

Online Social Status: A Critical Discord Analysis



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Abstract

In offline interactions many factors influence the manner in which social status and hierarchies are formed and assigned. Much of this process of social status assignment has been studied, among which many of the factors that influence this process, such as gender and wealth. However, there is not as much research and insight into how this process functions online, and most of the research that has been conducted focused on quantitatively measurable social status, for example through analysis of ‘likes’, ‘followers’, and ‘views’ (Lampe et al., 2007; Levina & Arriaga, 2014). In order to contribute to this gap in knowledge, this study analyzed the platform Discord using a critical discourse analysis. First the platform was analyzed using the discursive interface analysis, after which its social media accounts and website were analyzed. This was followed by the conduction of interviews and surveys, and lastly a social practice analysis was performed. Using the results of these analyses the following research question was answered in this thesis: *How does the platform Discord contribute to the creation of social status online?* One of the main results was a framework of indicators that contribute to online social status assignment. Of these indicators, interests and availability were found to be the most important contributors to social status assignment on Discord, and gender and education were found to be the least important contributors. Discord was found to mainly influence the process of social status assignment through their emphasis on the creation of communities and the use of roles within a server that they have implemented.

Table of contents

Introduction	3
1. Social Status Online and Offline.....	6
1.1. Phenomenon description – Discord.....	6
1.2. Social status	7
1.2.1. Online social status.....	8
1.2.2. Benefits of social status and hierarchies	11
1.2.3. Communication and indicators of social status.....	12
2. Critical Discourse Analysis.....	14
2.1. Method: Critical Discourse Analysis.....	14
2.1.1. Textual analysis: Discursive interface analysis.....	14
2.1.2. Discursive practice analysis	15
2.1.3. Social practice analysis	16
2.2. Corpus.....	16
2.2.1. Operationalization of social status indicators.....	16
2.2.2. Textual analysis.....	17
2.2.3. Discursive practice analysis	17
3. Analyses.....	20
3.1. Textual analysis: Discursive interface analysis	20
3.2. Discursive practice analysis.....	25
3.2.1. Discord’s website and social media accounts	25
3.2.2. Interviews	26
3.2.3. Surveys	30
3.3. Social practice analysis.....	32
Conclusion.....	35
Limitations and future research	36
Bibliography.....	38

Introduction

When communicating face-to-face, gestures, facial expressions, smell, appearance, and many other manners of subtly conveying information about oneself come into play (Turner, 2002). These and other, more explicitly communicated factors, such as occupation or gender, contribute to the opinion individuals form about each other, and the height of the social status an individual enjoys (Hollingshead, 1975). Social status is an indicator of the amount of power and esteem an individual holds in comparison to other individuals within the hierarchy that is present in our society. High social status offers many benefits, such as increased respect from others, and more influence in group decision making processes (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). Therefore, there is considerable incentive for individuals to attempt to increase their status, for example by attaining higher employment, being well groomed, or by signaling wealth through the purchase of luxury goods, such as an expensive car. These factors that contribute to social status consist of both more implicit communications, such as certain behavior, and more explicit communications, such as a certain clothing style (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). Important to note about these factors is that not all of them translate to online interactions and environments.

Computer mediated communication (CMC) is present in various forms in our current day society. In 1982 Scott E. Fahlman introduced the concept of the smiley on a message board, with :-) as an indication for a joke and :- (as an indication for something that was not a joke (Tomić et al., 2013), which led to many more smileys with which to express emotions when communicating over text. In 1991 the first Voice-over-IP application, Speak Freely, was released, enabling spoken communication over computers. These are but two examples of the many types and forms of CMC that have emerged over the past decades. In our present day society CMC is widely ingrained in our day-to-day life. Different forms of CMC allow varying amounts of information to be conveyed when communicating with others (Walther, 1992), and in turn might filter out many of the factors that contribute to the formation of opinions and social status. For instance, smell does not get transmitted over the internet and, depending on the form of CMC used, neither do gestures, facial expressions, and appearance. This leads to a different nature in the portrayal of self, and a different interpretation of others. This difference in communication has the potential of causing social status to be assigned differently as well, since it might emphasize certain aspects of the communication process that are not applicable to face-to-face communication, and make vital aspects of face-to-face communication obsolete.

There are many different platforms that are nowadays widely used for communication, such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Skype, Microsoft Teams, and many others. These are used not just for informal social interactions, but for work and education related communication as well. Especially during the COVID-19 pandemic, with many people working from home, this holds true. As such, it is important to understand how hierarchies form in varying online environments to better understand the interactions taking place in them, and to be able to retain the benefits that social hierarchies offer (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). On user generated content platforms possible factors for status assignment can largely be quantified, for example through the amount of views, likes, comments, or shares. However, many of these platforms consist mainly of implicit participation and demonstrate a low threshold for active participation. This is especially the case of user generated content platforms. On these platforms a small group actively produces content, and therefore have a higher participation threshold, however, the majority of the users only participate in passive, low threshold participation (Lai & Chen, 2014). Such low thresholds, for instance, having to only press one button when 'liking' a post on Facebook, make individuals more inclined to participate (Schumann & Klein, 2015). The resulting 'likes' can then, to a certain degree, be translated to the social status an individual enjoys on a platform. Other examples of low threshold platforms are Instagram, Tumblr, and YouTube. On platforms with a higher overall threshold for participation and limited focus on the active participation aspects, such as platforms aimed at interaction on a more personal level, it is more difficult to measure how social status is constituted as it cannot be quantified in the same way. Examples of such platforms are WhatsApp, Microsoft Teams, TeamSpeak, and Discord. Much of the research in the field of online status on online platforms has relied on quantification of status, for example through 'likes', or by applying network analyses between actors (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). For future research into online status Levina and Arriaga (2014) suggest using qualitative means in order to better understand "which internal and external distinctions matter and how they get rewarded in a field" (p. 484). In order to contribute to the knowledge on online status assignment and manifestation I have chosen to analyze a platform on which participation requires such a higher threshold for participation, namely the platform Discord. Discord is an application which allows its users to create online communities through the use of servers. On these servers they can create voice channels to which they can connect to communicate with Voice-over-IP with other users that are connected with the voice channel, and text channels through which they can message the other members of the server. It was originally designed as a voice chat program to use whilst playing online video games, but has

grown to include a wide audience. I have run several Discord servers and, as a result, I am very familiar with its features and the means it offers users to express themselves through. In my use of the platform I have found certain aspects of Discord that I considered exemplary of differences between the online and offline in regard to status assignment. Furthermore, my familiarity with the platform is likely to help me in my exploration of its role in online social status. Therefore, I have chosen Discord as the subject of my thesis in order to contribute to the knowledge on online social status assignment and gain an overall better understanding of how social status manifests online. In order to gain a better understanding of how social status is assigned the following research question will be answered in this thesis: *How does the platform Discord contribute to the creation of social status online?* This research question will be answered using the following sub-questions:

1. *What kind of platform is Discord?*
2. *What is the difference in the conceptualization of online and offline social status?*
3. *How does status creation on Discord differ from offline status creation based on the affordances of Discord?*
4. *How is the importance of these factors perceived by Discord and its users?*

In order to answer these questions first a theoretical framework will be constructed in chapter 1. This chapter will elaborate on literature on the creation and assignment of social status, both online and offline. Furthermore it will contain an overview of previously proposed indicators for social status which will be operationalized for this study in chapter 2. Chapter 2 will contain a description of the method that will be used for this study: the critical discourse analysis as proposed by Fairclough (2001). The previously mentioned indicators will be operationalized in this chapter. After this, the analyses will be performed and the results of these will be discussed in chapter 3. Lastly, in the conclusion the research questions will be answered, and the limitations of the study and possible directions for future research will be discussed.

1. Social Status Online and Offline

In this chapter a theoretical framework will be presented on the theories and concepts relevant to this study. First a description of the platform Discord will be provided (1.1), after which a definition of social status will be constructed that will be used in this thesis (1.2). Then a review of relevant literature on social status will be provided (1.2.1.), followed by the benefits and indicators of general social status (1.2.2). Lastly, indicators of social status will be collected from literature which will be used to create an operationalized list of indicators in the method (1.2.3.).

1.1. Phenomenon description – Discord

In this chapter a description of Discord will be provided that will include what the platform is, what it can be used for, and by what demographic it is used. Discord is a communication platform that focuses on Voice-over-IP and text messaging for communication between individuals and groups, and the creation of online communities. Discord enables its users to create servers to which other users can be invited (Discord, n.d. a). These servers consist of a collection of voice channels, which are indicated by a speaker symbol, and text channels, which are indicated by a '#'. After joining a server, users can enter a voice channel by clicking on the channel's name which immediately connects them to that voice channel. By pressing on a text channel's name they are presented with all previous text messages sent in that channel, and a bar in which they can type and send their own messages. The program was originally intended to be used by gamers to voice chat with others whilst playing video games, however, the user base has grown to include a wide variety of users and purposes. Servers tend to be used on both a smaller scale, such as by friend groups to interact with each other, and on a larger scale, such as by well-known streamers of games to interact with their followers. It is not possible to determine the exact demographic of the platform as such data is not collected on users. However, it was originally intended for gamers and it is therefore likely that a large percentage of users will still fall in this category, as a representative of Discord estimated that 30% of servers were used for purposes unrelated to video games (Fagan, 2020). This makes it likely that the demographic of Discord will be partially in line with a demographic typically associated with gamers. For instance, the majority of gamers in the United States was between the ages of 18 and 34 years old in 2020 (Clement, 2021), making it likely that a considerable amount of Discord users fall within this age range as well.

