



Supporting Community-Building in Digital Libraries: A Pilot Study of LibraryThing

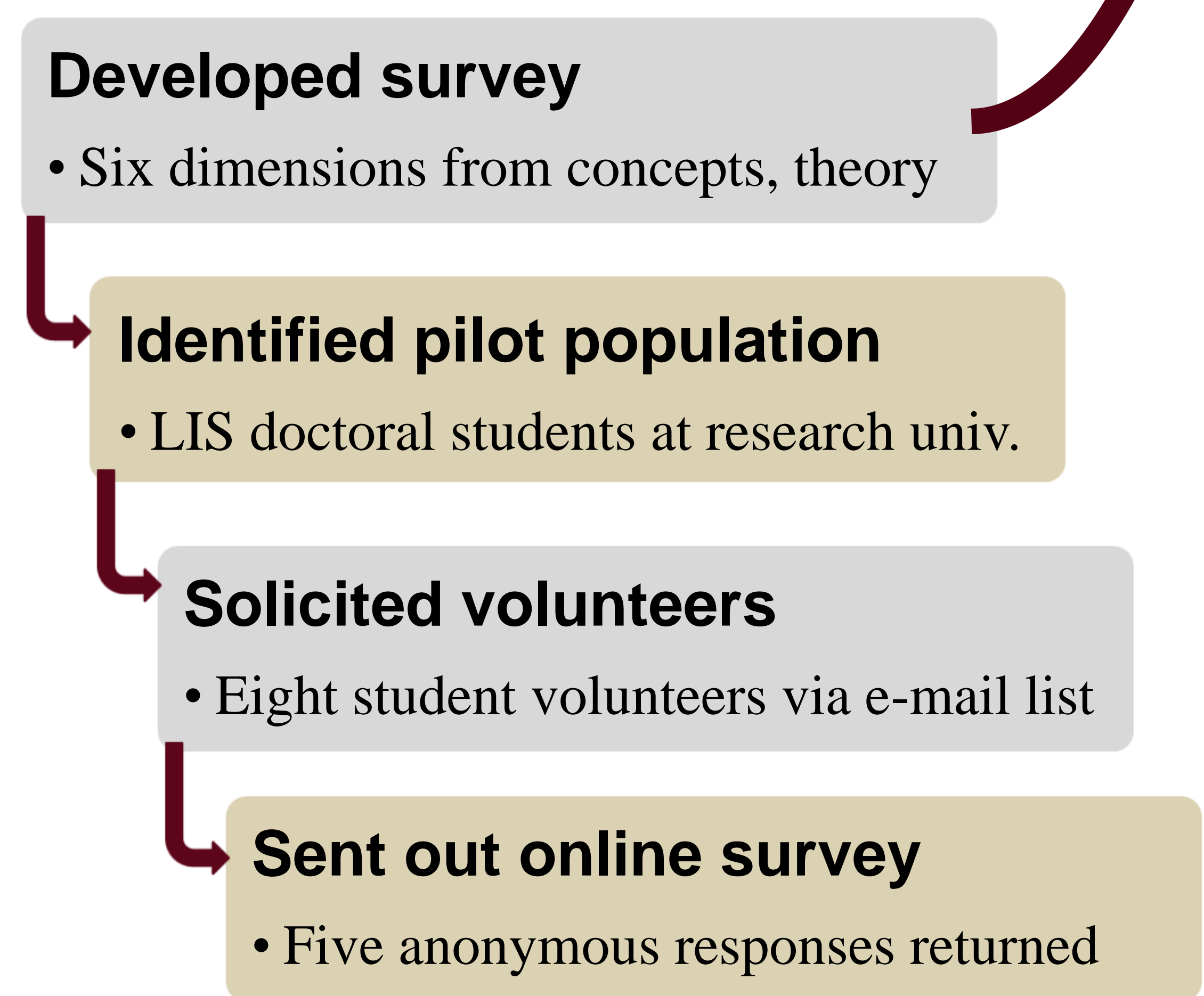
Adam Worrall, College of Communication and Information, Florida State University



Introduction

- Digital libraries are inherently social organizations and environments that must support and build the communities that use them through *both* content *and* services
- However, many digital libraries were and are not designed or developed with social contexts in mind, and often do not support these well
- They should improve this support of social interactions to integrate better with, cross the boundaries of, and build their user communities
- This poster reports on ongoing research on this important problem:
 - Development and piloting of a survey instrument measuring and evaluating the support for community-building, as judged by users, in digital libraries
 - LibraryThing (librarything.com) was used as a test case

