

Ethnographic Survey of a Massive Open Online Course (MOOC) Discussion Forum

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This is a micro ethnographic survey of a Massive Open Online Course, or so called MOOC. This micro ethnographic survey was based on the Coursera Scandinavian Film & Television Culture MOOC.

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Disclaimer. This micro-ethnography was produced as a 'cultural artifact' for an online course in Education and Digital Culture. The observations and opinions expressed are the sole responsibility of the ethnographer.

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The subjects for this micro ethnography who were online learners in the Scandinavian Film and Television Culture MOOC. A secondary objective of this presentation is to introduce Scandinavian Films and TV series to the viewer and to stimulate them to explore some of the films and TV series mentioned, or even future iterations of the Scandinavian Film and TV Culture MOOC.

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Here is the Research Question that was posed to guide this micro ethnography. Is there a correlation between MOOC learners' previous knowledge of the MOOC course content and their rankings as top discussion forum posters? For purposes of this survey, the term "poster" is used to refer to a MOOC Learner who *posts* a comment in the discussion forum.

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Ethical considerations were paramount for the ethnographer conducting this research. The ethnographer reviewed the MOOC terms of service and no explicit prohibitions were posted were found against conducting research given the "open" nature of this course to the general public. The

ethnographer was motivated to cause no harm neither to the organizers of the MOOC, nor to the participants.

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The MOOC had a built-in analytic algorithm whereby forum points were awarded based on the sum of the square root of all the votes received for each post. The time span of this micro ethnographic survey was limited to the first 2 1/2 weeks (that is, the mid-point) of 5 week course. The ethnographer participated as a learner within the MOOC to facilitate direct observation.

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Massive Open Online Courses are online courses with open enrollment that typically have thousands of active students. MOOCs are still a relatively new phenomenon. Coursera was launched as recently as 2012. A recent 2013 report published by the United Kingdom Government provides some background on the maturation of MOOC. The graph depicted here shows the emerging student patterns in Coursera style

MOOCs. MOOC learners are typically divided into categories of: observers, drop-ins, passive participants, and active participants.

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A common feature of MOOCs is that many provide discussion forums for learner interaction with each other. However, research indicates that 66% of MOOC learners never set foot in a discussion forum. Recognition systems are another feature of MOOCs. Recognition systems provide extrinsic rewards to MOOC learners such as 'reputation points' for timely, high-quality contributions to discussion forum. However, reputation systems have no significant impact on grades, retention or the learners' subjective sense of community.

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This table captures the primary data that was collected for analysis in this micro ethnography. The focus of data collection and analysis was the discussion forum reputations of the Top Forum Posters in the ScanFilmTV MOOC. At the mid-point of the course, there was an apparent threshold of the upper tier of Top TWELVE forum posters with a of 5 – 7 points algorithmically calculated based on the sum of the square root of all the votes received for each post. In the following slides, the ethnographer provides a brief snapshot analysis of each of the twelve top forum posters, highlighting their favorite Scandinavian film or TV series.

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POSTER NUMBER ONE exhibited an **EXPERT LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian films citing at least 6 films that he has watched. His comments exhibit substantive familiarity with Scandinavian cinema. He mentioned in his introduction video clip that he has a long-standing interest in Scandinavian cinema dating back to college when he first saw Theodor Carl Theodor Dreyer's classic silent film *Passion of Joan of Arc*. He indicated above that his favorite Scandinavian film is ***THE SEVENTH SEAL***.

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The Seventh Seal depicts a protagonist who seeks answers about life, death, and the existence of God as he plays chess against the Grim Reaper during the Black Plague.

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POSTER NUMBER TWO exhibited an **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian film citing **MY LIFE AS DOG** and **FANNY & ALEXANDER** as her favorite Scandinavian films. She draws extensively on her Swedish heritage and upbringing to explain deep background on Swedish culture when commenting in exchanges with our MOOC participants. Her comments were more 'cultural' than cinematic. She exhibited 'sociability' and high degree of self-disclosure'.

