

ATTENDING ONLINE COMMUNITIES: CULTURE OF YOUTH?

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Abstract. The article deals with the subject of attending online communities by users of different age groups. We analyze a representative sample of Czech population aged 12 years and older, the whole sample consisting of 1,586 respondents, and analyzed replies of 862 Internet users. The research was carried out in September 2007 by face-to-face interviews. We show that older adolescents aged 16 – 19 years are the most common attendants of virtual groups and that participation decreases with age. Adolescents are also less inhibited in online communities and, if what they claim is true, it seems that virtual groups enrich their lives more than other users. Adolescents have higher needs of meeting people in groups in general and therefore their behavior on the Internet is similar as in real life. The fact that adolescents are less inhibited in these communities could also be caused by them feeling the urge to develop their identities.

1. Introduction

In the social network paradigm, we can define a community as a group of people with some form of interaction between participants, who also share certain similarities (e.g. a hobby) with other users in the group. In community psychology, McMillan and Chavis (1986) defined four elements of the feeling of community: membership, influence, integration and fulfillment of needs and shared emotional connections. Many researchers documented the fact that characteristics of communities seem to also be developing in virtual worlds (i.e. Kendall, 2002; Suler, 2006). Haythornthwaite (2007) further argues that a community can exist in a virtual world despite the physical co-location not being present.

In this paper, we concentrate on the subject of attending online communities, with emphasis on age differences. We ask how people in various age categories differ in using online communities and what their approaches to virtual groups are.

2. Methodology

The data was obtained as part of the “World Internet Project: Czech Republic” research, which surveyed a representative sample of the Czech population. 1586 respondents attended the survey, all at least 12 years old. The research sample was representative for

the Czech Republic as far as the variables of sex, education, age, region, and the size of the respondent's domicile are concerned. Data collection took place in September 2007, face-to-face interviews were used. The analysis in this article includes Internet users only, i.e. the replies of 862 respondents (54.4% of the population). Internet users replied to a specific set of questions dealing with the ways of using the Internet, one part of the questionnaire asked about respondents participating in online communities.

The main question asking about respondents' attendance in communities was as follows: "On the Internet, do you regularly visit places where you meet the same people or groups of people, such as chat rooms, discussion forums, games, IRC, etc."

We evaded use of the word "communities" in the Czech question, because the word "community" ("komunita") has a negative denotation in the Czech language. Therefore we used the question which asked on the regularly attendance in "groups of people on the Internet". The word community is used in the broader sense in this article, only as regularly visiting and meeting people or groups of people online.

3. Results

We will concentrate on emphasizing age differences in the results. Table 1 shows percents of Internet users who attend online communities, divided into age groups:

Table 1. Attending online communities in the group of the Internet users

		Presently Visiting online communities	Visited online communities in the past (last 4 years)	Never visited online communities	Total
Younger adolescents 12 - 15 years old	N	37	3	59	99
	%	37.4%	3.0%	59.6%	100.0%
Older adolescents 16 - 19 years old	N	64	8	53	125
	%	51.2%	6.4%	42.4%	100.0%
Emerging adults 20 - 26 years old	N	37	6	75	118
	%	31.4%	5.1%	63.6%	100.0%
Young adults 27 - 36 years old	N	39	11	132	182
	%	21.4%	6.0%	72.5%	100.0%
Middle adults 37 - 49 years old	N	40	4	159	203
	%	19.7%	2.0%	78.3%	100.0%
Older adults 50 years and older	N	15	3	117	135
	%	11.1%	2.2%	86.7%	100.0%
Total	N	232	35	595	862
	%	26.9%	4.1%	69.0%	100.0%

Age differences in using online communities are significant $\chi^2(10, N = 862) = 81.66, p = .00, \phi = 0.31$. We can see a large variance in attending online communities between

age groups. The most common visitors of online communities are adolescents aged 16 - 19 years - only 42% of them have never taken part in online communities. It is notable that differences in the whole population are deeper because they are influenced by the digital divide effect, which influences the studied phenomenon in a similar manner as differences in attending online communities. Of the whole population, participation in online communities is 35% for younger adolescents aged 12 - 15, 47% for older adolescents aged 16 - 19 years, 25% for emerging adults aged 20 - 26 years, 15% for young adults aged 27 - 36 years, 12% for middle adults aged 37 - 49 years and only 3% for adults aged 50 years and older. The digital divide problematic in the Czech Republic is described in detail in other articles (Galacz & Šmahel, 2007; Šmahel, 2007). We found no significant difference in using online communities between men and women; the difference was not notable in any age group.

Respondents who attend online communities now or attended them in the past 4 years were asked 16 questions dealing with several aspects of their approach to an online community. Factor analysis was applied on these 16 questions and can be found on the web site¹. The analysis revealed two main factors of behavior in online communities which we call enrichment (first factor, Eigenvalue 5.5; 34.2% of variance) and disinhibition (second factor, Eigenvalue 1.8, 11.2% of variance).

