virtual group has the ability to send a message to everyone in her group, regardless of whether she has yet established weak ties with all of those individuals; and if the group has strong norms of reciprocity and trust then it is plausible that a stranger—a latent tie—could respond to the call for assistance. Indeed, in the Mission Parents case study interviewees reported constantly receiving assistance from strangers through their email list—they were able to activate latent ties in times of need—while simultaneously reporting that they had made few new weak ties via the list.
Additionally, research on the potential benefits of networks of latent ties could be useful in making a case for place-based virtual groups in neighborhoods, especially among populations that are resistant to moving their community interactions into a virtual space.

### 6.2.2 Alloy Social Capital in Neighborhoods

So far, very little research has been done on alloy social capital—social capital that is developed through both online and offline interactions. Additional research on the existence and development of alloy social capital might reveal more information on what CMC tools or methods work best at reinforcing ties among offline acquaintances, thus being of use to those who develop tools that enable place-based virtual groups or those who are interested in picking the most appropriate tool for initiating a group in a particular neighborhood.

Additionally, as with latent ties, research on the potential benefits and strengths of alloy social capital could be useful in making a case for place-based virtual groups in neighborhoods, especially among populations that are resistant to moving their community interactions into a virtual space.

### 6.2.3 When Do Virtual Groups Become Virtual Communities?

In the literature regarding online community and the use of CMC in supporting social capital, Anita Blanchard makes a distinction between virtual communities, in which members share a sense of community and have developed feelings of belonging, and virtual groups, in which members just interact with each other online (2004). Nancy Baym makes a similar distinction (2010). It would be interesting to look more closely at place-based virtual groups in neighborhoods to see how this distinction is playing out. Under what conditions are place-based virtual groups likely to become virtual communities? Under what conditions do group members and/or non-member residents see the development of a virtual community as a positive outcome?

### 6.2.4 Online Communities and Virtual Groups as Civic Associations

One critique of *Bowling Alone* (Putnam 2000) was that while it included a brief discussion of the potential of the internet to affect social capital, it excluded online communities and virtual groups from its definition of civic associations when assessing participation and civic engagement in the U.S. A few researchers have pointed out that online communities and virtual groups may play the same roles in
increasing social capital as traditional in-person membership organizations. Barry Wellman noted that computer-mediated communication (CMC) provided a means for people to easily organize around interests into structures that could become an “Internet-cum-Toquevillian substitute for the decline of organized groups” (2001), although he did not cite any examples. Wellman and Anabel Quan-Haase later repeated this assertion in 2004, noting:

Putnam’s (2000) observed decline in organizational participation may not reflect actual disengagement from community but community becoming embedded in digital networks rather than in traditional, geographically bounded groups: in short, a movement of community participation from public spaces to cyberspace.

Nan Lin, during a larger discussion of cybernetworks, also claimed: “Individuals, groups, and organizations can create institutions and capital by forming chat rooms, clubs, and groups [online]” (2001), but again did not mention examples.

I was able to find only one empirical study that actually looked at specific online groups in the context of civic associations—a 1999 study entitled “Toqueville in Cyberspace” (Klein). In the study, which did not mention social capital or Robert Putnam, Hans Klein similarly proposed that online forums could potentially facilitate “the formation and operation of citizen associations”. Klein looked at an email discussion list that was acting as a proxy for official membership in an organization that had been successfully achieving goals as a collective, and he found that the online forum (i.e., the email list) helped the organization avoid barriers that would have been associated with using a more traditional meeting-hall style in-person forum—barriers such as distance, time, and the cost of participation. Klein also noted that online associations could be formed and/or reactivated very easily and quickly compared with traditional associations.

Over the course of my research several interviewees referred to their place-based virtual groups as being means through which they were civically engaged. The moderators of the email lists and Facebook Group, in particular, mentioned their

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33 There are two investigations that at first glance seemed to address the question of civic associations online but upon closer inspection ignored the issue and therefore are not mentioned in this section. One is Putnam and Feldstein’s chapter on craigslist in Better Together (2003), which ignores the question of whether craigslist could be a civic association and instead looks only at whether craigslist as a virtual community supports social capital. The other is from Putnam’s Saguaro Seminar at the Harvard Kennedy School—a report on Meetup.com (Sander 2005). Again, this study investigates Meetup’s track record in supporting social capital but does not mention civic associations.

74 Interestingly, Klein’s article seems to have made its way into the eParticipation / eGovernment literature (e.g., Saebø, Rose, and Flak 2008) but not into the literature on virtual communities.
moderation duties when I asked what they did to get engaged in their local communities—more than one interviewee referred to starting a place-based virtual group as "neighborhood organizing". I also came to view two of the groups—ActonCommunity and Mission Parents—as neighborhood institutions.

Future research should continue to pursue the question of what sorts of participation in place-based virtual groups (and indeed other types of online communities) may serve the same civic purposes as participating in more traditional civic associations. It seems clear that some forms of participation in virtual groups, such as spending several hours a month moderating a community email list, might lead an individual to be more civically engaged than some forms of participation in traditional civic associations, such as attending an occasional public meeting. So what is the threshold for online participation to be counted as civic engagement? Does that threshold differ based on an individual's personality or based on prior experience with civic activity? And what are the differences in terms of civic engagement for someone who moderates an email list, someone who rarely reads email list messages but regularly posts messages, and someone who rarely posts but reads every single message that comes through her inbox?

