Emotional Norms in Online Communities

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Abstract

This paper reviews online communities how they negatively affect our ability as humans to be ever truly be alone, with reference to traditional offline communities. Online communities have been a great addition to technology, increasing productivity and adding an element of ease into our lives, however have made being alone in the 'real world' a difficult task for some. Web 2.0 has created a constant need for connection and has given 'real-life' a lonesome feeling that leaves people begging for a sense of control within their social lives. This paper explores the feelings experienced when communicating online and the impact they have on daily life and traditional communities.

Keywords: Online Community, Collective Self-Esteem, Invisible Dimension, Web 2.0

Online communities in Web 2.0 negatively impact our ability as humans to experience moments of independence when navigating the online world. These communities, while having many positives such as accounting for marginalised groups and making everyday life easier, are the same communities that are responsible for things such as loneliness and ignorance of professional opinion as well as a decrease in the set of life skills one would otherwise develop if not following in the footsteps of everyone else in the world. An online community can be defined as "passion-centric" (Porter, 2015, p161) groups of individuals with similar interests or situations that form a basis for means of communication. Today's individual's use online communities in a search for approval and recognition from others as well as to find a niche within communities that makes them feel part of a group. Web 2.0 technologies are responsible for connecting people and allowing communities to be portable within daily life. With reference to work by other scholars, this paper argues that online communities should be held responsible for a decrease in one's ability to be independent in every-day life as well as noting we are never truly alone when it comes to Web 2.0. Through social hierarchies and power in online communities the influence they have on our lives and decision-making processes is phenomenal. Sherry Turkle's 2012 TED talk about the lonesome feeling we get as a result of constant connectivity in online communities will be largely referenced to back up my argument and ideas formed about belonging in communities and works by other scholars will back up her ideas as well as help to form the rest of my argument.

Belonging in Online Communities

There is an online community that suits every individual's needs and interests, from fashion and sporting communities to buy-and-sell and relocation communities - the internet houses every niche audience imaginable that it almost seems impossible for users to ever be truly alone. Turkle (2012) notes "being alone feels like a problem that needs to be solved" hence why so many people are reaching for their devices. Online communities make people feel like they are a part of something bigger than just an individual sitting alone at home, holding Web 2.0 technologies responsible for creating such a "psychologically powerful" world, that is always available to help us feel a form of connection (Turkle, 2012). In moments of lonesomeness, it is not uncommon for individuals to crave a connection in an online community, where as a body they are alone but their minds are occupied as part of a constant communication happening elsewhere. This has significantly changed everyday life, because

now we exist in the 'real' world, and because of mobile technology, in "an invisible dimension over everyday life" (Thompson, 2008) at the same time. Traditional communities have changed as a direct result of this. Traditional communities are different from online communities in that the communication is not constant and is not as controlled. People would choose when to communicate with others and almost all of the time needed to physically be in the same room for this to occur. Online communities boast non geographical connections at any time but seem to fill a void in everyday life where participation is based upon wanting to feel something rather than participating because a feeling is already being experienced (Turkle, 2012).

Where before, alone time out of communities was a hindrance and a bore, it has now become a luxury that people crave to have. However, humans have always needed a community and a sense of belonging but we have evolved into having a need to belong all of the time, leaving people in online communities wondering why should they be alone when they do not have to be, even if your physical bodies are nowhere near each other. Gangadharbatla (2008) explains this "need to belong" as a motivational way of gaining social recognition and that it also stems from 3 qualities that come from being a part of an online community; inclusion, affection and control. This type of person is what we call an "altruist individual", they are "motivated by collective action, community belonging and knowledge sharing" (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007, p53). Gangadharbatla (2008) discusses a concept called "collective self-esteem", which is defined as the worth someone places on themselves based upon the communities they are a part of. This relates directly to my argument that individuals no longer know how to be on their own, and how to perceive others as individuals. Online communities make it so much easier to place labels and values on people, based solely on what their interests are and who they associate with. Whilst I agree, online communities have helped marginalised groups become a part of society, they still separate groups of people creating an 'us and them' atmosphere on the web. Solving tasks as part of a group is something we all know makes life a lot easier, but I argue that while this increases individual productivity it decreases an individual's belief that they can complete a task alone as they are always going to be looking for social recognition in the "invisible dimension" (Thompson, 2008) that gives them a chance of boosting their "collective self-esteem" (Gangadharbatla, 2008).

