IDENTIFYING ONLINE COMMUNITIES AS SELF-SUSTAINING ECOSYSTEMS FOR
FULFILLING MEMBERS’ NEEDS

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The following study shows what current online community members expect of their communities, and how each member plays a vital role in the self-sustaining ecosystem. In the past online communities were self-contained and managed by moderators who would often generate much of the content, and set guidelines for the users within the community. Based on the results of this study members now show that there are two different types of Lurkers (Active and Passive), which make up the majority of all members within a community. Active Lurkers have been identified as those who share content externally and back to their own network, which in return brings new members back to their community. As identified in the study, users must have a motivational need to contribute physically in an online community or; however, having a user’s friend already active may increase this potential as well. Based upon the study’s results current online community members have established that they should not only be a voice in the evolution of a community, but assist other member types with satisfying their needs or specifically the reason why they joined the online community.
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Chapter 1: Introduction

Online communities are being utilized by businesses, political offices, schools and individuals. These online communities are often formed around a single point of interest, but what motivates them to remain active and continue to grow? Much like social media, online communities have been labeled as a mythical beast that only those with the proper education and communications skills can wrangle and bend them to their will (Reed, 2009). There are numerous factors that cause an online community to form, yet there is no single process for creating it or the foundation for structured growth. Is it the needs and wants of a professional organization, teacher, or defined leader that forms a thriving community full of engagement; or is it the needs of a community member to have it grow? In the past Community Managers were tasked with the formation and advancement of their community (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006; Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski & Terveen, 2007; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002); however as people are increasingly adopting the Web the user is becoming more important (Howard, 2010; Rainie et al.; 2011). This study supports the hypothesis that users are the motivating factor that leads to a successful online community.

Several communication theories were used in a collaborative effort to describe how a user from outside an online community may evolve through the various roles that are often found within a community. The proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model (Appendix D) incorporates three communication theories to explain the phases and changes that a new member goes through when first introduced to an online community, and also shows Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs running parallel to these steps. The model was specifically created for the purpose of explaining how successful online communities are self-sustaining ecosystems in this study, and it is based on past research, an independent study, and communication theory.
If a user’s needs are satisfied based on Maslow’s (1943) Hierarchy of Needs they will contribute back to the online community, which is defined as engagement. However, generating consistent engagement is easier said than done.

A common ratio that is attached to online communities is 1:10, which specifically relates to the amount of active users compared to those lurking (Takahashi, Masakazu & Yamasaki; 2003). Only 10 percent of any community will be engaged at any point, and a vast portion of content and discussions will be generated by the top one percent of that group. According to Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1943) these individuals can all be placed on specific levels of communication, and unless their basic needs are provided for they will not advance. This is where previous studies falter as they do not incorporate the needs of a community into long term growth.

This study identified previous research methods and communication theories that correlated with the formation and expansion of online communities, and also included an independent study to build upon the past research. The independent study also incorporated repeat questions from past research to confirm the past research. Because almost every online community has a different theme it was important to study various kinds such as professional, social, customer service based, and news oriented. Further, by studying various types of online communities the data from the survey was compared and contrasted against each other to find common traits that assisted in the formation of a proposed visual model (Appendix D) that acts as a foundation for building online communities.

**Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to explore what motivates an online member to participate in an online community, and how they become self-sustaining ecosystems. Is it the paid member,
the company’s customer service tool, the volunteer contributors, or maybe the lurker? This study should assist community architects to learn what role each member plays, how communities affect their ecosystem, and what member’s needs must be satisfied so that the system becomes self-sustaining.

**Importance of Study**

The current study is of particular importance because online communities are important outlets for global communication. By comparing and contrasting the various attributes that active community members highlight in addition to the needs of a lurker; organizations, companies, and individuals will be able to utilize the results to form a better foundation for future online communities. Many companies want thriving communities to assist their customers; however, there are misconceptions and a plethora of bad information that are associated with professional networks, which are later reflected on to their members. This process often causes a professional network’s members to stop utilizing them. The results from the surveyed participants will help community architects identify what should be at the foundation of a successful online community, and that each will be different based upon their theme and members. Online communities are increasingly becoming more important to distance learning, communicating about similar interests in a global forum, and reducing the digital divide between countries. Some online communities also include translating systems that allow people from around the world to discuss anything from current events, crisis situations (emergencies, acts of nature, and revolutions), the economy, and anything else surrounding either a general theme or a very specific focal point. By simplifying the online community architecture process people are better equipped to communicate with one another regardless of their geographic location, and individuals can learn first-hand from cultures from around the globe.
Definitions of Terms Used

Community Architect: A community architect is the person or group of people who want to form an online community. Architects are the ones who set goals associated with the community, decide what the purpose will be, and what tools should initially be used.