### 6.2.5 Place-Based Virtual Groups: Where do they Already Exist, and How Are They Being Used?

Studies on the impacts of place-based virtual groups are already rare, but studies that look at naturally occurring virtual groups (rather than virtual groups imposed as part of the research methodology) are even rarer. This paucity is unfortunate for at least two specific reasons.

First, we continue to lack a bird's-eye view of the use of place-based virtual groups. While we know that there must be tens of thousands of these groups in the U.S., only a couple of studies have even attempted to describe any portion of the landscape (Button and Partridge 2007; Neighbourhood Networks Group 2010). No one has yet attempted to map or otherwise collate data regarding their prevalence, frequency, density, or geography. A survey of place-based virtual groups in a large metropolitan area with high diversity would be particularly important as a foundation for planners interested in leveraging virtual groups to support community development and community organizing.

Second, there may be fundamental differences between the results of a controlled experiment (e.g., a virtual group that has been introduced to a neighborhood by a researcher) and the results of a naturally occurring experiment (e.g., a virtual group that developed without intervention) in this field of study. While researchers and
CMC tool developers alike seem eager to design the perfect tool to enable place-based virtual groups that maximize social capital, it may be more helpful to study the tools that are already in widespread use. Researchers could look for best use cases and/or consider changes to existing tools, rather than introducing additional tools.

### 6.2.6 The Role of Planners in Place-Based Virtual Groups

Thousands of place-based virtual groups exist in the U.S. How many of the groups are connected in some way to their municipal government or to a local community-based organization? Is there a role in the groups for planners from local community-based organizations, police departments, planning departments, or other civic institutions? If so, what is the best way for a planner to support a grassroots virtual group without intruding or interfering with the group’s dynamics?

### 6.2.7 The Role of Place-Based Virtual Groups in Community Organizing

So far, research on place-based virtual groups and neighborhood websites does not seem to have connected to the research and literature on the use of CMC tools by community-based organizations and governments. Are there cases where place-based virtual groups have been successfully seeded by community-based organizations or by local government agencies? Under what conditions is it possible for community-based organizations or government agencies to seed or nurture a successful place-based virtual group?

Alternately, community-based organizations and governments may be more interested in tapping into place-based virtual groups that already exist. How can planners effectively leverage existing place-based virtual groups in communications and outreach, or as a way of getting feedback from constituents?

### 6.2.8 Issues of Inclusion / Exclusion

Place-based virtual groups may potentially de facto exclude people who don’t have easy access to technology or who haven’t accumulated sufficient digital literacy skills to comfortably participate. Any place-based virtual group may also inadvertently exclude populations within a neighborhood—a group may demonstrate bias in how, where, or if it advertises its presence; a group may fail to create a

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75 Researchers interested in creating and introducing new tools might also consider that adoption rates of and interest in a tool might be higher if the tool is something that residents have already heard of.
welcoming space for populations dissimilar to the existing members; and/or a group may be perceived as serving only a particular slice of the local population. On the other hand, place-based virtual groups have the potential to bring voices that have traditionally been excluded from neighborhood decision-making into conversations; they can facilitate inclusion of the elderly, children, the disabled, renters, and commuters.

Additional research is needed to investigate the role of place-based virtual groups in exacerbating or closing the digital divide under various conditions, and researchers should also seek out cases of place-based virtual groups that are enabling traditionally underserved or under-participating populations to be a part of neighborhood decision-making.

**6.2.9 Interest-Based versus Place-Based Virtual Groups**

Place-based virtual groups can be inclusive of all residents within a certain area, or they can regulate membership based on shared interests. Leaving aside the issues of inclusion and exclusion mentioned above, this distinction between purely place-based groups and interest- plus place-based groups is worth investigation. How do interest-based and place-based virtual groups differ? Is one type or the other more likely to gel into online communities, as discussed in Section 6.2.3? What are the strengths and weaknesses of each type? Under what circumstances is one or the other more effective in supporting social capital and community?

**6.2.10 Visibility and Publicity**

Some place-based virtual groups are more public than others. Some groups advertise their existence, while some don’t. Some groups might want to keep numbers down to a certain size, while others are interested in growing. Overall, the visibility of these groups seems to be low. Do place-based virtual groups want more publicity and visibility? If so, how are they constrained from achieving more publicity and visibility?

Also, with visibility at low existing levels, is there a lot of redundancy, in terms of multiple place-based virtual groups overlapping in a specific geographic space?

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In the case of i-Neighbors, the founder said that he hadn’t yet seen any groups discriminate based on anything other than where a person’s house was located.
Are there ways that local planners could assist in improving visibility and reducing the chance of redundancy, such as by creating inventories of local groups?

### 6.2.11 Relationship Between Scale of Group and Functionality

Place-based virtual groups vary dramatically in size—both in how many members they have and in how much physical area they are associated with. How does the size of a virtual group affect its strengths and weaknesses? How much does size affect a virtual group’s abilities and affordances? What difference does it make when a virtual group includes all neighbors that live in an area versus just half of the neighbors that live in an area?

