

## Chapter 1.4

# Online Communities and Social Networking

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### INTRODUCTION

Technology has enabled communities to move beyond the physical face-to-face contacts to the online realm of the World Wide Web. With the advent of the highways in the 1950s and 1960s, “communities” were created in suburbia. The Internet, on the other hand, has over the last two decades, enabled the creation of a myriad of “online communities” (Green, 2007) that have limitless boundaries across every corner of the globe.

This essay will begin by providing a definition of the term “online communities” and then describing several typologies of this phenomenon. The various motivations for joining communities, how marketers create social bonds that enhance social relationships, as well as strategies used by firms in building online communities are also discussed. We conclude by discussing strategies for managing online communities, leveraging them for social networking, researching them, as well as directions for future research.

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### DEFINITION

A “community” refers to an evolving group of people communicating and acting together to reach a common goal. It creates a sense of membership through involvement or shared common interests. It has been considered to be a closed system with relatively stable membership and demonstrates little or no connection to other communities (Anderson, 1999).

With the rapid growth of the Internet, the geographic boundaries constraining the limits of communities are no longer a factor, and the functions of maintaining a community can be fulfilled virtually from anywhere in the globe. This is the basic essence of an online community, which is also synonymous with e-community or virtual community. Several authors have attempted to provide a formal definition of the term for semantic clarifications. The major definitions are as follows:

- Social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public

discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace. (Rheingold, 1993)

- Groups of people who communicate with each other via electronic media, rather than face-to-face. (Romm, Pliskin, & Clarke 1997)
- Computer mediated spaces where there is a potential for an integration of content and communication with an emphasis on member generated content. (Hagel & Armstrong 1997)
- Online Publics are symbolically delineated computer mediated spaces, whose existence is relatively transparent and open, that allow groups of individuals to attend and contribute to a similar set of computer-mediated interpersonal interactions. (Jones & Rafaeli, 2000)

While Rheingold (1993) provides one of the earliest definitions of the term, and one that is most quoted in the literature (Kozinets, 2002), many may question whether “with sufficient human feeling” is a necessary condition for online community formation. Romm et al.’s (1997) definition may not sufficiently distinguish it from general Web sites. Hagel and Armstrong (1997) emphasize member generated content, while Jones and Rafaeli (2000) use the term “virtual publics” instead of online community. Others, like Bishop (2007), have pointed to the phenomenon of “de-socialization” or less frequent interaction with human in traditional settings, as a consequence of an increase in virtual socialization in online communities. Based on the above definitions the term may be simply defined as a group of individuals with common interests who interact with one another on the Internet.

## TYPOLOGIES OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Online communities come in different shapes and sizes and may have memberships of a few dozen to millions of individuals. These communities may extend from active forums like discussion groups and chat rooms to passive ones like e-mails and bulletin boards. Given that these communities are not geographically constrained, their size can be much bigger than typical physical communities and many millions of them exist on the Internet. Uncovering archetype or gestalt patterns is fundamental to the study of social science and research, and several authors have proposed classification schemes for configurations of online communities.

Lee, Vogel, and Limayem (2003) in their review of classification schemes of online communities identify Hagel and Armstrong’s (1997) and Jones and Rafaeli’s (2000) typologies as being the most popularly referenced. Kozinets (2002) too delineates four kinds of online communities. These three typologies are reviewed, and a further popular typology of affinity groups proposed by Macchiette and Roy (1992) as applied to the online environment is also proposed.

Hagel and Armstrong (1997) propose four major types of online communities based on people’s desire to meet basic human needs: *interest*, *relationship*, *fantasy*, and *transaction*. Jones and Rafaeli (2000) further segment these communities by *social structure*, that is, communities formed based on social networks, for example, online voluntary associations, cyber inns, and so forth, and *technology base*, that is, types of technology platforms, for example, e-mail lists, Usenet groups, and so forth.

Kozinets (2002) proposed the four types of communities as *dungeons*, that is, online environments where players interact, such as for online video games, *circles*, (interest structured collection of common interests), *rooms* (computer-mediated environments where people interact socially in real

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time), and *boards* (online communities organized around interest specific bulletin boards).

