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UNDERSTANDING CULTURE ONLINE

ABSTRACT

Research and theory about online communities stretches back over three decades and involves all of the social sciences. The online social space of computer-mediated communications was once considered lean, cold, and egalitarian. But studies of actual online social groups instead emphasized the diversity and authentic cultural properties of online communities, and demonstrate the value of a participant-observational approach to the Internet.

Key Words: computer-mediated communications, ethnographies of online community, face-to-face communications, Internet research, Internet theory, lean media theory, online community, online identity, online participation, online social interaction theory, status equalization effects, technoculture

TECHNOLOGY AND CULTURE

Almost four decades ago, Canadian media theorist Marshall McLuhan predicted that the ‘cool’, participative and inclusive ‘electric media’ would ‘retribalize’ human society into clusters of affiliation (see, e.g., McLuhan 1970). As the decades passed, a number of other technological futurists, including Alvin Toffler, John Naisbitt, Peter Drucker, and George Gilder, located the important social changes and possibilities of an interlinked world.

Reading these past authors, it is easy to fall under the sway of a sense of technological determinism, an impression that technology is shaping our culture and changing

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our communities. Or we might assume instead a technocultural view of these changes. At an early stage of the Internet age, cultural theorists Constance Penley and Andrew Ross wrote that:

‘Technologies are not repressively foisted upon passive populations, any more than the power to realize their repressive potential is in the hands of a conspiring few. They are developed at any one time and place in accord with a complex set of existing rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, and, at last, but not least, popular desires’. (Penley and Ross 1991, p. xiv)

The insight that technology does not determine culture, but that they are co-determining, co-constructive forces, is a crucially important one. With our ideas and actions, we choose technologies, we adapt and shape them. To this realization it is also critical to add that our culture does not entirely control the technologies that we use, either. The way that technology and culture interact is a complex dance, an interweaving and intertwining. This element of technocultural change is present in our public spaces, our workplaces, our homes, our relationships, and our bodies – each institutional element intermixed with every other one. Technology constantly shapes and reshapes our bodies, our places, and our identities, and is shaped to our needs as well. Understanding of the way this transformation unfolds requires us to keep a keen eye on particular and general contexts – specific times and places, distinctive rules or rational procedures, institutional histories, technical possibilities, practical and popular uses, fears and dreams. A thorough understanding of these contexts requires ethnography.

As we move through our second decade of life in the Networked Age, the proliferation of computer-mediated communications (CMC) into everyday existence seems to be bringing some early predictions to life, and adding plenty of surprises along the way. Networked computers and the communication and coordination that they enable are driving major social changes and having a myriad of effects on people’s everyday lives.

But these dramatic effects weren’t always obvious to social scientists. Far from it, in fact. In recent years, we have only just begun to develop theories and sound analyses about the processes and practices surrounding these cultures and communities.

EARLY RESEARCH ON TECHNOLOGIES AND CULTURE

Initial Research on Online Interaction

Initial research into the burgeoning medium of online interaction was based on social psychological theory and experimental tests. This work suggested that the online medium provided a poor foundation for cultural and social activity. It asserted that social activity required the conveyance of rich social and emotional information, a sense of social presence, and the presence of social structure. Compared to face-to-face

(‘F2F’ or ‘f2f’) exchanges, online communications were theorized to be ‘lean’ and equivocal (e.g., Daft and Lengel 1986). Communicators were presumed to suffer from a reduction in social cues. That is, there was uncertainty in the communication because of the online medium’s reduced capacity to transmit nonverbal information relevant to social presence, such as voice inflection, accents, facial expressions, directions of gaze, gaze-meeting, posture, body language and movement, and touching (e.g., Dubrovsky et al. 1991; Short et al. 1976; Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Walther 1992, 1995). When tested in university laboratories with fresh sets of experimental subjects, these original assumptions were borne out.

Thus, from its beginnings, the online social environment was viewed with suspicion and cynicism, as a context that created task-oriented, ‘impersonal’, ‘inflammatory’, ‘cold’, and ‘unsociable’ interactions (Kiesler et al. 1984, 1985; Rice 1984; Rice and Love 1987; Sproull and Kiesler 1986; Walther 1992, pp. 58–9).

Another early stream of research suggested that the participants in online communities would be subject to a ‘status equalization effect’, a flattening of hierarchies where social status is equalized, social differences minimized, less rule-following occurs, and no leadership is possible. It was thought that the general lack of social context clues resulted in a reduction of social differences, an increase of communication across social barriers, less dominance, increases in self-absorption, and more excited and uninhibited communication (Dubrovsky et al. 1991; Sproull and Kiesler 1986). Many of these behaviours were already observable in online interactions, such as ‘flaming’, or insults, hostile language, and the use of profanities. These scientists thought that the technology behind online communities and online interactions undermined the social structure that was required for appropriate and hospitable social relations.

Testing Initial Assumptions about Online Sociality

However, it wasn’t very long before further research began to question these initial suppositions and early findings. Analysis of the actual content of CMC started to reveal discrepancies. Social group members seemed to ‘develop an ability to express missing nonverbal cues in written form’ (Rice and Love 1987, p. 89). In CMC, putting cues of affection, affiliation and other communications-clarifying elements happens through new symbols, or electronic ‘paralanguage’ such the familiar ‘emoticons’ [or smiley faces, such as :-) or ;-)], intentional misspellings, absence and presence of corrections and capitalization, as well as visual ASCII art (Danet 2001; Sherblom 1988, p. 44; Walther 1992, 1995). Similar attempts to imbue textual messages with features intended to replicate a face-to-face communication are common among users of other media (Beninger 1987; Gumpert and Cathcart 1985). Interdisciplinary research into the online environment revealed that, rather than being socially-impooverished and ‘lean’, there were detailed and personally enriching social worlds being constructed by online groups.