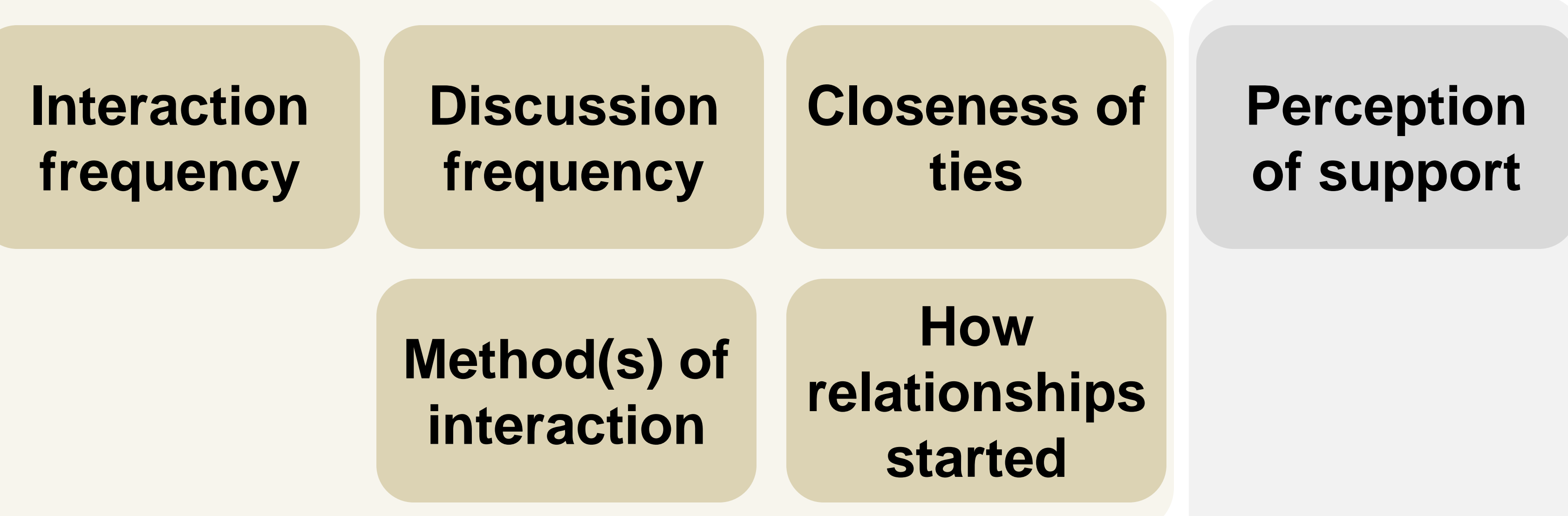
Method



Research Question

What level of support for community-building does LibraryThing provide, as judged by the users and communities that use its content and services?

Theoretical Framework



Communities of Practice

(Lave & Wenger; Brown & Duguid)

- Groups who share a particular practice, profession, or task, as well as related concerns
- **Networks of practice:** Broader groups or social networks that still have a practice in common, but work less closely together across organizational boundaries

