

U-Turn on the Bridge to Freedom: An Interaction Process Analysis of Task and Relational Messages in Totalistic Organization Exit Conversations on Online Discussion Boards

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Abstract—Totalistic organizations include organizations that operate by playing a prominent role in the life of its members through embedding values and practices. The Church of Scientology (CoS) is an example of a religious totalistic organization and has recently garnered attention because of the questionable treatment of members by those with authority, particularly when members try to leave the Church. The purpose of this study was to analyze exit communication and evaluate the task and relational messages discussed on online discussion boards for individuals with a previous or current connection to the totalistic CoS. Using organizational exit phases and interaction process analysis (IPA), researchers coded 30 boards consisting of 14,179 thought units from the Exscn.net website. Findings report that all stages of exit were present, and post-exit surfaced most often. Posts indicated more tasks than relational messages, where individuals mainly provided orientation/information. After a discussion of the study's contributions, limitations and directions for future research are explained.

Keywords—Bales' IPA, organizational exit, relational messages, scientology, task messages, totalistic organizations.

I. INTRODUCTION

ONLINE communities, like message boards, serve as neutral communicative places focusing on flexible participation of members, including lurking. These communities function in a similar way as research by Oldenburg discussing *third places* [1], [2]; however, online communities are not restricted by physicality, and maintain a virtual presence accessible regardless of geographical restrictions. Virtual third places provide a communal setting [3] for individuals to connect with others sharing the same interests [4]-[6], or to seek information from communities with a shared theme [7], [8]. An example of a virtual third place includes a message board discussing exiting and renouncing membership from a faith based totalistic organization.

Existing literature focusing on assimilation and organizational exit [9]-[11] primarily focuses on corporate environments where membership is connected to the value of pay [12]-[15]. Recognizing that membership in an organization is not always pay-based, Kramer [13], [16], extended the study of exit into volunteer organizations. Similarly, researchers

extended exit research into high reliability organizations (HROs) and faith-based communities, and argued that exit is "contextualized by organizational form" [17], [18]. Faith-based communities can serve as totalistic organizations and defined such as organizations whose practices, values, and relationships reach beyond the organization, and are instrumental in a member's life and identity [17].

Individuals belonging to a faith-based totalistic organization find that their primary ties are connected to the organization; therefore, the exit process of speaking with close ties may not be available as an individual would not want others to know he or she is considering leaving as "the stakes of leaving are, presumably, high" [17]. Individuals whom are considering exit may turn to online communities to solicit information or suggestions when making a decision. For example, an individual may seek information on how to leave the organization, what to do when they leave, should they leave, how to leave, etc. Information typically privy to close friends or family members during corporation exit [19], cannot be discussed with primary ties, due to the context of a totalistic organization.

This study adopts the notion that organizational exit is contextualized by the type of organization, and answers the call made by scholars to examine "member experiences as they are considering organizational exit" [18], and other faith-based totalistic organizations. Additionally, the current study answers a call proposed by a researcher for further exploration into New Religious Movements (NRMs), as most NRM scholarship focuses on the process of entering rather than leaving an NRM [20].

This study examines the communicative function of task and relational messages used in online discussion boards for individuals considering exiting a faith-based totalistic organization – the Church of Scientology (CoS). While the CoS is widely considered the most controversial NRM [21], [22], and colloquial debate concerns whether to define the organization as a cult or religious movement, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) does recognize the CoS as a faith organization in the United States. Further, several scholars recognize Scientology as a NRM due to practices, creed, and

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values of the organization [20], [23]-[26]. A researcher named Bromley has used the CoS as an exemplar in his typology of religions for the classification of 'prophetic, contractual religion,' [24], and another argued the practice of Scientology at home rather than attending a Scientology center, known as the Free-Zone movement, classifies Scientology as a religion even though individuals practice the teachings independently of the CoS [22].