Finally, Macchiette and Roy (1992) proposed a typology of affinity communities that can also be used for classifying online communities. They defined communities as either being: *professional* (e.g., doctors, lawyers, etc.), *common interest* (e.g., hobbies, interests), *demographic* (e.g., by gender, age, etc.), *cause-based* (e.g., Sierra Club, Green Peace), and *marketer generated* (e.g., Disney, Nintendo) communities. These communities may also be constructed in the online environment.

It is also interesting to make other dichotomous distinctions of online communities such as: (a) between *formal* (e.g., associations) vs. *informal* communities, (b) *commercial* (which offers goods and services to make revenues that in turn fuels community operations) vs. *noncommercial* (communities created from the ground up by a group of individuals, e.g., with an interest in stamp collection), and (c) *open or public* (where everyone regardless of their qualifications and individual profile can enter the community and participate) vs. *closed or private* (where outsiders are not allowed into the community, or where membership is very difficult to obtain).

### ONLINE COMMUNITIES: MOTIVATIONS, MODE OF PARTICIPATION, CHARACTERISTICS, AND BENEFITS

Rayport and Jaworski (2004) present a model of how the various components of an online community can be integrated. An adapted version of the model is shown in Figure 1.

The model illustrates how members' motivations for joining the online community, their mode of participation, and the community's degree of connectedness in many ways determine the characteristics of the community, which in turn influences the benefits sought by the members in

these communities. The various components of the model are discussed next.

### Motivations

A member's reasons for joining a community may depend on a wide range of factors, such as affiliation (others like them are members of the community), information (about experiences, ideas, and issues), recreation (meeting people, playing around, sharing stories, etc.), or transaction (e.g., those who join a Web site for buying and trading possessions).

### Mode of Participation

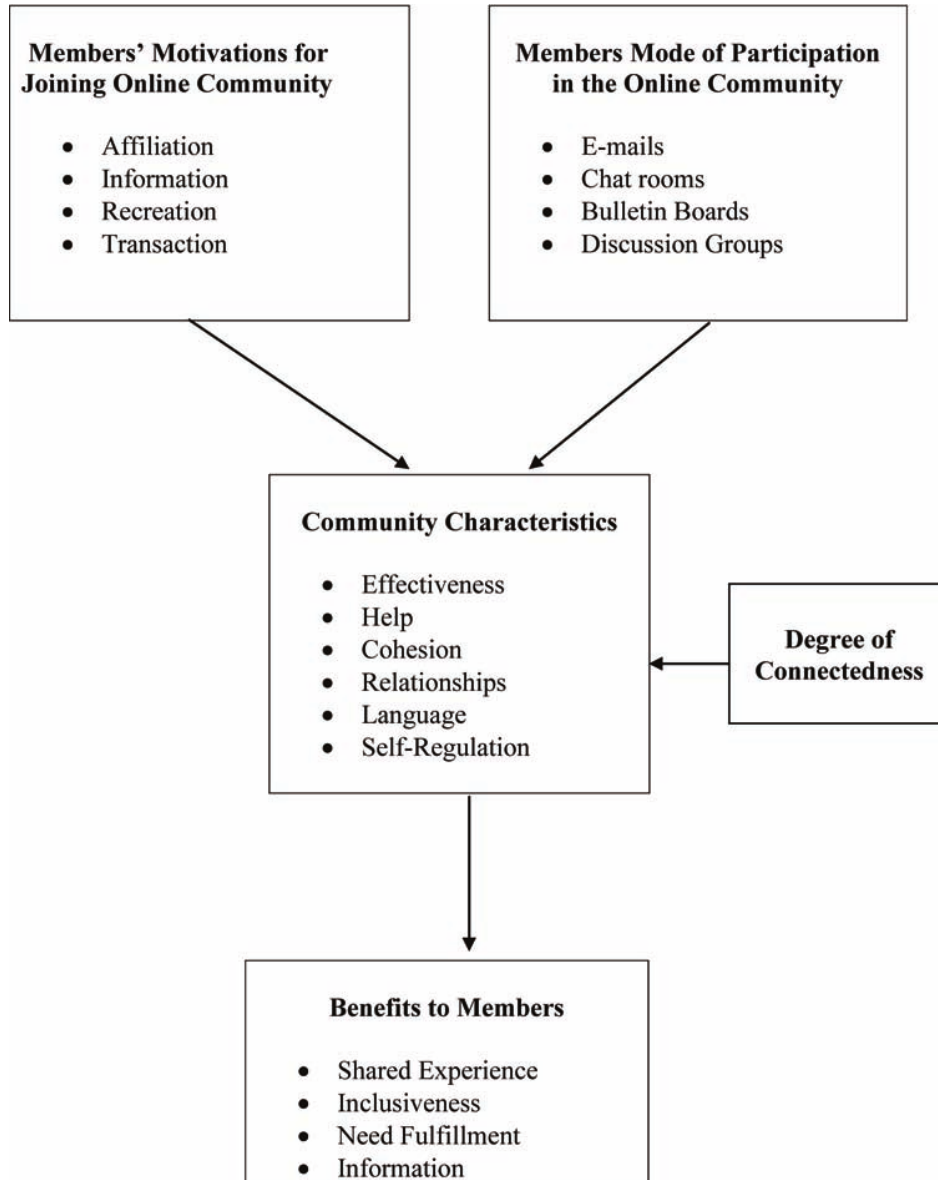
Participation can occur in a myriad of ways, for example, through e-mails, chat rooms, discussion groups, online events, blogs, social networking Web sites (e.g., *MySpace*, *Facebook*, *Orkut*, etc.), sharing photographs (e.g., *Flickr*), wikis (e.g., *Wikipedia*), bulletin boards, and so on. Some (such as discussion groups, chat rooms) have more active members than passive members (e.g., e-mail, bulletin board or posting, or watching viewing content on *You Tube*).

