

# **Social Media as A Third Space for Participation: Online Gaming Communities**

## **Abstract**

The importance of participation within communities has been emphasised by numerous articles, with most of them placing the blame on the decrease in offline community participation towards technological advancements. However, the blame cannot be placed entirely on the internet as it has given birth to a new form of community, online community. This paper will examine the shift from offline to online community but comparing the difference in structure, function, and why there's a lack in engagement in an offline space but extremely high amount of activity in an online space. Breaking down why social media platform are essential to the increase in participation, using the online gaming communities as a case study. Bringing into attention that offline and online communities' effect one another and are exchangeable. Social media makes it possible for a person to become involved in an offline community and assist the growth of participation in an online community.

## **Introduction**

Online social networks have become a crucial service within the 21<sup>st</sup> century, affecting the lives of billions as more and more people become reliant on the internet. Transforming the way people interact and communicate with one another. According to a report on Statista, there are currently over 3.78 billion users of social networks as of 2021 and is expected to reach 4.42 billion by 2025, (Tankovska, 2021). The usage of internet has also led various offline structures, way of life, systems and so on, to the transfer onto the online environment. However, this by no means suggests that their functions within the online scenario will be the same or similar to that of the offline. Keith N. Hampton and Barry Wellman explain that community is a fundamental part of society, but as technology advances further, it's commonly believed that community has been lost, (Hampton & Barry, 2018). With the enormous amount of people and activities online it can be said that communities have been amplified within the online space due to the nature of the internet, discoverability and spreadability of information. Additionally, the growth and popularity of video games was possible due to the internet and social media platforms which has facilitated online gaming community. In order to highlight how social media platforms act as

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a third space for increasing participation for individuals who are unlikely to contribute to an offline community; with the focus on gaming communities. This paper will demonstrate the difference between offline and online communities, how the structure of social media platforms increases participation, online gaming community's engagement with social media platforms, and online communities' influence over an individual's offline community and actions.

The foundation in which offline and online communities have revolved around is the same, but online communities include a larger scale of interactions and communications between individuals or groups. Hampton and Wellman describe a community in an offline environment as the place the person is born into, and the location in which they live in, that stretches for a limited distance. Family, friends, neighbours and colleagues (school or work) are examples of people who would be considered as a part of an individual's offline community. Community members share the same beliefs and have either the same or similar background and tasks, (Hampton & Wellman, 2018). On the other hand, online communities are constructed based on people who hold the same interest and goals in life, and consist of a diverse group of individuals, (Wang et al., 2011). The move from offline to online has greatly affected the level of participation within offline communities. There are less face-to-face interactions and conversations occurring as large number of people develop their own individual networked community. Taylor Dotson (2017), as mentioned in Hampton and Wellman (2018) explores the idea of society moving towards networked individualism, resulting in a shift in the way community functions as well as a decrease in social gathering and solidarity inside the local group. Instead of going outside to socialise with other members of the community at the park or club, they're spending a massive portion of their time online. The shift from offline to online also means that the connection with community members is able to be maintained as they're able to stay in touch with each other despite the difference in time, space, and distance. Unlike offline communities, the relationship between members within an online community is no longer as closely knitted as they used to be, access to information is not filtered and communication with a diverse group of people is possible through social media platforms.

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Mobility and easy access of the internet has had a positive effect in the online community as the number of participation increases. Indicating that the higher the engagement online, the lower the number of people contributing to an offline environment. Despite the lack of research on the motivation behind online participation, several factors which can be used for reasoning as to why an individual is likely to participate in an online space are due to the diversity in communities and resources, friendliness of the space, to accomplish a shared goal(s), and the perception of contribution online as an action that's meaningful, (Wang et al., 2011). In this aspect, social media platforms act as a third space where the motives mentioned earlier are made possible. The ability to create and post content is made available to all users of the internet, generating a sense of belonging to particular communities depending on their level of activeness. Sharing of content and knowledge by individuals expand the amount of information available online, encouraging other people to share. Jessica Kennedy and Helen Lynch state that although sharing of personal information in an online space may place the individual at danger, it can also enable them to progress further in life, (Kennedy & Lynch, 2016). The individual sharing their knowledge or content in the online space is not expected to be knowledgeable in the field, this removes the pressure placed on members within the community to participate, as there's no right or wrong. Participation in an online space not only refers to sharing of content, but also reading of content, (Harris, 2020). It's important to understand that both types of participation are necessary to maintain a community.