II. LITERATURE

A. Organizational Exit

Organizational exit is the end stage of Jablin's phasic mode of assimilation [9]-[11]. Although a complete review of Jablin's phasic model of assimilation is outside the scope of the current study, existing assimilation research has primarily focused on role entry and the beginning stages of Jablin's model [27]. Even though exit is understudied [13], [16], the existing literature examining organizational exit has used pay-based employment as the requirement for membership [13] with few exceptions, furthering the need to understand exit from non-pay-based memberships.

Jablin viewed exit as representing finality to an individual's membership in an organization [11]. Exit can be voluntary, where an individual prompts separation from the organization [28], [13], [29], or involuntary, where the organization prompts the separation [30], [31]. Jablin [11] argued the exit phase is the transitional period where individuals move from membership to non-membership. This phase is comprised of three stages – preannouncement, announcement, and post-exit sense making.

During the preannouncement stage, the individual is engaged in the decision-making phase of the exit process. An individual's motivation for leaving determines whether he or she is open or secretive about the process with the organization [19]. During preannouncement, an individual gathers information and seeks advice from close friends and family members. The announcement stage represents an individual's progression towards exit as the individual's decision to leave is communicated publicly to the organization. Once the individual leaves, the remaining members of the organization and the individual engage in sense making of the individual's exit.

Primarily, organizational exit research focuses on the reasons for exit [27], rather than the process of exiting, as pay-based organizational research is concerned with why employees are leaving [15], [32]. Research has exhibited that exit is dependent upon the organization's context [33], [18], and has recognized individuals leave non-pay-based organizations. Recently, research has begun to examine the process of leaving value-based organizations such as volunteer organizations [13], [16], or religious organizations [17], [18]. For example, a community choir was examined, and the researcher found that volunteer exit differs from corporate exit as exiting does not necessarily mean a final end as members maintain a fluid membership where they can join and leave several times [13]. The fluidity in membership enabled an individual to leave and return, promise to return and never show again, or stop attending events. This study reflects a different approach to exit than

previously understood.

Concerning religious exit, scholars have explored exit both as involuntary, such as excommunication [34], [35], and voluntary. For example, a research examined post-exit narratives of individuals whom exited Christianity voluntarily and found individuals referenced their time in the religion to determine identity post-exit [36]. In exploring post-exit narratives of ex-Muslims, Cottee discovered individuals moved through the exit process alone, maintaining doubt until announcement [37]. Upon announcement, the individuals were determined to be apostates, and members remaining in the religion severed all connection with an individual.

In one scholar's examination of post-exit narratives from ex-Church of Latter-day Saints (LDS) members, exit from a faith-based totalistic organization reflected individuals as remaining silent during the exit decision [17]. Ex-members placed doubt and exit burden onto themselves as not to alert others due to intertwined relationships within the organization. In these post-exit narratives, the leaving process varied in length of time, with the longest exit process taking 20 years [18].

While most NRM research concerns joining [20], [38], scholars have noted exit from NRMs is voluntary [39]-[41], and argued individuals maintain personal agency throughout membership, and enact upon that agency when deciding to leave. Though exit studies regarding the CoS are limited, Rubin's research examined post-exit narratives of CoS members, and found that individuals maintain certain values, for example structure, of the organization years after exiting [38]. Other results reflect similarities to Hinderaker's studies with ex-LDS members [17], [18], where members remained silent concerning any doubts due to intertwined relationships in the CoS, or exiting processes lasting up to 20 years.

Although these studies focus on different religions and totalistic organizations, leaving an organization is explored from ex-members of the organization through post-exit narratives. Examining the communication processes during voluntary exit from a totalistic organization may provide a more nuanced understanding of the exit process.

B. Totalistic Organizations

Totalistic organizations are organizations where "the values, practices, rituals, and relationships associated with membership not only extend into the member's everyday life, but play a primary role" [17]. Rather than an individual entering into an organization and bringing separate values with him or her, totalistic organizations' values permeate the member and bleed into all areas of membership. Totalistic organizations require members to pledge loyalty to the organization, and members form their identities through the organization [17]. For example, a member of a religious totalistic organization would accept the core beliefs and values of the religion. This internalization of core elements would then shape the individual's thoughts and subsequent worldview [42]. Totalistic organizations differ from totalist groups in that these groups, while having charismatic leaders or absolutist beliefs, are often based on a forthcoming apocalyptic event [43].