### Characteristics of Online Communities

With the growth and maturity of online communities, certain characteristics are prevalent. Adler and Christopher (1999) identify six such characteristics:

- **Cohesion:** Members seek a sense of belonging and develop group identity over time.
- **Relationships:** Community members interact and develop friendships over time.
- **Effectiveness:** The group has an impact on members' lives.

Figure 1. Online communities: Motivations, mode of participation, characteristics, and benefits



- **Help:** Community members feel comfortable asking and receiving help from each other.
- **Language:** Members develop shared communication tools that have a unique meaning within the community.

- **Self-Regulation:** The community develops a system for policing itself and sets ground rules of operation.

**Benefits to Members**

Adler and Christopher (1999) further point out that the members of the online community develop

various emotional benefits depending on the communities that they join. They include inclusion, shared information and experiences, need fulfillment, and mutual influence among others.

### **Degree of Connectedness in Online Communities**

The degree of connectedness in online communities also plays a significant role in how a online community develops. They can be classified as weak, limited, or strong. This primarily depends on the degree of interactivity between and among members.

- **Weak:** Members of these sites have no opportunities of interacting with each other on an one-on-one basis, for example, newspaper Web sites and corporate Web sites.
- **Limited:** These communities offer limited opportunities for members to interact with other, for example, reading and posting information or opinions.
- **Strong:** These communities offer chat rooms and message boards and allow users to form strong bonds with each other.

Research has shown that both strong and weak connectednesses have their own advantages. While weak ties are shown to facilitate such tasks as finding jobs (Granovetter, 1973), strong ties are required to facilitate major changes in the communities (Krackhardt, 1992).

### **Stages of Online Community Life Cycle**

Kim (2000) proposes a five stage online community building process which progresses as follows:

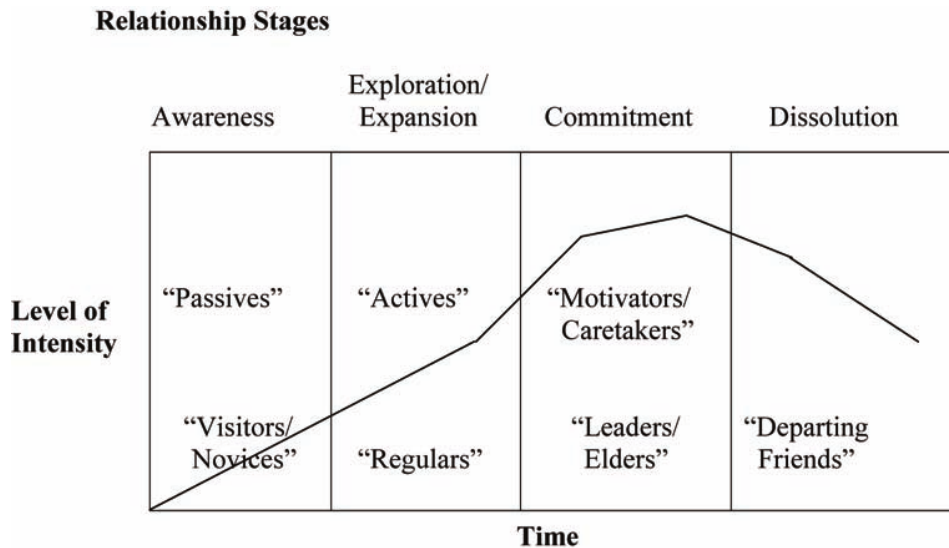
1. **Visitors:** These are individuals who “lurk” in the online community, yet do not participate in them.

