

A quantitative and qualitative analysis of "adult relationship forums" in Israel, France & England : a comparative study

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Abstract:

The role of online communities is important as they enable us to receive and share information, establish social interactions, to provide and be supported, create communication with others who share the similar interest, acquire educational contents, commodities and more, all of this within the comfort of our own PC. Amongst the various types of online communities, exist the social communities. The purpose of those communities is to provide support on specific subjects, share information that can benefit in required situations and also to provide a way to relieve doubts and pressures.

The purpose of this study is to examine whether differences exist among various countries regarding the following variables: Level of openness in the forums; the length of the messages and its correlation with the level of openness; messages types published in the forums; and differences in the purpose of the message that derives from social norms. In addition, this study attempts to establish which factors influence the nature of virtual communities.

This study focuses on social virtual communities, which its subject is love and relationships, in three different countries, The UK, France and Israel. Nine forums were selected, three forums from each country, similar in terms of activity volume. Research method was a quantitative and qualitative content analysis. Period of this study was approximately four weeks during February 2007.

The findings show that Israeli users expressed higher level of openness comparing the British and French users. However, differences were minor and most participants in general, held a low level of openness. In addition, it was found that a high ratio of French users wrote short messages comparing to the Israeli and British users. Thus, for example, the ratio of the French users that wrote medium and long messages is much lower than the Israeli and British ones. It was also

found that the largest differences were within the following messages types: sharing experience/ problem, advice, and personal approach to other participants. A higher ratio of messages by British and Israeli users are of type -sharing experience and advice comparing to French users who had a higher ratio of type messages - personal approach to other participants. Although no meaningful difference was found among the various countries regarding the variable "purpose of message that derives from social norms", it was found that a higher ratio of British users use the forum for the purpose of creating social interactions, in comparison to Israeli and French users.

It was also established that the nature of the virtual communities was determined by its moderators and its members. Community moderators establish the forum's tone and ambiance, direct users, whether by providing user guidelines or by making remarks while participating in the forum. Community members also influence its nature, whether it is social, supportive or professional, by publishing messages, their level of support and the response to other members' messages, and the level of social interactions among themselves.

It was possible to identify the old and active members of the community. They usually dictated the tone of the forum, they welcomed the new members, and enabled them to blend in socially, and provided information on forum rules. They also rejected the odd and different.

The analyzed forum characteristics were present in every forum to some extent. In each country one forum was of a professional nature, NRG in Israel, Amour- Love in France and The Hip Forum in the UK. It was a direct result of the moderators' involvement within forum's conduct. The other forums used also as support on relationships, but also as a proper social gathering venue.

Main limitation of this study was the subjectivity of the analysis. As in any content analysis, the researcher himself interprets the contents and the content is subject to his exclusive interpretation. Content analysis in this study was conducted with quantitative tools, but the results were affected by the personal perception of the subject by the analyzer who phrased the research questions and built the measuring scales.

As previously mentioned, our study focuses on certain questions and there is room for more studies that will compare the nature and content of messages within different content forums; will



examine the level of information sharing; and the affect of different social norms in different nature forums.

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