

**Virtual Vs Traditional Communities: The Benefits of Facebook's Virtual Communities and  
How they Differ from Smaller Traditional Communities.**

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### **Abstract**

This paper argues that social media platforms, specifically Facebook, are ideal spaces for the formation and success of diverse virtual communities. Furthermore, this paper challenges the view that virtual communities detract from their traditional counterparts. This paper examines Facebook's ubiquity as a factor in the diversity of virtual communities and the content they share as well as the benefits associated with this. This paper also examines the benefits of social media communities in terms of their ability to offer help and support for people who do not have adequate support systems in place in their physical communities. Finally, this paper also examines the benefits of Facebook and virtual community participation for online activism. Relying on examples of actual Facebook communities around the platform and a range of literature on the topic of social media and communities, this paper argues that virtual and traditional communities are capable of operating parallel to and complimenting one another without significantly detracting from either. This paper also identifies room for further research.

*Keywords: Social Media, Communities, Facebook, Virtual Communities, Traditional Communities.*

### **Virtual Vs Traditional Communities: The Benefits of Facebook's Virtual Communities and How they Differ from Smaller Traditional Communities.**

With the introduction of Web2.0 technologies and the rise of social media platforms such as Facebook, virtual communities have become an increasingly popular tool for connecting with others. Presently, Facebook is the most popular platform and hosts the greatest number of worldwide users. The ubiquity of Facebook creates an ideal space for the formation of diverse and beneficial virtual communities that transcend the limitations imposed by traditional communities. Due to the global reach and popularity of Facebook, the communities that form within can be very large and diverse compared to smaller traditional communities. Traditional

communities typically consist of smaller groups of individuals linked by a common place and shared views and social circles, people in traditional communities tend to be strongly linked by relationships, needs, goals, views and so on. Unlike traditional communities such as those found in areas with much smaller populations, one of the benefits of large virtual communities is that in addition to a diverse population, there is also a diverse range of views, opinions, and information sources shared amongst the community. Community members can be exposed to differing points of view, foreign news, different values, traditions, and so on. Virtual communities are not completely separate from traditional communities and can often exist parallel to each other. These might take the form of 'buy, swap and sell' pages, akin to a virtual garage sale, or local neighbourhood watch pages to keep smaller communities informed of important issues. Facebook has the power to bring together people both close and distant. In addition to information being less restricted in virtual communities, they can also offer a wider range of support for individuals who may not have support networks available to them in a face-to-face setting. The Facebook platform also gives individuals the tools to form virtual communities for the purpose of raising awareness and affecting social and political change.

As of February 9, 2021, Facebook is recorded as being the most popular social media platform in the world with over 2.6 billion users worldwide (Statista, 2021). The widespread of use of the platform in addition to its groups and pages features make Facebook a hub for digital community creation and participation. In an increasingly connected environment, many people find it difficult to avoid the platform whether it be for work, entertainment or for socialising. Understandably there are groups such as the elderly that struggle to use social media platforms. However, if they are fortunate enough to have a strong community around them to assist with navigating platforms, social media can allow these people to remain connected to communities such as family and friends. Facebook like many other platforms has become a pervasive element in the everyday lives of its users. People are found to be using Facebook for a variety of activities including connecting with others, using applications, 'social surfing' and even wasting time as a result of habitual use (Klier et.al., 2014, p.473 and Giannakos et.al., 2013, p.600). As a result of the platforms reach and ongoing popularity, it comes as no surprise that the platform attracts a highly diverse range of users. The platforms diverse pool of users means that there are also a diverse range of communities covering many topics and interests. Virtual communities continue to be formed around just about anything from shared traits to interests and politics,