Walther (1997) suggests that we can understand much of online community behaviour by referencing the ‘anticipated future interaction’ of participants. If participants

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believe that their interaction is going to be limited and will not result in future interactions, then their relations tend to be more task-oriented. If, however, a future interaction is anticipated, participants will act in a friendlier way, be more cooperative, self-disclose, and generally engage in socially positive communications. We can conclude from this that longer-term online gatherings, particularly those where individual identities are revealed, would have tighter and more positive social relations than groups that are shorter-term and more anonymous. Similarly, Olaniran (2004) asserted that in order to manage online groups with diverse members, there was greater need to focus on shared relations of trust and unity of common interests rather than on differences. Wellman (2001b) speculates about a type of 'networked individualism' in which online communities' lack of formal institutional structure means that communications will depend on the quality of the social ties that the individual forms with the group.

Further research, including some of the early ethnographic investigations, disputed the early assertions of status equalization by showing how online group members brought to bear various strategies of visibility and identity expression in order to compensate for the scarcity of traditional markers of status differentiation and to permit its re-establishment online (Meyer and Thomas 1990; Myers 1987; Reid 1996). 'Electronic communicators have developed a grammar for signaling hierarchical positions' (Walther 1992, p. 78). 'The newcomers to a computer conference or a MOO are immediately recognized as such and the same holds true of the leaders. Both acquire and use symbols that make them different one from the other' (Paccagnella 1997). Positions of dominance in an online group are achieved through the manipulation of various social cues, such as verbal floor-managing (Shimanoff 1988), and the presence or absence of signature files (Sherblom 1988). As communicators begin building longer-term relationships and start exchanging interpretive social cues, they also start to more actively manage their self-presentations in order to create more favorable social impressions and a greater level of intimacy or attraction (Walther 1997).

The participants in online communities,

communicate social information and create and codify group-specific meanings, socially negotiate group-specific identities, form relationships which span from the playfully antagonistic to the deeply romantic and which move between the network and face-to-face interaction, and create norms which serve to organize interaction and to maintain desirable social climates. (Clerc 1996 pp. 45-6).

Recent research at Forrester Research asserts that online communities running the gamut from forums and web-pages through to blogs and social networking sites enable personal expression, active participation, and the formation of relationships (Li and Bernoff 2008).

Walther (1992, p. 53) summarily notes of this early research that 'the characterizations of CMC born from experiments on groups seem contradictory to the findings of CMC in field studies'. Naturalistic investigations of content and culture enriched prior social psychology-based portrayals of online interaction by problematizing the reduced social cues and status equalization effects theories, theories whose evidence

was largely based on short-term experimental studies of asynchronous ‘zero history’ or ‘one-shot’ groups. Examining what people actually did with CMC in their own social worlds, over the longer-term, as they wove webs of affiliation, turned out to be quite different from what people were doing in short-term situations with the technologies in laboratory situations. When information and communications technology is cast into the world, and moist life breathed into its brittle, dry circuitry, it turns out that it is used to manifest culture and build community.

DEVELOPING NUANCED UNDERSTANDINGS OF THE ONLINE SOCIAL WORLD

The development of the field of research about online cultures and communities is a story of multiple methods working to answer different research questions and reveal different facets of a new, highly complex, and rapidly evolving social phenomenon. Survey approaches inform us about the relative population, demographic constitution, and frequencies of behaviours of online community members. Social psychological and experimental approaches hypothesize about and test suggested causal relations between important individual and group level variables such as attitudes, memory, and beliefs. They enrich our understanding about the processes at work as participants engage in online communities. Netnography, the ethnography of online groups, studies complex cultural practices in action, drawing our attention to a multitude of grounded and abstract ideas, meanings, social practices, relationships, languages, and symbol systems. All of these disciplines offer complementary and necessary perspectives. Each of them is useful as we seek greater understanding of this new and ever-changing landscape of online communities and cultures.

Three decades of research have revealed that online gatherings follow many of the same basic rules as groups that gather in person. For example, the ways in which group norms develop and the importance of group identity are very similar in online and off-line groups. However, a range of research has concluded that the online community’s unique characteristics – such as its anonymity and accessibility – create some unique opportunities for a distinctive style of interaction.

Most of the social psychological research conducted on computer-mediated communication and interaction in the 1990s was concerned with investigating whether the theories developed among other groups and in the earlier years of CMC research would still hold. There is also a considerable amount of information about early group and decision support systems, and virtual teams as applied in organizations. Researchers suggest that scholarly and relational bonds develop quite naturally through the use of virtual teams (Vroman and Kovacich 2002). This should be a reassuring finding given that scholarly and professional bonds were the founding reason behind the creation of the Internet in the first place.

McKenna and Seidman (2005) classify the emphasis of the earlier years of CMC research in social psychology as ‘main effects’ accounts, and conclude in their review that:

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there are as few 'main effects' of communicating electronically as there are of communicating face-to-face. Online interactions can be and are as rich and as varied as traditional interactions; the processes that produce given outcomes can be as complex and multiply determined as those that occur in traditional interactions venues. [Social psychological] research is only beginning to demonstrate just how complex the 'online world' can be (McKenna and Seidman 2005, pp. 192–3).

As we will see later in this chapter, some of the netnographic accounts offer portayals of exactly this sort of richness and complexity.

Initial concerns that Internet use might be corrosive to the existing patterns of group, family, and community life have been contradicted by later, and more thorough, investigation. They suggest that, in fact, the opposite may well be true. Analyses of national surveys suggest that Internet users are just as likely as those who do not use the Internet to call their friends on the telephone or to visit them in person, and actually conclude that Internet users have larger social networks than those who are not users (DiMaggio et al. 2001). A large, random-sample study relates that people believe the Internet enables them to keep in touch more effectively with their friends and family, and even to extend their social networks. This belief in the relational power of the Internet should come as no surprise to those familiar with social networking sites. In another, related, study, Howard et al. (2000, p. 399) conclude that their results 'suggest that online tools are more likely to extend social contact than detract from it'. A longitudinal study by Kraut et al. (2002) suggests that people who use the Internet more also engage in more face-to-face and telephone contact with their friends and family, and also that more Internet use is correlated with increased civic involvement.