Two scholars identified totalistic organizations as being both

pay-based and value-based [17], [18]. In terms of pay-based totalistic organizations, one study identified police and fire departments as totalistic because members are tightly coupled to each other and the organization [17]. Specifically, members are willing to accept the risk of personal danger because of the mission and values of the organization. For value-based faith organizations, two researchers argued that the LDS was totalistic because membership required absolute belief and adherence [18]. The faith values and practices of members in the LDS are foundational to the member's way of life, and members view the world through that lens of faith.

In totalistic organizations, a member's primary ties – family and friendships – are within the organization. The rituals and ceremonies completed for membership, for example confirmation ceremonies or sworn oaths, bind the member to the organization. When deciding to exit a totalistic organization, the member risks rejection from their support system, their family and friends.

C. Scientology as Totalistic

Scientology was founded in 1954 [23], [25], following an individual who, while practicing the teachings of L. Ron Hubbard's *Dianetics*, reported viewing a past life [44]. Officially and legally, the CoS moved from science to religion in the 1990s [23], [22], [26], when the U.S. recognized the CoS as a religious organization. Although debate exists in the media regarding the CoS as a cult or religion, Lewis argued academia is disqualified from "making any kind of judgment call regarding the religious status of the Church of Scientology that would be acceptable to the rest of society" [22]. Other scholars have argued that the CoS was always a religion, even prior to IRS classification [24]-[26].

At the core of Scientology is the belief that man is good and the goal of man is to know the finite universe [45]. Human beings are pure spirits, or *thetans*, who are trapped in matter, energy, space, and time (MEST) [20]. For a Scientologist to become an *operating thetan* (OT), or a spirit who is able to leave their body and perform specific actions that do not require the physical body, the Scientologist must become *clear*. Clear refers to an individual being free of *engrams*, or traumatic memories. An individual can apply the technique of auditing to remove engrams [44], and statistics of the individual's process are then sent to the CoS each week.

In addition to auditing, Scientology stresses loyalty to a specific set of beliefs using *100 percent standard tech*, or religious technology [46]. The member must study tech through training and courses that advance the individual in a hierarchical manner to enlightenment, *the bridge of freedom* [25]. Sunby, as cited in Rubin, argued that core members in the CoS are either clear, OT, have started the Bridge, or have experienced a large amount of the CoS' teachings [38].

The CoS' values extend into the lives of its members [21], a characteristic of totalistic organizations. The CoS teaches members to put the CoS needs before others, and encourages the teachings be applied to all areas of a member's life. For example, there is tech available for marriage troubles, finances, communication practices, etc. Scientologists engage in faith

practices that are institutionalized and highly structured, for example, *the bridge*. The top-down organizational hierarchy in the CoS extends into the organizational practices of its members – practices that remain after exit [38]. Practicing Scientologists who are private (signing a contract to join as staff) pledge their lives to advancing Scientology in return for reduced pricing of tech or free auditing procedures. Other private Scientologists desiring to make a deeper commitment to the CoS may elect to sign a billion-year contract and join the *Sea-Organization* (Sea-Org). The Sea-Org is set up in a para militaristic fashion where individuals experience communal living and work long hours; the CoS refers to the Sea-Org for "individuals who have dedicated their lives to the volunteer service of their religion," and for the "singularly most dedicated" of Scientologists [47].

Regardless if a member practices privately or publicly (not working in the organization), leaving the CoS is a difficult decision as the more closed a NRM is, the harder it is to leave [34], [48]. For an individual to leave Scientology, they risk being labeled a *suppressive person* (SP). Members are instructed to disconnect from any SPs or risk being labeled one as well. Lewis equates being labeled an SP to an "amplified version of Amish shunning" [51]. Should an individual be determined to be an SP, the individual loses a majority, or all primary ties with CoS members, and is unable to return to the CoS in the future. Should a member decide to leave and is not labeled an SP, they are determined to be a *potential trouble source* (PTS), one-step below a SP. When a member decides to exit the faith, the member leaves behind access to tech, services, relationships, and risks total disconnect from primary ties, including family members who may remain.