Power and Status in Online Communities

While the idea of community boasts equality amongst participants, social hierarchies exist and online communities fall nothing short of a typical social hierarchy as well as a heightened ability to upgrade once social status. Social hierarchies and status seeking is not something unfamiliar as far as communities go, there always seems to be a leader unspoken or elected, in traditional communities. However online with exposed admins and hierarchal titles, such as how often you participate in online discussions within the community, status seeking seems to be the main motivation within online communities. Aguiton and Cardon (2007) suggest that the more active a user is within an online community (i.e. the more power they have), the more important their goals are within the community. Admins and highly ranked members of online communities are looked up to by newcomers and lower ranked community members, with usernames often recognised amongst the bunch.

Like with offline communities it gives a sense of power to those higher rated within online social groups and creates a desire in the minds of lower ranked participants, to be socially accepted within the community. "Status seeking is a social passion that drives participants to invest time and effort in giving the gift of their experience to others without direct benefit to themselves. This social passion is a reliable source of continuing participation, making it more likely that virtual communities will survive and grow." (Lampel and Bhalla, 2007). Status seeking and power are the main motivators for individuals to invest so much time into creating another identity for themselves, for the reason that behind a computer or mobile screen, you can create the perception of being whoever you want to be. Aguiton and Cardon (2007) also state that "people build their identity through the continuous search for recognition in the eyes of others". This again draws attention to the idea that individuals have become wrapped up in the Web 2.0 world where the technology is available to construct yourself to feel powerful, giving them another reason to not experience time alone away from communities, as they have a social status to build. Status within the community, self-building and set leaders are amongst the "rules and norms [that are] are created by users themselves" (Aguiton and Cardon, 2007, p56) and are responsible for a pattern that shows lower ranked community members adapting their beliefs and values to follow the highly ranked members, in order to become more socially accepted in yet another community they are a part of. The

constant need for recognition, approval and power in virtual communities are another reason individuals are no longer capable of being independent, with the ability to upgrade one's social status 24-hours a day, it is obvious why some individuals feel the need to be constantly participating in online discussions and playing an active role in online communities that never sleep.

Influence from Online Communities

In spite of the fact that many participants in online communities have never met each other, they have an undeniable ability to influence each other's opinions instead of individuals being able to create an opinion for themselves. This has skyrocketed things like word of mouth or buzz marketing and online collaboration. For corporations, these are great money making tools but for individuals, can seem like while the friendships and bonds formed online may seem real, there always is in fact an outside motivation to the relationship. Aguiton and Cardon (2007, p55), convey that "publishing individual activities is the first step towards potential collaboration with others", this is for the reason that it sparks familiarity in similar interests. The word similar in this sentence hold significant importance, as no two opinions are the same. Even without online word of mouth marketing and promotion, individuals still hold lots of power to influence opinion of people they would not have otherwise met in a traditional way. An example I would like to point out is how naivety is affected in online communities when it comes to professional opinion versus community opinion with reference to the saying "do not believe everything you read on the internet".

Behind a computer screen it is impossible to know whether the professional giving you advice at the other end is actually who they say they are. Web 2.0 gives users the opportunity to conceal their identity within communities, whereas traditional communities are largely face to face. In online communities there is an element of trust with the forged bonds that are created with again, people you may have never met. This trust stems from the sense of belonging you feel within the community. The loneliness experienced by people in online communities, though constantly communicating, is part of the reason they trust others they meet online so easily. It is almost as if they are consumed by online communities and have nowhere else to turn. "The process of social influence leads people to adopt behaviours

exhibited by those they interact with" (Crandall et al, 2018). The impact of an influence in behaviour experienced by people because of individuals they have never met is staggering. Where before traditional communities were quite reserved in opinions seeing as you could place a face to shocking comments that were made, the online world now gives users the opportunity to say what they really think, introducing strong influences from many directions. Independent voices seem to be a thing of the past, as now our opinions are made up of those of others. There seems to be no such thing as an original opinion, just merely samples of the opinions of others that we witness in online communities. The influence created in situations like these goes unnoticed and forges bonds between people online for sharing the 'same' opinion. Excuses for forming bonds such as this one are a direct influence from the lonely feeling people get when they feel they do not share common beliefs as part of a community.

Conclusion

With web 2.0 technology so integrated as a part of everyday life, it is hard not to constantly be involved with an online community that requires little effort to participate in. On one hand it keeps us engaged with others but on the other means we never get time to make meaning on our own without outside influence and support. The lonely feeling we get when we are not connected with other holds responsibility for our involvement in an "invisible dimension" (Thompson, 2008). Needing to belong and a need for power as well as naivety when it comes to being influenced all play a role in the way we unknowingly need to be a part of online communities. These factors all have one thing in common, that is they all involve other people. Independence as we know it, has changed significantly due to virtual communities, creating a hardship when it comes to being alone in 'real life'. Online no matter what you do, there are always other people there, making it seemingly impossible to ever be alone in virtual space and making it so we do not ever want to be away from our online communities.

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