



Understanding user participation in online communities: A systematic literature review of empirical studies



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ABSTRACT

Online communities have become a popular and widely studied research topic. As active participation has been acknowledged as essential for the sustainability of the communities, research has focused largely on the most visible participants with the greatest financial value for community providers. However, users can engage with the sites in different ways, which calls for a more diverse classification of participation, instead of a simple active–passive dichotomy. This systematic literature review discusses empirical studies on online community participation. The results indicate that despite the large amount of research conducted on the topic, a theoretical and conceptual framework for user participation remains undefined as most of the research has approached participation in terms of its quantity. The complexity of online participation and its implications for methodology in future studies is discussed.

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1. Introduction

Since their introduction over 20 years ago, online communities have become one of the most popular forms of online services globally. Consequently, a large number of studies exist on the topic. While online communities have been studied in various contexts, there has not been a cohesive review that would synthesize the results obtained on the various topics and contribute to theory development in the field. In this article, we make an attempt at creating such synthesis while placing particular emphasis on participation as a criterion for online community formation. In this study, online communities are understood as web-based online services with features that enable members to communicate with each other. From a historical perspective, listservs, bulletin boards and chatrooms were the first technologies of online communities. For this reason, online communities are often understood as text-based discussion forums. However, with the constant emergence of new technologies, today's online communities are supported by a wide range of software.

The Internet is generally considered to enhance participation by encouraging and enabling more people to voice their opinion. However, not only users benefit from online participation: one of the most fascinating and at the same time the most challenging aspects of online communities is their dependency on users for

the generation of content, as any user can act as a producer of the content consumed on the sites (Baumer, Sueyoshi, & Tomlinson, 2011; Velasquez, Wash, Lampe, & Bjornrud, 2013). Encouraging participation and building thriving communities are frequently cited central challenges for any online community provider. Therefore, understanding what makes users participate has become a key question in online community studies. Research has found that online participation is connected to many positive outcomes as it indicates greater member loyalty and satisfaction with the online community (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). All in all, social media has dramatically changed the user's role by collapsing the distinction between media consumers and producers, and making users who participate by generating and circulating content the key element of any social media site (Miller, 2011). In this sense, participation is essential for the sustainability of online communities.

This systematic review seeks to analyze empirical findings on online community participation to date in order to provide an overview of main research themes and methods, as well as implications for future research and practice. The objective of this study is twofold: first, we review articles in order to understand the current state of research, particularly how the concept of participation has been defined. Second, we discuss the main issues influencing user participation based on the empirical findings presented in the reviewed studies. In conclusion, we aim to point out emerging research topics and the most important gaps in the field to help the direction of future work.

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2. Background

2.1. Definitions and approaches to online communities

The first and presumably the most cited definition of an online community was produced in 1993 by Howard Rheingold, who described them as “social aggregations that emerge from the Net when enough people carry on public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling” (Rheingold, 1993, p. 5). Jenny Preece (2000) approached online communities from the administrator’s viewpoint, emphasizing that developing them constitutes a practical activity and that a definition of an online community is needed to guide the practice. According to Preece, an online community consists of people interacting socially and sharing a purpose, of policies to guide these interactions, and of computer systems to facilitate the sense of togetherness (Preece, 2000, p. 10). In social scientific theories, definitions of community have emphasized the significance of experiences and meanings within a community over the role of appearances and structures. In the notion of symbolic communities introduced by Cohen (1985), a community exists in the minds of its members and is constructed symbolically through shared meanings, norms and culture. Later, Blanchard and Markus (2002, 2004) defined shared emotional connection and a feeling of belonging in a group, a *sense of community*, as another distinctive feature of online communities.