D. Online Communities

Online communities, like discussion boards, are virtual third places. One scholar conceptualized third places as the space between work and home, where individuals converge and engage in conversation [1], [2]. This scholar viewed third places as having a sense of charm because they were flexible – individuals could come and go as they please. Online communities function in a similar manner, only void of the physical restrictions of a coffee shop or bookstore. Regardless of time or space, individuals can enter and leave online communities and converse with other individuals in the community [8].

Online communities converge around a shared interest or theme [4]-[6]. The shared interest of members, for example, exiting the CoS, form the conversational foundation for building camaraderie among members of the community. The shared interest often generates idiomatic language [49], and inside jokes, and reflect membership in the community. Further, Walther argued that online users are able to translate nonverbal communication into online communities via online paralinguistic use of text and emoticons [50], [51]. These elements are key in building swift trust within a community [52], [53].

In a review of the literature, McEwan noted that discussion board online communities require an individual to be active and seek out the community online [8]. Individuals are motivated to

receive and give information on a common subject that the individual may not have access to in his or her own network. Finding a community to exchange information with will prompt an individual to return to the community [54], and look to the information being shared as credible, similar to information shared from an interpersonal source in an offline setting [7].

Individuals seek communities online that provide a virtual third space for them to engage in conversation around a shared topic. When considering leaving a faith-based totalistic organization, like the CoS, individuals are unable to converse with primary ties as a member's relationships are within the totalistic organization. Therefore, individuals may seek out online communities during the pre-announcement stage to seek advice, exchange stories, or converse with others whom are in or have faced a similar situation. Likewise, individuals may use online communities to communicate a post-exit narrative. Consequently, the following research question is offered:

- RQ₁: What stages of exit are represented in online discussion boards with the shared interest of leaving the CoS?

E. Task and Relational Messages

Messages are the foundation of group communication and group interaction. Schweiger and Sandberg argued that when individuals are facing complicated problems such as determining to exit a totalistic organization, groups are better suited to discuss and make decisions. At the foundation of the group's communicative processes and effectiveness are task and relational messages [55]. Task messages are comprised of information sharing, questions, suggestions, and opinion statements that concern the task the group is faced with; messages that drive the activity of the group [56]. Relational messages are more concerned with the social fabric of the group [57] and are important for group relations and task completion.

Bales' IPA [58], [59] is a "discursive approach that seeks to understand how multiparty communication occurs" [60], and can be applied to examine task, and positive and negative relational communication in groups. Researchers have applied IPA to a variety of group interaction, both face-to-face [61], [55], and computer-mediated groups [62]-[65]. Lin and Peña argued that IPA's applicability to both online and offline groups represents its influential approach to communication research [56].

In the context of computer-mediated communication (CMC), IPA has been applied to recreational [65], instrumental [64], [66], and support [62], [63], group interactions. Lin and Peña observed that while the frequency of task messages in CMC groups is higher than relational messages across the literature, the group provides the context for the type and pattern of messages [56]. For example, in Peña and Hancock's examination of video game groups, members used more relational messages than task, reflecting a relational component to the group [65]. In Guo and Goh's study examining a support group for individuals with HIV/AIDS, the authors found that task messages outweighed relational messages in the beginning of the support group [63]. However, as the support group grew in numbers, the focus of the group represented more relational

messages as individuals were using the group differently.

Lin and Peña's observation, though applied across contexts, is particularly salient for discussion board research incorporating IPA, and examining task and relational messages [56]. In Beck et al.'s study exploring task and relational messages used in online depression support groups, the authors found the overall ratio of task to relational messages was nearly two-to-one [62]. Beck et al. argued this finding reflected individuals going online for support were seeking information more so than seeking socio-emotional communication [62].