Online Community Manager: The person or group of people who manage their specific online community. This role can do anything from enforcing rules, encouraging social norms, assisting new members, and spreading the word about the community. Because each community is different, the role each Community Manager plays will differ.

Paid Member: These are members who are paid to contribute to a community with comments so that there appears to be activity on it. Often this is based upon the idea that if outside members see an active community they may be more motivated to participate (bandwagon). In some cases paid members can also come from external communities and spread links or content from their own to draw new members back to their network.

Power User: These are the people who push for new discussions, shout on roof tops about how much they enjoy the community, provide feedback to Community Managers, and often act as mini Community Managers themselves. Power users make up one percent of the community.

General Member: These members appear to do a majority of the grunt work for online communities, but that is only partially correct now that social media is being used throughout the world. Prior to the adoption of social media most communities were self-contained or vaguely spread through word-of-mouth and chat rooms. These members actively comment on articles, discussions, and external communities, but not as frequently as a power user.
Active Lurker: Of the members in an online community active lurkers will make up a vast portion of them. Based on Ben McConnell's 90-9-1 principle for every one post a power user makes in a community, 90 lurkers will have consumed the content and not contribute anything in the community. However, active lurkers consume community content and also share the content to their own personal networks and external communities. When Active lurkers share content externally they become detrimental to a community and its growth.

Passive Lurker: These are members who continue return to a community to consume the content, discussions, and advice but do not contribute or share any of it.

External Community: An external community is any community that discusses the events, postings or related content from another community.

Internal Community: An internal community is the dedicated space where discussions, interactions, and networking reside throughout the lifespan of its existence.

**Organization of Remaining Chapters**

This study has been organized into five chapters. Chapter two consists of a literature review of communication theories and past studies that identify how online communities have been built successfully that identifies how they become self-sustaining social ecosystems. The study also highlights a psychological theory that compliments how each type of community member’s needs is being fulfilled.

The methodology and scope of this study can be found in the third chapter, and it highlights the quantitative data and research that supports the theories being used. Chapter four discusses the results of the study obtained by surveying participants, and identify any trends or
conclusions that can be supported by communication theory. Chapter five includes conclusions of this study, how past research compares to the results, limitations of the study, and suggestions for additional research.
Chapter 2: Review of Literature

This section will review various sources of literature that will define what an online community is, and the reason that so many different tribes attempt to create them. Because there are many reasons to create an online community it is important to understand what would motivate members to join, consume, and contribute to them. By using Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1945) in collaboration with three communication theories (Adaptive Structuration Theory, Communication Accommodation Theory, and the Spiral of Silence) a member can be seen evolving through the ecosystem based on their needs. For an online community to be successful it must act as a self-sustaining ecosystem where each member type plays a vital role (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002; Conrad, 2002). To identify what role each member will play in the community architects will need to identify the theme of the online community, and what would motivate members to be part of the ecosystem (Maslow, 1943, 1954; Millington, 2009; Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006; Rainie, Purcell & Smith, 2011). Current research shows information on specific instances that made a community successful, but does not connect communication (Noelle-Neumann, 1984; DeSanctis & Poole, 1994; Giles, 2007) or psychological theory into why they work; however, connecting the following research and theories together into a proposed model will make self-sustaining online community ecosystems (Appendix D) more clear. There are also exceptions like Web based classrooms that use online community models that require users to participate (Howard, 2010), and do not apply to the self-sustaining online community ecosystem model.

Online communities are formed around common ideas, information or services exchanges and last for an indefinite period of time as they become self-sustaining ecosystems. For those seeking to build online communities they should focus on a purpose that many people
care about, rather than creating a purpose without a particular audience (Millington, 2009).

“People, who interact socially as they strive to satisfy their own needs or perform special roles, such as leading or moderating” are at the heart of all online communities (Howard, 2010, p. 32). For example, this type of social interaction can be found on professional networks where individuals attempt to market themselves through their information delivery (self-actualization), and those receiving the information satisfy their need of belonging and esteem.