To be able to analyze online social status on Discord it is imperative to first have an understanding of offline social status as well. This will aid in identifying and understanding

any differences between online and offline social status found in the analyses. Therefore, first an elaboration of offline social status will be provided, after which online social status will be explored.

1.2. Social status

Social status is the representation of one's rank within a hierarchy. Typically, higher social status correlates with a higher extent to which one is respected by others (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). Social status can be either ascribed or achieved. Ascribed social status is when one is predetermined to have this social status, for instance, due to heritage, and might encourage the enforcement of the current status. Achieved social status is attained through merit and hard work. If social status can be achieved individuals will make an effort to do so in order to enjoy the benefits of higher social status (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015). Social status has also been shown to be largely inversely proportional with affection (Gould, 2002), which further demonstrates that higher status results in being held in higher regard and being treated more affectionately.

There are different manners through which social status can be defined and categorized. One of these manners is by approaching social status as the product of different types of capital (Bourdieu, 1984). There are three main types of capital and one special kind of capital that contribute to social benefits: economic capital, cultural capital, social capital, and symbolic capital (Bourdieu, 1984). Economic capital refers to the resources which an individual possesses, cultural capital refers to the cultural and educational capabilities of an individual, social capital refers to the networking capabilities of an individual, and symbolic capital refers to social status. This last kind of special capital was found to be especially important in contexts where economic capital mattered less (Bourdieu, 1984), such as in online environments. Furthermore, Bourdieu (1984) describes social distinction as the use of strategies by individuals to differentiate themselves from others. This also contributes to their social status, as this communicates aspects of them that are relevant for the assignment of status.

Another manner through which to approach social status, is by using a four factor index for the calculation of an individual's social status (Hollingshead, 1975). This index proposes a calculation for social status that uses four factors: sex; education; occupation; and marital status. In this approach, the factor education is considered to change during childhood and youth, and to stabilize in adulthood. It is believed to be reflected in knowledge and cultural tastes, and to serve as a prerequisite for certain higher status occupations. Occupation

is considered to change during early adulthood and stabilize later in adulthood. It tends to be presumed as indicative of skill and power. Sex remains constant throughout and is believed to play a part in predicting the performance of functions in society fulfilled by individuals. Notably, it is not mentioned how this factor concretely influences social status. The last factor, marital status, is important due to differences in how adult family members participate in the economic system. In current day society this factor might be better broadened to include more types of registered relationships as marriage has become less normative than it was in the past (Hollingshead, 1975). According to Hollingshead (1975) there are three underlying assumptions of this index. The first assumption is that in our society there exists an unequal status structure in which some have higher status than others. The second assumption is that this status is mainly measured by the occupation of an individual and their educational background, with other factors that come into play being sex and marital status. The third assumption is that the above mentioned factors can be combined in order to reliably form an estimation of the social status of an individual within our society. Using the aforementioned factors the approach offers mathematical calculations of social status, with an index of different occupations and varying levels of education with numerical values corresponding to them (Hollingshead, 1975). These specific calculations of status may not be relevant to this thesis, as their numerical values might not translate to the current day society since societal values have changed over time. Nevertheless, the factors can be tested in the degree to which Discord affords their communication to other users, and to what degree users find them to be important in the online environment.

1.2.1. *Online social status*

There are many differences between online and offline communication in regard to the manners in which people can communicate status. These are caused partially by the limitations in conveying information, but also by the digital divide within the possibilities of the means available. The digital divide is “the gap that exists between individuals advantaged by technology and those individuals relatively disadvantaged by the internet” (Rogers, 2001, p. 100). These individuals do not benefit from the means available and are therefore less able to properly convey and attain status online. Distinguishing oneself from others on the internet has been shown to generally create positive opinions from others (Levina & Arriaga, 2014), however, in order to do this proper understanding of technology is required. Therefore, it is likely that those that are not technologically literate would be disadvantaged in creating their status online (Lister et al., 2009). The same would apply depending on the quality of the

technology available to individuals. For instance, when a participant in a voice chat has a very low quality microphone, or a bad internet connection, this might cause others to, either consciously or unconsciously, think less of this individual, and individuals might attain higher status due to better internet connection or more time to dedicate to the internet. Therefore the digital divide might contribute to the assignment of status online (Lister et al., 2009). Furthermore, online environments often offer a certain degree of anonymity which allows users to construct their identity more consciously. They are able to provide and withhold information about themselves as they please, allowing them to construct a different identity online than they have offline (Lister et al., 2009). Bullingham and Vasconcelos (2013) found that participants of their study re-created their offline self in the online environment, but also edited certain facets of their presentation of self. This indicates that users of online environments might indeed portray a different version of themselves online, which might influence the assignment of status in these environments.

In offline settings sex, education, occupation, and marital status have been found to be generally indicative of social status, and are therefore means of acquiring and retaining status (Hollingshead, 1975). However, these and other factors, such as race, have been found to be less important in online settings, as they are often not visible (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Levina and Arriaga (2014) found that in online environments other aspects play a vital role in status assignment, such as online power and influence, the quantity of contributions made on a platform, the relevancy of these contributions to the specific group, and long-time participation. The focus of their study was on how status is weighed on user-generated content (UGC) platforms, for example, through likes, views, and follows. They found that there are many theories on how social status is formed online, however, many of these theories are applicable exclusively to a certain niche. Therefore, they aim to introduce a framework that combines different perspectives on social status attainment to be more widely applicable.

Levina and Arriaga (2014) argued that the design of a platform plays an important role in the shaping of the social dynamics of the platform. However, they also found that there is a wide array of other aspects that might influence social status. An example of this is homophily, similarities between individuals, such as their interests and demographic. Individuals have been found to seek homophily in communities (McPherson et al., 2001). Online there is a broader availability of social connections and communities, this might lead to more specific selection based on similarity, and therefore more homophily. Nevertheless, generally the specific factors that create higher social status depend largely on the specific community. Individuals gain status based on what is considered important within a group,

which recursively enforces itself. For instance, if certain content is highly valued in a UGC environment that content will be created more frequently which in turn makes individuals increasingly prefer that content. Members of a network that have attained higher status tend to influence this process more than people with lower status. Leadership, and therefore often power, within online communities often stems from long-time participation, a central position in the network, and frequent contributions (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Power and status in this context are not the same, but they are very similar and influence each other. Power, the control over resources, often provides status, respect and admiration (Levina & Arriaga, 2014). Within the object of this thesis, Discord, power might for instance translate to the role a user has in a server and moderation rights on that server. Moreover, online community leadership has been found to be heavily influenced by emergent leadership processes (Johnson et al., 2015). This leadership was also associated with positive contribution to communities with language use familiar to other participants (Johnson et al., 2015). Although the study by Johnson et al. (2015) focused on community leaders that possessed formal power apart from any informal power, it provides the implication that certain behaviors and attributes are heavily associated with higher positions in the online community, and therefore higher status, such as a central network position, positive contributions, and familiar language usage.

In their analysis of theories on status in organizations Levina and Arriaga (2014) found three main limitations that made the theories not properly applicable to online social networks, specifically for UGC platforms. The first limitation is their focus on external social cues, such as gender or race, as these are often not communicated in online settings and therefore do not weigh as heavily. The second limitation is the assumption that groups share a goal, as in many online settings individuals act on personal benefit goals. The third limitation is the type of membership an individual has within the group. In organizational settings membership of a group is largely static, whereas in an online community this is not the case. Members can be different degrees of involved in a group with generally weaker affiliations and can leave and join groups more freely. Furthermore, Levina and Arriaga (2014) found the design of a platform to play an important role in the way status is assigned. For example, in the case of YouTube this is done through the amount of views. As such, the design of Discord might play an important role in the assignment of status on the platform as well, and therefore an analysis of its design and affordances would provide interesting insights on how this might influence the process of status assignment. Levina and Arriaga (2014) suggest future research

on this topic to utilize a combination of qualitative methods to explore the subject and quantitative methods to test key relationships.

The type of social media plays a role in other manners as well. For example, in their study on profile elements on Facebook, Lampe et al. (2007) found that more information on profiles was positively related to the amount of friends individuals had on Facebook, and therefore likely occupied more central positions in networks. This might indicate that on platforms where there is a high degree of customization and information sharing on profiles, more information shared might also correlate with higher online social status. However, it should be noted that more information on a profile might also correlate with higher use of the platform by users, and therefore with sending more friend requests. These users might attribute more value to their social media without occupying a high position in the online social hierarchy. Although Discord does not possess a very high customization of profiles, it is nevertheless interesting to note these implications on the importance of profile elements.