Task oriented messages serve to provide information and coordinate information [58], [59]. As individuals considering exit from a totalistic organization are unable to seek out information from primary ties, individuals may seek information from online community discussion boards. In doing so, task-oriented communication may represent a larger frequency of messages than relational messages. Further, because the context of the group determines the type of messages shared, the type of messages may differ according to the stage of Jablin's organizational exit model the individual is experiencing [11]. Therefore, the following hypothesis and research question are presented:

- H: There will be more task messages than relational messages used in discussion boards focusing on exiting a totalistic organization.
- RQ₂: Do the types of task or relational messages differ per exit stage?

III. METHOD

This study used a mixed method approach to examine the task and relational messages used in online discussion boards for individuals considering exiting, and who have exited a totalistic organization. The website *-Exscn.net* was selected for analysis as it is one of the more popular websites for information concerning Scientology, and hosts one of the most popular forums for former members of the organization. In particular, this website was chosen as it specifically maintains a discussion board devoted to current members considering leaving the organization.

Discussion board topics and posts are created by individuals who have registered through the website; registered individuals must create a username, password, and provide an email address. Registration is free, and once members are registered; they can participate in a variety of threads occurring in the discussion boards. Individuals who are not registered, known as lurkers, can access the material and read conversations, but are unable to participate until they are registered.

The initial population included 318 message board posts with 12,531 total replies. Systematic sampling, which selects every *n*th unit [67], was used to select 10% of boards in the discussion thread. Following DiTunnariello and Farrell's methodology [68], every 10th message board was selected from the discussion thread, *Leaving Scientology*. This thread is promoted as a place for users to post if they are "thinking of leaving or have already left" [69]. Only message boards including three or more individuals were included in the data as three members are required for group communication [70]. This provided a sample

of 30 message boards with 1,329 total replies ($M = 44.3$ replies per board). Message board threads spanned from 1 week to 1.5 years in duration.

A. Coding

The researchers unitized each discussion board into thought units [71]. Thought units are complete thoughts that can exist on their own [72]. In this study, thought units followed the methodology of Beck et al., and were defined as short verb phrases [62]. To test for intercoder reliability in regard to unitization, the researchers unitized 10% of the sample, or three discussion boards. First, reliability was calculated using Guetzkow's U , which was satisfactory between the two researchers ($U = .032$). Because Guetzkow's U does not identify which units are not the same during unitization [73], the researchers conducted a second unitizing test following Beck et al.'s [62] calculation of: $2M/(N_1 + N_2)$. Here, M equaled the total number of units coded the same by the researchers, and N equaled the total number of units for each researcher. High reliability was achieved at .979, and the researchers discussed varying units until consensus was reached. The researchers coded 30 boards, producing a total of 14,179 thought units ($M = 472.6$ thought units per board). Copied material provided in message board threads was eliminated prior to coding.

B. IPA

Bales' IPA is used to examine surface-level behavior in group interaction [58]. IPA identifies the different types of group member behavior by categorizing messages as either task or socioemotional with 12 codes. Task codes are identified as either asking or giving information, suggestions, and opinions (e.g., *gives information*: I found this board when I was considering the sea org [Discussion Board #8]). Socioemotional codes examine the influence of messages on the make-up of the group. These codes are determined by valence and include agreement/disagreement, shows/diminishes solidarity, shows/releases tension (e.g. *shows solidarity/seems friendly*: What a marvellous [sic] post, Petey [Discussion Board #6]). Table I provides an example of the breakdown of IPA codes.

The researchers developed a codebook based on past literature and coding discussion boards not included in the sample. The researchers coded that 10% of the sample achieved reliability (Cohen's $K = .83$), and each researcher coded half of the sample separately, checking for drift at the end of the coding process (Cohen's $K = .89$). Differences were discussed after each reliability check until consensus was reached.

C. Organizational Exit

Discussion boards were coded for each stage of Jablin's phasic model [11], of exit by the original post of the discussion thread, as the original post provided the context of the group discussion. Boards were determined to be in the pre-announcement phase if the original poster expressed desire to leave but was still involved in the CoS. Announcement boards were coded if the original poster announced he or she had made the decision to leave the CoS, and was telling members of the community about his or her decision. Boards were determined to be in the post-exit phase if the original poster shared their

exit story, reflected on their time in Scientology, or expressed he or she had been out of the Church for a certain length of time.