provided they do not violate the platforms terms of service. Virtual communities that Facebook plays host to include pages and groups like *For Reading Addicts* which boasts over 1.4million page followers, *Animal Crossing: New Horizons* a video game group with over 300,000 group members, and *THIS CAT IS C H O N K Y* [sic] a group with over 880,000 members whose purpose is to share content on overweight cats. The lists of communities and topics they can be formed around are almost endless and often attract audiences around the world. In addition, group administrators can take advantage of different privacy settings to create groups that cater to communities that discuss sensitive topics (Gibbons, 2019). This means that administrators and moderators of any group can regulate membership, ban disruptive members, and enforce rules to protect the community. While this might seem hierarchical and tightly controlled, community members who are dissatisfied with the administration of certain groups have the ability to find Facebook communities that they feel are more suited to their needs or to make and share their own to attract likeminded people. The kinds of groups that form arise from either necessity (because such groups do not exist) or because those already in existence do not cater the wants and needs of different parts of a community (for examples some virtual communities might be run by individuals who are not inclusive of certain groups of people and so new groups tend to form that are more inclusive).

While critics of virtual communities are quick to denounce digital communications as detrimental, the reality is there are a variety of benefits and advantages to belonging to virtual communities. Virtual communities are home to more diverse groups of people than traditional communities, in addition there are fewer limitations on the flow of information also typical of traditional communities (Hampton and Wellman, 2018, p.644-647). In traditional communities for example religious communities, local communities and even family groups, individuals share certain common traits like geographic location, interests, and values. Individuals in these communities are typically exposed to and circulate information that is relevant to their area or interests and that support or represent only specific perspectives and values. For example, religious communities are more likely to adhere to practices and share information specific to their religious views and might be less likely to be exposed to the views and practices of different religions in other parts of the world. This is referred to as the *filter bubble*, an imaginary bubble in which only select information circulates around a community (Hampton and Wellman, 2018, p.645). By being a part of virtual communities, users are more likely to be exposed to a more

diverse range of people, perspectives, and news sources. It has been found repeatedly that being exposed to a diverse pool of news and sources helps individuals learn about the world, broaden their views and opinions, and assists with decision making (Jehn et al. 1999; Mutz and Martin 2001; Van Alstyne and Brynjolfsson 1996 in Kitchens, Johnson, and Gray, 2020, p.1623). There are a variety of virtual communities around Facebook for people around the world to share news and other content for example the *Sunrise* page which is part of 7 News Australia. In addition to news content, there are groups and pages for sharing different countries cuisines for example there are dozens of groups pertaining to Vietnamese cuisine which exist to share recipes. These kinds of groups not only share recipes with the rest of the world, but they also benefit people who are away from home temporarily or who want to connect to their cultural heritage. These groups offer a sense of community that might not otherwise be available face-to-face.

Despite the benefits of virtual communities and the similarities between the virtual and traditional, some maintain that virtual communications are impersonal and do not produce the same ties as traditional communities (Memmi, 2006, p.2). This may be true for some groups within social media platforms, however, there exist groups that still resemble more traditional communities such as location specific groups for different religious congregations found around the United States and other countries. Other scholars have long held that the view of impersonality in virtual communities is one-sided or biased, as it neglects to mention or dismisses the things made possible by virtual communities that traditional communities are incapable of (Etzioni and Etzioni, 1997, p.295). This might include giving individuals a platform to ask an unbiased community for advice or to air a personal grievance to strangers where the information being vented is less likely to reach people that the individual knows. Misconceptions of modernisation and the prevalence of virtual communications can lead to a perception of them as responsible for the erosion of traditional bounded communities. The central idea is that people lose sense of community when they lose their connections to local places and change the way they socialise moving from face-to-face communications to online spaces (Driskell and Lyon, 2002, p.373). In reality, virtual communities provide individuals with ways to connect with other community members and places when they otherwise might be unable to make or maintain these connections. Facebook groups provide places for these kinds of virtual communities to form, they can take the form of buy, swap and sell groups, school pages, community organisation groups, and even neighbourhood watch groups. They function as traditional communities

leveraging social media to strengthen community ties by allowing people within to remain connected with others and stay informed of relevant information they might otherwise miss. The literature suggests that these groups are utilised by individuals to remain connected to and play an active role within their communities and also to help form new connections when they enter into new and unfamiliar environments (Kelly and Finlayson, 2015, p.66 and Yang and Brown, 2013, p.404). Evidently, virtual communities can help maintain community ties and form new ties in ways that that traditional communities might struggle to facilitate.