Research that studies online communities that use e-mail and mailing lists to stay in contact have found these media to be useful for developing and maintaining networks with 'weak ties', that is, networks in which the participants do not have close relationships characterized by the exchange of lots of information or the presence of intimate personal friendships (Matei and Ball-Rokeach 2003). As we might expect of complex actual phenomena, online communities appear to have a number of different usages. They can intensify existing relationships as well as help to create and then maintain new relationships.

Meta-analyses of computer-mediated communication studies indicate that Internet users progress from initially asocial information gathering to increasingly affiliative social activities (Walther 1995). Kozinets (1999) theorized that there was a pattern of relational development as people who are interested in online communities became drawn into and acculturated by their contact with them. First, for a variety of reasons, an Internet user will become interested in an online community and its culture. The user often will have a particular goal that they want to accomplish, such as hearing others' political opinions, finding out about a car rental service, locating the best deals on wine, or learning how to properly install a new toilet. Doing so will lead them to search engines as they 'browse' information sources. There, they will often 'lurk', unobtrusively reading, but not writing about their focal topic of interest.

Consider the theoretical example of 'Samantha', a dedicated and enthusiastic young backpacker, who is planning her vacation to Agra, India. Seeking 'hard'

information, Samantha begins her quest by searching the city's name in Google, clicking on the link to Wikipedia, and then visiting the official Website of Agra. However, as she delves deeper and explores more of the online links from her Google searches and Wikipedia entries, she begins to notice and visit sites that have 'third party' information, information from other 'real people' like her, except that these people have actually been where she wants to go.

Samantha might seek out pictures of the Taj Mahal and, from the comments that she finds there, find out that there are communities and blogs dedicated to discussing travel stories. Eventually, she reads some of the posts written by members of these communities. Intrigued, she may make online contact with the people on a forum or on a blog. She reaches out to others who are planning similar trips. She might question a few blog authors individually, and then make a general post to an online community that gathers on a particular web-page's forum. One of her querying replies to an answer is found to be culturally-insensitive and offensive by one of the regular posters to the group (who happens to be Indian). That person insults Samantha's intelligence publicly on the forum. Another member, a leader in the group, gently defends her and suggests that she apologize. Samantha feels genuinely horrified at her faux pas. Despite her deep embarrassment, she apologizes. She thinks about never going back to the forum, but eventually, after 10 days away, she returns. After posting several more questions to the community, she sees a question about Nicaragua, a place she has recently visited. At that point, Samantha feels obliged by norms of reciprocity – after all, with only a few exceptions, the community has been good to her – and she answers it in great depth and detail. After some time, she becomes an occasional participant in group discussions. When she actually does travel to India, she cannot help but think many times about what she has learned from the members of the online community; she even feels that somehow, she is carrying them along with her. After she returns from her travel to Agra, she posts a long contribution, with links to some amazing photographs. A few months go by in which she rarely visits the group, but then she starts to become a more intense participant in the group as she plans her next travel destination.

As depicted in Figure 2.1, the pattern of relationship development in an online community is one in which task-oriented and goal-directed informational knowledge is developed in concert with social and cultural knowledge and social relationships. As we saw from the example of Samantha, fact-based information is learned alongside knowledge of the online community's specialized language and sensitized concepts, norms, values, rituals, practices, preferences, and the identities of experts and other group members. As personal details and stories are shared, cultural cohesion ripens and empathy blooms. A group structure of power and status relationships is learned. What began primarily as a search for information transforms into a source of community and understanding (Kozinets 1999).

In the contemporary Internet realm, there are other pathways to community membership. Within a community format designed for social interaction, such as a social networking site or a virtual world, there initially might be no abstract or socially distant topics or information to exchange or share. In the social network, the exploration and building of that network might be the goal. In a virtual world or a

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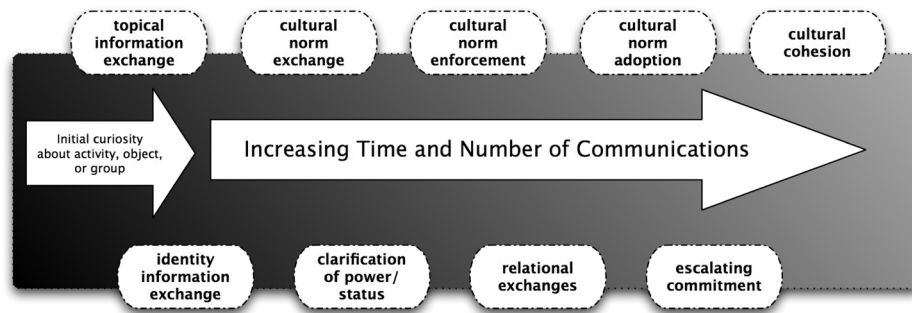


FIGURE 2.1 DEVELOPMENTAL PROGRESSION OF PARTICIPATION IN ONLINE COMMUNITIES (ADAPTED FROM KOZINETS 1999)

gaming-based community, the learning of the social norms or game rules, or the mastering of the online environment itself, might be the primary objective. In those cases, topics about which people share information might be more personal in nature or more about the characteristics of the social or constructed environment. From there, the participant might follow a path to the learning of cultural norms, and the broadening and spreading of social relations throughout the various extended arms of the online community.

Regardless of the medium or exact pathway to participation, the theory suggests that, over time and with increasingly frequent communications, the sharing of personal identity information and clarification of power relations and new social norms transpires in the online community – that social and cultural information permeates every exchange, effecting a type of gravitational pull that causes every exchange to become coloured with emotional, affiliative, and meaning-rich elements.