The **disinhibition factor** means that people behave without barriers present in real life, they say things in the virtual group they wouldn't say in reality, forget about their real problems and have a feeling of self-importance in the virtual group.

The **enrichment factor** means that people claim the online group enriches their inner life, brings them new information and also fun. They feel useful to the community, people in the virtual group listen to them and they have a feeling of belonging to the community.

We created scores based on the main variables of both factors: the disinhibition score (Cronbach Alpha = 0.77) and the enrichment score (Cronbach Alpha = 0.81). These scores were created as the average values of answers per question and therefore their values are comparable; the scales are identical. Both scores are not direct opposites, however they supplement each other because they strongly correlate $r(257) = 0.56$, $p < 0.001$. Most community users are disinhibited and the community enriches them. Figure 1 shows average values of both scores based on age.

¹ <http://www.terapie.cz/materials/catac2008-factor.pdf>

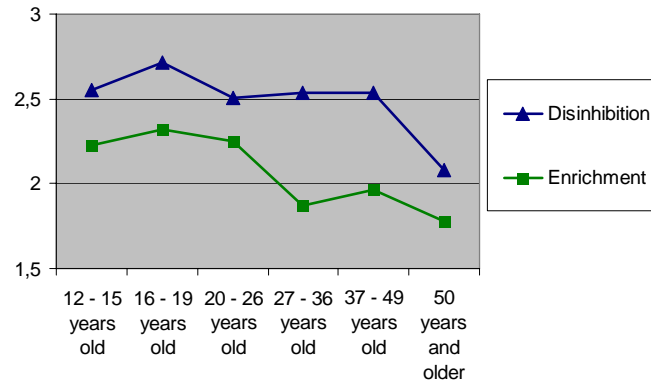


Figure 1. Disinhibition and enrichment scores by age

We can see that respondents generally had higher scores in the disinhibition factor. People in online communities agree with behaving without barriers in the virtual world more than about online communities enriching their lives. Differences in both scores are significant according to age - disinhibition $F(5, 254) = 3.21$; $p = 0.008$, $\text{Eta}^2 = 0.059$, enrichment - $F(5, 253) = 2.26$; $p = 0.049$, $\text{Eta}^2 = 0.043$. We can see that the highest disinhibition score was present in the age group of older adolescents (16 – 19 years). Interestingly, the disinhibition score remained almost the same for users between 20 and 49 years. The enrichment score has similar values from 12 to 26 years and after that it starts dropping. Adolescents and emerging adults who attends online communities say that these communities enrich their lives more frequently. The lowest values of both scores can be found in the oldest age group. It is possible that older people visit online communities for different purposes than younger ones.

5. Discussion and Conclusions

We have shown that virtual groups are primarily used by adolescents and emerging adults and that use decreases with age. Older adolescents aged 16 to 19 years participate the most - 51% of them currently take part in online communities. This corresponds to the fact that several psychologists speak about adolescence as a period where there is a very high need to communicate in groups (mostly with peers) (Dunphy, 1963; Macek, 1999). According to developmental theories, the frequency of meeting in groups drops in the period of emerging adulthood and keeps dropping after that (starting at the age of 18), corresponding with our results. It seems that people tend to meet other people online in patterns similar to those they follow when doing so in real life.

Still, meeting in online communities is a new possibility for adolescents as well as for older people. Our results seem to suggest that attending virtual groups is a “culture of youth” since mostly youth takes part in online communities. The differences between

youth and elderly are truly deep in the whole population because they are also amplified by the digital divide gap. Accessing virtual groups could also be more important for adolescents because of their developmental need to experiment with identity and try out multiple roles (Erikson, 2002). This hypothesis is supported by disinhibition score values, which are highest among adolescents aged 16 to 19 years. Adolescents in this age stated more often that they feel no real-life barriers in virtual groups, they say things they wouldn't say in real life and have a higher feeling of self-esteem in online groups. Therefore it is an open question whether adolescents and young people visit communities because it is a cultural phenomenon (others do it, it is modern, makes them feel "in" etc.) or because the virtual environment allows them to better fulfill some of their developmental tasks (experimenting with identities, being more open, behaving without real life restrictions etc.). Perhaps both reasons are intertwined and strengthen each other.

Users below 26 years of age have also stated more often than older adults that online communities enrich their lives. Younger users claim that virtual groups enrich their inner lives, bring them new information and fun, that they have a higher sense of belonging to community. It is possible that younger participants in online groups consider these groups more of a "real community" as psychologists define it. Adults aged 27 and older are usually only "visitors" of such communities or only use them for practical purposes, and their sense of community is lower.

This article is first and foremost an exploratory view on attendance in virtual groups of different age groups. Its strong point is having a representative sample of the population and the age comparison which could give directions for following research. Future research could, for example, dive deeper into studying specific online communities and analyzing community users - their motives, measuring their sense of community and analyzing the structure and development cycles of communities.

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