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MY LIFE AS A DOG is a Swedish film directed by Lasse Hallstrom. It tells the story of Ingemar, a young boy sent to live with relatives.

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BABETTE'S FEAST is the story of a French woman, Babette, who takes refuge with two elderly sisters in a small village on the remote western coast of Jutland in 19th-century Denmark. When Babette wins the lottery, she repays the sisters and the village with a scrumptious French dinner.

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POSTER NUMBER 3 exhibited **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian film listing over a dozen films that she has watched throughout her adult life. She indicated that she is an American of Swedish heritage and that is her reason for wanting to take this MOOC. She was very impressed by **FANNY AND ALEXANDER, THE EMIGRANTS** and **AS IT IS IN HEAVEN**. She expressed some strong opinions about Bergman's films and reputation. Her high forum ranking seemed to be more attributable to her 'sociability' factor than to her expertise level.

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Fanny and Alexander is a 1982 Swedish drama film written and directed by Ingmar Bergman. The plot focuses on two siblings and their large family in Uppsala, Sweden in the 1900s.

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Poster Number 4 seemed to be a 'NEWBIE' to Scandinavian film and did not exhibit previous knowledge. She did not respond to the discussion question naming her favorite Scandinavian film. Her high ranking as a top forum poster is attributable to the fact that she started a thread expressing sympathy to 'Danish' friends for the recent shooting spree in Copenhagen.

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POSTER NUMBER FIVE exhibited an **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian films citing at least 6 films that she has watched. In her introduction video clip she mentions that she Scandinavian film and TV "refreshing" and she expressed an interest in Danish TV series **BORGEN**. She admitted that she has not seen many Bergman's films, but she seemed familiar with Lars von Trier's work.

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BORGEN is a Danish one-hour political drama television series that tells the story of charismatic politician who unexpectedly becomes the first female Prime Minister of Denmark.

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POSTER NUMBER SIX exhibited **BASIC LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian films citing at least 6 films that he has watched. He watches *a lot* of Scandinavian TV (e.g. Borgen, The Killing, The Bridge). His favorite Scandinavian film is **SOMETHING MUST BREAK**.

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SOMETHING MUST BREAK, directed by Swedish Director Ester Martin Bergsmark, deals with the topic of belonging somewhere in between what is considered being male and what is considered being female.

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POSTER NUMBER SEVEN exhibited an **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian film, with a particular interest in the Dogme 95 movement and Lars von Trier films. He expressed an keen interest in the some works of von Trier's recent work and particularly the film **DOGVILLE**.

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DOGVILLE is a 2003 Danish drama film written and directed by Lars von Trier. It is a parable that uses an extremely minimal, stage-like set to tell the story of a woman hiding from mobsters who arrives in the small mountain town of Dogville, Colorado, and is provided refuge in return for physical labor.

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The center image depicts Danish Director Lars von Trier distributing 'The Vow of Chastity' leaflets in Paris (1995) announcing the 'Dogme 95' film movement. The goal of the Dogme 95 movement was to purify filmmaking by refusing expensive and spectacular special effects, post-production modifications and other technical gimmicks. The filmmakers concentrate on the story and the actors' performances. They believed this approach may better engage the audience, as they are not alienated or distracted by overproduction. To this end, Lars von Trier and Thomas Vinterberg produced ten rules to which any Dogme film must conform.

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POSTER NUMBER EIGHT exhibited **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL** of with some previous knowledge of Scandinavian film with an interest in *Dogme 95* films. He indicated that ***BREAKING THE WAVES*** was a particular recent favorite.

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BREAKING THE WAVES is a 1996 film directed by Lars von Trier. It is about an unusual young woman and of the love she has for her husband, who asks her to sleep with other men when he becomes immobilized from a work accident.