TABLE I
 IPA CODES

Social Emotional* area:	1) <i>Shows solidarity/seems friendly</i> : Acts that show positive feelings toward another person in the group
Position reactions	2) <i>Shows tension release/dramatizes</i> : Any act that reduces or reconciles the anxiety a person or group may be experiencing
	3) <i>Agrees</i> : Any act that shows active or passive acceptance of what another person has said
Task area: Attempted answers	4) <i>Gives suggestions</i> : Any act that offers direction/action for how to engage the task
	5) <i>Gives opinions</i> : Any act that advances a belief or value that is relevant to the task
Task area: Questions:	6) <i>Gives orientation/information</i> : Any act that reports factual observations, experiences, or clarifies information
	7) <i>Asks for orientation/information</i> : Any act that requests factual observations, experiences, or clarification
	8) <i>Asks for opinions</i> : Any act that requires a belief or value that is relevant to the task
	9) <i>Asks for suggestions</i> : Any act that requests direction/action for how to engage the task
Social Emotional* area: Negative reactions	10) <i>Disagrees</i> : Any act that shows rejection of what another person has said or withholds help
	11) <i>Shows tension</i> : Any act that indicates that a person is experiencing anxiety
	12) <i>Shows antagonism/seems unfriendly</i> : Any act that shows negative feelings toward another person, group or deflates another's status

Note. *Relational

IV. RESULTS

The hypothesis explored the overall distribution of task and relational messages used in the dataset. The hypothesis was supported. Chi-square analysis ($\chi^2(1) N = 14,179 = 1467.15, p < .001$) indicated over 66% of all messages used in the discussion threads were task messages ($n = 9,370$) as compared to relational messages ($n = 4,809$). This suggests that the ratio of task to relational messages represents an almost two-to-one ratio. Frequency counts for Bales' [58] IPA codes in the data (see Table II) indicated *gives orientation/information* were the most common messages used in online discussion boards regarding exit from a totalistic organization.

RQ_1 examined what stages of exit are represented in discussion boards for members and ex-members of a totalistic organization. The data revealed that discussion boards are used for each stage of the exit process, although the sample suggests a higher frequency of posts created during the post-exit stage ($n = 19$) when compared to the pre-announcement stage ($n = 9$) and announcement stage ($n = 2$). Frequencies and percentages are represented in Table III.

RQ_2 examined the distribution of task and relational messages in each stage of exit. The data revealed in each specific stage of the exit process an almost two-to-one ratio in task to relational messages. Chi-square analysis for pre-announcement ($\chi^2(1) N = 6,585 = 858.03, p < .001$) indicated that over 68% of messages were task messages ($n = 4,481$) as compared to relational messages ($n = 2,104$). Chi-square analysis for announcement ($\chi^2(1) N = 1,110 = 106.61, p < .001$) indicated that over 65% of messages were task messages ($n = 727$) as compared to relational messages ($n = 383$). Chi-

square analysis for post-exit ($\chi^2(1) N = 6,484 = 522.15, p < .001$) indicated over 64% of messages were task messages ($n = 4,162$) as compared to relational messages ($n = 2,322$). In the current study, *gives orientation/information* was reported the most in all three exit stages (pre-announcement: $n = 2,416$; announcement: $n = 531$; and post-exit: $n = 3,026$). These findings reveal that IPA code frequencies were distributed differently across each exit stage; however, the top type of message was the same task message for all three exit stages. Frequencies of IPA messages used in each stage are represented in Table III.

