

Lurking in Online Communities: A Communication Apprehensionerspective

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Lurking – The Invisible Problem

- Activity is key to online community success
 - For text-based communities – this means message activity
 - Empty communities cannot accomplish their purpose
 - Communities with stale content are not sustainable
- Participation *should not* be a problem
 - 84% of internet users have participated in an online community (Pew Internet & American Life, 2001)
 - 90 million Americans have used an online community (Pew Internet & American Life, 2001)
- But it is...
 - Only 10% of those who use online communities participate (Nonnecke & Preece, 2000, 2001, 2003)
 - 90% of community users are lurkers (Katz, 1998)

Lurkers Withhold Resources

- Resource Based View of Communities
- Weighing Costs to Benefits Leads To Not Contributing
 - Contribution costs = Time + Effort + Energy
 - Benefit from access to resources (i.e. content) (Fulk et al., 1996)
 - Resources available for free, users unwilling to incur costs
 - Free-riding users a.k.a. lurkers (Kollock et al., 1996)
- Lack of Social Relationship Leads To Not Contributing
 - Contributors have high levels of reciprocity (Wasko & Faraj, 2005) towards the community and are altruistic (Lakhani et al., 2003)
 - In contrast to those who do share, lurkers have lower levels of reciprocity and are not altruistic
- Contribution of Resources = Participation
- Inverse of Participation = Lurking
- Lurking = Not Contributing

Participation as Communication

- Characteristics of Community Participation
 - User enters a public space (i.e. the community)
 - User creates a message
 - Message is communicated to the community
 - Message can be seen (i.e. heard) by all users of a community (i.e. a large group of people)
 - Other members can respond
 - Users assess the meaning and credibility of the message's content, and thus make judgments about the person who created it
- These characteristics do not describe participation as the contribution of a resource
- Instead, participating in an online community is a form of communication, specifically – public communication

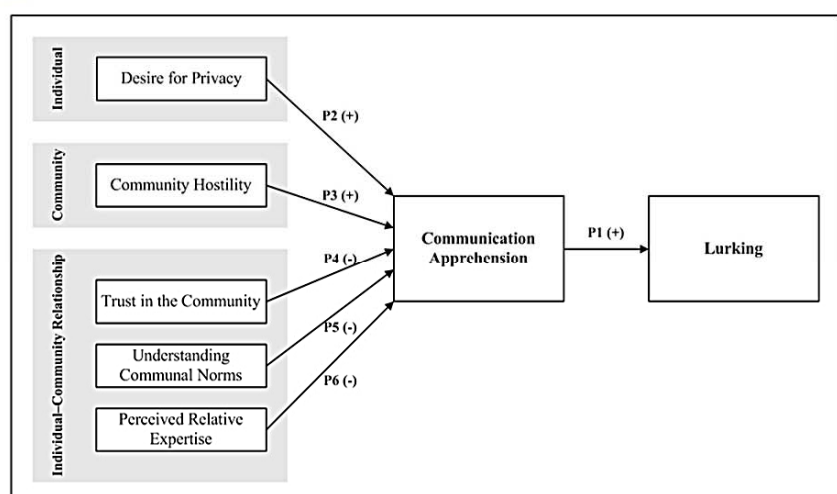
Communication Apprehension

- Individuals' reluctance and avoidance of communication has been the focus of research since the 1930's
 - Stage Fright (Clevenger Jr. 1959)
 - Audience Sensitivity (Paivo 1964)
 - Reticence (Phillips 1965; Phillips 1968)
- Causes
 - Lack of public speaking skills
 - Unpreparedness
 - Failure to recognize public speaking was not different from talking to other people – *assumed to be easy*
- Culminated with the theory of Communication Apprehension (McCroskey, 1970)
- Lurking is not a case of unwillingness to contribute a resource
- Rather, a desire to avoid communication due to apprehension

Community Apprehension Framework

- Dynamics of Communication in Communities
 - Individual
 - Desire for Privacy (e.g. McWilliams, 2000)
 - Community
 - Community Hostility (e.g. Alonzo & Aiken, 2004; Jonas et al., 2002)
 - Individual-Community Interaction
 - Trust in the Community (e.g. Alonzo & Aiken, 2004; Jonas et al., 2002)
 - Understanding Communal Norms (McKenna & Green, 2002)
 - Perceived Relative Expertise (e.g. Wasko et al., 2000; Thomas-Hunt et al., 2003)

A Communication Apprehension Framework



Conclusion

- Lurkers are important to communities
 - Not understanding lurkers leaves researchers and practitioners with an incomplete understanding of online communities
 - Potentially an untapped source for contributors
 - Current resource contribution oriented explanations limit online communities in reaching their full potential
- Move beyond a Resource Based View of Communities
- Recognize the communication dimension of participation
- Communication Apprehension is a useful framework for understanding lurkers, and potentially contributors as well