### 6.3 Coda: Possible Approaches to Developing Social Capital through Computer-Mediated Communication

In addition to closely examining three email lists and one Facebook Group, I also undertook a cursory investigation into a number of other CMC tools that are being used to build place-based virtual groups (see Appendix B for the lists of CMC tools discovered during research for this thesis). During my investigations I spoke with eight individuals who have been innovators within this realm. These leaders, including entrepreneurs, developers, community managers, and researchers who either have been involved or are currently involved in Blockboard, Burning Man, Front Porch Forum, i-Neighbors, Meetup, Microsoft Research, Nextdoor, rBlock, and Tribe, shared information about the history of these companies, the philosophies behind the way their CMC platforms and tools have been designed and implemented, and various lessons they’ve learned over time about how best to build place-based community and support the development of social capital using CMC (see Table A-2 in Appendix A for a list of interviewees).

One of the most interesting discoveries from these interviews was the variety of approaches that guided each individual and/or company, given that every company was explicitly aimed at building community and most of the interviewees were guided by an interest in increasing social capital. Each approach varied slightly based on a range of theories and assumptions regarding the answers to a number of

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77 Burning Man, while not a technology company, oversees a large number of place-based email discussion lists and a community forum. I spoke with the woman who acted as Communications Manager and Regional Network Manager.
SECTION 6: LESSONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

questions that affect design. Some of the questions that came up in interviews included the following:

- What is the key type of interaction that people need in order to feel like their neighborhood is a community?
- Who do people need to interact with, and to what extent, in order to feel like their neighborhood is a community?
- What sorts of communications among neighbors are most important?
- What volume and frequency of communication are the right amounts?
- What sort of information are neighbors most interested in hearing?
- How much information is the right amount?
- How much do people care about online privacy vis-a-vis their neighbors?
- Are people willing to meet and/or be friendly with their neighbors?
- Is it better to verify identity, allow pseudonyms, or allow anonymity among neighbors?
- Is it better to have rigid neighborhood boundaries and verify users’ addresses, or have fluid boundaries and not worry about verifying where users live?
- How many neighbors should there be in a single place-based virtual group?
- How much physical area should a single place-based virtual group cover?
- What sorts of membership criteria are important, and which are unnecessary?
- Will mobile applications, website-based applications, or email-based tools be most effective?
- Is it better to have a simple bare-bones tool, to have a tool with lots of features, or something in between?
- How much curation and/or moderation are necessary?

Consideration of each of these questions is important in designing a platform or tool that one hopes will support place-based community and social capital, although some questions may be considered more important than others, and their relative importance can fluctuate dramatically depending on which professional you speak with. Table 6-1 contains descriptions of the dominant approaches to building place-based community online that I encountered in my research. Note that while these approaches are not necessarily mutually exclusive, I did find that platforms tended to be designed with one of these in mind in particular.
Table 6-1: Approaches to Building Place-Based Community Online

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Approaches to Developing Social Capital and Building Place-Based Community Online</th>
<th>Examples of Platforms</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Neighbor-to-neighbor interactions as key to community:</strong> In this theory, community is built as interactions accumulate among neighbors. The interactions can be about anything, but in the process of interacting people get to know each other and learn to trust each other over time.</td>
<td>Front Porch Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Knowing people as key to community:</strong> In this theory, community is built just through getting to know each other's names and faces. Being familiar with one's neighbors' names and faces results in feeling more comfortable in one's neighborhood and eventually presumably also in more interactions with one's neighbors.</td>
<td>Nextdoor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Strengthening local businesses as key to community:</strong> In this theory, local businesses are the hubs through which community is built. Local businesses (and other physical places) are emphasized, and neighbors exchange advice and recommendation about the local businesses through the tool. Neighbors develop relationships with the businesses and the business owners, which builds sense of community, and through patronizing the businesses they eventually also interact with and meet other neighbors.</td>
<td>rBlock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local news as key to community:</strong> In this theory, local news is the way to get neighbors engaged in their community. Tools share local news and ask neighbors to contribute their own news and announcements. Through sharing news and commenting on news together, neighbors get to know each other and their neighborhood.</td>
<td>Patch</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Civic engagement as key to community:</strong> In this theory, neighbors participate in online discussions about civic issues. Through exchanging thoughtful comments and opinions, neighbors get to know each other and trust each other and build collective efficacy.</td>
<td>MindMixer</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Local data as key to community:</strong> In this theory, getting a data-driven sense of one's neighborhood leads to more interest in the neighborhood and community. Tools provide data streams that neighbors access to learn about their neighborhood. Data streams might include information about potholes, construction work, crime, real estate, business reviews, events, and photos. Once people understand their neighborhoods through data, they'll take more responsibility for the neighborhood, become more civically engaged, and potentially work with their neighbors to solve local issues.</td>
<td>Blockboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Common interests as key to community:</strong> In this theory, place-based community is rooted in common interests aside from just proximity. Tools</td>
<td>Tribe; Meetup</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
connect neighbors based on significant traits (e.g., having children) or lighter characteristics (e.g., having a keen interest in tasty brunches), and because people feel like they have something in common, they develop relationships and trust with their neighbors.