In addition to fostering new connections, virtual communities also offer a space where individuals can come together to find help and support that may not be available in a face-to-face setting. One of the more common forms of support communities relate to physical and mental health support. People participate in these kinds of communities to share and enquire about issues pertaining to their mental or physical health, as well as to share experiences and support other members. Despite the perception that people are using social networks to obtain medical advice Hale et.al. (2014, p.2) notes that existing research shows that Facebook's medical support communities are most commonly used for support. There are a few benefits of these types of communities, which allow members to discuss sensitive issues with varying levels of anonymity and the members are not geographically bound (Zigron and Bronstein, 2018, p.130). Anonymity is important for these communities, groups can act to protect the privacy of their community members, but some members will also use aliases when looking for help or support especially when discussing sensitive or stigmatised topics such as suicide (Still, 2020, p.33). Physical and mental health support are not the only kinds of support needs that individuals use virtual communities to fulfill. The kinds of support groups one might expect to find on Facebook for example include grief support, animal health and wellbeing, technical support, career advice, minority support groups and much more (Bennett et. Al., 2019, p.4). The literature suggests that these kinds of virtual support communities can have a positive impact on psychological wellbeing even when participants are only participating by lurking in these communities (Batenburg and Das, 2015, p.585). These communities are beneficial because they support individuals at times where there is no equivalent or limited support available in their physical community.

In addition to these benefits, virtual communities can arise around different political and social issues in which community members either have a vested interest in creating change,

raising awareness or for members to monitor and discuss issues with others in the community. The online activism that takes place in virtual communities often translates to real world events and movements and offers some community members the opportunity for face-to-face interaction which solidifies community ties. A common term for online activism is 'Facebook activism', communities can form around issues as they are being addressed. In these cases, Facebook is a tool by which new and existing communities can come together online to organise activities, raise awareness, or call others to action reaching people around the world as well as locally. Some groups use other Facebook tools for organisational purposes, like Facebook's events tool which allows people to organise events including protests and demonstrations. These tools were used by a community of Syrian students during the Syrian revolution to organise activist events and also to raise awareness and gather support at a time when the state made this challenging (Rodineliussen, 2019, p.240). In addition, there are also a number of Chinese backpacking communities who communicate online and occasionally in-person. The literature suggests that individuals can communicate more freely in these virtual communities and take part in online activism, alongside this the offline interactions help solidify the individual's connections to the community (Zhang, 2014, p.286). This is also an example of a previously discussed idea: virtual and traditional communities operating together to accomplish something that would otherwise be difficult to achieve. Other kinds of communities also arise that aim to promote change, for example communities of people with a shared interest in climate change that come together to share news and tips on sustainability. Some virtual communities form close enough ties that after an objective has been achieved the community remains active and maintains their relationships. One example of this is *The Moonbat Bar and Grill* which is a small Facebook community group with an interest in American politics.

The literature on virtual communities shows clear benefits to belonging to those communities that are both linked to traditional bounded communities and those that are not linked to any geographical location. Facebook's ubiquity and tools provide the ideal space for a wide variety of communities to form. These communities may not have the strongest ties but for many these groups can accomplish and fulfill needs that some traditional communities cannot. The benefits that online communities offer include a level of anonymity, diverse perspectives and sources of information, a variety of different kinds of support, and outlets to organise change. One of the limitations of this paper is that it focuses on Facebook communities in a broad sense

without focusing on any specific type of virtual community. One of the limitations of this paper is its broad approach to analysing virtual communities. It is acknowledged that some of Facebook's virtual communities will inevitably be exclusionary in nature and will see similar biases and information bubbles as traditional communities because of the tools and features that allow administrators to filter community members. This however poses questions for future research into issues such as examine whether virtual communities like those found within the Facebook platform can also form and succeed on more open platforms such as Twitter that do not share the same privacy features, and how they might look.

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