Whether the community is purely social or there are paid members contributing to it, volunteers are what historically allow the community to prosper (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002). Once a community is formed a factor that reduces its longevity are the members. Lurkers, members that sign up to a community and do not actively use it as it was designed, make up 90 percent of a community and only the top one percent actively engage with each other on a regular basis (Howard, 2010; Takahashi et al., 2003). This is not to say that lurkers are not affected by the content and engagement of a community, but they do not publicly present themselves or contribute to it in an obvious manner. Lurkers consume the content in another fashion which allows them to still benefit the community in one of two ways: Personally providing additional traffic and ad revenue, or sharing the content to communities they are active in and bring in new members. Because a vast portion of any community will consist of lurkers, it is also important to study how their needs are being satisfied. By identifying the needs of an online community’s lurkers Community Architects can grasp a better measurement of their external community that influences their internal community. The difficulty in measuring what effect a lurker has on the community will be established in the methods section, and how their sharing of content contributes to the longevity of their online community. It should be noted that lurkers are an important aspect to any online community, and attempting to convert them into
engaged users could pose ecosystem stability issues (Takahashi et al., 2003; Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006). Because lurkers play a vital role in sharing content outside of the ecosystem that brings outsiders back to it, changing their role could affect community growth.

After identifying what needs the community must sufficiently provide to retain members and continue to grow, this will also allow the Community Managers to re-strategize what needs the members must satisfy in exchange for providing information (Maslow, 1943; Takahashi et al., 2003; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002). Professional organizations often are not satisfied by a growth in traffic alone, but also require public participation in response to their content. Community managers are often under the impression that lurkers must be encouraged to become General Members so that their needs are satisfied. If lurkers can be encouraged to participate by improving the community and the tools, it will further satisfy the needs of each type of participant (Ba, 2002), and specifically the Community Managers. Through in-page analytics and traffic analysis the information and pages a lurker navigates to can be converted into qualitative data that will help improve the community’s tools.

Online communities are sustainable because of the tools that are utilized. Depending upon the technological structure that the community uses, a member can leave at any point and return at their leisure (Howard, 2010; Garrison, 2007). This makes it easier to choose between being a casual member or a power user, which highlights another important attribute of a successful community, member variation. A community that is built on a tool members can learn without much effort will increase their potential to participate (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). This is particularly important because the ease of use will dictate whether a less technologically educated individual can participate (Conrad, 2002). This also becomes an important factor when identifying what is motivating a community, because members may be lurking due to
unfamiliarity with the tools (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006). Though not all online forums are considered to be online communities, their tools and ease of use can lead to similar feedback that will prove useful in this study.

**Creating a Purpose**

An online community is similar to a new product idea as both require a demand and a need for them to become successful. An online community will consist of various types of members that have a “shared focus on an interest, need, information, service, or support that provides a reason for individual members to belong to the community (Preece, 2001).” As members seek to find answers, acceptance, and methods to self-actualization around a specific theme they will follow the proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model (Appendix D), which was designed to incorporate past online community research and communication and psychological theory.

“We believe one reason online communities fail to elicit activity is social structures needed to sustain contribution have not been incorporated systematically into online community design and operation. One way to remedy this situation is to exploit insights from social theories that address why people contribute in face-to-face communities” (Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski & Terveen, 2007). Uniqueness and dissimilarity are two traits that can be attributed to well established online communities. For example the online community will be targeted toward a particular group’s dissimilarities and the unique offerings each member can bring to the discussion will increase their motivation to post. This is more commonly known as making the individual feel unique (Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski & Terveen, 2007). According to Maslow (1943) and Preece, et al. (2006) if these members are satisfied when provided an environment to discuss similar topics with people, and prove themselves as experts (uniqueness) this may be a
motivating factor in their continued contribution to the online community. This is further supported by Preece’s study that states the majority of community members join because they can get answers to questions, tell stories or participate in discussions, and have access to experts (p 13). It is important to identify if the online community is professional or casual, and from here the professional organizations can strengthen what brings members to their community.

The Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model

Once a connection has been made with a community the individual sets off on a path that will dictate what level of motivation will be required to satisfy their needs, and what amount of active contribution is needed to complete this (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002; Ba, 2002). At this point a member will fall into a community role that runs parallel with satisfying their needs. Each segment of the proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model (Appendix D) has a barrier that requires a certain amount of motivation to move further into a more active role, and this will be explained further by the independent study in chapter four. The proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model also explains why the amount of active engagement is created by one percent of on an online community and that as a member discontinues their advancement in the community their engagement drops off as the member’s needs are satisfied (Harper, Li, Chen & Konstan, 2006; Maslow, 1943; Ba 2002; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002).

There are gaps in current studies that identify how online communities act as a self-sustaining ecosystem as member needs have not been attributed. The purpose of the Community’s Motivational Structure (Appendix D) is to align what level of motivation is required for a member to advance and produce additional content, what level of motivation a
lurker requires to consume content and also share it, and how the barriers of converging to social norms and surpassing the Spiral of Silence allows information to flow more readily.