This emotional, affiliative element – its social psychological origins and its social values – has been recognized repeatedly in research. Research using survey responses and structural equation modelling by McKenna and Bargh (1998) revealed that many respondents had, as a result of their online community participation, come out to their families and friends about a stigmatized aspect of their identity for the first time in their lives. Because of their online community experiences with others who shared their own stigmatic status, they considered themselves less different, benefited from the increase in self-acceptance, and felt less socially isolated.

Similarly, another study of online support groups for people with serious and often stigmatized illnesses such as alcoholism, AIDS, and forms of cancer, established the benefits of online communities (Davison et al. 2000). For those who sought out similar others under conditions of great anxiety and uncertainty, the anonymity and accessibility of these communities has been a virtual godsend. A range of studies also suggest that online communities have considerable stress reduction, self-acceptance, and informational value, even for people who have illnesses and conditions that are not stigmatized, such as diabetes or hearing impairments (see, e.g., McKay et al. 2002).

Ethnographically studying the phenomenon in a subcultural context from a symbolic interactionist frame, the findings of Williams and Copes also reinforce the utility of the online communal forum for those who feel disenfranchised or marginalized. Using

'internet-based subcultural forums to combat the liminal feelings that are widespread in the face-to-face world ... many individuals who feel marginalized in contemporary society search for others in emerging virtual spaces' (2005, p. 85).

As a result of their study of the impact of online communities on social capital and involvement in local communities, Kavanaugh and Patterson (2001, p. 507) suggested that 'the longer people are on the Internet, the more likely they are to use the Internet to engage in social-capital-building activities'. In their overview of this research, McKenna and Seidman (2005, p. 212) suggest that not only are people not substituting participation in online communities for involvement in physical activities and relationships, but 'if anything, Internet use appears to be bolstering real-world community involvement'. These and other results show us that not only do online communities have real social benefits, but also that they have powerful effects on people's sense of identity.

RESEARCH ON NEW PRACTICES AND SHIFTING SYSTEMS OF MEANING

Early ethnographic studies of online communities also underscored the dramatic impacts that the Internet and networked connectivity were having on self-identity and social relationships and then proceeded to detail the varied practices involved in achieving these effects. Two of the earliest and most influential works in the field of ethnographic online community studies are Rheingold (1993) and Turkle (1995).

Writer Howard Rheingold's (1993) *The Virtual Community: Homesteading on the Electronic Frontier*, is a trailblazing investigation into the early online community, the WELL. In this work, Rheingold (1993) offers a conceptual charting of online communities and the interactive potentialities they offer. Massachusetts Institute of Technology professor Sherry Turkle's (1995) book, *Life on the Screen: Identity in the Age of the Internet*, is a close examination of people's changing understanding of computers that also studies how they interact with the Internet, specifically with one another in multi-user domains (MUDs) (see also Cherny 1999).

Three other important early ethnographies of online communities are Baym (1999), Markham (1998) and Cherny (1999). One of the pioneers of online ethnography, University of Kansas media studies professor Nancy Baym (1999), conducts a detailed study of rec.arts.tv.soaps, a Usenet fan bulletin board devoted to soap operas. She theorizes that there are many similarities between audience communities and online communities (see also Jenkins 1995). Further, she suggests that online communities be viewed and studied as 'communities of practice', because 'a community's structures are instantiated and recreated in habitual and recurrent ways of acting or practices' (Baym 1999, p. 22). The book proceeds to explore and elaborate the various practices used in this online community, charting out the terrain of online communities. Baym describes a range of interpretive, informative, interpretive, and social practices, such as evaluation, commiseration, criticism, and other strategies for the creation of a group identity. She details a number of ways that sociability and dissent

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are managed in the community, verbal strategies and rituals for accomplishing friendliness and managing the inevitable disagreements, and also notes the various formations – particularly the dyad – that online sociability within the greater community affords.

In *Life Online* – the result of her own intense experiences as a heavy Internet user – University of Wisconsin–Milwaukee professor Annette Markham (1998) also offers a detailed ethnographic account of linguistic practices and collective formations manifesting through CMC. The book is presented as the narrative of a journey from a naïve beginner to a knowledgeable insider and expert. It is a profoundly textual journey, and Markham emphasizes the textuality of life online by providing many excerpts that approximate for the reader how her computer screen appeared when she was encountering these various at-first alien cultures and communities. She also lists and explains various acronyms and computer commands she had to master in order to navigate this early online environment. Along the way, Markham theorizes about the practices, identities, consumption, and particularly the lived experience of online community membership, casting the online experience as simultaneously a tool, a place, and a way-of-being.

Markham's (1998) innovative book also self-reflexively considers issues of embodiment, and her auto-ethnographic accounts bring life and detail to her analysis:

After a few hours of [online] work, my body is screaming with pain. My back constantly aches, no matter how I adjust my chair. If I do not chew gum, I clench my teeth; if I do not talk, my throat is raw and sore. My hands take the most punishment. (Markham 1998, p. 59)

She also offers many useful and honest reflections and suggestions about conducting ethnographic fieldwork in the online environment (see also Markham and Baym 2008).

The result of two years of research conducted in a 'multi-user dungeon' (MUD), user experience authority Lynn Cherny's (1999) *Conversation and Community* offers another ethnographic investigation into a close knit synchronous or 'real-time' chat-based community, its members' linguistic practices, their shared history, and their relationships with the members of other online communities. Cherny's book details necessary innovations and adaptations made by community members to address the limitations of the textual medium. Speech routines, vocabulary and abbreviations, syntax and semantics, and turn-taking strategies distinguish the online community's 'register' – its variety of speech that has adapted to a particular recurrent communication situation. Her study demonstrates and also explains the ability of people interacting online to use language in order to create a genuine sense of online community, analyses the impact of power structures and hierarchy (revealing a technocracy in which the technically empowered are the most influential actors), and also considers the role of elites, gossip, and conflict in the formation and maintenance of an active, thriving community.

