

Virtual Community Characteristics of the Hearing-Impaired

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Abstract:

The information and communication revolution and other changes in modern society led to the creation of a social organization called virtual community, in which the mutual connections among its members are formed, taking place and evolving through computers that are connected by networks. The Internet enables the hearing impaired community to participate in online groups called forums, where they can have discussions without constraints of time and space (Granit & Nathan, 2000).

Through the research method of passive observation, the present study aimed to analyze characteristics of an online support group for the hearing impaired: "Hard of hearing and Deaf" forum placed at "Tapuz People" portal. The research about virtual communities of the hearing impaired is very limited, hence the significance of investigating it. The personal characteristics of the participants were examined, as well as the dynamics between them, the community norms, the contents and subjects of their discussions, different interactions and behaviors such as social support, collaborative behaviors, hostility and expressing criticism. The community's group activity was also examined. The research population was the messages posted to the forum. Overall a sample containing 2050 messages was examined: it included all the messages posted between the dates 14/3/2009-22/12/2009, a period time of nine months.

It was found that the majority of participants were young females who live in the central area of the country. As to the hearing level of the participants, it was found that some of them can hear and lack any hearing problems, but most of them are hearing impaired and are defined as hard of hearing. It was also found that some of the hearing members participated on behalf of other hearing impaired person, but most hearing members participated due to an interest in the hearing impaired community.

The main subject that interested the participants was the “technical aspects” of the hearing impairment, meaning, messages on technical information of hearing aids, cochlear implants, assistive listening devices, programs, services of companies and shops that sell products to the hearing impaired, devices funded by the health maintenance organization, repairing and maintaining of hearing aids and assistive listening devices, prices of hearing aids, hearing tests and information about cell phones that are adapted to the hearing impaired. The second subject that interested the community was “difficulties of impairment”, which refers to different difficulties due to the hearing impairment. The third subject that interested the community was “hearing impaired on the Media”, which refers to messages about articles and news referring to the hearing impaired, programs, videos and court rulings that involve the hearing impaired. The fourth subject that interested them was “hearing impaired rights”, referring to messages on different rights to the hearing impaired. The fifth subject that interested them was “social activities”, referring to messages about suggestions to social activities and events, the will to initiate social activities, searching for social activities and discussions on past or future activities.

The majority of messages were found to be relevant to the subject area of the forum. Most non-relevant messages dealt with “general current affairs”, meaning messages referring to news on different general subjects that don't involve the hearing impaired such as the latest country news and the weather and also with “greetings”, meaning, messages referring to various greetings such as happy holiday, birthday and good morning greetings. Also, it appears that the activity level in the virtual community is not very high: The average number of messages written in one day is 7.21 messages. It was also found that most messages received a response and that the main subject which didn't receive a response was “hearing impaired on the Media”. The majority of messages were written during the day and a small portion during the night. In addition, most messages were defined as short and only some were defined as long.

The data about the dominant participants of the community revealed that most of them are young married males, living in the central area of the country and have a hearing impairment defined as hard of hearing. They mainly discussed the following subjects in the following order: “technical aspects” of the hearing impairment, “difficulties of impairment”, “hearing impaired on the

Media” and “hearing impaired rights”. The findings indicated that the forum manager was the third dominant participant in the community and his main guidance focused on referring to questions, personal stories and opinions of other participants in the community. Also, the content of his messages mainly dealt with the following subjects in the following order: “technical aspects” of the hearing impairment, “hearing impaired on the Media”, “general current affairs” and “difficulties of impairment”.

Reviewing the interactions and behaviors in the community revealed that most of them were positive and only a small portion negative. It was found that the majority of messages dealt with “social support”. The current study, like similar studies that examined social support at online communities (e.g. Coulson, Buchanan & Aubeeluck, 2007; Mo & Coulson, 2008), used the SSBC model: “Social Support Behavior Code”, developed by Cutrona & Suhr (Cutrona & Suhr, 1992), a coding framework that assesses the frequency of occurrence of five support-intended communication behaviors: information support, tangible assistance, emotional support, network support and esteem support.

The majority of social support behaviors in the community were classified as information support to different topics related to the hearing impairment. Hence, providing information about the impairment and how to deal with different aspects and difficulties deriving from it, by various ways such as advices, referring to experts or specific websites, situation appraisal (redefining a situation) and sharing own experiences. Other social support behaviors in the community following information support were of esteem support, tangible assistance, network support and emotional support. It was also found that most social support messages were typed as providing social support by the participants to other community members and only a small amount of them were a request to social support. Examining the message types of the forum manager and dominant participants also revealed that the majority of them dealt with social support and most of these messages were classified as information support. Also, most of their social support messages were typed as providing social support to other community members. These findings are not surprising in light of studies demonstrating that virtual communities have a social support function as well as information exchange and assessment (Eysenbach, 2005). Furthermore, the fact that the forum

has an ordered mechanism for documentation and organization of information, further emphasizes that the forum is a source for providing information about the hearing impairment.

Another behavior that was found in the community is expression of criticism. The majority of criticism messages are critical reference to what another member wrote at the forum and only a few are criticism on the forum conduct and management. Collaborative behaviors were also found in the community, meaning, collaborative behaviors not specifically oriented toward information: neutral behaviors such as "small talk" (for instance, greetings) and gossip, and also humorous behaviors such as jokes and language games. No significant difference was found in frequency of these two behaviors above. It was also found that the virtual community contained only a small amount of negative hostile interactive behaviors, meaning behaviors that are negative in nature and the majority of messages classified as such were typed as "flaming". It was also found that no special norms developed in the community. In addition, it was found that only a small portion of the messages in the community were typed as group activities of the community members and the majority of the messages typed as such, were group activities that took place outside the virtual community, which is manifested in direct approach to telephone or email, a meeting, invitation to chat and invitation to an event.

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