Participation and Lurking in Social Discussions in Facebook Groups
/ Tali Gazit

Abstract

Modern communication channels, and especially the Internet, are considered nowadays as a vital part of the daily life of many people around the world. Online forums, as an important aspect of it, are Internet spaces that allow people with similar interests to congregate and to discuss common problems and issues and to offer information and support about a variety of topics such as health, recreation, professional and technical subjects. These online spaces are ever developing and evolving to fit the needs of their creators and users. Despite the benefits gained from participation in online groups, research has shown that only a small percentage of users participate in group discussions, while the majority are inactive passive readers.

Research literature distinguishes in this context between "active participants" and "lurkers". Active participants are the ones who are actively writing posts, commenting to others and clicking "like". Lurkers, on the other hand, are defined as those who "read social media data, but do not directly contribute". Understanding participation and lurking is central to understanding the socialization element in online social behavior, especially as lurkers do have opinions, ideas, and information that can be of value to the online and offline community.

The asymmetric information exchange that happens, according to the literature, in online groups, raises the main research question of this dissertation: what are the psychological and environmental factors behind participating and lurking in online discussion groups - particularly Facebook groups?

To answer this question, four studies were carried out: 1) four focus groups – two with lurkers and two with active participants; 2) a closed-ended online questionnaire to which 507 Internet users answered; 3) a quantitative content analysis of three Facebook groups, which are the most popular type of online groups nowadays, with 274 members and 450 posts; 4) managing research learning groups of students, while using a triangulation method, combining quantitative coding, closed and opend questions in a questionnaire and depth interviews.

Regarding the focus groups, a variety of factors was found that account for participation and lurking and organized them in a model with the core categories: psychological factors, environmental factors and anonymity.

The findings of the second study that used an online survey, strengthened the outcomes of the focus groups: The level of participation can be predicted by extroversion, openness, offline activity, the type of platform used, whether or not participation is anonymous and numerous motivations to participate such as knowing that participating has influence, or the degree of importance for users to express their feelings.

The third study , in which 450 posts were coded from closed Facebook groups, showed that when participants asked a question or requested help, they received more responses and fewer "likes". When a photo, video, link, emojies, tags or exclamation mark were attached, there were more "likes" but less discussion. It was also found that more than 60% of posts that were long or contained ellipsis created discussions and receive many "likes".

The group' members also filled out a closed-ended questionnaire. The posts, comments, and "likes" were coded and counted for a period of two months of 274 members who answered the questionnaire to assess the participation level of each member. It was found that gender, level of group importance, offline activity and interaction between age and neuroticism can predict the level of participation in Facebook groups. A relationship between extroversion and the level of participation was found only among one of the groups.

The fourth study, which combined several methods: 1) coding the level of participation in Facebook learning groups that were created for the purpose of this research, 2) questionnaire and 3) interviews of the students participants, had a few interesting findings along with strengthening the findings on the previous parts. First, it strengthened the finding from the third study that suggested more discussions and fewer "likes" for posts with question marks or a request for help. Here, again, when a photo, link, emojies, tags or exclamation marks were attached, there were more "likes" but less discussion. Second, it was found that the main motivation to participate was getting help with the course material, followed by the groups admin's quality of answers and the feeling that they are not alone. It was also found that when a WhatsApp group exists at the same time and same topic as the Facebook one, people sometimes prefer the WhatsApp for several reasons, mainly intimacy considerations.

It is hoped that understanding how individual behaviour varies according to their psychological traits along with environmental factors, will help those trying to encourage greater participation in online discussions to target their efforts more effectively. Encouraging active participation in online communities is one of the greatest challenges facing community initiators. Participation is the lifeblood of online communities - without it communities will find it difficult to sustain themselves, and thus the findings and conclusions of this dissertation can be used as powerful tools to make that happen, while a diversity of voices and opinions are being heard.

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