TABLE II
OVERALL IPA FREQUENCY DISTRIBUTION

IPA Code	Frequency	Percent
1) Shows solidarity/seems friendly	1,149	8.1
2) Shows tension release/dramatizes	1,301	9.2
3) Agrees	453	3.2
4) Gives suggestions	1,116	7.9
5) Gives opinions	1,715	12.1
6) Gives orientation/information	5,973	42.1
7) Asks for orientation/information	489	3.4
8) Asks for opinions	62	.4
9) Asks for suggestions	15	.1
10) Disagrees	163	1.1
11) Shows tension	849	6.0
12) Shows antagonism/seems unfriendly	894	6.3
Thought Units	14,179	100

Note. Highlighted = task categories; remainder = relational categories

TABLE III
IPA CODE DISTRIBUTE PER EXIT STAGE

Exit Stages	Preannouncement	Announcement	Post-Exit	Thought Units
IPA Code				
1) Shows solidarity/seems friendly	609	74	466	1,149
2) Shows tension release/dramatizes	598	125	578	1,301
3) Agrees	184	34	235	453
4) Gives suggestions	840	101	175	1,116
5) Gives opinions	987	49	679	1,715
6) Gives orientation/information	2,416	531	3,026	5,973
7) Asks for orientation/information	212	40	237	489
8) Asks for opinions	17	5	40	62
9) Asks for suggestions	9	1	5	15
10) Disagrees	77	7	79	163
11) Shows tension	373	80	396	849
12) Shows antagonism/dseems unfriendly	263	63	568	894
Thought Units	6,585	1,110	6,484	14,179
Percent of Thought Units	46.5	7.8	45.7	100
Frequency of Message Boards	9	2	19	30
Percent of Message Boards	30%	6.6%	64%	100

Note. Highlighted = task categories; remainder = relational categories

V. DISCUSSION

The results of this study add to academia's current conversation on organizational exit. Specifically, the

contributions of this study focus on faith-based totalistic organization, the CoS. After coding for Jablin's stages of organizational exit [9]-[11], and utilizing Bales' IPA [58], the findings contribute to NRM research by making the following three contributions: findings (1) add to the current state of online communities used by current and former members of CoS, (2) investigate how members of CoS may provide information rather than asking for help because of CoS' system of beliefs and (3) explore how members of CoS provide information for the purpose of purging negative occurrences experienced prior to organizational exit.

First, the results of this study support the current academic conversation surrounding online communities. For example, one scholar argues that online communicative spaces act as virtual third places providing forums for discussion [3]. Additional scholars conclude that these virtual spaces allow individuals to communicate with others interested in similar topics [4]-[6]. Results indicate that members of Exscn.net share similar experiences and interests through their discussions of leaving CoS, or thinking about leaving CoS. These conversations varied, supporting findings indicating a mix of individuals falling within the different stages. Although experiences varied through the three different exit stages, numerous comments were posted by many of the same individuals. This observation is supported by literature stating that about 9% of members of an online community post messages; therefore, 90% are deemed lurkers because they have access to posted information, but do not contribute [74].

The lack of contributions from a variety of visitors to the website may be an indication of the cost of being part of a totalistic organization. When it takes a large span of time for individuals to leave totalistic organizations, a conversational space would represent individuals at different stages of exit. Additionally, posters in several pre-announcement boards communicated concern about the CoS finding out they were considering leaving. One researcher explained how stakes are high in a totalistic organization because the organization is intertwined with every aspect of a members' life [17]. These posts conveying concern reflected the high stakes of leaving the organization. In the case of members of CoS, leaving the Church would include the high stakes of completely disconnecting from friends and family who remain in CoS.

The second contribution made by the findings of this study make sense of the CoS' potential role in why members of CoS may provide information rather than asking for help. According to the results, it appears individuals in all stages of exit mostly gave orientation/information (pre-announcement: $n = 2,416$; announcement: $n = 531$; and post-exit: $n = 3,026$), and instances asking for suggestions were very minimal (pre-announcement: $n = 9$; announcement: $n = 1$; post-exit: $n = 5$). The largest group that gave orientation/information included individuals within the post-exit stage of organizational exit. A reason for these findings may be at the heart of CoS' system of beliefs and regulations. Church operations frown upon the consumption of any media information speaking critically or poorly against CoS. Due to this reasoning, there may be fewer individuals in the pre-announcement stage represented on the Exscn.net

discussion board. Further, individuals in the post-exit stage may be identified as a SP or PTS by the CoS due to leaving. For these individuals, stakes are no longer high as they have exited the organization. Having gone through the process, these individuals may be more apt to provide information to those considering leaving as individuals in the post-exit stage previously experienced the situation members considering exit are currently experiencing.