Brenda Danet (2001), in her book *Cyberpl@y*, collected a decade's worth of discourse analyses to examine the variety of online forms of play. Her account provides a detailed historical, literary, sociolinguistic, aesthetic, folkloric, and theoretical

unpacking of five particular forms of linguistic online performance, as they manifest in various online communities. Danet (2001) examines the convergence of playfulness, art and communications through five case studies which elaborate and interpret the language of e-mail, playful performances on Internet Relay Chat, the construction of elaborate multi-coloured ASCII images, text-based art and communication on a chat channel called 'rainbow', and community members' enthusiastic play with, and collection of, digital fonts. Her rich visual examples, results, and discussion theoretically illuminate the interplay of technology, play, art, and community in the online environment. Each of these valuable books is noteworthy for its thorough breakdowns and descriptions of the developing systems of meanings and practices that we observe as online community members build and share their cultures.

TYPOLOGIES AND CLASSIFICATIONS OF ONLINE COMMUNITIES AND ONLINE PARTICIPATION

In an early study demonstrating the genuineness of the online communal experience, Correll (1995) conducted an ethnography of 'The Lesbian Café', an electronic bar. Her ethnography suggests that the online community experience is mediated by impressions of real-world locations as well as by the unique contingencies of computer-mediated communications. Based on her observations in this site, she offers a typology of four styles of online community membership and participation: regulars, newbies, lurkers, and bashers. There is an apparent developmental progression from lurker to newbie to regular, and an oppositional status displayed by the bashers who come from outside of the community in order to harass members. Correll's (1995) early descriptions of online community and the progression from one membership stage to another have been influential.

Another idea is that the members of online communities have two main elements bringing them together, which can interrelate in many ways. We may be able to better understand membership identification and participation by studying these two non-independent factors. The first considers the relationship between the person and the central consumption activity that they are engaging in, with and through the online community. The term 'consumption' is intended to be interpreted with considerable flexibility. In an online community devoted to the videogame 'Spore', for example, the central activity would be gaming. In a beer brewing community the central 'consumption' activity might not be consumption per se, but the production of a homemade brew, maybe a nice mead mélange fermented with an ancient Egyptian yeast strain and Manuka honey (of course, its consumption would also play a role). In a virtual world such as Second Life, the central activity might be 'consuming' new friends in a general sense or having interesting and exciting new online experiences.

The guiding notion underlying this dimension is that the more central is this activity to a person's sense of identity, and the more that they believe the pursuit and

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development of the skill or activity is central to their self-image and core self-concept, then the more likely this person is to pursue and value membership in a community, be it online or otherwise. Because the activity is so important to them, any connection to it, to others who share it, or to pathways to knowledge about it and social discourse surrounding it, is going to be held in great esteem, coveted, and cherished. Conversely, if this consumption activity is not particularly important to them, their relationship to the online community is going to be more distanced.

This category of consumption interest centrality is correlated and interrelated with consumption proficiency. Thus, the greater the centrality of the consumption interest to the person, the higher the interest level and concomitant level of activity knowledge and skill. This is a measure not only of self-identification, but of identity and interest combined with expertise.

The second factor concerns the actual social relationships of this particular online community itself. How deep, long-lasting, meaningful, and intense are those relationships? Are these people considered to be merely somewhat-interesting strangers, or are they long-term friends that are as close to the participant as anyone else in their life? Obviously, some forms of online community are more likely to promote this sort of affiliation than others. Social networking sites operate under the assumption that affiliations are already pre-existing, and use technological connection to intensify them. Virtual worlds like *Second Life* are structured so that social intercourse is the primary pursuit and objective. Blogs can be a bit more impersonal in their communal forms, with one or several major authority figures relating with a more traditional 'audience' form, but this perspective cloaks the often close relationships between related groups of bloggers (Rettberg 2008). There is not an online communal form that we will deal with or mention in this book where deep and meaningful personal relationships cannot be built.

It is also important to note that these two factors will often be interrelated. For example, imagine a young woman who is extremely devoted to collecting Hello Kitty items and who lives in a rural community in Korea. If she has broadband Internet access, and has no one in her face-to-face community who understands – let alone shares – her passion for Hello Kitty, then she is more likely to seek out and build social bonds with the members of one of the many Hello Kitty online communities. In addition, particular online forms such as social networking sites, virtual worlds, and many gaming sites (such as, say, a poker site that encourages chat while the players play) already have social dimensions 'baked in' to their formats. In that case, the central consumption activity is already social, and the question of actually knowing and having relationships with the members of this online community is almost repetitive.

TYPES OF ONLINE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION

We need alternatives to the rather essentializing clustering of all members of online communities into a single category of membership or non-membership. Netnographer and consumer researcher Kristine de Valck (2005, p. 133) suggests

