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Discourse Community Research Project: Secret Code of the Aggie Band Family

Introduction

The UC Davis Marching Band-uh is known for being one of the proudest groups in the university. As a member since the start of 2017 spring quarter, I have noticed a distinct way of communication within the community that differs from any other musical groups, including choir, chamber orchestra, musical and rock band, that I have participated in previously. There are numerous research papers on interactions within orchestras and other artistic organizations, yet nearly none on a marching band, which is so unique on its own. The marching band uses their own jargons both formally, in performances, and informally, as jokes in conversations between band members. College students from Ohio University and Boise State University have also identified unique vocabularies within their marching bands and expressed that in blogs (Jauregui, 2011 and Marching 110) and research papers (Dagaz, 2012). This affirms the idea of the marching band being a discourse community as Schmidt and Vande Kopple states that members of a discourse community share ways of communication (1993). However, what strikes me most of the community is the exceptional belongingness and togetherness among band members. Despite being a group of several hundreds, most members know each other like families. Through primary and secondary research, this paper will investigate whether the unique ways of communication contribute to the exceptionally strong belongingness and togetherness within the UC Davis Marching Band-uh.

Methodology

In this research paper, I am using the UC Davis marching band-uh as a representation of marching band in general. As the band is such a huge group, consisting more than 250 active members, I chose to collect my data through surveys to get a more accurate representation of the entire community. I posted my survey on the UC Davis Marching Band-uh Facebook group, where members communicate through most of the time. The Facebook group includes both current and alumni members. There are more than 300 members in the group. However, they are not forced to do the survey. The objective of this survey is to confirm my observations on communications between members in the band.

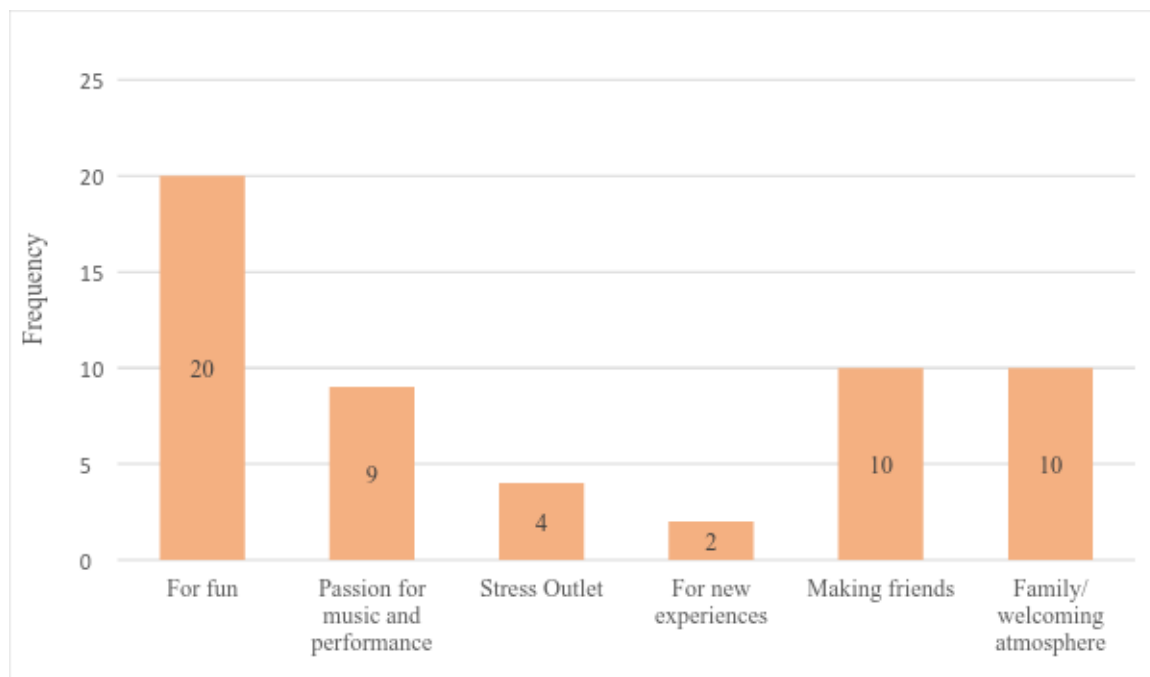
The survey consists of six questions, two short answer questions and four multiple choice questions. The first question is about whether they enjoy being in the marching band community and the reason that they continue being part of it. This question is to have a general idea of what members feel about the band. The second question asks participants about the unique terminology among the community and some examples of the terms. This gives me a scope of lexicons that is commonly used. The four multiple choice questions are on whether the ways of communication used within the community are different from other communities and whether they contribute to the sense of belonging towards the band.