Note: The tools noted in this table are not intended to be touted as pure representations of the corresponding approach to community-building; rather, this rough typology was created in order to give the reader a sense of the variety of approaches currently being employed.

As detailed in Section 5, I found in the course of my research that place-based virtual groups enabled by email discussion lists and Facebook Groups, under some conditions, may support the development of social capital as indicated by sense of community, neighboring behavior, citizen participation/civic engagement, and collective efficacy. Unfortunately, I was not able to similarly examine place-based virtual groups enabled by any of the CMC platforms listed above, but each of these approaches obviously emphasizes different aspects of community and thus will presumably vary in terms of how they affect local social capital. Additionally, while a number of these companies employ methods similar to email lists and Facebook Groups (e.g., email notifications of messages, threaded conversations on a group home page), each platform emphasizes a slightly different set of CMC tools and affordances, which may also cause variation in how they affect social capital.

Implementation of these platforms, as well as implementation of email lists and Facebook Groups, may also result in different social capital outcomes depending on timing and location of implementation. Some platforms or tools may be more appropriate for established suburban neighborhoods full of families, some may be more appropriate for up-and-coming urban neighborhoods full of transient twenty-somethings, and others may be most appropriate for independent living facilities for senior citizens.

Persons interested in developing social capital through the implementation of place-based virtual groups should be aware of this wide array of variables and consider their own priorities when selecting a platform or tool for either study or implementation.


Au, Randy (Data Analyst at Meetup), email message to author, April 24, 2012.


Ellison, Nicole, Jessica Vitak, Charles Steinfield, Rebecca Gray, and Cliff Lampe. 2011b. “Negotiating Privacy Concerns and Social Capital Needs in a Social Media Environment.” In Privacy Online: Perspectives on Privacy and Self-


Prezza, Miretta, Matilde Amici, Tiziana Roberti, and Gloria Tedeschi. 2001. “Sense of Community Referred to the Whole Town: Its Relations with Neighboring, Loneliness, Life Satisfaction, and Area of Residence.” *Journal of Community Psychology*


Subdivided: Isolation and Community in America. DVD. Directed by Dean Terry. 2007.


APPENDICES
A.1 FINDING AND SELECTING INTERVIEWEES

I selected the nine-county San Francisco Bay Area as my geographic region of focus, both because of my familiarity with the region and because I expected that the Bay Area would be a region in the U.S. with relatively high levels of use of computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools.

As my first step I solicited information on the existence of what I initially called locally focused social networking services, described as: “any online social networking tools, including email lists, that people are using to connect to other people who live geographically near them—[t]o their neighbors, specifically”. I requested leads from friends and acquaintances via postings on Facebook on December 5, 201178 and emails79 sent on December 21, 2011. I hoped to discover place-based virtual groups that were using specialized civic social network sites like

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78 As of December 5, 2011, I had approximately 1,300 Facebook friends that could potentially have seen my posting.
79 I sent emails to approximately 500 individuals, although approximately 15 addresses failed to work. Note that the majority of the people I emailed are also Facebook friends of mine.
Nextdoor and i-Neighbors and that were inclusive of all residents living within the bounds of the neighborhood (i.e., not just parents). I received suggestions to investigate 93 groups, websites, and organizations. None of the suggestions connected me groups that were both using specialized civic social network sites and being inclusive of all neighbors, but there were still many interesting potential case studies.

From my initial round of inquiries I was told about approximately 50 place-based email discussion lists (including parents lists and neighborhood watch lists); 3 geographically bounded Facebook Groups; a handful of groups on social network hosting platforms like Big Tent and Ning; 6 place-blogs and hyperlocal news sites; 5 web-based or mobile services that were designed specifically to connect people to their neighbors; 5 web-based or mobile services that otherwise deal with location and neighborly behavior, such as sharing resources or exchanging goods and services; and 6 organizations that support neighborhood organizing using technology. Table B-1 in Appendix B includes the full list of recommendations. None of these suggestions included groups that were using civic social network sites.

From the initial list I first narrowed down just to place-based virtual groups, which included email discussion lists, discussion sites, and specific groups on social network sites. There were approximately 60 place-based virtual groups. I then weeded out groups that weren’t located in the Bay Area, groups that covered a geographic area larger than a neighborhood, and groups that covered a geographic area smaller than a block. I was left with 25 groups to investigate.

For each of those groups I contacted either the person who referred me or a contact person recommended within the referral and I asked for additional information on each group. During that round of information-gathering I eliminated groups that seemed to focus solely on neighborhood crime/safety and groups whose representatives didn’t respond to my emails. At that time I decided not to exclude all parents groups, despite the fact that they were not inclusive of all neighbors equally, because it became clear that parents groups were a very common and influential example of place-based virtual groups.

I was left with approximately 12 groups that I wanted to approach for interviews. I contacted members of each of these groups and ended up with nine initial interviews.