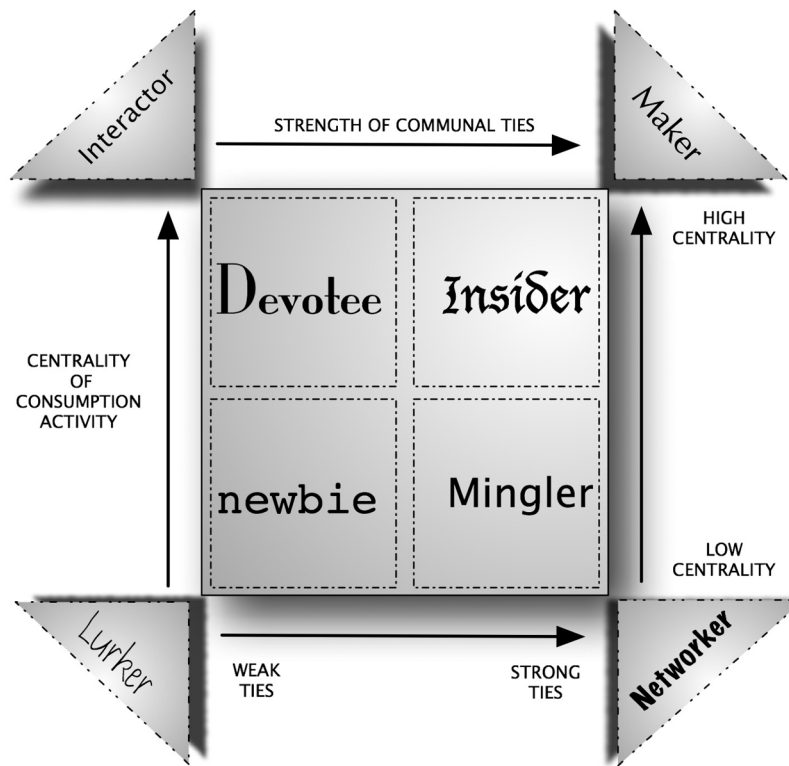


FIGURE 2.2 TYPES OF ONLINE COMMUNITY PARTICIPATION (ADAPTED AND DEVELOPED FROM KOZINETS 1999)

in her detailed study of SmulWeb, a Dutch online community dedicated to food, that there have been many converging typologies of online community members types. This, she argues, is strong evidence that the dichotomizations of online community members as either lurkers or contributors is too simple to be theoretically useful.

In its basic form, the two factors described above – the centrality of the identification and expertise with the core activity of the community, and relations with other online community members – are distinct enough that they can guide our understanding of the four idealized member ‘types’, shown in Figure 2.2. *Newbies* are the first of the four types. Newbies lack strong social ties to the group, and maintain only a superficial or passing interest in the consumption activity itself and have relatively weak abilities and skills. *Minglers* come next. They are the fraternizers of these communities, socializers who maintain strong personal ties with many members of the community but who are only superficially interested or drawn to the central consumption activity. *Devotees* reverse this emphasis: they have relatively shallow social ties with the members of the community, but maintain a focal interest in and enthusiasm for the consumption activity in the community, as well as refined skill and knowledge sets. Finally, *Insiders* are those who have strong social ties to the online

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community as well as deep identification with, aptitude in, and understanding of the core consumption activity.

The diagonal dimension indicates various relationships, and proposes four additional 'types' of relationship and interrelationship with a given online community. At the lower left diagonal is the much-recognized category of the *Lurker*, the active observer who learns about a site through initially watching and reading. The lurker has the potential, over time, to become a newbie, a neo or neophyte, a new member who is using the community to learn about the core consumption activity or to reach out and build social relationships. Lurkers feed into the community. We cannot actively observe their participation, but we can learn about them through other means, such as the electronic shadow trails they leave in cyberspace, and the retrospective reflections that people have of their own time as lurkers (see Schlosser 2005).

On the other extreme are those who have developed their social and consumption-focused skills and connections to such a high level that they become central to the community, or even form new communities of their own. This diagonal stretches out from the top-right corner, reaching out from the category of the insider into the category of the *Maker*. Makers are active builders of online communities and their related social spaces, such as the person who has been involved in the online Ferrari culture for so long that they eventually begin their own online forum devoted to a particular model of Ferrari, and excluding other models that are not, in their not-so-humble opinion, 'classic' Ferraris.

The other two diagonals reflect interrelationships with other kinds of communities, both online and off. The top-left diagonal depicts the *interactor* reaching into the community from other communities that are highly engaged with the consumption activity, usually from in-person venues, or those that are primarily in-person with only peripheral use of CMC to keep members connected (such as a football or book club that uses a mailing list to keep members in contact with one another). So, as an example, consider *Star Trek* fans that have local in-person fan clubs connecting to a few *Star Trek*-related online communities by offering consumption activity-related news, how-tos, or information to devotees, or engaging in devotee-like behaviours, in particular online communities.

The final diagonal is at the bottom-right of the diagram. Here, members of other communities, which the model terms *Networkers*, will reach into a particular online community in order to build social ties and interact with the members of that other community. This contact might come from another community that is totally unrelated in terms of content, but which is connected by particular members' weak or strong social ties. Or it could come from a related community that seeks to link up and exchange ideas with, or even steal members from, that community. The point of the networker is to build ties between different online communities.

Generally speaking, a lurker has the potential to progress from newbie status to becoming an insider as she gains social capital with the group and cultural capital with the core consumption activities in which it engages. Another, related, model considers the general trending and movement through these relational modes. Participation can move from a factual and informational type of exchange to one

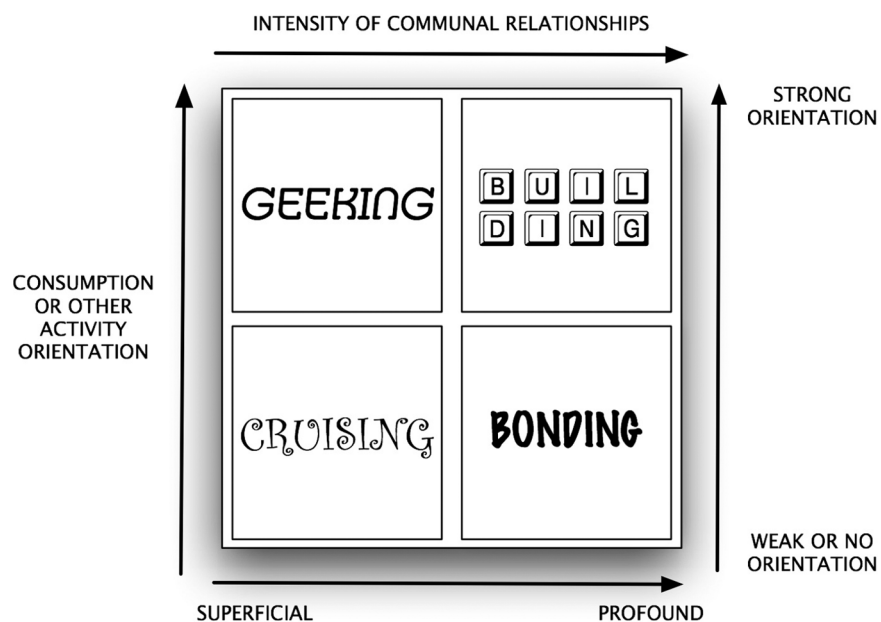


FIGURE 2.3 TYPES OF ONLINE COMMUNITY INTERACTION

that effortlessly mixes factual information and social, or relational, information (see Kozinets 1999).

