

1. Long time listener, first time caller - Why people do and don't engage in an online community

In this paper, we discuss the psychology of why people simply (and passively) observe a community while others actually participate and contribute.

We discuss the process and decisions people go through when locating a community, choosing to sign up and participate in activities (e.g., sharing of information), through to becoming a 'long time member', or in some cases a leader (or super user) in a community. In our related paper, we discuss how organisations can use knowledge about these decisions to create an engaging online community.

We present our 'Observer / Participant Barrier' model illustrating the critical leap people make to become active members in a community. It's easy to simplify things by saying people get involved in a community when some salient event occurs to stir their emotions and inspire them to action. While this is true, we need to other methods to inspire people than to merely leave it to chance.

People can get a lot of benefit out of being an active member of a community, as well as the host organisation. Understanding the psychology of people and communities will give you greater insight into what you can do to rally your audience into action.

1.1. The psychology behind people's participation in communities - The journey people take from being a long time listener to a first time caller - and more

We've all heard the phrase '...I'm a long time listener, first time caller' people open with when they call a talkback radio program to show that, while they hadn't previously contacted the presenter, they maintain a regular interest in the programme and are (passively) involved in this community.

That an individual can be a member of a community, without contributing, is a familiar concept in both radio and online. For example, radio stations frequently use 'listener' and 'caller' statistics to rate the impact of particular talkback shows. Comparatively, online communities, such as FaceBook, Twitter and YouTube, measure both active contributors and passive subscribers to determine the size of community participation. Online forums also show a large number of passive viewers of posts, with relatively few making a regular contribution.

There is a distinction between two types of online social communities. The first comprise sites like Facebook and MySpace that are general purpose online environments where people generally invite friends to be part of their community. The second comprises, for example, online forums or fan sites, created around a topic, idea or person where people self select into based on their needs and interests.

1.2. Toward building an online community

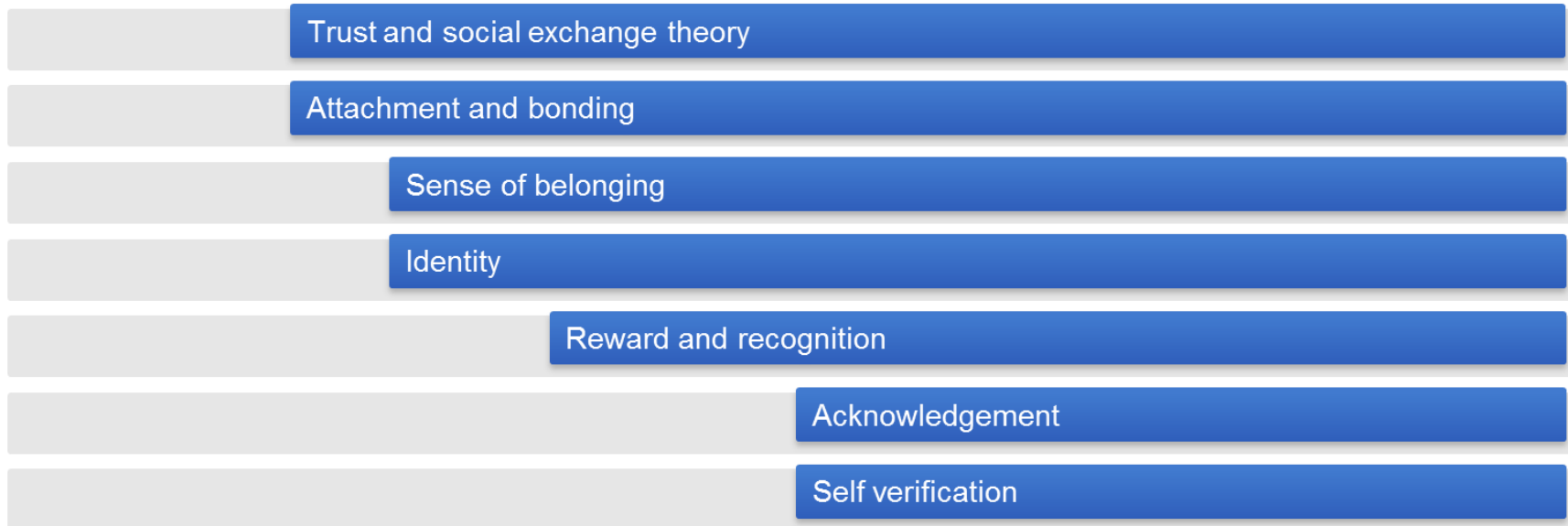
So, what then makes someone move from a long time 'listener' to a first time 'caller' in an online community? We'll provide some insights into this critical question by looking at several social psychology theories that can help us understand the motives behind why people actively participate, or do not participate, in online communities.