A final interesting point is that social class has been found to correlate with social media use, for instance individuals with limited internet use that predominantly focused on social media were found to typically belong to lower socio-economic groups (Yates & Lockley, 2018). What is important to note about this correlation between socio-economic status and social media use is that within platforms it is likely that there exists a certain demographic of individuals with similar socio-economic status.

1.2.2. *Benefits of social status and hierarchies*

There are many reasons to sustain social hierarchies, both from a societal as well as a personal perspective (Dubois & Ordabayeva, 2015; Zitek, 2012). This is especially the case where social status is not only predetermined, but can also be achieved through hard work. On a societal level Dubois and Ordabayeva (2015) propose three main reasons to retain social hierarchies. First of all, social hierarchies offer decision making benefits, as putting a few in charge of the decisions of many provides a more efficient and less time consuming decision making process. This would lead to a more efficient use of resources and minimal conflict over these decisions. The second benefit relates to coordination benefits both within and between groups, as there are fewer actors involved in the communication surrounding the coordination. Lastly, social hierarchies lead to motivational benefits. This last reason relates to the personal benefits Dubois and Ordabayeva (2015) propose. Higher status within a society provides many personal benefits, which motivates individuals to actively work to retain their status and/or climb the social ladder to attain more benefits, which leads to higher

overall productivity. Examples of these personal benefits are respect, attention, and influence. This is due to the perception that these individuals are more competent based solely on their higher status. Furthermore, social hierarchies are more fluently and more easily processed, and as a result people have been shown to generally prefer them over equality, despite explicitly stating to dislike hierarchies (Zitek, 2012). Due to the above reasons hierarchies are kept in place in social context, and individuals are actively motivated to either retain their status or gain merit which allows them higher status, and therefore more benefits.

1.2.3. *Communication and indicators of social status*

In every interaction there is a certain set of meanings and presentations of self in regard to how someone expresses themselves to others that are retained. Erving Goffman (1956) proposed this presentation of self to be 'face' and this collection of meanings to be the 'interaction order'. When entering an interaction, individuals have a moral obligation to maintain this interaction order. Part of the interaction order is the status that interactants have in relation to other interactants, and how they convey this status. This status is signaled throughout interactions, however, how this is done exactly and which indicators are relevant for this and what they signal he does not clearly define.

Dubois and Ordabayeva (2015) state that the communication of status within a hierarchy can be done implicitly and explicitly. Implicit communication of status could be subtle signals or types of behaviors that are associated with higher status. For instance, accent, such as how in the past certain English accents were associated with high class and others with low class. Explicit communication might be certain clothing styles and social codes. Furthermore, they state that there are four traits of effective explicit status signals (Dubois and Ordabayeva, 2015). First of all, effective status signals must be costly and hard to obtain in order to signal that the owner possesses the means to acquire them. Secondly, they must be of limited practical value to signal that the owner has the luxury to own them for purely status communication. Thirdly, they must be visible or recognizable to the social group in order to properly serve as communication. Lastly, there must be agreement within the group that it signals status. This last point is arguably the most important one, as without agreement within the group status will not be recognized, even if signals meet the other requirements.

The four factor index proposed by Hollingshead (1975) and the types of capital identified by Bourdieu (1984) discussed earlier provide a foundation from which to further construct a provisional set of indicators for social status with the addition of signs of social class proposed by Kraus et al. (2017). Kraus et al. (2017) "theorize that class signals (a) occur

frequently, rapidly, and accurately in the social perception process; (b) augment group boundaries between the haves and have nots in society; and (c) elicit psychological processes and behaviors that justify and maintain the current economic system” (p. 422). They propose the following signs of social class: ‘body’, which is constituted by body language, facial expressions, and appearance, such as an individual’s face or body; ‘voice’, which consists of how someone talks, what their voice sounds like, and what type of register they use; and ‘culture’, which refers to sartorial choices, their interests, and their leisure activities. A combination of Hollingshead’s (1975) four factor index, Bourdieu’s (1984) types of capital, and the signs of social class proposed by Kraus et al. (2017) will be further operationalized in the method.

2. Critical Discourse Analysis

The critical discourse analysis (CDA) as proposed by Fairclough (2001) will be utilized to analyze Discord and examine how social status is constituted on the platform. This will consist of a textual analysis of the platform and its affordances, a discursive practice analysis of Discord's website and interviews with users, and an analysis of the social practice. In this chapter, I will elaborate on the chosen method (2.1), after which I will provide the corpus of this study (2.2.), which will include an operationalization of social status indicators (2.2.1).

2.1. Method: Critical Discourse Analysis

In this chapter the chosen method will be elaborated. The critical discourse analysis as proposed by Fairclough (2001) was chosen as this is “the most developed theory and method for research in communication, culture and society” (Jorgensen & Philips, 2002, p. 60). Fairclough's (2001) CDA analyzes three dimensions of discourse: the text, the discursive practice, and the social practice. The analysis of the text (2.1.1.) concerns all linguistic features of the text, the analysis of the discursive practice (2.1.2.) concerns the production and consumption of the text, and the analysis of the social practice (2.1.3.) concerns the wider social practice to which the text belongs and explanations of it.

2.1.1. Textual analysis: Discursive interface analysis

In my analysis of Discord using the CDA, I will be focusing on the affordances of Discord as linguistic features for the first step, the textual analysis. A textual analysis usually concerns the representation that a text offers, and not the meaning it conveys. Since the meaning is imperative to properly understand the representation in this study, I intend to look at both representation as well as meaning by analyzing the affordances, which will enable me to do this. An affordance is whatever the environment affords an individual to do with it (Gibson, 1977). This can be the intended purpose, for example when a vase is used to hold water and flowers, or an unintended use, such as when a vase is used as a paperweight. Affordances apply to any type of environment, and therefore online environments as well. In order to analyze the affordances of Discord, I will use the method proposed by Mel Stanfill (2015). Stanfill (2015) proposes a method that uses affordances at its core as an intervention to understand what users do, and should do, on a normative level when using online interfaces: the discursive interface analysis. In her description of this method she focuses on the interface of websites, but the method can be applied more broadly to other interfaces as well, for example those of applications and platforms (Stanfill, 2015). Stanfill (2015) states that

affordances produce norms, as they determine what a user can and cannot do, and through that, they provide implications on what a user should and should not do. She uses Hartson's (2003) identification of four different types of affordances: Physical, functional, cognitive, and sensory.

The first type of affordance, physical, relates to any design features that “[help] users in doing a physical action in the interface” (Hartson, 2003, p. 323). Stanfill (2015) deems this affordance inapplicable to online interfaces, leaving the other three types as relevant affordances. However, considering that Discord is an interactive platform with the option of customization of, for instance, the user profile and servers, these affordances might influence social status creation, therefore, I will include this affordance in my analysis. Functional affordances relate to any design features that “[help] users accomplish work” (Hartson, 2003, p. 323), for instance, the search function of an interface. They also serve as a means to create norms, as they determine what a user can and cannot do, which implies what a user should use the interface for, and what they should not use the interface for. Cognitive affordances refer to any design features that “[help] users in knowing something” (Hartson, 2003, p. 323). This entails the naming, labeling, and self-descriptions of an interface and contributes to meaning-making. For example, when a button on a website is labeled ‘search’ or has a looking glass depicted on it, it indicates that that part of the interface is dedicated to finding something on the site. This can also contribute to the self-identification of a website, for example, when a fan-site labels itself the ‘official’ fan-site of a certain fanbase it emphasizes on their legitimacy. Lastly, sensory affordances relate to design features that “[help] users sense something” (Hartson, 2003, p. 323) regarding the visibility, legibility, or audibility of aspects of an interface, for example, how much emphasis is placed on specific components of a website (Stanfill, 2015). This could be bold fonts, bright colors, or more prominent placements.

As Stanfill (2015) states “[h]ow a site negotiates between aesthetics and finance in sensory affordances reflects and reinforces beliefs about its purpose and what Users (should) care about” (p. 1064). In this sense all three types of affordances deemed relevant by Stanfill (2015) contribute to the creation of norms: Functional affordances determine what a user can do; cognitive affordances determine what a user ought to think about an interface; and sensory affordances determine what a user should focus on. Stanfill (2015) notes about this that media offer content and encourage particular actions, rather than forbid undesired actions.

2.1.2. *Discursive practice analysis*

The discursive practice analysis relates to the consumption and production of the text. The analysis of the discursive practice can be executed in multiple different manners concerning both consumption and production. The production can, for instance, be examined through analysis of the process through which the text is created in regard to what changes it undergoes, where these changes originate from, and how they affect the text. Another approach could be analyzing the underlying norms and values of the production and producers, and how these are reflected in the text. The consumption might be analyzed by studying the reception and interpretation of the text by its audience.