**Communication Theory**

**Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST)**

One of the initial barriers that will hinder an active lurker from advancing to a more active role in the ecosystem are the tools the community is built on. The Adaptive Structuration Theory (AST), based on Anthony Giddens’ Structuration Theory, explains in this context that interactions within an online community are governed by the tools and rules set forth by the community architects (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Successful online communities are self-sustaining ecosystems in that not only must members adjust to the tools they are provided, but community architects must adapt to member needs. “AST posits that four major sources of structure (technology, task, environment, and the group's internal system) affect social interaction which, in turn, is the key determinant of social outcomes (such as decision efficiency, quality, consensus, etc.),” (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994). Some online communities are built with dedicated reasons that require a user to interact with the tools regardless of their knowledge of them and the tools ease of use. This can affect the quality of discussions, amount of contribution, and self-sustaining cycle.

For Web based classrooms that model themselves after online communities it will deviate from the proposed Self-sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model at this point, because users are not able to stop using a discussion area based on their preference of tools. In a situation where a class is required to discuss with one another they will not have the luxury to disregard the tools, but it can affect their willingness to interact with it (Howard, 2010). If it is a requirement for students to interact with other students, studying this will allow the Community
Managers to identify if there is a development concern, or a disinterest in the product (Conrad, 2002; Cheng & Vassileva, 2005).

**Hierarchy of Needs: Safety and Belonging**

Outside of required participation in an online community and once members have adapted to the structure and tools, a member must surpass their needs of safety and be motivated to belong to the community. For a member to satisfy their needs of Safety they must be knowledgeable enough to remain protected, is not being over charged (limitations), and identifies the community as stable (Maslow 1943; 1954). That is to say the information a member has been receiving by consuming content as a lurker has not only been useful, but there is further need for them want to belong to the content. Maslow (1954) suggested that international communities, personal growth groups, and what is to eventually be labeled as online communities grow rapidly due to belongingness being unsatisfied.

Such social phenomena may arise to overcome the widespread feelings of alienation, strangeness, and loneliness that have been worsened by increasing mobility, the breakdown of traditional groupings, the scattering of families, the generation gap, and steady urbanization. Any good society must satisfy this need, one way or another, if it is to survive and be healthy. (Maslow, 1954, p. 20).

This is to say that individuals may be motivated to belong to an online community to satisfy these needs. For a member to achieve belongingness they will need to adapt to the tools (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), be motivated to satisfy their Esteem needs, and learn the social norms put in place by the Community Architects and that have been adapted by Power Users. The medium between General Members and Power Users is often found as the communication
accommodation theory is altering the member’s communication pattern within the community (Howard, 1971).

**Communication Accommodation Theory (CAT)**

As a member attempts to satisfy their needs for belonging to a particular online community they must adjust to the physical structure and common language being used. For example a website may use community specific stories and memes to relate to current events. This is equivalent to code-switching or slowly gaining an accent specified by the region a person lives in after a period of time (Harwood & Giles, 2006). Members of online communities who seek to belong will successfully converge their communication patterns with that of current members (Giles & Ogay, 2006, p. 238). However, not all community members have the motivation to observe or converge to the norms in place, which is when maintenance can occur.

Maintenance is when a member blindly enters a conversation and “persistence in his or her own original style, regardless of the communication behavior of the interlocutor,” (Giles & Ogay, 2006). These types of members are often looked upon negatively, and thus do not strive to satisfy a need for belonging to the community. In some online communities such as reddit, members are given the option to vote on individual comments which not only acts as a self-imposed moderation system that perpetuates social norms and accommodated communication, but also teaches new users that they must converge. For users who have observed the community norms, but wish to place emphasis on their differences (possibly to make a statement) they may diverge (Bourhis & Giles, 1977). Users who may diverge from online community norms and patterns may still be advanced users; however, the Spiral of Silence will disallow them from becoming Power Users.

**Spiral of Silence and Power Users**
The final role a General Member can take is that of a Power User, which makes up the smallest percentage of an online community, but is also the most vocal. Howard’s (2010) 90 – 9 – 1 rules states that the Power Users are at the peak of an online communities pyramid of content creation, and as a result of their continued contributions they become esteemed influencers who are motivated by self-actualization (Maslow, 1945). Like all hierarchies the leaders have the most influence on what the tone, continued theme, social norms, and acceptance into the communities are. As a result of a Power User’s influence on the community the Spiral of Silence asserts that other members will be less likely to express their opposing opinion on a given topic because they appear to be in the minority (Noelle-Neumann, 1974). This is not to say that Power Users are always against the majority simply because they are the most vocal. In fact Power Users require the assistance of other members in the ecosystem to become an empowered voice and satisfy their need for self-actualization (Maslow, 1943).