The third contribution made by the current study helps to understand why individuals personally provide information. The study reported that more messages were created during the post-exit stage compared to the pre-announcement and announcement stages. This finding provides support for why individuals reported more task messages than relational messages. If an individual has already exited the organization, they would be using the website to either report their story, or provide and share information about the CoS that would be important for current followers as they make their decision to leave the organization.

When having exited a totalistic organization, the process of providing information seemed almost cathartic for individuals posting their stories. By posting their stories, individuals were either purging their minds of their previous suppression and mistreatment, or finding solace in the fact that they were not alone as others in the stages of post-exit also discussed their exit stories. The contributions of the members of the website seemed to mirror an informational discussion of what had occurred with other members offering agreement and praise, but mainly, offering their own personal accounts. Because of the flow of the discussion, by a majority of individuals already having left CoS, individuals mainly focused sharing their stories, and providing helpful pieces of information, rather than asking for suggestions about how to tackle an exit issue.

The results of this study helped provide the perspectives of individuals posting on Exscn.net. It would seem that individuals posted more task rather than relational messages, possibly because most of the individuals were in the post-exit stage, and used the message board to inform others of what occurred. The fear instilled by the CoS to its members regarding negative media representation could explain why individuals entering pre-announcement and announcement phases of exit are fewer than those in post-exit.

VI. LIMITATIONS AND DIRECTIONS FOR FUTURE RESEARCH

Although the current study analyzed one of the most popular Scientology message boards, and uncovered new and useful information, this study is not without limitations. The first limitation reported is that this study only analyzed information from one website. Methodological procedures did code a great deal of information (14,179 thought units); however, future research may want to replicate this study analyzing another Scientology website. One topic of interest would be coding exit phase material and utilizing Bales IPA on specific groups of CoS members. For example, the website Ex-Scientology Kids specifically discusses leaving the Church after having been raised in CoS [75].

Secondly, when coding material, emoticons were uncovered

in the commenting process. Unfortunately, the coding of emoticons was not related to the research questions or hypothesis posed in this study. Future research should specifically focus on the contribution emoticons make to task or relational messages. Because emoticons carry meaning through their emotions in their very definition, it would be helpful to know if patterns exist in the use of emoticons.

Last, this study specifically sought to focus on actual posts and written records of CoS members. However, the coding process could not account for the role of lurkers. Some research has explored how lurkers “join” online communities for similar reasons as actual posters [76]. Because of CoS’ feelings against media criticizing the Church, it can be assumed that lurkers would most likely be in the pre-announcement phase. Some individuals in the post-exit phase recounted their path to exit and reported reading the Exscn.net website to search for CoS exit information when deciding to leave the Church, but did not post at that time for fear official members would uncover who they were and their intentions to leave. Lurkers could very well alter results because there is no written record that they visited the website.

VII. CONCLUSION

Overall, this study sought to assess how task and relational messages were communicated in online discussion boards revolving around a faith-based totalistic organization. In particular, the current study focused on individuals currently or previously connected to the CoS. CoS represents a religious group that is considered a totalistic organization, and part of NRMs. This study answered the call for research on NRMs [20], particularly on the process of exiting the organization. Exploring the exit stages of Jablin’s model of organizational assimilation [9]-[11], and Bales’ IPA [58], 10% of posts from Exscn.net were analyzed resulting in 30 boards and 14,179 thought units. Findings explained that all three stages of exit were present in the online discussion posts, with post-exit representing the highest number in terms of frequency. Regarding Bales’ IPA, the data uncovered more task than relational messages, with individuals mainly posting by providing orientation/information. Ultimately, even though exit is understudied [13], [16], with the rise of attention being paid to NRMs [20], and totalistic organizations [18], future research should continue to better understand exit processes from non-party-based membership organizations.

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