2.1.3. *Social practice analysis*

Lastly, in the social practice analysis, using the results of the previous two steps, a theoretical lens will be used to analyze and draw conclusions on the text and the place of the research within the theoretical debate will be determined. Then the impact they might have on the discourse and what consequences they might have for the broader social practice will be debated.

2.2. *Corpus*

In this chapter, the corpus that will be used for the analyses will be discussed. First, a framework of social status indicators will be operationalized that will then be used in the analyses (2.2.1.). Then, the corpus for the textual analysis (2.2.2.) and the discursive practice analysis (2.2.3.) will be elaborated on.

2.2.1. *Operationalization of social status indicators*

Drawing from status signaling factors proposed by Hollingshead (1975), Bourdieu (1984), and Kraus et al. (2017) a provisional framework of ten status indicators was constructed. For each of these indicators it will be elaborated on what they refer to. In the CDA it will then be analyzed how Discord affords each of these status signals and the value they hold for users.

The first indicator that was identified is *intelligence*, which encompasses any education an individual has followed, or is currently following, the general successfulness of their educational career, and their overall perceived intelligence. The next indicator, *capabilities*, relates to the skill over which an individual possesses, their employment, both present and past, and their overall success of their professional career and other activities that require them to possess certain capabilities, such as sports and creative expressions. *Social connections* refer to any relationships of the individual, for instance, their romantic

relationship, their friendships, and overall how well connected they are to others. Another indicator is *gender*, which refers not only to the gender of the individual, but the degree to which they communicate this, since online environments allow a certain degree of anonymity which enables individuals to not share their gender or lie about it. *Appearance* refers to all related aspects to how an individual looks, but also how they visually present themselves online, for example their profile picture or username. *Body language* encompasses facial expressions and body language. The indicator *voice* relates to a variety of linguistic communications, such as an individual's voice, how they type, and the overall register that they use. *Interests* refers to an individual's hobbies and interests. *Wealth* refers to the economical capital of an individual and their expression of this. *Accomplishments* refers to achievements and feats of the past from a symbolic perspective.

2.2.2. *Textual analysis*

The textual analysis will be conducted using the discursive interface analysis as proposed by Stanfill (2015) and elaborated on in the theoretical framework. The corpus will be the interfaces of Discord. Discord has both an application as well as a web interface, and both of these interfaces will be incorporated in this analysis. In the analysis the four types of affordances (sensory, cognitive, functional, and physical) will be identified and analyzed in regard to how they might enable any of the operationalized indicators on the platform to be communicated.

2.2.3. *Discursive practice analysis*

For the discursive practice analysis the manner in which Discord is marketed on its website and social media pages, how its users interpret it, and how this relates to the indication of status will be analyzed. First Discord's website and social media pages will be analyzed in regard to how Discord promotes its intentions and visions. Then, using the categorization that results from the textual analysis, interview questions will be constructed that test the value of the indicators and related affordances as experienced by users. These questions will be used to conduct semi-structured interviews with users of Discord. To better substantiate the significance of the indicators found to be important in the interviews, a survey will then be conducted based on these indicators.

2.2.3.1. *Discord's website and social media accounts*

In order to gain an understanding of Discord's vision, their website (Discord, n.d. b) will be analyzed, as well as several of their social media accounts: their Twitter account; their Instagram account; their Facebook account; and their YouTube account. Posts and statements found on these websites and accounts will be collected and connected to how they translate to the importance of the operationalized social status indicators and the affordances found in the textual analysis, and the categorization of these affordances.

2.2.3.2. *Interviews*

The categorization created in the textual analysis will then be used to construct interview questions in which the perspective of Discord users will be studied. Standard open-ended interviews will be conducted that consist of set questions that allow the respondent to answer the question in any way they want, with room for the investigator to ask probing questions in order to further explore the respondent's answers (Turner, 2010). The questions will be constructed with the aim of being neutral, open-ended, clearly worded, and not double-barreled. Proxies will be used in order to avoid the risk of respondents providing socially acceptable answers to more direct questions. One pilot interview will first be conducted so as to identify and improve any shortcomings of the provisional interview questions, after which the interviews with the respondents will be executed. The purpose of the interview will be explained to the respondents, confidentiality will be addressed, and an indication will be provided on how long the interview will take. Furthermore, the respondents will be provided with means to get in touch with the researcher in case they have further questions after the interview. Six respondents will be selected based on their frequent use of Discord. Due to the current situation in regard to regulations on traveling and visitation the interviews will be conducted entirely online on Discord, since all participants will be familiar with the platform, preferably over a video call in order to enhance the communication. The audio of the interview will be recorded, after which it will be transcribed. Then, the audio will be deleted to ensure the privacy of participants. From the interview transcriptions, thick descriptions will be made which will then lead to better insight into which indicators are important for status assignment to users.

2.2.3.3. *Surveys*

Based on the indicators and affordances which were found to be most important in the interviews, surveys will be created using proxies for these indicators and affordances. The indicators that are tested in the survey will be tested on a 7 point Likert scale, with five

questions per affordance. After this, a regression test will be used to determine which factors play a significant role. Approximately 30 to 50 participants will be selected for this survey based on any usage of Discord. Apart from the questions on the indicators, the participants will be asked for demographic information, such as age, gender, and education. Furthermore, inquiries will be made after their usage of Discord such as in regard to how often they use the platform, what kind of servers they are active in, and for what purpose they use it most often.

3. Analyses

This chapter will contain the execution and results of the three steps of the CDA. First the textual analysis will be performed (3.1.), after which the discursive practice analysis will be executed (3.2.) through an analysis of Discord's website and social media accounts (3.2.1.), interviews (3.2.2.), and surveys (3.2.3.), and lastly the social practice analysis will be performed (3.3.).

3.1. Textual analysis: Discursive interface analysis

Contrary to many UGC platforms, such as YouTube, Instagram, and Facebook, Discord allows very little quantification of status. Reactions in the form of smileys can be added to messages sent in Discord, but this does not cause the message to become more prevalent such as a video on YouTube would. However, there are other means through which users can assign and be assigned status. The affordances that contribute to this assignment of status will be explored in this textual analysis using the discursive interface analysis, as well as other relevant aspects that emerge from these affordances.

The first two types of affordances to explore are the physical affordances and the sensory affordances. These two types of affordances will be discussed together, as the sensory affordances found all overlapped with physical affordances. A physical affordance is a "design feature that helps users in doing a physical action in the interface" (Hartson, 2003, p. 323). A sensory affordance is a "design feature that helps users sense something" (Hartson, 2003, p. 323). In the case of Discord, the physical affordances pertain most prevalently to communication between users on the platform. The most important physical affordances on Discord in regard to communication are voice calls and channels, and direct messaging and text channels. In voice calls the user connects to a voice chat with another user, or multiple other users, by calling them individually. Voice channels function similarly, however, instead of calling another user individually, the user connects to a channel in a server that other users in the same server can connect to as well. In regard to the operationalized indicators, the indicators that most relate to this would most likely be *gender* and *voice*, as the user would be able to hear the other user's voice and deduce their gender based on this. Furthermore, the linguistic register of the user might contribute to the assessment of the other user, as well as the quality of their sound. In this sense, it is not only Discord that contributes to the assignment of status but the appliances, and the quality of said appliances, over which a user possesses contribute as well. This applies to the physical affordance of video calling as well, which adds the use of a webcam to a voice call. Within voice channels users can choose to

turn on their webcams as well. Video calls contribute to the indicator *gender*, in the same way as voice calls and channels do as they reveal the gender of the user, however, they also contribute to *appearance* and *body language*, since they allow the user to reveal themselves and their body language physically in any way they choose to. For example, a user might choose a specific angle to show themselves that only reveals certain parts of themselves, such as only their face. In this sense there is also a limitation in regard to conveying body language, as not all body language used might be visible to other users. A final relevant physical affordance connected to voice calls and channels is the option for users to mute and deafen themselves, and use Push to Talk, which only makes them audible when they press a specifically assigned button. This might influence the indicator *voice* as users are able to choose when they are audible to others and when they are not. This might for example be relevant when users have background noise or are otherwise making sounds that might be disruptive to other conversations and choose not to mute themselves. Furthermore, they can mute other users as well, allowing them to choose which users they want to hear, and which not. Direct messaging and text channels function similarly to voice calls and channels in the sense that they too can be used on an individual basis, as well as in a channel on a server. They too allow users to convey information in the form of their linguistic register, with the addition of emoji and GIFs that can be sent. This contributes to the indicator *voice* as well. Apart from expressing themselves actively through messages and voice conversations, users can also more passively express themselves through the physical affordances of changing their profile picture, username, and server-specific nicknames. These three affordances were found to be both sensory as well as physical, since they allow users to actively change their own profile picture, username and nickname, and more passively sense these aspects of other users' profiles. Through this customization of their profile users might contribute to the indicators *gender* and *appearance*, as their gender might be revealed through either their username or their profile picture, and their appearance is portrayed in either the sense of them showing themselves in the picture, or it showing their online 'appearance'.