Continuing on the point that social media platforms increase participation of individuals, the online gaming community is sustained due to the large amount of contribution made to the community on various platforms. According to Game Marketing Genie, some of the most popular platforms used by the gaming communities are Facebook, YouTube, Discord, Twitch, and Twitter, (Game Marketing Genie, 2020). It's also important to note that an industry report by CompareCamp, indicates that there are close to 3 billion gamers worldwide as of 2020, excluding those who're viewers of gaming content, (Zuckerman, 2020). The popularity and size of the communities is an indication to the amount of participation which is taking place. Like most information on the internet, it's common to come across a specific content on various platforms a number of times. The original content

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is not the only thing being distributed and shared throughout the different media; remediation of the original work is another example of a technique showcasing the participation of members in the community. For example, PewDiePie's Minecraft hardcore series on YouTube (PewDiePie, 2020) can also be found on Reddit, Twitter, TikTok, and many more. The series has also led to viewers participating in his community through the creation of memes, fanarts, and video compilations. To enhance one's relationship within the online community the members should be actively involved in activities. In the gaming community a sense of belonging to a community and level of tie is shown through purchasing of merch, a membership, or simply commenting and subscribing to the content creator. Furthermore, engaging with other gamers inside or outside the game create deeper attachment to the community.

Massively multiplayer online role-playing games (MMORPGs) is a genre of game which encourages members to interact and communicate with other players within the game or community to progress further in the game, (Zhong, 2011). This interaction between members is not limited to the online space, in some cases individuals must make contact with other people within the community through social media platforms in order to arrange a meet up in the offline world to exchange information or game inventory. For example, an in-game interaction would be when players join a guild or work together in a group for them to accomplish a quest or qualify to battle the dungeon boss. By interacting with other members and the community, the bond between the two is strengthened. *"The identity of being a member of an in-game community and the sense of belonging to the community make social interactions meaningful to the gamers,"* (Zhong, 2011, p. 2353). As these forms of social interactions are viewed as a meaningful activity, participation is more likely to occur. MMORPGs enable people to play with others be it in a small or large group (solo playing is also an option), players often come into contact with hundreds of individuals on a daily basis, (Molyneux et al., 2015). Although the players may only come into contact for a particular purpose for a set amount of time and never cross paths again throughout their entire gameplay, their interaction during that moment still holds importance. This links into how members of an online community have a common goal, as mentioned earlier in the paper. Rachel Kowert and Julian A. Oldmeadow's study suggests that the online gaming

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community is entirely motivated by goals, emotional communication plays a large role in the construction of relationships; therefore, players prefer to play on a server that is populated, (Kowert & Oldmeadow, 2013). In a popular game such as Call of Duty: Modern Warfare, players who are a part of a clan will often use platforms such as Discord to communicate with each other during the game. This allows for their interaction to be more intimate and is also an example of how online communities push individuals to take actions offline. Individuals gain more confidence in participating in an offline environment, due to the success of their online interaction and knowledge obtained.

Communities that are formed in an online space can also transfer to the offline space. As of now there's a lack of research on whether online participation can influence an individual to become more involved in an offline scenario. Based on the available research in this area, events such as Gamescom encourages a large-scale offline gathering in which many members of the online gaming community gather to meet and interact with not only content creators from platforms such as YouTube and Twitch but also members of the community face to face. *"The amount of people who attended was mind-blowing, filling up every square inch of every room..."*, Natalie Bergman one of the exhibitors of Gamescom commented on a review, (Tradefest, 2019, para 5). This clearly demonstrates that people from the online gaming community are taking actions beyond the screen and are willing to participate in events where online communities are given the opportunity to come together. A hybrid form of community is created with the combination of offline and online communities, the structure of both communities can be seen when analysing the action of attendee and what the convention is about. For example, the people who're attending are from a large range of online and offline communities producing a diverse range of individuals. Like Bergman many individuals who attended the same convention shared content of the event through the social media platforms for those in the online communities to see. In this aspect, both communities affect each other in a way that something which happens offline can be passed onto the online environment, and vice versa.

This paper has been describing the various way in which participation has been increased in online and offline communities by analysing sections of gaming communities and how social

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media has facilitated this growth. In spite of limited academic research and studies in relation to online gaming community and community involvement, the paper has highlighted that participation in communities has increased as a result of online community and social networked platforms' characteristics. Constant sharing of content on multiple media has expanded the amount of information and content made possible to view and use; as well as motivating others to create and share. It can be said that online community has indeed increased the number of member's participating online and offline as they gain confidence, also providing an opportunity for people to partake in community events where they willingly contribute.

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