TYPES OF ONLINE COMMUNITY

These types of membership and participation might also help us to understand some of the different forms of online communities, as represented in Figure 2.3. As we have already noted, the nature of relationships in online communities can vary from intensely personal and deeply meaningful to those that are quite superficial, short-lasting, and relatively insignificant. They can also vary from those that are oriented strictly around a particular activity, such as wood-carving or discussing America's Next Top Model, to those in which a unifying activity or interest is irrelevant. Online gatherings that are known for their weaker social relationships and the low centrality of any particular kind of consumption activity might be known as *Cruising communities*. Particular virtual worlds, chat-rooms, and certain gamespaces would fit well into this cruising classification. They would satisfy the 'relational' and 'recreational' needs that draw people to online communities (Kozinets 1999).

Online locations that are known to have and create very strong social ties between members, resulting in deep and long-lasting relationships, but whose members are

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not particularly focused on a shared or unifying consumption behaviour, might be termed *Bonding communities*. Social networking sites, many virtual worlds and particular places in virtual worlds, as well as a number of social forums would fit into this category. Bonding online communities would primarily fulfil their members' relational needs.

A third type of online community would be the online gatherings where the sharing of information, news, stories, and techniques about particular activity is the community's *raison d'être* – again, it could be consumption or production, or even 'prosumption' (Tapscott and Williams 2007). With all due respect – and I do mean this sincerely, since I am a founding member of this club – I call these *Geeking communities*. Many newsgroups, website forums, social content sites and services, and blogs would be Geeking communities, offering their member and readers deeply detailed information about a particular set of activities, but not deeply engaging most of them in meaningful social relationships. The modes of interaction on these communities are predominantly informational.

Finally, we have the online gatherings that offer both a strong sense of community as well as detailed information and intelligence about a central, unifying interest and activity. These communities I term *Building communities*. Although blogs, wikis, Social networking sites (SNS) interest groups, and other forms of online gatherings could certainly be Building communities, I have seen more of these online communities grow from website forums, devoted websites, and virtual worlds. A good example of a Building community would be the Niketalk forum devoted to in-depth discussions, evaluations, and even design of sports shoes and basketball sneakers (see Füller et al. 2007). Another is the open source software community, in all of its various manifestations, such as slashdot (Hemetsberger and Reinhardt 2006). The mode of interaction in these types of communities is informational as well as relational. These categories mingle and for many participants become recreational and even, for some, transformational. Transformation is most often actively pursued by insiders, whose social and active skills empower their online experience. However, these transformational activities, which can include resistance and activism, will also be followed by devotees whose interests and skills inspire them to take leadership positions in seeking to enact positive change.

DEVELOPING STUDIES OF ONLINE CULTURE AND COMMUNITIES

As more researchers conduct creative ethnographies on the online communities that continue to burgeon, mutate, and spread, we learn just how much online communities are changing society. Ethnographies of online communities and cultures are informing us about how these online formations affect notions of self, how they express the postmodern condition, and how they simultaneously liberate and constrain. They reveal the enormous diversity of online groups, from skinheads to economically privileged new mothers, from youth subcultures to the elderly. They reveal how our human relationships, our work relationships and our structures of

power are changing. They reveal tensions between commercial orientations and power structures online and the communal forms that they promote. They tell us about the promotion of cultural transformation, and the creation of change agents.

Many of these ethnographic investigations, particularly the earliest ones, have been undertaken by scholars working from within the discipline of cultural studies. It is somewhat surprising that more anthropologists have not conducted online ethnographies. In one anthropological investigation, Lysloff (2003) is cautiously optimistic about the online community's expressionistic impacts on human culture. She relates cyberculture to the postmodern notion of the fragmented, multiple self as well as to a Situationist sense of voice:

When we go online, the computer extends our identity into a virtual world of disembodied presence, and at the same time, it also incites us to take on other identities. We lurk in, or engage with, on-line lists and usenet groups that enable different versions of ourselves to emerge dialogically. The computer, in this way, allows for a new kind of performativity, an actualization of multiple and perhaps idealized selves through text and image. (Lysloff 2003, p. 255)

Demonstrating the ability of online ethnographies to reveal cultural nuance, Campbell (2006) studies skinhead culture online, arguing that skinhead identity as expressed online is remarkably heterogeneous. He further elaborates that there is a surprisingly complex and dynamic relationship between skinhead culture online and notions of race and racism. Studies such as this one underscore the utility – perhaps even necessity – of studies of online gatherings to help reveal additional nuances to our understanding of existing cultures and communities, and to demonstrate how these communities are inflecting, hybridizing, and transformed by the unique abilities conferred by Internet connectivity.

In their study of an edgy, post-punk, quasi-neoconservative 'straightedge' online community, Williams and Copes (2005, p. 86) also suggest that there are links between 'the postmodern condition', the 'fragmentation of identity', 'the weakening of commitment to anything but oneself', and the 'liminal quality' of the Internet communal experience. They see online communities functioning 'as a communication interlock' between the mass media and face-to-face subcultural interaction, facilitating 'subcultural diffusion via nomadic Internet users who share subcultural values and feel a part of a virtual community but who do not feel the need to self-identify as subcultural members' (Williams and Copes 2005, p. 86).