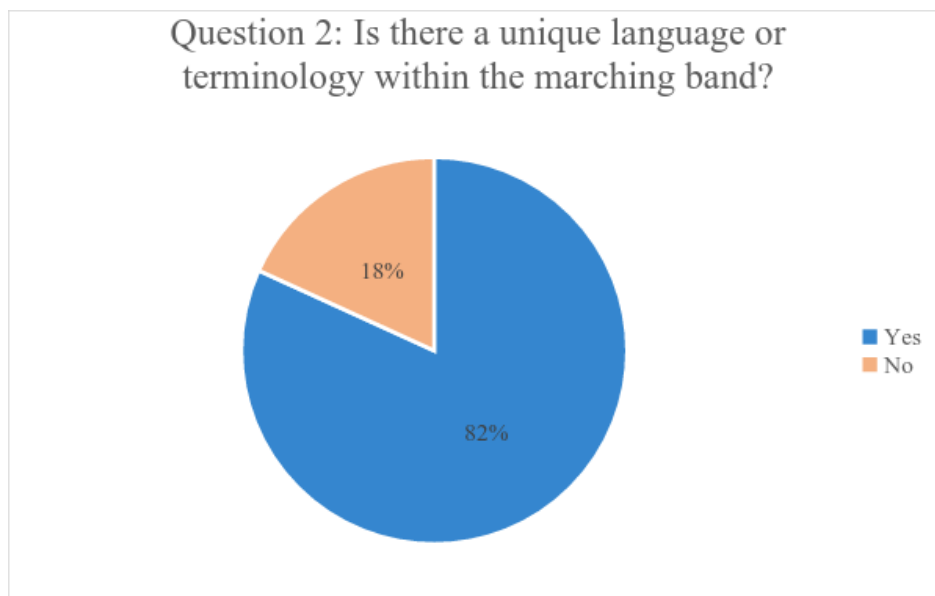
Being one of the members, I acted as a participant-observer in the UC Davis Marching Band rehearsals for this research. I observed how members communicate with each other during practice sections, which takes place every Monday evening. I recorded both verbal and nonverbal ways of communication between members.

Data Results

In the period of two weeks, I received 34 responses from the survey that I posted on the UC Davis Marching Band-uh Facebook group. The following are the results that I accumulated.

In question 1, “Do you enjoy being in the marching band?”, all the participants answered that they enjoy being in the marching band. Although there is a diverse set of reasons of them being in the band, the following are the most common reasons:



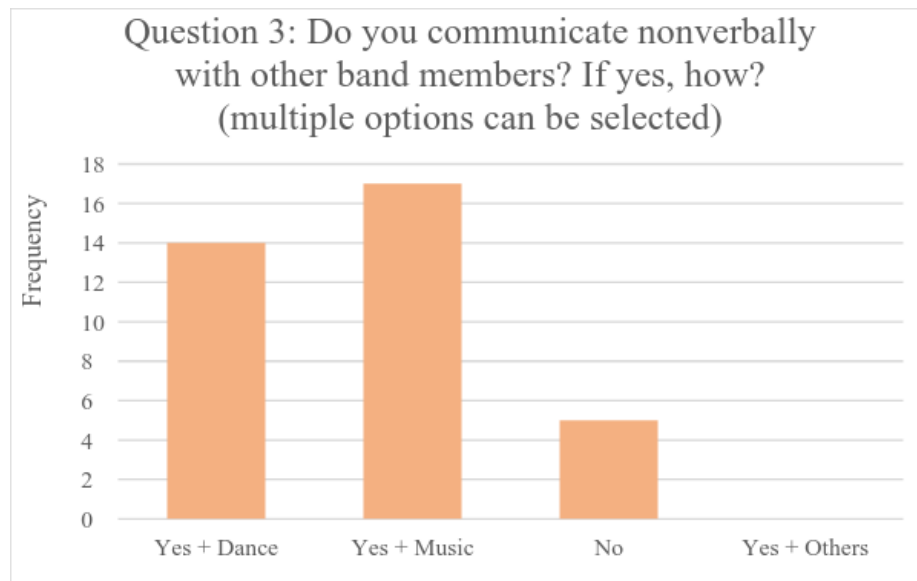


81.8% of the participants expressed that band members use a unique language to communicate. 18.2% of the participants who claimed that there is not probably because they are not aware that the terms they use within the community are actually unique. That is certainly reasonable because they have been using the words so long that they may not treat them as something special. Participants who have answered positively to this question also provided some examples. The following are the most mentioned words:

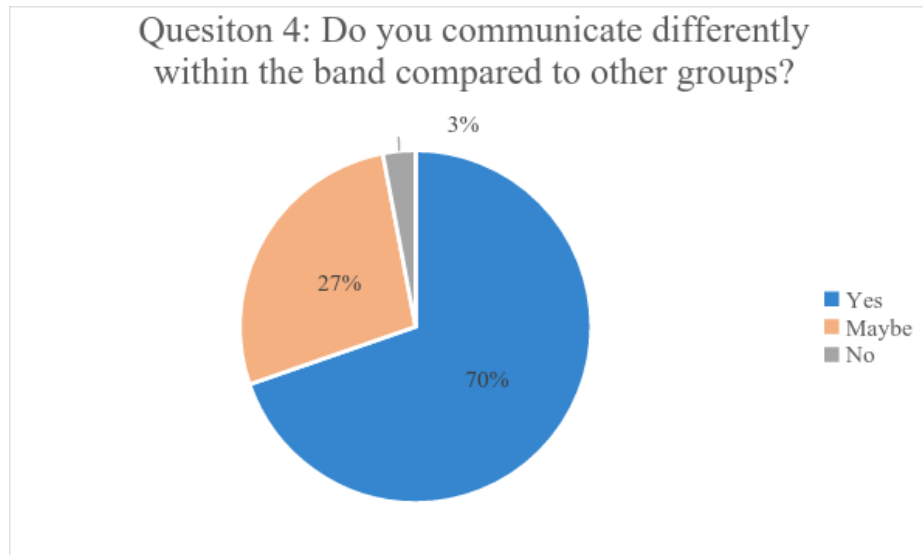
- Marching instructions – steps, halfway points, pivots, harry hat, 8-5, etc.
- Music instructions – top, cadence, etc.
- Event names – gigs, barn, MNR, etc.
- Position names – StuD, AssMan, AssDM, AssStuD, stale, etc.
- Uniform items – mav, yackets, etc.
- Slangs – can you do me, horn up, etc.

From my observation during the UC Davis Marching Band rehearsal, I noticed the frequent use of the technical lexicons mentioned above. The regular whole band meeting and section meeting are especially jargon-heavy because members are updated on upcoming events and uniform and

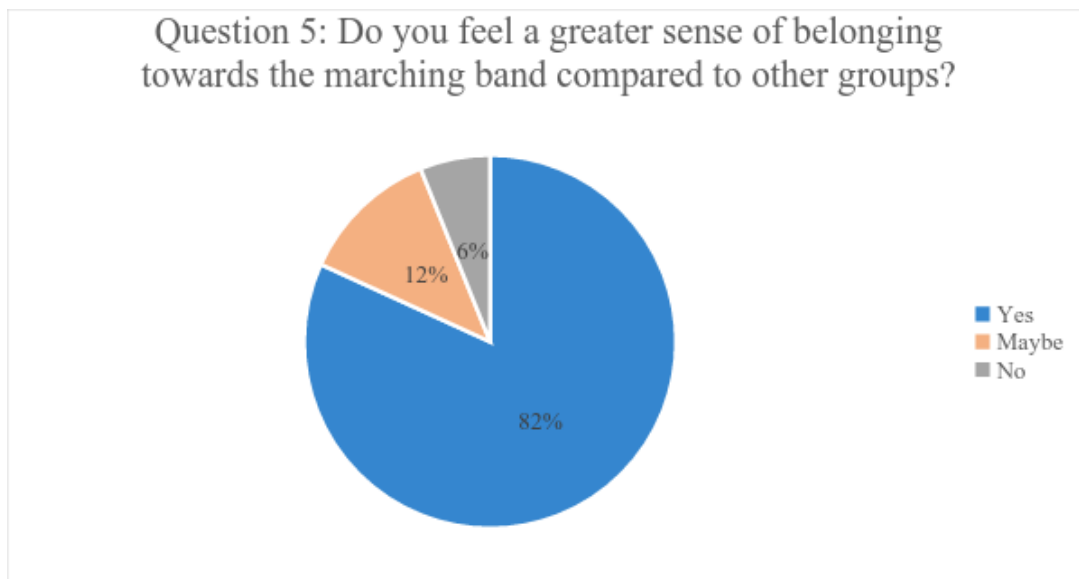
equipment to prepare. When practicing the music and dance, technical words for marching and music are also often used.