The third type of affordance to study are the cognitive affordances. A cognitive affordance is a "design feature that helps users in knowing something" (Hartson, 2003, p. 323). In Discord, this mainly relates to the information that users can access about other users. When viewing the profile of another user, three tabs are available: 'user info'; 'mutual servers'; and 'mutual friends'. Of these three, 'mutual servers' and 'mutual friends' are cognitive affordances. These allow a user to view any mutual servers and friends they have with another user, contributing to the view of how well connected other users are, and

therefore contributing to the indicator *social connections*. Furthermore, on the profile users can see badges that other users have earned through, among other things, the premium membership and accomplishments on Discord which therefore might contribute to the indicators *wealth* and *accomplishments*. Users can additionally view the current activities of users on their friends' list on the right side of the 'friends' tab of the 'home' screen. This shows, among other things, what games users are playing, if they are currently in voice channels in mutual servers, and what music they are listening to. By showing the activities of other users, this contributes to the indicator *interests*. A final relevant cognitive affordance consists of 'roles' on servers. On a server 'roles' can be assigned to users. These roles can be purely symbolic, with the user's name being portrayed in a different color or separate from other users in the user list. This contributes to *social connections*, as the height of the role in the user list has the potential of assigning informal status and might indicate a higher standing of a user among the users in the server. Roles might also provide a user with rights in the server, which leads to the fourth type of affordance: functional affordances.

A functional affordance is a "design feature that helps users accomplish work" (Hartson, 2003, p. 323). The server rights that a role might afford a user can allow a user to change other users' usernames, disconnect people from voice chats, or even block users from a server, giving them power over other users and therefore formal status within a server. This affordance fits best with the indicator *accomplishments* as the user attained this formal status in the server. The previously mentioned 'user info' on the user profile also contains a functional affordance. Users can link their accounts on other platforms, such as Steam, Twitch, and Twitter, to their Discord profile. Their usernames and links to these accounts can then be found under the 'user info' tab on the user profile. Since this refers users to other aspects of a user which are likely to contain information on their interests and achievements they might share, this is related most to the indicators *interests* and *accomplishments*.

Another functional affordance is the option to use the 'Noise Suppression' function. This filters out background noise and allows users to improve their sound quality, contributing to the indicator *voice* since it influences how well a user's sound transfers. This possibly might influence *wealth* and *appearance* as well, as it depends on the quality, and therefore likely monetary value of the microphone, and the sound of a user's voice could be considered as part of their appearance as well. Functional affordances that contribute to the indicator *social connections* and enable other affordances relevant for this indicator are the options to add friends and join servers. Two final to each other related functional affordances are Discord Nitro and 'server boosts', both of which are paid services. Discord Nitro allows

users upgraded services, such as better quality streams, special badges, and animated profile pictures. Furthermore, Discord Nitro allows users to boost a server, which allows upgrades to the server. These server boosts can be purchased separately as well. Both of these affordances relate to the indicator *wealth*, as they allow users paid bonuses.

All the affordances that were found to possibly be of importance for the assignment of status are combined in Table 1. The affordances can be found in the second row, and are arranged by the indicator that they contribute to, which is indicated in the first row. Furthermore, for each affordance, the type of affordance is provided in the third row. These are the four affordance types as proposed by Hartson (2003): physical, sensory, cognitive, and functional. Apart from the specific affordances as shown in Table 1, there were also other important factors that were enabled by the affordances, but could not be categorized under any of the types of affordances. One of these was the hardware over which a user possesses, since this might influence how well a user's computer can run certain games and programs that contribute to the indicator *accomplishments* and *capabilities*. Furthermore, the quality of a webcam or microphone might influence how users perceive other users. Other aspects that might be relevant are location and language, these will be further incorporated and explored in the discursive practice analysis.

Table 1*Functions of Discord Possibly Relevant for Online Social Status Assignment*

Indicator	Affordance	Type of Affordance
<i>Intelligence</i>	-	-
<i>Capabilities</i>	Linked accounts	Functional affordance
<i>Social connections</i>	Mutual servers	Cognitive affordance
	Mutual friends	Cognitive affordance
	Add friends	Functional affordance
	Join servers	Functional affordance
	Server role	Cognitive affordance
<i>Gender</i>	Video call	Physical affordance
	Voice call	Physical affordance
	Voice channel	Physical affordance
	Change and view profile picture	Physical affordance, sensory affordance
<i>Appearance</i>	Video call	Physical affordance
	Change and view profile picture	Physical affordance, sensory affordance
	Change and view username	Physical affordance, sensory affordance
	Change and view nickname	Physical affordance, sensory affordance
<i>Body language</i>	Video call	Physical affordance
<i>Voice</i>	Voice call	Physical affordance
	Mute/Deafen/Push to Talk	Physical affordance
	Noise Suppression	Functional affordance
	Emoji and GIFs	Physical affordance
	Direct messaging	Physical affordance
	Text channels	Physical affordance
<i>Interests</i>	Linked accounts	Functional affordance
	Change and view profile picture	Physical affordance, sensory affordance
	Now active	Cognitive affordance
<i>Wealth</i>	Discord Nitro	Functional affordance
	Profile badges	Cognitive affordance
	Server Boost	Functional affordance
<i>Accomplishments</i>	Linked accounts	Functional affordance
	Profile badges	Cognitive affordance
	Server rights	Functional affordance

3.2. *Discursive practice analysis*

For the discursive practice analysis, three steps were undertaken, the first step consisted of an analysis of Discord's website and social media account posts, the second step consisted of conducting interviews with active users of Discord, and the third step consisted of conducting a survey. First, the results of the analysis of the website and social media of Discord will be discussed (3.2.1.), then the main findings of the interviews will be summarized using thick descriptions ordered by the operationalized indicators (3.2.2.), followed by the results of the survey (3.2.3.).

3.2.1. *Discord's website and social media accounts*

During the analysis of Discord's website and social media accounts it became clear that most social media posts overlapped with information on their website, and that Discord does not have an explicit stance on how social status or hierarchies should function on this platform. However, certain stances and implications can be gathered from their website in regard to how they enable the assignment of social status, and what their implicit values entail. Therefore, this analysis will mainly focus on Discord's website, rather than their social media accounts, and how Discord implicitly frames how they intend their platform to be used in regard to the assignment of social status.

The first relevant expression found on Discord's site is their main motto, which is centered on their homepage: "Your place to talk" (Discord, n.d. b). Discord attempts to focus on the user, and the creation of a place for the user where they can interact with others in their own, personal environment. From a broader perspective Discord also intends to create communities, and frame its servers as such. This can for example be seen in the following statement:

"Discord is about giving people the power to create belonging in their lives. We want to make it easier for you to talk regularly with the people you care about. We want you to build genuine relationships with your friends and communities close to home or around the world. Original, reliable, playful, and relatable. These are the values that connect our users and our employees at Discord." (Discord, n.d. c)

They intend for their platform to be a comfortable place to interact with others with the dynamic and values that tie in with a community. However, they also make it clear that this community is accessible only to those that you wish to have in it: "Discord gives you the power to create your own place to belong. Your Discord server is your home, shared with only the special people you invite" (Discord, n.d. a). Discord, therefore, provides its users

with the intrinsic power to include and exclude others from their online communities. Another aspect that they appear to value is the availability of communication that Discord offers its users, as can be seen when they state that you can “[g]rab a seat in a voice channel when you’re free [so that] [f]riends in your server can see you’re around and instantly pop in to talk without having to call” (Discord, n.d. b). Discord can in that sense be compared to a physical location in which you can approach whoever is there and talk to them, it offers a relatively low threshold for availability in that regard. Furthermore, despite aiming to be a comfortable place for everyone, Discord also offers its users to distinguish themselves and others from other users. For instance, it allows users to “[g]ive members special powers, set up private channels” (Discord, n.d. b), and in doing so distinguish between members in a server. These affordances offer the user the means to differentiate between users, and therefore to assign and receive social status. Apart from these implicit values, Discord also has explicit values that it enforces, for example, that they “remain dedicated to effective, proactive approaches to bad actors and harmful content [...] in order to make [its] platform as safe as possible” (Discord, 2021). Therefore, although users are provided with the freedom to use the platform as they please, they do have to abide by certain base norms. A final interesting aspect of Discord’s website is how they frame Discord Nitro, their premium membership. Discord emphasizes that it “is free to use—no member or message limits” (Discord, n.d. a), and their premium membership is set up as an upgrade in the already available features and therefore as a service that users should use for the functionalities that it provides them with, and not as a feature to show off with. The features of Discord Nitro that are showcased on the website of Discord include one feature that is aimed at communicating that you have Discord Nitro, namely profile badges, but this is specifically framed in regard to supporting Discord.

The main conclusions that can be drawn from the analysis of Discord’s website are that Discord aims to create communities, and therefore aims for the norms and values that are associated with communities. Furthermore, it emphasizes availability as an important feature, which might also make this an important contributor to the assignment of social status on the platform. Lastly, it explicitly allows users to distinguish themselves and others from other users in a server, and therefore it allows the creation of hierarchies within its servers.