---

80 As stated in Section 1, I am interested in virtual groups because they seem particularly well-positioned to support social capital because they are designed to encourage relationships among neighbors, facilitating free conversation on a multiplicity of topics among individuals who are each given equal voice within a coherent and bounded group. By choosing to focus on virtual groups I excluded place-based blogs, hyperlocal news sites, local wikis, and several place-based mobile apps.
all of which were carried out in January 2012\(^81\). At the end of each interview I asked for recommendations for and referrals to other people to talk to; I then followed up with some of these referrals. Based on referrals from my initial round of interviews I carried out an additional four interviews during January 2012. During this initial round of interviews I heard about people’s experiences with approximately 40 place-based virtual groups, since most interviewees were participants in more than 1 such group.

After reviewing the interviews and other materials gathered during my first round of data collection in January, I decided that for my second round of interviews I would focus on four of the place-based virtual groups that had been discussed in my first round of interviews (Acton Community, Brittany Meadows, Mission Parents, and PiedmontAve). I asked my contacts from each of the four groups if they would introduce me to other members of the group via email (except in the case of PiedmontAve, in which I directly emailed the group). My goal was to interview a minimum of five individuals from each of these four virtual groups. Over the course of March and April I conducted 23 second-round interviews over the phone, including 8 second interviews with people I had already talked to and 15 first interviews with new contacts. The total number of virtual group participants interviewed was 28: I interviewed 5 participants from Acton Community, 3 from Brittany Meadows (plus 1 Brittany Meadows resident who did not participate in the virtual group), 8 from Mission Parents, and 7 from PiedmontAve.

In addition to speaking with participants in place-based virtual groups, I also solicited interviews with leadership at a variety of non-profit and for-profit organizations that operate electronic communication tools. These interviewees consisted of entrepreneurs, researchers, developers who were familiar with the history and founding philosophies of their organizations, which included Blockboard, Burning Man, Front Porch Forum, i-Neighbors, Meetup, Microsoft Research, Nextdoor, rBlock, and Tribe (see Table A-1).

---

\(^{81}\) Interviewees names and characteristics have been kept confidential.
Table A-1: Industry Leadership Interviewees

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name</th>
<th>Title and Organization</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Andie Grace</td>
<td>Communications Manager/Regional Network Manager at Burning Man</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Carolyn Anhalt</td>
<td>Director of Development &amp; Technical Support at New Systems Associates (owners of tribe.net)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>danah boyd</td>
<td>former consultant at tribe.net Senior Researcher at Microsoft Research</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>lan Kallen</td>
<td>Senior Engineer at Blockboard</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Keith Hampton</td>
<td>Founder and CEO at i-Neighbors Associate Professor at the School of Communication and Information, Rutgers University</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Michael Wood-Lewis</td>
<td>CEO and Co-Founder at Front Porch Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Nirav Tolia</td>
<td>CEO at Nextdoor</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Scott Heiferman</td>
<td>CEO and Co-Founder at Meetup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Vivek Hutheesing</td>
<td>CEO and Founder at rBlock</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

A.2 PARTICIPANT INTERVIEWS

By opting to use interviews as my primary means of data collection, I was able to explore a number of personal experiences in depth, providing rich information as to how people see place-based virtual groups as influencing their lives. My primary goal in interviewing participants in place-based virtual groups was to discover whether the participants experienced or saw evidence of indicators of social capital in their neighborhoods, and whether participants thought that the virtual groups were contributing to the presence of these social capital indicators.
I asked about four indicators of social capital—sense of community, neighboring, citizen participation, and collective efficacy (Section 2 and Figure 2-1 for full descriptions of these concepts). Each of these indicators can be conceived of and measured at the level of the individual and/or at the level of the neighborhood (Perkins & Long; Perkins, Hughey, & Speer). I asked interviewees whether a) they personally had experienced these indicator qualities differently after beginning to use the place-based virtual groups and/or b) they had seen noticed a difference in these qualities at the neighborhood level that they attributed to the place-based virtual groups. (Unfortunately, due to the way the conversations progressed, it was sometimes difficult to determine whether interviewees were referring to observations of indicators at the level of the individual, the block, the neighborhood, or whatever they conceived of as “the community”.)

In addition to inquiring directly about the four indicators of social capital, I also asked about participants’ use of place-based virtual groups, participants’ use of other online social network services, participants’ feelings about neighborhoods and communities, and participants’ current and preferred relationships with their neighbors and their neighborhoods. I used the following questions to guide my interviews:

- Why do the interviewees use place-based virtual groups?
- Do place-based virtual groups affect the development of social capital at the neighborhood and individual levels?
- How do the interviewees see place-based virtual groups as being related to the concept of community?
- Are there individual characteristics that may help explain the variation of interviewees’ valuation and perceptions of a) place-based virtual groups and/or b) neighborhood-based community?
- What do interviewees think are the appropriate roles (and associated best tools) for CMC within neighborhoods?

Interviews were semi-structured with open-ended questions in an attempt to allow interviewees to spend more time talking about the topics they were more interested in and to make cross-topic connections more likely.

---

82 Level of analysis is a controversial subject in the social capital literature, with different researchers arguing that social capital can be conceived of and/or measured only at the individual level, only at the group level, or equally at both levels. Perkins and Long, from whose work I take my four social capital indicators, favor multi-level analysis (using quantitative methods to assess individual-level data as well as group climate variables compiled from aggregate individual perceptions). Due to time and resource constraints I was unable to perform a quantitative multi-level analysis for this study.
Compensation for interviewees was limited to an opportunity to win a $100 gift card in a raffle, the existence of which was announced after interviewees had already expressed interest in participating in the study.