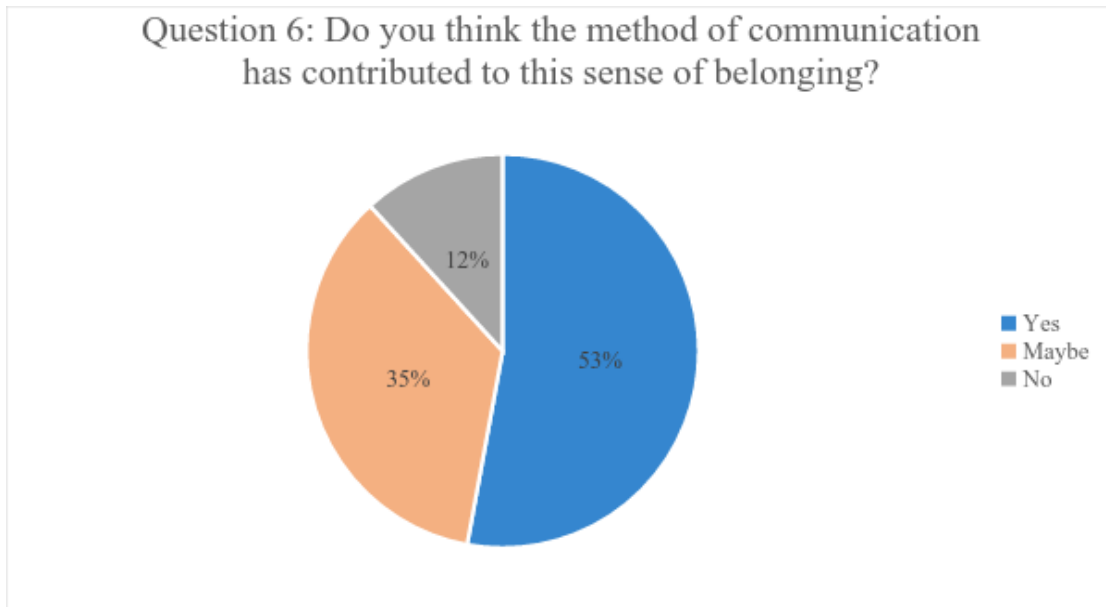
Approximately half of the participants claim that they use dance and sounds to communicate. Although there is no data on how other groups communicate, this combination of gestures, dance and sound is certainly not commonly found in sports or academic groups. During practices, I felt that band members create a genuinely fun and welcoming atmosphere through playing their instruments joyfully and expressing themselves freely through random dance moves.



Around 70% of the participants firmly express that they communicate differently compared to other groups, whereas a quarter of the participants are not sure, but they still consider the possibility that the marching band has unique ways of communicating.



81.8% of the participants agree that they greater sense of belonging towards the band than any other groups. My observation during band rehearsals affirms this result. From their smiles and friendly interactions with other members, I can deduce that they really like being in this community.



I am aware that there are many factors that contribute to that sense of belonging, for example, the frequent bonding events and the same goal of having fun. The method of communication is such a natural thing that most people would not be aware of its contribution. Though, more than half of the participants claim that it does contribute to the belongingness, while 35.3% are unsure and only 11.8% reject the idea.

Analysis/Discussion

Verbal Communication

Lexicon

According to the responses on question 2 in the survey, we can be sure that lexis exists in the UC Davis Marching Band-uh, despite not all the participants are aware of it. These lexicons can be divided into two groups: technical and general. Majority of the lexicons are used for directing the band in marching and music playing, while some are for positions in the band, uniform and equipment. The general lexicons are not official. It consists of slangs and jokes that are understood by band members, such as “Can you do me?” meaning “Can you zip me up?” and “horn up” meaning “get ready to play”.