3.2.2. *Interviews*

As the second step of the discursive practice analysis semi-structured interviews were conducted. There were six respondents that participated in these interviews. The interviews were recorded, after which transcriptions were made of the recordings, from which then thick

descriptions were conducted to identify the main findings. These findings will be structured according to the ten indicators proposed in the corpus chapter.

The first indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *intelligence*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to overall intelligence and knowledge of subjects in which the respondent is knowledgeable. All respondents indicated to interact mostly with intelligent people. However, they defined intelligence differently, for example as being socially capable, being critical, or being educated. Regardless of their definition of intelligence, none of the respondents found intelligence to overall be very important, but two of the respondents did consider intelligence to be beneficial to interesting conversations. Education was either not discussed on Discord due to anonymity, or not considered to be important or very indicative of intelligence. Five of the respondents found other users being knowledgeable about the same subjects as they were knowledgeable about to not be as important. However, being interested in these subjects was important, and they tend to interact mostly with people that are interested in these subjects. One of the respondents stated to find it mainly important for others to respect and acknowledge their knowledge.

The second indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *capabilities*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to the use of Discord for gauging capabilities, for example through linked accounts, and the importance of capability in shared activities. Four of the respondents indicated to never use the linked accounts feature of Discord. Two of the respondents use linked accounts to gauge the interests of other users, such as in regard to which video games they play, but this was very limited. The main shared activities that respondents engaged in when using Discord were competitive video games and party games. The respondents that played competitive video games indicated to have a slight preference for engaging in this with people that were good at these games. There was no such preference for party games. Another activity that several respondents engaged in was the sharing of knowledge in Discord servers specifically dedicated to this purpose. On these servers people with more knowledge were likely higher regarded, however, since the respondents enjoy sharing knowledge as well, they did not prefer these individuals over those with less knowledge.

The third indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *social connections*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to mutual friends and servers, and server roles. Four respondents found that having mutual friends was beneficial for them to like that person, as having someone in the middle makes it less overwhelming and it makes it easier to meet new people. However, none of the participants found it to be a requirement. The same applies to

being in mutual servers. Server roles were found to possibly convey multiple meanings and impressions, depending on the kind of server. In smaller servers server roles were considered indicative of either closeness to the server owner, how long someone has been in that server, or how active they are in that server. They can be used to show a certain appreciation. In servers aimed specifically at sharing information, roles reflected respect and provided users with credentials to substantiate their claims. In bigger servers roles were found to overall be more important and more reflective of social standing within that server. Furthermore, a higher role tends to reflect trust in a user. Overall, roles were found to impact how someone is seen in a server, but this is mainly in regard to first impressions.

The fourth indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *gender*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to the diversity of respondents' social circles, and the manners through which Discord allows the communication of gender. All respondents stated to not find gender an important factor in communication on Discord, however, five of the respondents also indicated that the majority of their interactions on Discord are with males. Discord was overall found to not reflect gender too much. Profile pictures were indicated to rarely depict the user, and usernames are generally pseudonyms by which users go online. One user indicated that when a username is very masculine or feminine they tend to assume that a user is of the corresponding gender, but overall they do not find this a good indicator for gender. The main aspects that were found to convey gender are voice calls and video calls. Nevertheless, several respondents indicated that even this is not always indicative, as males can have higher-pitched voices, females can have lower-pitched voices, and for non-binary people, their voice does not communicate their gender either. One respondent found that some servers they frequent use server roles or nicknames to indicate pronouns.

The fifth indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *appearance*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to how Discord allows the communication of appearance and how this might influence respondents' opinions on other users. Video was found to be the main feature through which appearance is communicated, however, five of the respondents indicated to not use video often when communicating on Discord. One respondent suggested that this was related to anonymity, and indicates to have seen very few of their friends on Discord. Another respondent reported that the times they have seen online friends were mostly when meeting them physically. Another way through which respondents learned of the appearance of others was through pictures posted in text channels on Discord. Profile pictures were suggested to rarely depict the appearance of users. Nearly all respondents indicated that there was either very little or no change in their opinion of someone after seeing their

appearance, however, one respondent indicates that it made a friendship more meaningful, and another respondent stated that it provided more credibility.

The sixth indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *body language*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to how the addition of video might change the communication on Discord. Four of the respondents found video calls to improve communication, either through the addition of body language and facial expressions, or the option of showing physical objects during voice calls. One respondent stated that video calls made them feel restricted in their communication due to not being able to hide their body language.

The seventh indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *voice*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to the main uses of emoji and how the use of emoji might influence the respondents' opinion on other Discord users. Emoji were mostly found to be used for expression and to add extra meaning to a text message, for example by using an emoji to indicate sarcasm that might otherwise not have been conveyed properly. A majority of the respondents indicated that their opinion would be negatively impacted by emoji use that they considered to be 'weird' or inappropriate. One respondent stated that using too many emoji might make someone seem childish, and none at all might make someone seem too serious.

The eighth indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *interests*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to how Discord can be used to gauge interests and the importance of shared interests. Several respondents indicated to use Discord to gauge interests, such as music taste through connections to Spotify, and linked game accounts. Furthermore, interests were found to be more important on Discord due to this often being the connecting factor, for example when users join a server to play a specific game. Moreover, respondents indicated to prefer to interact with other users that could join them in shared activities.

The ninth indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *wealth*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to how Discord Nitro reflects on users. Four of the respondents found Discord Nitro to be expensive and not indicative of wealth, with the exception of one participant that did consider Discord Nitro as an indicator for having the financial means to spend money on it. Furthermore, Discord Nitro was by some participants considered to communicate using Discord professionally or hosting a large server. Server boosts were overall seen as friendly gestures, and as a contribution to a server, but they found this to be achievable through general participation in the server as well.

The tenth indicator that will be discussed for the interviews is *accomplishments*. This indicator will be discussed in regard to server rights and how these correlate with the social hierarchy in a server. Overall the respondents found that server rights correlated with the social hierarchy in a server. Individuals with more server rights tend to be more active in the server, and more trusted and more respected by other users. Four of the respondents indicated that respect and trust tend to result in more server rights, but this does not work the other way around. The main server rights that were considered important are the option to join private channels and to mute and kick out users in voice channels.

3.2.3. Surveys

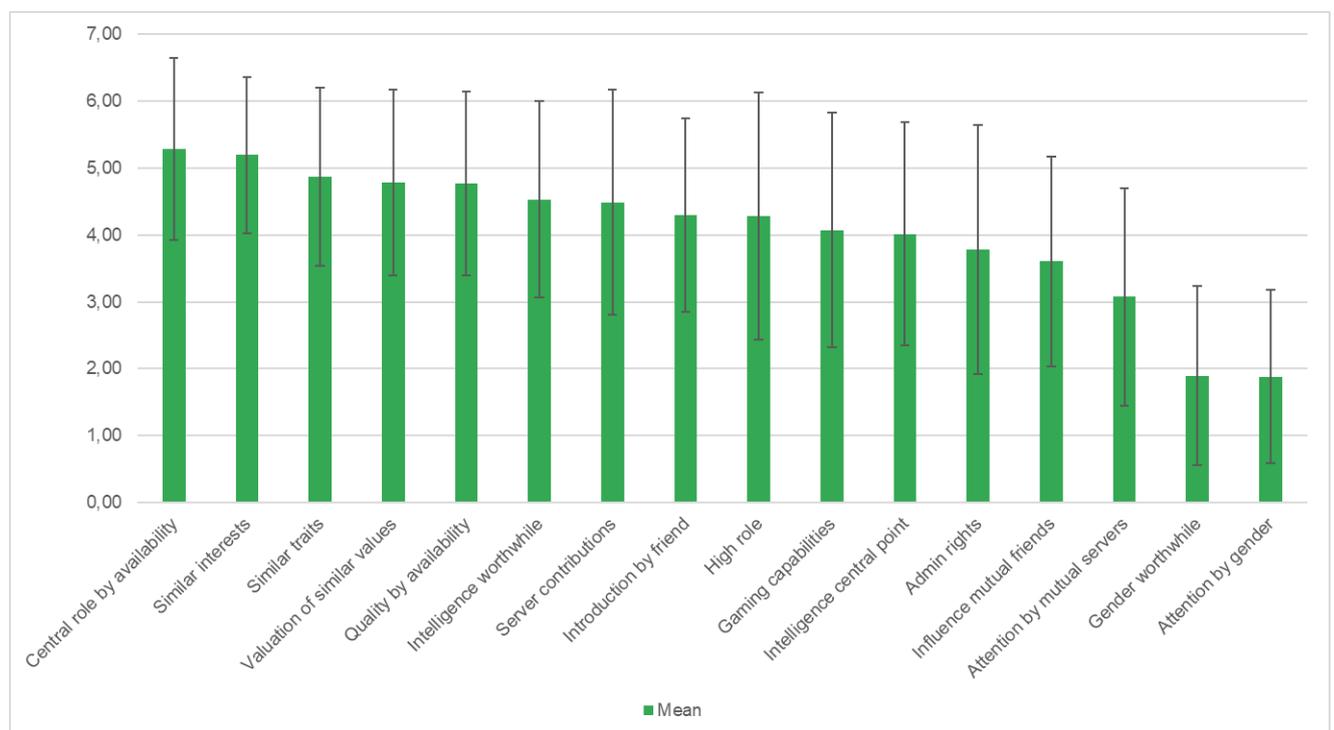
In order to analyze the contribution of Discord to online social status, a survey was conducted in which 68 respondents participated. Of these participants 10 were female, 56 were male, and 2 preferred not to disclose their gender. The ages ranged from 15 to 33 and averaged at 23. The respondents were mostly higher educated, with 56 of the respondents following, or having followed, bachelor's degree education or higher. The questions asked in the survey, alongside the corresponding factors, can be found in Appendix 1. The questions are ordered by the factors they contribute to, the factor is provided in brackets after each question, and the possible responses are shown underneath each question.