2. **Novices:** They are new members or “newbies” who are usually passive and are busy learning the rules and culture of the online community and thus are not actively engaged in it.
3. **Regulars:** They are established members comfortably participating in the exchanges and make up the largest segment of the online community.
4. **Leaders:** These members are volunteers, contractors, and staff who create topics and plan activities that keep the online community running.
5. **Elders:** They are respected members of the online community who are always eager to share their knowledge and pass along the culture of the community to the newer members.

Mohammed, Fisher, Jaworski, and Paddison (2004) further suggest four relationship stages: awareness, exploration/expansion, commitment, and dissolution, and the varying level of intensity patterns as online community members go through membership life cycle. At the initial “awareness” stage, members have the lowest intensity levels and are likely to be considered visitors up until the exploration stage. At this second stage, these novices develop greater intensity and commitment to the site. The equity building efforts over time translate into the online members becoming regulars and subsequently leaders or elders. Finally, over time even the most committed members outgrow a community and become “departing friends.” Figure 2 illustrates these stages.

Farmer (1994) had earlier described four similar stages through which individuals in online communities mature. According to him, members begin as *passives* (attending a community, yet not actively engaging in it), and then go on to become *actives* (participating in communities and taking part in conversations). The highest levels of participation are displayed by *motivators* (those who create conversation topics and plan activities)

Figure 2. Intensity patterns of the different types of online communities at various relationship stages (adapted from Mohammed et al., 2004)



and *caretakers* (those who act as intermediaries between members).

The “passives” are analogous to the “visitors” and “novices.” the “actives” are similar to the “regulars,” while the “motivators” and “caretakers” are equivalent to the “leaders” and “elders” in the Mohammed et al. (2004) model.

- Involving the community members in activities and recruiting.
- Providing tools and activities for member use.
- Managing the cultural environment.
- Encouraging free sharing of opinions and information.
- Obtaining financial sponsorship.

### STRATEGIES FOR MANAGING SUCCESSFUL ONLINE COMMUNITIES

Duffy (1999) outlines the eight critical factors for community success as recommended by *Accenture*, the Management Company. They are:

- Increasing traffic and participation in the community.
- Focusing on the needs of the members by using facilitators and coordinators.
- Keeping the interest high by provoking controversial issues.

### Social Networking in Online Communities

In the last few years, several social networking sites like *My Space*, *FaceBook*, and *Orkut* have come up which allow individuals to build up the equivalent of their circle of friends (Scott, 2007). Some communities allow simple access to friends or acquaintances, while others have provisions for improving skills or contacting people with particular types of expertise.

A recent study reported by Steel (2007) showed that *Webkinz.com*, *Clubpenguin.com*, and *Zwinky.com* received the virtual world sites to most unique visitors with 6.0, 4.7, and 4.4 million visitors in

September 2007. Most notably, all three sites primarily target young teenagers, who happen to be the most active participants of these communities.

### **Researching Online Communities**

Kozinets (2002) suggests using “netnography,” involving ethnographic techniques in studying online communities for providing insights into the symbolism, meanings, and consumption patterns of online communities. The method is derived from “ethnography” which was developed in the field of anthropology. Netnography, or ethnography on the Internet, involves the study of distinctive meanings, practices, and artifacts of online communities.

Rather than approaching the problem from a positivistic or scientific point of view, where a researcher begins with a theory, develops and tests hypotheses, and draws conclusions, netnography approaches the construction of meaning in online communities in an open ended manner using inductive techniques using grounded theory. Since the research technique by nature is unobtrusive, ethical research guidelines must strictly be followed such as: (a) fully disclosing his or her presence, affiliations, and intentions to online community members; (b) ensuring confidentiality and anonymity to respondents; and (c) seeking and incorporating feedback from the online community being researched.