### A.3 PARTICIPANT SURVEYS

Participants from the four case studies were asked to fill out a short (five-minute) survey, either online or in person depending on circumstances, with questions regarding their use of the internet and various personal demographics. Results of the survey are shown in Table A-2 (at the end of this appendix).

### A.4 SELECTING SAMPLE GROUPS

By the end of the first round of interviews I had spoken to people about their involvement in approximately 40 place-based virtual groups, most of which consisted of email lists. There was a wide range of topics, and some groups generated much more communication and electronic contact than others. I decided that it would be interesting to try to tease out differences among some of the more prominent and high-traffic groups, and I opted to pick three to five representative groups to focus on as I moved forward. In selecting the sample of three to five virtual groups to focus on I considered the following factors:

- Whether there was sufficient interest from members to garner at least four interviewees;
- What type of tool was being used (with the goal of including at least two types of tool);
- Whether the group was exclusively focused on a subset of residents, all official residents, and/or all persons interested in the neighborhood;
- How frequently people posted to the group;
- What municipality the group was located in (with the goal of diversity);
- Whether the site of the group was urban or suburban (with the goal of diversity);
- The geographic size of the neighborhood that the group covered; and
- The likely population demographics of the neighborhood (with the goal of diversity of residents’ ages, housing tenure status, and number of children).

My goal was to pick groups that were different enough that they covered some range in terms of size of neighborhood, level of urbanness, characteristics of residents, and type of communication tool. However, it ended up being difficult to select for
difference based on characteristics of residents due to the bias of my initial search for groups through my network of acquaintances.

I ended up selecting four virtual groups to focus on: Acton Community, a Google Group for a few blocks in a quiet residential portion of the City of Berkeley; Brittany Meadows, a Facebook group in a small neighborhood in the suburban City of Santa Rosa; Mission Parents, a Yahoo! Group for parents in a large very urban neighborhood/district in the City and County of San Francisco; and Piedmont Ave, a Yahoo! Group for a large urban neighborhood in the City of Oakland.

Appendix B contains lists of the virtual groups, neighborhood websites, and related organizations and CMC tools that I discovered but chose not to focus on during my research.

A.5 COMPARISON OF PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS

For each of the four main place-based virtual groups of interest, I gathered enough information to give the reader a sense of the physical setting for each group, the demographics of the residents, and the characteristics of the group. I prepared the following (located in Section 4):

- Brief history and physical description of the neighborhood;
- Summary of neighborhood demographics at the census tract level (from the 2006-2010 American Community Survey 5-Year Estimates and the 2010 Census);
- Synopsis of electronic content based on interviews of participants and a three-month sample of the group's electronic archives;
- Description of the distinguishing features of each group, based on interviewees' perceptions and my personal observations; and
- Discussion of how the virtual group seems to relate to the neighborhood.

Unfortunately, I was not able to obtain demographics for the members of each group for the sake of comparison to the demographics of the neighborhood overall, since that would have required administering an additional survey for each virtual group.
This study is not intended to be a survey of all types of users and uses of placed-based virtual groups in the Bay Area or even present a comprehensive look at the current uses of such groups in the four case study neighborhoods. There exist no lists of placed-based virtual groups in the Bay Area, nor any lists of individuals who use these groups in the Bay Area, so selecting a representative sample from all placed-based virtual groups or all group users was not possible. Participants for this study were found using a snowball sample that originated with my personal acquaintances, and was therefore biased toward certain demographics. While interviews and case studies were initially sought with an attempt to achieve some level of diversity along the variables of age, gender, level of education, marital status, number of children, length of time in current neighborhood, and type of urban setting, I was limited by the fact that most interviewees were volunteers and not personally solicited. The following demographics are overrepresented in the sample: women, homeowners, parents of children under 5, Caucasians, 30-somethings, individuals who were married or living with a partner, and individuals with advanced degrees. Table A-2 shows the demographics of the interviewees as a group as well as a breakdown by case study. These overrepresentations are very likely to bias the results of this study.

The results of the study are not intended to be generalizable to all residents of the Bay Area, although they may be generalizable to similar types of people in other urban and suburban environments. This thesis is intended to serve as an introductory and descriptive discussion of individuals’ experiences with place-based virtual groups and social capital in their neighborhoods.

It should also be noted that residents of the Bay Area, due to their proximity to Silicon Valley and a thriving technology start-up culture, may be more likely than other Americans to be aware of small, new, or niche social network services, social media tools, and other options for CMC. Similarly, residents of the Bay Area may also be more likely to be early adopters of new technologies. (In fact, several of the services I discovered were being piloted first in Silicon Valley or in San Francisco.)