In Graph 1 the means of the answers to each question can be found under the corresponding factor. The factors were scored on a 7-point Likert scale, the standard deviation is indicated for each factor using an error bar. In order to test for correlation between survey items, a correlation matrix was created which can be found in Appendix 2. From this matrix and the general scores of the factors, several indicators were found to be important. The survey results show that availability was one of the important factors that contributes to social status assignment. The correlations showed that people who are present more often were found to have a more central role in servers and conversations on servers ($M= 5.28$, $SD=1.36$). Furthermore, it indicated that people who are available more frequently were also rated as better conversation partners ($M=4.76$, $SD= 1.37$). Another important factor based on the survey is the similarity of the person. Respondents reported to paying more attention to people with similar interests ($M=5.19$, $SD= 1.16$). They also valued the advice and opinions of people with similar values more highly ($M=4.78$, $SD=1.39$). Statements reported as having the least importance were gender and shared connections. A factor that was found to not be important in regard to social status assignment was being of the same gender. Respondents indicated to not pay more attention to people of the same gender as them on Discord ($M=1.88$,

SD=1.299) and did not regard conversations with people of the same gender as them on Discord as more worthwhile (M=1.90, SD=1.340). Having mutual friends and having mutual servers were also found to not be important in regard to contribution to social status assignment on Discord. Respondents did not seek out more contact during conversations on Discord with people who are in multiple mutual servers with them (M=3.07, SD=1.627), nor did they find opinions of people on Discord with mutual friends to be more important (M=3.60, SD=1.566).

Graph 1

Factors Relevant for Social Status Assignment on Discord



Besides intercorrelation from questions regarding the same category, several interesting correlations were found. The first interesting correlation was between intelligence and similarity. Respondents who regarded conversations on Discord with people with high intelligence as more worthwhile had a higher appreciation of people on Discord with similar traits ($B=.325$, $p=.007$), and valued people's advice and opinions on Discord more if they had similar values ($B=.284$, $p=.019$). Respondents that preferred to play competitive games with people that are good at those games, when gaming together on Discord, found the opinions of people with mutual friends less important than respondents that did not have a preference to play competitive games with people that are good at those games ($B=.224$, $p=.045$).

Furthermore, respondents that indicated to be good at competitive games preferred to play competitive games with people that are good at competitive games as well, when gaming together on Discord ($B=.356$, $p=.003$). Respondents that were more appreciative of other users' presence if they contribute to a server had better interactions with people who are more available on Discord ($B=.342$, $p=.004$), and thought that people who are present more often have a more central role in the conversation in servers that they visited ($B=.427$, $p<.001$).

Overall, it can be concluded from the conducted surveys that there are several indicators that are relatively important to online social status assignment, and several indicators that are not important. Most important were availability and similarity, which are both emphasized by Discord in its promotion of the platform and the affordances it offers. Online it is easier to be readily available as the participation threshold is relatively low, and high availability is appreciated. The appreciation for similarity is possibly due to that Discord servers are often created for certain goals, such as exchanging information or playing certain games, as this implicates that users seek out others with similar interests and values as well. Less important were gender and mutual connections. Gender is likely unimportant as this is communicated to a very limited degree online, and mutual connections might not be as important due to the anonymity of online interactions.

3.3. Social practice analysis

For the social practice analysis, a theoretical lens was used to draw conclusions on the previous two steps and locate this study in the theoretical debate. The most important theory for this step of the analysis concerns the operationalized indicators and how these influence social status differently online compared to offline. Using the theoretical lens of social status and hierarchies, several categories can be distilled in regard to how important the operationalized indicators are for status assignment on Discord.

The first category consists of indicators that were found to be similar between online and offline status assignment, but expressed in different manners. On Discord, formal status can be expressed through server roles or server rights. This is comparable to formal status in offline settings, for example, a leadership function in a company. Formal status on Discord is more confined and limited than formal status offline, as there are many more contributing factors to offline formal social status, whereas on Discord formal status originates almost exclusively from server rights and server roles.

The second category consists of indicators that are comparable in importance offline and on Discord, for instance, intelligence and social connections. The importance of social

connections is expressed similarly on Discord as it is offline. This is likely due to the focus on communities that is present on Discord. Therefore, being connected within an online social network on Discord is comparably as important as being well-connected in offline communities. Another indicator that is expressed similarly on Discord and offline is capabilities. Having high capability in a skill that is considered important in a community is a contributor to social status on both Discord as well as offline. For example, on Discord, being good at a competitive game is valued highly in a server dedicated to competitive gaming, similarly to how being good at soccer is valued highly in a soccer club.

The third category consists of indicators that were found to be less important online than they are offline, such as wealth, gender, and appearance. This likely originates from the type of communication that is used. Certain indicators cannot be conveyed at all online, and others are communicated less efficiently. For example, in regard to appearance through the halo effect, which entails that if an individual possesses over a certain positive trait, such as being attractive, they are assumed to possess over other positive traits as well (Nisbett & Wilson, 1977). Therefore, the halo effect might positively influence the social status of a more attractive individual. However, since Discord allows limited conveying of appearance this likely has a less imperative role in the assignment of status. The same is likely to apply to gender, since this is also communicated less clearly.

The fourth category concerns indicators that are more relevant to online social status on Discord than to offline social status. On Discord capabilities in regard to server improvement are appreciated and can elevate a person's social status, however, this skill is not present in offline communication and therefore not as important. Offline, contributions to a community are appreciated in a somewhat similar manner, but to a lesser degree as this is a less prevalent and fundamental aspect of interactions. This is due to a server on Discord being vital for the interactions, and therefore very important, whereas offline this is not a requirement and therefore less focal. Availability is also more important on Discord than it is offline. On Discord, less effort is required to initiate regular communication with others, since individuals do not have to be in the same location in order to interact with each other. This lowers the participation threshold but also makes users more inclined to opt for easier initiated interaction, for example, to enter a voice call in which someone is already present, rather than asking someone to join them in a voice call. Therefore, someone who is available more frequently is valued more highly on Discord.

Another interesting observation that can be made through a theoretical lens is that in bigger servers on Discord, for example, the servers of influencers, the benefits of social status

and hierarchies translate relatively well. Individuals tend to enjoy more respect and attention, and therefore strive to attain higher status and act according to the norms within a server to retain their current status, social status leads to better organization within the server, and the decision-making processes are likely made with more ease.

Conclusion

Based on the results of the three steps of the CDA the research questions can now be answered. In order to answer the main research question, first the sub-questions must be answered. Sub-question 1 pertained to the type of platform that Discord is. Discord is a communication platform that focuses on Voice-over-IP and text messaging for communication between individuals and groups. It can be used to create servers to which other users can be invited. In these servers, voice channels and text channels can be created in which users can communicate over voice chat and text messaging. Users can also communicate on an individual basis and add other users as friends. It was originally intended for communicating with others while playing online video games with them, and therefore has a high focus on video game-related functions and marketing. It is also widely used for the creation of communities, and as such, it has a high focus on community building and the norms and values associated with communities.

Sub-question 2 pertained to the difference between the conceptualization of online and offline status. Overall, online status tends to be more quantifiable. This is especially true for online communication on UGC platforms where users can express their appreciation for content in a quantifiable way, for example through likes, views, or comments. Furthermore, online many of the important factors for status assignment that have been found to be relevant to offline status are not as important. Rather, other aspects, such as online power, are important. Many of these aspects occur in both online as well as offline status assignment, however, their manifestation differs depending on the manner of communication.

Sub-question 3 pertained to the creation of social status on Discord and how this differs from offline social status creation based on the affordances of Discord. The most prevalent functionalities of Discord are communication functionalities based on voice chats and text messaging in a server-based ecosystem. Therefore, looking at Discord and what it affords in regard to communication in the textual analysis it was found that the creation of social status is likely to mostly originate from *social connections* and *voice*, since these indicators are most prevalently communicated when using Discord. Discord is a platform based on online communities. In communities, individuals tend to seek homophily (McPherson et al., 2001). As a result of this, several other indicators, such as similarity in *interests*, *intelligence*, *capabilities*, and *accomplishments*, were found to be likely relevant for status assignment as well. Communication on Discord differs from offline communication in several ways. For instance, when looking at Walther's (1992) theory on CMC, the communication forms on Discord have a smaller 'bandwidth' than offline communication.