Market research firms are increasingly following individuals into virtual communities such as *My Space*, *FaceBook* and *Second Life* (Story, 2007). By using online focus groups and questionnaires, they are able to get immediate feedback and make decisions about how best to target them in these environments. For example, at CC Metro, an imagined island on the Web, visitors can set up an “avatar” or a virtual alter ego, which can then shop and dance at the *Coca Cola* diner, visit a movie theater, as well as buy clothes and other

accessories for their avatars, while surreptitiously being monitored by the firm.

### **FUTURE RESEARCH ISSUES**

There are several issues relating to online communities that are worth investigating (Maclaran & Catterall, 2002). First and foremost is the issue of whether or not they facilitate socialization or whether they are a threat to civilization. Some see them as a way of enhancing social capital between families, friends, and acquaintances, empowering individuals and organizations, creating new ways of relating to each other. Innovative firms leverage this power to create growth and create loyal customers. Others see them as a far cry from the regular face-to-face interactions, creating weak ties between strangers instead of strengthening existing ties between friends and neighbors.

Other issues deal with how to integrate online and off-line communities and developing appropriate metrics for such integration. How can these communities reduce member churn and build loyalty? What are the appropriate metrics for measuring community strength? Hanson (2000) suggests using content attractiveness, member loyalty, member profiles, and transaction offerings as possible metrics for measuring this phenomenon. Under what circumstances is loyalty developed through member-to-member relationships vs. content attractiveness vs. the transaction offerings? What is the most appropriate way of classifying the typologies and taxonomies of these communities? How are intentional social actions generated in such communities (Bagozzi & Dholakia, 2002)? How can stronger brands be built through the use of such communities (McWilliam, 2007)? Are online communities likely to replace regular face-to-face associations in the long run?

Other related research issues pertain to motivation aspects (Igbaria, 1999) and network dynamics (Wellman, Salaff, Dimitrova, Garton, Gulia, & Haythornwaite, 1996) and effects. What

business models are likely to work the best for various types of online communities (Hanssens & Taylor, 2007; Reid & Gray, 2007)? How are trust, privacy (Luo, 2002), and satisfaction issues (de Valck, Langerak, Verhoef, & Verlegh, 2007) different between off-line and online environments? What rules of engagement and social structure governs such networks (Cindio, Gentile, Grew, & Redolfi, 2003), and what factors impact the members' continuance in these communities? How do various forms of market structure impact member interaction in these communities (Sohn & Leckenby, 2007)? What ethical dilemmas and challenges do researchers face in researching electronic communities (Hair & Clark, 2007)? What differences are there in online communities across countries? For example, Talukdar and Yeow (2007) have identified interesting differences in such communities in Bangladesh and the United States. Finally, has the balance of power shifted to consumers over firms, with the rapid growth of virtual communities? (Chen, 2007).

Online communities of all shapes and forms are rapidly evolving and creating values for their respective members. Many such communities have over millions of members. These communities will continue to attract the interest of researchers from a wide range of academic fields in the future.

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## KEY TERMS

**Affinity Communities:** Communities that are based on profession, common interest, cause, demographic, or marketer generated phenomenon.

**Characteristics of Online Communities:** Online communities are characterized by their

level of cohesion, effectiveness, helpfulness of members, quality of the relationships, language, and self-regulatory mechanisms.

**Netnography:** Using ethnographic techniques to study online communities.

**Online Community:** A group of individuals with common interests who interact with one another on the Internet.

**Online Social Media:** Uses online community members' collaborative attempts in connecting information in various forms including internet forums, Weblogs, wikis, podcasts, pictures, and video. Examples of such applications include *MySpace* and *Facebook* (social networking), *You Tube* (video sharing), *Second Life* (virtual reality), and *Flickr* (photo sharing).

**Online Social Networking:** Necessitates the use of software to involve communities of individuals who share interests and activities. *MySpace*, *Facebook*, and *Orkut* are currently some of the most popular online social networking sites.

**Stages of the Online Community Life Cycle:** Online community members go through four relationship stages: awareness, exploration/expansion, commitment, and dissolution.

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