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83 Neither Yahoo! Groups, Google Groups, nor Facebook allow users to search for groups based on location. Meetup allows for searches based on proximity to a target zip code. As of May 4, 2012, the number of Meetup groups located within 50 miles of San Francisco was 2,911. Meetup groups write their own descriptions and choose their own category tags, so it is difficult to determine how many Meetup groups in the Bay Area are actually used to connect neighbors and support neighborhoods. A search for groups using the word “neighborhoods” on May 5, 2012, resulted in 49 groups, though only 26 were reported to actually employ in-person meetups.
This means that the average interviewee in this study may be engaging in or aware of more CMC methods than a typical American. However, if this is indeed the case, it seems reasonable to assume that the Bay Area residents are an early-adopting population for technologies that will eventually become widespread throughout the U.S.: so again, while the results of this study are not intended to be generalizable to all residents of the U.S., they may be generalizable to similar types of people in other urban and suburban environments around the country, either now or in the near future.
# Table A-2: Interviewee Characteristics

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All (24 interviewees)</th>
<th>Acton Community (5)</th>
<th>Brittany Meadows (4)</th>
<th>Mission Parents (8*)</th>
<th>Piedmont Ave (7)</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Average length of residency</strong></td>
<td>8.5 years</td>
<td>6.6 years</td>
<td>16.1 years</td>
<td>6.6 years</td>
<td>7.3 years</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Gender</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Male</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Female</td>
<td>18</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Age</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>30-39</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>40-49</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>50-59</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>60-69</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>70-79</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Marital status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Married or living with a partner</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Separated</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Never married</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Children under 18 living at home?</strong></td>
<td>13</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Homeowner?</strong></td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>4</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Education</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Some college</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bachelor’s degree</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Advanced degree</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Race and ethnicity</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>White</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian / Pacific Islander</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Asian / Pacific Islander and White</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Something else</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Decline to state</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Employment status</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Employed</td>
<td>19</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Retired</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Student</td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Homemaker</td>
<td>2</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>1</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Experience with online community?</strong></td>
<td>6</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>1</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Note that one interviewee from the Mission Parents list did not complete the demographic survey and therefore some tallies in this portion of the table do not sum to eight.*
In the process of looking for cases to focus on for this study I came across a large number of neighborhood websites. I was surprised at how many I found, especially since I didn’t use any methodical search methods. Table B-1 (tables at end of appendix) reprises the neighborhood website typology presented in Section 3. Table B-2 presents a list of all the suggestions for groups, sites, and computer-mediated communication (CMC) tools I received during my initial round of inquiries. Table B-3 presents a list of all the additional groups, sites, and CMC tools I discovered after beginning participant interviews.
B.2 WHO STARTS PLACE-BASED VIRTUAL GROUPS?

The following is a list of the types of formal institutions with which I found place-based virtual groups associated:

- Neighborhood associations
- Homeowner associations
- “Friends of” parks groups
- Elementary schools
- Sports clubs
- Local governments
- Neighborhood watch
- Recreation centers
- Merchants associations
- Anonymous support groups
- Small businesses

It is interesting to note I did not find any groups that were created by institutions explicitly interested in community development or community organizing, such as community-based organizations. It is also interesting to note that many of the groups I encountered were started through the initiative of one or more individuals rather than at the behest of an institution. The many parenting, safety, and neighborhood groups were started by motivated individuals with no formal organizational associations. This finding, which lends credence to arguments that grassroots organizing of groups has become easier and more common (Shirky 2008) is interesting and deserves further investigation.

B.3 WHAT INTERESTS BRING PEOPLE TOGETHER?

The following is a list of interests with which I found place-based virtual groups associated:

- Neighborhoods
- Parenting
- Dogs
- Safety/Crime
- Local news
- Gardens
- Parks
- Local government
- Sports
• Local restaurants
• Local businesses
• Art

I also feel confident that there exist neighborhood networks that are associated with faith-based groups and youth groups.\textsuperscript{84}
## Table B-1: Neighborhood Website Typology