When considering how to promote active, rather than passive, participation, we need to consider how a person gets to the point where they want to actively contribute to a community (rather than passively observing community interactions). This is shown in the following diagram:

DECISION QUESTIONS

	Non-member	Observer	Regular observer	OBSERVER/PARTICIPANT BARRIER		
				Occasional participating member	Regular participating member	Leader/ Super user
	What is out there for me on the Internet?	Is this a right online community for me?	Do I want to make a decision to join this online community?	Do I have something worth contributing to the online community?	Have I received feedback from other members?	Have I established a 'leader' status?
	What information of interest is available to me?	I'm interested in checking group information and members.	Is it a right fit for me?	What is the quality of my information?	What is the frequency of my feedback?	Do I have authority in this online community?
			Do I want to be part of this?	Can I establish credibility and trust with other members?	Have I established any interactions with others?	

APPLICABLE THEORIES



1.2.1. Trust and social exchange theory

The notion of 'giving and receiving' is a fundamental part of all social exchanges. We help and receive assistance from others on the assumption that favours will be returned, and debts repaid.

In a community, if an individual does not feel comfortable relying upon another to 'return a favour', they be less likely to contribute help (Robinson, 1996; Robinson & Rousseau, 1994). This situation demonstrates the strong need for trust between people for successfully sharing knowledge and resources.

1.2.2. Attachment and bonding

The link between attachment and identity is generally accepted in the psychological community. Theories of attachment emphasise that the people and places to which we become attached assist in determining a sense of who we are, where we belong, and what we see as important (Prochansky, Fabian & Kaminoff, 1983; Puddifoot, 1995).

1.2.3. Sense of belonging

Traditional social psychologists (e.g., Maslow, 1943) suggested that people have to satisfy different level of needs, such as physiological, safety and social. Social needs are met through a sense of belonging with friends, family and intimate relationships. This would usually be accomplished through day-to-day interactions and communications.

With the change in technology and the increased prevalence of online communities (such as Facebook and Twitter), however, day-to-day interactions become secondary and online interactions become primary.

By connecting with friends and family online, in essence we are forming relationships and gaining a sense of belonging to the group. This in turn motivates us to stay connected with the group and maintain relationships.

1.2.4. Identity promotion and self-expression

Generally, people seek opportunities to express their views, feelings or ideas about the world, to promote their identity, and verify their uniqueness within the world. Given this, people are more likely to express their views, feelings or ideas if they believe the information they are providing is unique (Beenen, Ling, Wang, Chang, Frankowski, Resnick, et al, 2004). For example, people may participate in industry events to promote their knowledge and network with like-minded people, similarly in online communities (e.g., Twitter) people can promote their knowledge and the magnitude of the people it reaches is much greater than in real-life.

1.2.5. Reward and recognition

Psychological research has consistently shown that rewards influence people's behaviour, where the anticipation of a reward motivates us to behave in a certain way (Skinner, 1953).

Although we usually think of rewards as tangible things, such as money, rewards can also include things that make us feel a certain way. For example, when someone recognises us for what we have done, it makes us feel good and motivates us to do it again (Hertzberg, 1968).

1.2.6. Acknowledgement and self-verification

It's comforting for a person to know that others share the same beliefs as they do about their own identity (e.g., appearance, personality, education, occupation, culture etc). In fact, this feeling is so satisfying that people will actively seek verification of their self-beliefs through the opinions of others by interacting in all types of social situations (Bock & Zmud, 2005; Ma & Agarwal, 2007; Kankanhalli & Tan, 2005; Sawnn & Read, 1981).

This fundamental need to verify their identity is what motivates individuals to join, or not join, and contribute to an online community.

1.3. Moving from passive to active members

In this article, we show that building an online community is a process of moving individuals from a non-member to a leader within the community. This process begins with an individual becoming a 'long time listener' by searching online for a community and reading a variety of online forums.

As the individual continues to observe and visit more regularly, they develop a sense of belonging and identity, and may eventually become a registered community member. At this point, the member has reached the 'observer-participant barrier' and may idle here for some time, reading and observing the community.

In time, after reading others' contributions, the individual may contribute themselves. However, how long it may take to contribute is hard to determine, and in some cases the member may never even contribute. We cannot take a passive approach to managing the communities we want to build and sustain.

In light of this, a key driver for promoting a user's 'first call' is contained within their motivations. These motivations comes from a need for acknowledgement, self-verification, and to help others who have assisted them. Without doubt, harnessing these motives to 'tip the scales' in favour of contributing is critical in promoting and developing a sustainable online community.

1.4. References

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2. About the Author

Craig Errey is the Managing Director and founder of Solve Group (T/A PTG Global). Solve is a leading business technology consultancy that designs and delivers IT solutions that work the right way, first time.

Craig has nearly 20 years in user experience, user interface design and change management.

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Craig is a member of the Australian Psychological Society and the APS College of Organisational Psychologists. He holds a Masters in organisational psychology from the University of NSW and is also an Associate of the UNSW and Macquarie University.

As a registered psychologist, he understands the way people think and creates user interfaces that are simple, user-friendly and effective. His expert insight into technology and how it is used has been called on by media outlets including The Australian, SMH, 2UE and the ABC.



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