Despite the large amount of research on the topic, the term ‘online community’ has been the subject of debate, as the question whether communities can exist online or not has been addressed by a number of scholars (Miller, 2011; Roberts, 2006; Wittel, 2001). This is partly explained by personal associations of the word ‘community’ as something “warm and fuzzy” (Preece, 2000) but also by the differences between online and geographically-based communities, especially in when it comes to intimacy and shared history between community members (Brint, 2001; Miller, 2011; Wittel, 2001). Research has shown that community feelings, or a sense of community, can also be experienced online. Yet, not all websites can be labeled as online communities, nor will they eventually become ones (Blanchard & Markus, 2002). In fact, lack of user activity and contributions has been the most frequently cited reason for the failure of online communities (e.g. Ling et al., 2005). Consequently, the importance of user participation for has been widely acknowledged among scholars.

According to Hercheui (2010), research on online communities has so far been descriptive rather than theory-driven and significant emphasis has been placed on the novelty of the phenomenon. There is still a lack of consistency in the field, as a wide range of community types varying in terms of structure, purpose and user base have been compared under the heading online community (Gallagher & Savage, 2013). The main challenge of research has been identified as the constantly evolving nature of the subject, of which research can only capture a snapshot view (Iriberry & Leroy, 2009). Such snapshots do not provide an accurate representation of the dynamic nature of online communities. Research into online communities is currently at an exploratory, developing, and dynamic stage, where membership and activity are increasing at a rapid pace, and more research is needed in order to improve the generalizability of results (Gallagher & Savage, 2013).

2.2. Active participation

Motivating users to participate in community activities has been seen as key to successful online communities (Koh & Kim, 2004; Koh, Kim, Butler, & Bock, 2007). Nov (2007) explored types of motivations in relation to the volume of contributions to

Wikipedia and found that top motivations for volunteering were fun and ideology. In particular, fun as a motivation correlated positively with the number of contributions. In their examination of factors that stimulate participants’ posting and viewing of community content, Koh et al. (2007) found that passive participation (viewing) and active participation (posting) were motivated and hindered by different factors. Previous research has characterized two types of community participation: active members, who post the majority of the content, and passive members, who browse and take advantage of the benefits offered without contributing to community activities (Okleshen & Grossbart, 1998; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Passive members have generally been referred to as “lurkers”. A large number of lurkers may increase the popularity of a community in terms of figures, because they generate website traffic and increase hits, but they do not necessarily contribute to the success of an online community in terms of content (Ridings, Gefen, & Arinze, 2006). However, both types of activity are needed and reflect the members’ level of commitment to the community (Koh & Kim, 2004).

From the viewpoint of community designers and administrators, a central question has been how to improve the user interface in order to make the site more attractive to users. Research has produced design guidelines for the creation of communities and for facilitating sociability (Preece, 2000). The concept of participation has been seen as essential for the survival of communities but has also been used as an indicator of their success: websites abandoned by their users have been referred to as “ghost towns” (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2003). For the purpose of evaluating online community success and measuring the impact of new design elements, researchers have developed success metrics. According to Iriberry and Leroy (2009), the most commonly employed metrics are the volume of contributions and the quality of relationships among members. This is based on the assumption that the larger the volume of messages posted and the closer members feel to each other, the more successful the online community.

When participation has been studied in the context of physical communities, evidence has been found that participation in civic society increases social capital (Cullen & Sommer, 2010) and active community members possess a greater number of close social ties in their immediate surroundings (Oliver, 1984). Online participation has been found to have similar effects: those who participate actively are the most connected (Laine, Ercal, & Bo, 2011), and the more people are involved in online organizational and political activity, the more they are involved in these activities offline as well (Wellman, Haase, Witte, & Hampton, 2001). Online social networking can also increase social capital and promote psychological well-being (Ellison, Steinfield, & Lampe, 2007; Wellman et al., 2001). In the context of online consumer communities, user participation has been found to increase customer and brand loyalty, and benefit community providers in many ways (Holland & Menzel Baker, 2001).

To conclude, active user participation has been identified as a key component to any successful online community. However, more research is needed to understand other forms of participation and particularly their influence on the communities. The main objective of this review is to integrate previous empirical research on online community participation. The following four research questions are explored:

RQ1. What are the main topics and types of software studied in online community research?

RQ2. How has user participation in online communities been conceptualized and operationalized in empirical studies?

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