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Type of Site, Tool, or Platform</th>
<th>Description</th>
<th>Examples</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>place-blogs and blogazines</td>
<td>blogs and online magazines that solely or primarily contain content about a single locality</td>
<td>Neighborhoodr, Burrito Justice</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>hyperlocal news sites</td>
<td>news websites (often commercial) that contain news about a single locality</td>
<td>Patch, Mission Loc@l</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>community directories</td>
<td>listings of local businesses, services, and events</td>
<td>Blacksburg Electronic Village</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>share / barter sites</td>
<td>facilitate local sharing of resources or exchange of goods and services</td>
<td>Neighborgoods, Snap Goods</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>place-based wikis</td>
<td>collaboratively created repositories of local information</td>
<td>localwiki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>placed-based information aggregators</td>
<td>aggregate feeds of local information and statistics (e.g., crime incidents, 311 reports, real estate listings, business recommendations)</td>
<td>Everyblock</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>discussion lists and static notice boards</td>
<td>email discussion lists and corresponding websites that allow postings by members; all content can be seen by all members, content typically cannot be seen by non-members, and content is not categorized by topic</td>
<td>Google Groups, Yahoo! Groups, Front Porch Forum</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>forums / message boards</td>
<td>websites that facilitate threaded conversations among members; content is organized by topic or category; all content can be seen by all members and content typically cannot be seen by non-members</td>
<td>e-Democracy</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>groups within general-interest social network sites</td>
<td>pages that have a local focus but are hosted by a general-interest social network site; may include message boards, forums, photo galleries, or other tools; content may be private, semi-private, or public</td>
<td>Facebook, Tribe, Meetup</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic social networks on social network hosting platforms</td>
<td>private specialized social networks for use by neighbors, hosted by a company that provides a generic social network site platform; designs vary but most provide member profiles, discussion forums, and a handful of other typical social network site amenities; content cannot be seen by non-members</td>
<td>Ning, Big Tent</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic social network sites</td>
<td>social network sites designed specifically to connect neighbors and neighborhoods; each site hosts civic social networks for neighborhoods; designs vary but most provide member profiles, discussion forums, and a handful of other typical social network site amenities; content cannot be seen by non-members, and most content is private so that you only see content related to your neighborhood</td>
<td>i-Neighbors, Nextdoor, eNeighbors</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>civic discussion platforms</td>
<td>websites set up by governments or companies in order to facilitate semi-structured discussions and solicit feedback about local civic issues</td>
<td>MindMixer, Neighborland, Common Place</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>(other civic-focused CMC tools and websites)</td>
<td>other tools and websites that were designed specifically to connect neighbors and/or support neighborhoods; may be web-based or mobile phone application-based</td>
<td>rBlock, Blockboard, Hey Neighbor, Jabberwocky</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>
### Table B-2: Initial Suggestions for Groups, Sites, Organizations, and CMC Tools to Investigate

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Name of Group, Site, or Organization</th>
<th>Type of Tool, Site, or Platform</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Blockboard</td>
<td>mobile phone application</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>rBlock</td>
<td>application to connect neighbors and local businesses</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Tribe neighborhood groups</td>
<td>groups within general interest social network site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Meetup</td>
<td>groups within general interest social network site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>RaisingThem</td>
<td>Ning social network site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Craigslist</td>
<td>notice board (classifieds)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Yelp</td>
<td>local recommendations</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Snapgoods</td>
<td>share / barter site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Moveon.org</td>
<td>community organizing site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Obama campaign</td>
<td>community organizing site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bay Area Community Exchange</td>
<td>share / barter site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Taskrabbit</td>
<td>share / barter site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Davis Wiki</td>
<td>place-based wiki</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ning</td>
<td>social network hosting platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Big Tent</td>
<td>social network hosting platform</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Patch</td>
<td>hyperlocal news site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Bernalwood</td>
<td>place-blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Everyblock</td>
<td>information aggregator</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Burrito Justice</td>
<td>place-blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mission Loc@l</td>
<td>hyperlocal news site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Oakland Local</td>
<td>hyperlocal news site</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Laughing Squid</td>
<td>place-blog</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sacred Wheel Cheese Shop</td>
<td>Facebook Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Mariposa Gluten-free Bakery</td>
<td>Facebook Page</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Crowdcentric's Social Media Week</td>
<td>social media organization</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local Labs</td>
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<td>Big Tent social network site</td>
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<td>Vulcan Facebook Group</td>
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<td>Berkeley Parent Network Golden Gate Moms Group</td>
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<td>Burlingame Preschool parents groups Burning Man's Regional Network</td>
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<td>South Park neighborhood in San Francisco Washington D.C.</td>
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<td>Unnamed neighborhood in Winters Yolo County co-ops</td>
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<tr>
<td>Davis Community Cooperative Network Old East Davis Neighborhood Association</td>
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Table B-3: Additional Suggestions for Groups, Sites, Organizations, and CMC Tools to Investigate

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<tr>
<th>Name of Group, Site, or Organization</th>
<th>Type of Tool, Site, or Platform</th>
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<tr>
<td>1900 Eddy Street in San Francisco</td>
<td>email list</td>
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<tr>
<td>21st and Bryant Neighborhood Association in San Francisco</td>
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<td>24th and Bartlett Neighborhood Association in San Francisco</td>
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<td>Baha Noe Babes in San Francisco</td>
<td>email list</td>
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<td>Dolores United in San Francisco</td>
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<td>Friends of Coronado Park in San Francisco</td>
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<td>Friends of Lafayette Park in San Francisco</td>
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<td>Friends of the Noe Valley Rec Center in San Francisco</td>
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<td>MindMixer</td>
<td>civic discussion platform</td>
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<td>Ravelry</td>
<td>groups within general-interest social network sites</td>
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<tr>
<td>Neighborgoods</td>
<td>share / barter site</td>
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<td>localwiki</td>
<td>place-based wiki</td>
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<tr>
<td>GroupMe</td>
<td>group text messaging</td>
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<td>Share Some Sugar</td>
<td>share / barter site</td>
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<td>Neighbourhoodr</td>
<td>place-blog</td>
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<td>Neighbortree</td>
<td>civic social network site</td>
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<td>HeyNeighbor</td>
<td>civic social network site</td>
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<td>Shareable</td>
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<td>WeLocally</td>
<td>company that supports hyperlocal services</td>
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<td>Neighborland</td>
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<td>Groupsite</td>
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<td>Outside.in</td>
<td>hyperlocal news site</td>
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<td>Grindr</td>
<td>geo-social networking application</td>
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