The existence of lexis is not only valid in the UC Davis Marching Band-uh, but also in other schools’ marching bands, such as the marching band in Ramona High School and the Marching 110 of Ohio University. In Ramona High School’s marching band, members also have these two different groups of lexicons. For the technical group, the percussion section of this marching band has invented a dialect known as “drumspeak”. The drum players would refer to parts of the music by mimicking the sound of the drum.

“Hey, Dylan, let’s take it from measure 69.”

“Is that where the snare drums go, ‘diggida diggaga boom sh’kadat’?”

“No, it’s after the buzz roll. ‘Spiggida-biggida bzzzzz chubzy chubzy boom sh’kadat.”

(Jauregui, 2011)

This way of communication is likely not endemic to this marching band, but others in slight variations.

As for the general group, members joke by referring to music jargons. For instance,

“Wow, that laugh was just like an arpeggio!” and “I’m a fermata. Hold me.” Terms like “arpeggio” and “fermata” may not be known to people who have not studied music. These unique jokes that are only understood between band members strengthen their bonds because their mutual understanding creates memories. On the other hand, these jokes would mean nothing between a band member and an outsider.

Meetings

The UC Davis Marching Band-uh have practices every Monday 7pm to 9pm. Every time, there would be announcement time at 8pm. Staff from the management team would give everyone updates on events and reminders. Although there is a hierarchy structure in the band, there is no sense of authority in the communication between section leader or staff with other members. The regular updates make sure all members are on the same page; no one is left out. There is also a regular section meeting after that. After looking deeper into the community, I noticed that the marching band is not just a single discourse community but a collection of discourse communities formed by different instrument sections. Each section has their own bonding activities and traditions.

Nonverbal Communication:

Music

As most people would expect, music is one of the main ways of communication between performers and audiences. In fact, members also communicate with each other through music. Although they may not be delivering a particular message, they are naturally creating an atmosphere that is often fun and energizing. One participant mentioned that s/he enjoys being in

the band because of the welcoming atmosphere, while many mentioned that the band is just like a family. All members work together as a group. There is no need to compete for being the loudest or the fastest, or else the music would be a mess. In the marching band, unity sometimes matters more than individuality. Members work together to produce a harmonious outcome.

In colleges, or even high schools, students are bombarded with competition - competing for higher grades, jobs and opportunities. One of the most mentioned reason that survey participants enjoy being in the band is for stress relief. This shows that the band displays a competition-free environment for the members. Every member has a guaranteed part, that they do not have to worry about being taken away from them. Even someone like me, who does not even know how to play the trumpet, is given a position in the community. This environment, formed by the welcoming and friendly communication between members through music, is different from academic groups, where there are often some underlying competitions. With the desire for such an accepting and family-like community, members feel deeply connected to the group.

Dance

Dance is the other most well-known communication method in the marching band. Very similar to music, it creates that free-will atmosphere for members to express themselves. During practices, even if they are not required to dance while playing, members would still dance or do whatever movements they feel like doing. I often see members doing silly movements that I would not see outside of the band room. Their dance moves tell others that they are having fun, which is a shared goal within the community. The constant communication and reminder of the goal of having fun unite the community. Despite the dance moves being hilarious, no one would

judge one another. Some of the survey participants expressed that they could fully be themselves in the marching band. That was what I felt too. I do not have to endure the judgmental gazes from the public. In the article “Learning from the Band: Trust, Acceptance, and Self-Confidence”, Dagaz (2012) interviewed Dalia who is participating in her high school’s marching band. When Dalia shared her experience, she said that she used to be “grossly overweight and depressed.” Her parents would always tell her that she could not dance and that she would only embarrass herself. However, Dalia still joined the marching band. Although she could not learn the dance moves as quickly as others, band members were very supportive. With tremendous effort and the help of others, she was able to dance freely and made it onto the varsity guard team successfully. She thanked her fellow band members and the directors for accepting and encouraging her. The marching band is a very special place where everyone can be themselves.

Conclusion

A marching band is a very tight-knit community that uses both verbal and nonverbal communication. The technical lexicons and general lexicons both help strengthening the togetherness among members. The regular announcement meetings prevent any band members being isolated or left ignorant of the community’s progress. The non-verbal communication includes music and dance that create a warm and fun environment that allows members truly be who they are. Being free of competition makes members feel at home, thus have exceptionally strong sense of belonging towards the community. The marching band is a very successful discourse community that everyone should be proud of.

Reference

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