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POSTER NUMBER NINE exhibited **BASIC LEVEL** previous knowledge of Scandinavian films citing at least 6 films that she has watched and noting that she has been interested “for years.” She mentions ***BREAKING THE WAVES***, ***OPEN HEARTS*** and ***RECONSTRUCTION*** as three recent films that have impressed her recently.

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OPEN HEARTS is a 2002 Danish drama film directed by Susanne Bier using the minimalist filmmaking techniques of the *Dogme 95*. It is the story of two couples whose lives are traumatized by a tragic car accident and adultery.

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Poster Number Ten exhibited an **EXPERT LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian films citing a list of at least 12 films that he has watched. He mentions in his introduction video clip that he was impressed by Ingmar Bergman’s ***PERSONA***, ***WILD STRAWBERRIES*** and ***SILENT***.

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WILD STRAWBERRIES is a 1957 Swedish film written and directed by Ingmar Bergman about an old man recalling his past.

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POSTER NUMBER ELEVEN exhibited a **BASIC LEVEL** of knowledge of Scandinavian film, but also an **INTERMEDIATE LEVEL** of knowledge of Swedish TV. She likes the Swedish **SOLSIDAN** series. She indicated that she previously “never cared about Scandinavian film and decided to change that.” She indicated that she is aspiring film producer, so her knowledge of film is probably more extensive than indicated by her posts which are more **SOCIABLE** in nature. She indicated that the Norwegian drama film **HAWAII, OSLO** made a lasting impression on her.

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HAWAII, OSLO is a Norwegian drama film about Vidar, who works at a psychiatric hospital, and tries to keep himself awake as much as he can, because he has several times dreamt of horrible events that turned out to be true premonitions.

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POSTER NUMBER TWLEVE exhibited **BASIC LEVEL** of previous knowledge of Scandinavian film. He indicated that **THE PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC** is his favorite Scandinavian film. His top forum ranking is attributable to a thread that he started asking about the difference between terms: Scandinavian and Nordic.

This course was about Scandinavian Film and Television, which means that the focus is on the three Scandinavian countries: Denmark, Norway and Sweden. The Nordic countries are defined as the three Scandinavian countries and Finland and Iceland, sometimes also the Faroe Islands.

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THE PASSION OF JOAN OF ARC is a 1928 silent French film based on the trial of and execution of Joan of Arc. The film was directed by Swedish Director [Carl Theodor Dreyer](#) and starred [Renée Jeanne Falconetti](#) as Joan. It is widely regarded as a landmark of cinema, especially for its

production, Dreyer's direction and Falconetti's performance, which has been described as being among the finest in cinema history.

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There was, in fact, evidence of some significant correlation between forum reputations and previous course content knowledge.

The evidence suggested that the top forum posters in this ScanFilmTV MOOC were motivated to share their and interest and passion for cinema.

Top forum posters also exhibited 'sociability' towards peers and those with previous course content knowledge served as 'mentors' sharing knowledge and encouraging engagement within the MOOC.

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However, previous course content knowledge or 'expertise' was not the only factor for determining forum reputations of the top forum posters in the ScanFilmTV MOOC.

Sociability, defined as a positive and engaging attitude towards other participants in the online community of the MOOC was also observed.

In Sociability Case A, **TOP FORUM POSTER # 4** established a high forum reputation based upon expressing sympathy for the Danish people due to recent shooting tragedy.

In Sociability Case B: **TOP FORUM POSTER # 12** established a high forum reputation based upon clarification of the difference between terms 'Scandinavian' and 'Nordic'.

In either case, previous knowledge of specific cinematic course content was not a major factor in establishing their forum reputations, rather they posed questions or comments of generic interest to the MOOC community of learners.

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In Conclusion, MOOCs are still a relatively new phenomenon.

MOOCs are fertile ground for understanding digital learning and online community behaviors.

Discussion forum participation and use of recognition systems are particularly interesting areas for further research.

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Here is a list of references.

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Thank you for viewing this presentation. Please check out one of Scandinavian Films or TV series mentioned to expand your own appreciation of modern cinema.

Takk skal du Ha!