Online communities are widespread phenomena, and their norms and rituals are shaped by the practices of cyberculture and those of the general cultural groups using them. Studying the role of the Internet in the lives of a group of technologically proficient, socially advantaged, white, heterosexual, new mothers, Madge and O'Connor (2006), sought to explore in what sense online communities might fulfil their vaunted potential for empowerment and feminist activism. They asserted that online community contact definitely provided a sense of social support and alternative sources of information that increased the women's sense of being empowered in the crucial transition to motherhood. However, they also suggest that traditional stereotypes of mothering and gender roles persist in online communities devoted to

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it. They describe a paradox in which the Internet is both liberating and constraining in the lives of those partaking in this particular community of practice. Demonstrating that the use and importance of online communities are not limited to the young or middle-aged, Kanayama (2003) asserts that elderly Japanese people beneficially partake in online community interactions with one another in a variety of ways and using diverse linguistic formats such as emoticons and haiku.

In her study of relationships and friendships online, Carter (2005) advances the argument that some people are investing as much time and effort in online relationships as they are in their other relationships. Her study, focused on an online ethnographic site called Cybercity, provides evidence that 'many of the friendships formed in Cybercity are routinely being moved offline', and, as a result of this, 'individuals are extending their webs of personal relationships to include cyberspace. In this respect cyberspace is no longer distinct and separate from the real world. It is part of everyday life, as these relationships are becoming embedded in everyday life' (Carter 2005, p. 164). However, the nature of relationships and friendships may be changing because of the different forms and freedoms available to us through computer-mediated communications. Because of online communities and ICT, social relationships, she concludes, are currently in a state of transformation.

A similar conclusion could be reached from Whitty's (2003) study of 'cyberflirting'. However, Whitty (2003) also explores the widely reputed aspect of disembodiment online. She suggests that, rather than there being an absence of the body in online community interactions, the body is reconstructed or re-embodied online in different ways. She also recounts the interesting combination of realistic and fantastic elements that allow for rich and playful online communication to arise.

Online communities even appear to be changing the nature of work and work relationships. Gossett and Kilker (2006) undertook a study of counter institutional websites, in the context of a close examination of RadioShackSucks.com. They assert that these sites enable and empower individuals to publicly and anonymously voice their work-based frustrations. They do this in an anonymous and supportive environment that offers them a reduced fear of retribution or termination from their jobs. There are a number of important theoretical and practical implications to the fact that participants can use these sites to engage in voice and resistance efforts outside of the formal boundaries of various types of organizations such as human resource departments or labour unions. 'It is clear', they state, 'that the Internet is increasingly becoming a place for workers to come together, share information, and engage in collective action outside the boundaries of the organization' (Gossett and Kilker 2006, p. 83).

Another important theme is that of the interrelationship between commercial and marketing institutions and the communities that they foster, maintain, and propose to serve through ICT. Kozinets (2001) identified several core tensions between the stigmatized *Star Trek* and media fan communities, their utopian and inclusive ideologies, and the large corporate enterprises that gathered them together for commercial purposes in venues both physical and online. Kozinets and Sherry (2005) also studied these tensions between communities and the commercial organizations of wider society in the setting of the Burning Man festival and its all-year-round online community.

A precautionary note is sounded by Campbell (2005, p. 678) in his examination of lesbian, gay, bisexual and transsexual (LGBT) online communities. He depicts gay Internet portals openly courting the gay community online with promises of inclusion and an authentic communal experience. However, they also simultaneously reposition gays and lesbians in a commercial panopticon that places them under corporate surveillance. He wonders if 'all commercial portals purporting to serve politically marginalized groups beg the question of whether there can be a harmonious balance between the interests of community and the drives of commerce' (see also Campbell 2004; Campbell and Carlson 2002).

Germane to this discussion of commercial empowerment are emerging research streams suggesting that increasing ICT and online community participation around the world is removing power 'from nations and their regulatory agencies in terms of surveillance, monitoring, and administrative and cultural management policies' (Olaniran 2008, p. 52). It is also the case that online community participation seems to weaken the influence of existing local cultures and their embedded practices. Online community members' easy access and exposure to the different values of diverse national and regional cultures can have dramatic impacts on how individuals view their own local lifeways. Along these lines, Robert McDougal (1999) suggests, in a study of the introduction of e-mail among the Mohawk tribe, that members of this group considered that the technology altered what they held to be important ways of relating to the world and even to their own traditional way of life.

A salient point is raised by Olaniran (2008). He notes that:

a factor mediating interaction experiences in e-tribes is the fact that members are set apart from the general population of the country of origin. This factor creates, or at a minimum establishes, the need to conform and adopt group norms in e-tribes. The communication implication is that members must develop a new set of norms that is unique to their particular group. (Olaniran 2008, pp. 44–5)

As the new sites and forms of community become institutionalized – a process whose alacrity cannot help but impress anyone watching YouTube or Facebook's meteoric rise – local communities may find their own norms and standards taking a backseat to those of these new institutions. The longer-term implications of this delocalizing trend for local communities and traditional ways of life are far from clear.

Finally, online communities change the way that people seek to change their world. An early study concludes that environmental organizations became more politically active because of the Internet and online communities (Zelwietro 1998), and suggests that online communities have a transformational effect on their participants, allowing them to organize more effectively and to focus on the specific tasks needed for longer-term realization of their objectives. Bolanle Olaniran (2004, p. 161) asserts that online community participants can and will serve as social agents for cultural transformation in their other various cultures and communities. He suggests that, in online communities, 'group interests [can] inspire devotees to demand and seek positive change inside and outside the group' (Olaniran 2008, p. 47).

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SUMMARY

Interdisciplinary research demonstrates how authentic, beneficial, and diverse communal qualities transfer to the online environment. Ethnographic investigations teach us about the varieties of strategies and practices used to create a communal sense and teach us about the varieties and substance of online community participation, members, participation styles, and forms. Recent developments in ethnographic online research reveal how much online communities are changing notions of the self, systems of social support, personal and work relationships, institutional power, and social activism. The following chapter overviews and compares various research methods used to understand the social world of online communities and cultures. This will help you evaluate these approaches before we proceed to the chapters that introduce, explain, and demonstrate the netnographic approach.

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