Social Network Analysis

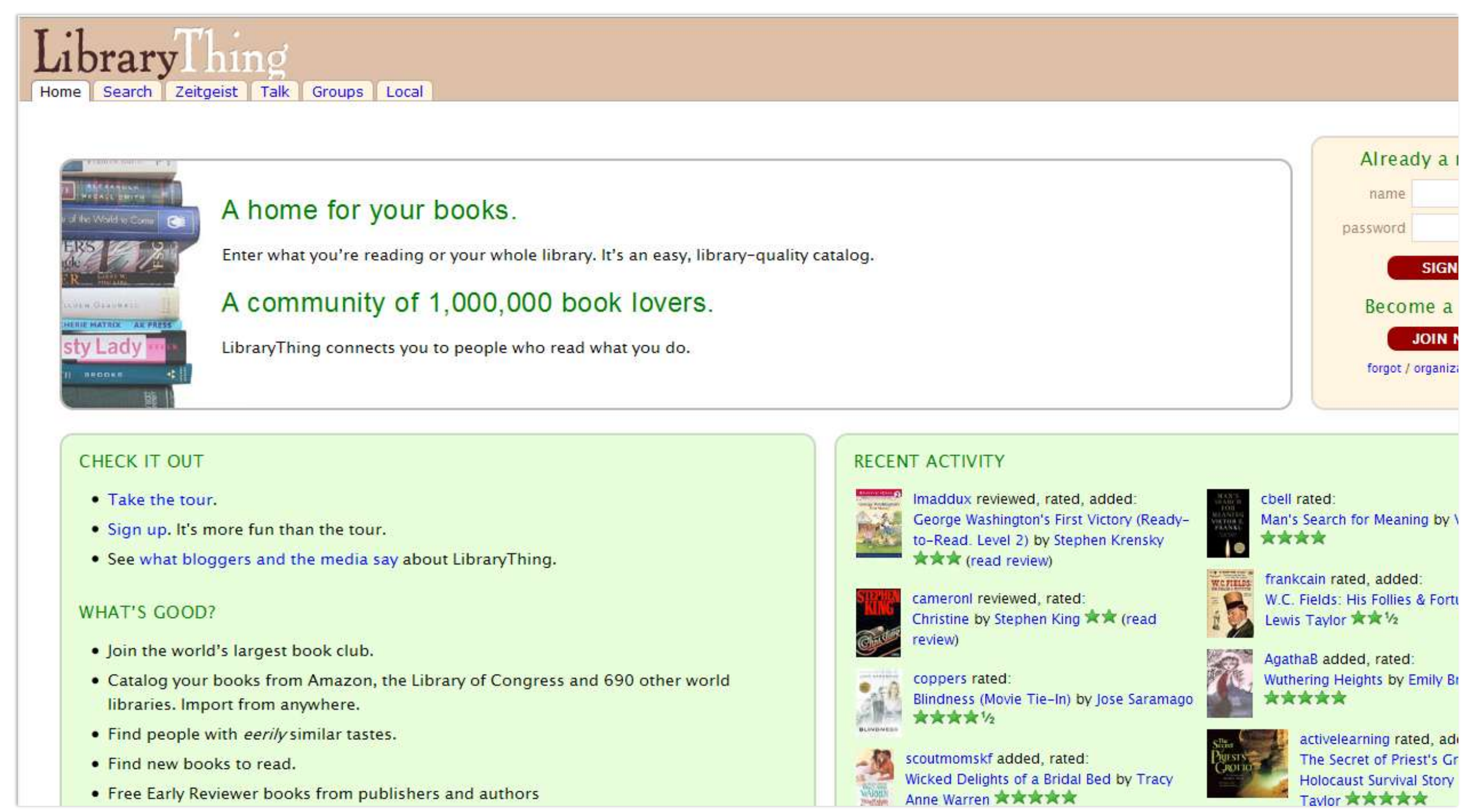
(Garton, Haythornthwaite, & Wellman)

- Describes network of social relations, passage of information through them
- Of particular note are measures of **range** and **density**
- Rarely used in digital library research, but high face validity here

Boundary Objects

(Star)

- Cross between multiple worlds and adapt to many of them to support translation between communities
- Digital libraries should act as successful boundary objects to build the social worlds and communities that use them



Pilot Findings

- **Low support for community-building provided**
 - Range and density of social networks was low
 - Low frequency of interaction and discussion
 - Lack of close ties, relationships via LibraryThing
 - Low usage of most methods of interaction
 - Perceptions more reasonable, but not strong
- **Parallels literature on communities, interaction**
- **Close ties**
 - Tie strength relies not just on depth, but also time in relationship (Marsden & Campbell, 1984)
 - In one case, closeness due to time, not frequency
 - Backed up by other responses, literature
- **Community-building was observed, but without support from LibraryThing**
 - Failure by LibraryThing to act as a successful boundary object, integrate users' social networks

Further Research

- **Full mixed-method case study of LibraryThing**
 - Larger sample
 - Broader population
 - Open-ended questions
 - Follow-up qualitative interviews
 - Content analysis
- **Exploration of motivations for use/non-use of social features of LibraryThing**
- **Multiple case studies comparing community-building across similar digital libraries, other social systems**

Thanks to Besiki Stvilia, Michelle Kazmer, Melissa Gross, Gary Burnett, Sheila Baker, Lisa Tripp, Don Latham, and the anonymous reviewers for their help, suggestions, and advice. Many thanks as well to the LIS doctoral students who completed the survey.