This leads to a lower possibility of signaling status through one's appearance. As such, indicators that were found to likely be less important were *gender*, *appearance*, *body language*, and *wealth*.

The actual relevance of the abovementioned indicators was analyzed to answer sub-question 4, which pertained to how Discord and its users perceive the importance of these indicators for social status assignment on Discord. From the analysis of Discord's website, the surveys, and the interviews can be discerned that of the established indicators, the indicator *interests* was the most important factor for social status creation on Discord. Furthermore, availability was found to be an important factor. *Social connections*, *voice*, *accomplishments*, *intelligence*, *capabilities*, and *body language* were found to be relevant as well, however, this was to a lesser degree than *interests* and availability. Unimportant were *gender*, *appearance*, and *wealth*. More concretely, it was mainly the roles of participants that were found to communicate status, and participation in voice chat or text chat was most important for the assignment of status. Many other affordances of Discord that were expected to have been important for the assignment of status, such as the use of video chat, linked accounts, or mutual friends and servers, were generally not found to be very important.

Based on the answers to the sub-questions the main question can now be answered: *How does the platform Discord contribute to the creation of social status online?* Due to Discord's focus on shared activities in its use availability and shared interests are most important for the assignment of status between users. Discord's features do not contribute significantly to the communication of shared interests, because although it has features that would allow this, respondents indicated to not make much use of this. It is likely that the design of Discord and its server-based communities is the largest contributing factor to the prevalence of shared interests as an indicator of social status. Availability is mainly specific to certain servers and is expressed through activity in voice channels and text channels. Discord allows the communication of status through the assignment of roles within a server, which can be both formal and related to server rights, as well as informal. Aspects that in the traditional sense of social status tend to be considered important, such as gender and education, were found to be mostly unimportant.

Limitations and future research

There were several main limitations to this study. First of all, the corpus was limited in several aspects. Due to the scope of the study, there was no possibility to conduct the surveys and interviews in regard to offline status assignment in order to compare the results. This

lowers the external validity of the study. Moreover, the study only incorporated one online platform and might have yielded more representative results if it had included multiple platforms with different audiences, different affordances, and different norms and values at their cores. The respondents were furthermore somewhat homogenous, which is likely due to the target audience of Discord. This may have caused the results to not be reflective of social status creation in different demographic groups. Another possible limitation originates from the chosen method, as a different method might have produced better results. Differences between the theory on social status and the results of this study might originate from more modern notions in regard to social status compared to the leading theories on offline social status. The theories for offline social status were mostly developed between the 1950s and the 1980s, which might cause a difference in notion of time in values and beliefs compared to Discord's relatively young target audience. Lastly, it is important to note that the results of the surveys and interviews are based on self-reports by the respondents, which might influence the results. This was avoided as much as possible by using proxies in the questions, but might still have occurred.

There are several directions in which future research might further explore this subject. Other platforms can be incorporated to draw comparisons and explore how the design and use of the platform might influence online social status assignment, or a control group might be included, focused on offline status assignment in order to draw comparisons between the online and offline. Furthermore, quantitative social status might be incorporated as well within larger communities. Another option would be to apply different methods, for example by analyzing a specific group of individuals on an online social platform with observations in order to see how the behavior they portray in regard to social status within the group compares to their interpretation of this.

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Appendix 1 – Survey questions

Intelligence/Capabilities

I regard conversations on Discord with people with a high intelligence as more worthwhile.
(Intelligence worthwhile)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

I prefer playing competitive games with people that are good at those games, when gaming together on Discord. (Gaming capabilities)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Someone's contribution to a server on Discord makes me appreciate their presence. (Server contribution)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Intelligent people have a more central focal point in my interactions on Discord. (Intelligence central point)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Social Connections / Mutual friends / Being There

I have better interactions with people who are more often available on Discord. (Quality by availability)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

People who are present more often have a more central role in the conversation in servers I visit. (Central role by availability)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

If one of my friends introduces me to someone on a Discord server, I am more inclined to like them. (Introduction by friend)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

When people in a Discord server have mutual friends with me, their opinions are more important to me. (Influence mutual friends)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

I seek more contact during a conversation on Discord with people who are in multiple mutual servers. (Attention by mutual servers)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Appearance / Gender

I regard conversations on Discord with people with the same gender as more worthwhile.
(Gender worthwhile)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

I pay more attention to people of the same gender as me on Discord. (Attention by gender)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

I appreciate people with similar traits to me on Discord. (Similar traits)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Interests

When interacting on a Discord server I value people's advice and opinions more if they have similar values as I have. (Valuation of similar values)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

On Discord, I more actively seek out attention of people with similar interests as mine, than of people who don't. (Similar interests)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Accomplishments / Wealth

When someone has a high role in a server, I assume they are better liked or more respected in that server. (High role)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

I respect people with admin rights on Discord servers. (Admin rights)

Completely Disagree (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Completely Agree

Demographic questions

What is your gender?

Male – female – other: ... – I'd rather not say

What is your age in years?

Open

How often do you use Discord?

Every day – a few times a week – once a week – a few times a month – once a month
– a few times a year – once a year)

What is the highest level of education that you finished or are currently following?

Primary school – high school – trade/technical/vocational training – Bachelor's degree
– Master's degree – Higher than a Master's degree

How diverse is your social circle on Discord in regard to gender? (Not at all -> Very)

Not at all (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Very

Does your Discord profile picture depict you?

Yes – no

Is your Discord username your real name?

Yes – no

For what kind of communication do you primarily use Discord?

Communication on big servers – communication on small servers – individual communication

What do you mostly use Discord for?

Video games – party games – exchanging information – hanging out with friends – other: ...

To what degree do you value your anonymity when interacting with others on Discord?

Not at all (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Very

Generally speaking, how good are you at the competitive games that you play?

Not at all good (1 – 2 – 3 – 4 – 5 – 6 – 7) Very good

Appendix 2 – Correlation matrix

Correlations

	I regard conversations on Discord as more worthwhile.	I prefer playing competitive games with people who are good at those games, when gaming together on Discord.	Someone's contribution to a server on Discord makes me appreciate their presence.	Intelligent people are central to my interactions on Discord.	I have better conversations with people who are more available on Discord.	People who are present more often in servers I visit.	If one of my friends introduces someone on a server, I am more inclined to like them.	When people in a discord server have mutual opinions are more important to me.	I seek more contact during a conversation with people who are in multiple mutual servers.	I regard conversations with the same gender as more worthwhile.	I appreciate people with similar traits to me on Discords.	When interacting on a server I value people's opinions more if they have similar values as I have.	On Discord, I more actively seek out attention from people with similar interests as mine, than of people who don't.	When someone has a high role in a server, I assume they are better liked or more respected than that server.	I respect people who admin rights on Discord servers.	What is your age in years?	Generally how good are you at the competitive games that you play?
I regard conversations on Discord with people with a high intelligence as more worthwhile.	1	.100	.154	.082	.188	.082	.031	-.037	.065	.172	.158	.325**	.284	.097	.055	-.031	.171
I prefer playing competitive games with people who are good at those games, when gaming together on Discord.	.088	1	.416	.209	.000	.124	.508	.802	.765	.602	.198	.007	.019	.431	.565	.803	.162
Someone's contribution to a server on Discord makes me appreciate their presence.	.100	.416	1	-.033	.091	.013	.023	-.208	-.244*	.114	.149	.122	-.085	-.207	-.002	-.324**	.356**
Intelligent people are central to my interactions on Discord.	.088	.088	.688	.460	.460	.913	.855	.088	.045	.357	.323	.452	.090	.210	.988	.714	.008
I have better interactions with people who are more often available on Discord.	.154	-.033	1	.242	.342**	.417**	.168	.154	.089	-.103	-.049	.135	-.030	.173	.061	.183	-.009
People who are present more often in servers I visit.	.209	.792	.000	.047	.004	.000	.172	.210	.579	.401	.693	.271	.807	.157	.619	.135	.943
If one of my friends introduces someone on a server, I am more inclined to like them.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
When people in a discord server have mutual opinions are more important to me.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
I seek more contact during a conversation with people who are in multiple mutual servers.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
I regard conversations on Discord with people with the same gender as more worthwhile.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
I appreciate people with similar traits to me on Discords.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
When interacting on a Discord server I value people's advice and opinions more if they have similar values as I have.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
On Discord, I more actively seek out attention from people with similar interests as mine, than of people who don't.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
When someone has a high role in a server, I assume they are better liked or more respected than that server.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
I respect people with admin rights on Discord servers.	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
What is your age in years?	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688
Generally speaking, how good are you at the competitive games that you play?	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688	.688

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).
* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).