In some situations divergence can occur where a General Member is trying to break down the Spiral of Silence, and could create a rift that allows the majority opinion to become more vocal in a bandwagon approach (Noelle-Neumann, 1974; Bourhis & Giles, 1977). In these situations a Community Manager may need to mediate any issues that could cause extensive issues between members; however, some communities also have built in systems that allow users to anonymously vote for what they believe in, which allows Lurkers and other member types to add to the self-sustaining ecosystem.

As some members are only motivated by their need to belong to the online community the Spiral of Silence will have an effect on how they participate. Fahmy and Liu’s (2011) data shows that regardless of if a person is part of a physical forum or an online one that the most vocal may appear the majority.
In the online community, where there are fewer physical constraints and concrete punishment concerns, every opinion has the possibility of being attacked and suppressed. Consequently individuals may select to remain silent. And as our findings suggest, individuals are not more likely to express opinions in online versus offline settings and when people perceive fear of online isolation, they are less likely to express their opinions online. Rather, there are other variables, such as the fear of suppression and attack, which may smother individuals’ expressions in an online setting (Fahmy & Liu, p. 55, 2011).

Because users are empowered by those within the ecosystem, the Spiral of Silence may be their final barrier outside of their motivation to becoming a Power User. For those seeking to achieve self-actualization within a community they will be more motivated to adapt to the structure of the community, observe and adhere to social norms, and set forth the most vocal opinions. Different members empower Power Users in different ways such as an Active Lurker sharing their content to their network, a General Member agreeing with their statements, and even Community Managers featuring their content in a member spotlight.

Creating Online Community Motivation and Need

Many communities encourage their members to engage with one another through several different solutions especially if goals have been set and are not being achieved. If a professional community is just being formed there are likely to be initial goals set that allows the architects to gauge what their return on investment (ROI) will be. For example a community may have 10,000 active members (log in on a regular basis) and their paid Community Managers will spend one hour per day creating seed discussions over the course of a business week. That means a minimum of five discussions will be posted and a maximum of 1,000 members will interact or
click on each discussion. That means based on the 90 – 9 – 1 rule, 100 members will likely
comment on each of them (Howard, 2010). This means that a community heavily relies on
volunteer participation, which in return must offer something that satisfies their needs. Some
architects also deploy visual measurements that display how active member are to encourage
their continued participation.

By displaying how active a member is they may be encouraged to improve their
engagement as their sense of belonging will be present (Cheng & Vassileva, 2005). An example
of this type of activity can be found on the location based tool FourSquare, and the badges
members receive for checking into a variety of locations. One of the most effective titles a
FourSquare member can obtain is mayor of a particular location because they check into it more
than any other member. While these badges and titles are arbitrary there is a sense of
competition, which results in a sense of belonging and increase esteem (Cheng & Vassileva,
2005; Maslow, 1943). Some communities use monetary incentives such as contents to increase
traffic and engagement, but have proven to only be successful for a brief period of time (Harper,
Xin Li, Chen & Konstan, 2006).

Past research has shown that community growth and stability should come from the paid
Community Managers (Harper, Li, Chen & Konstan, 2006; Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski &
Terveen, 2007); however, as social media becomes more prominent the amount of sociability
from members now dictates what will occur in a community (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut,
2002; Lampe, Johnston, 2005). This study will compare and contrast several successful
communities to find whether the members, paid participants or a combination of both are the
motivating conduits that lead to a successful online community (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler, Kraut,
2002). Social media has influenced the amount of content sharing online community members do
in an average day, which places more power in their hands. The initial concept of Community Managers have evolved from paid members who moderate discussions, to those who help form the Community Architect’s visions by acting as a role model to volunteer members. Current research also states that lurkers can play an important role in the growth of an online community as they may be sharing internal discussions to external communities, which extends the communities voice and continues to motivate all each member in different ways (Lampe, C., Johnston, E., 2005; Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski & Terveen, 2007; Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006).

**Research Questions**

The following questions and concepts have been identified as gaps found within current studies on online communities.

RQ1: How do online community tools affect a user’s motivation to contribute to a community?

RQ2: Should social norms and the community structure come from Community Managers and Architects or from the community as a whole?

RQ3: How do Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs’ various levels of motivation contribute to specific roles community members play in the advancement of the proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model?
Chapter 3: Scope and Methodology

Research Design

To successfully identify what motivates an online community’s members to engage and perpetuate a self-sustaining ecosystem the researcher selected five separate online communities to provide a quantitative survey. The data from the survey was then be analyzed and compared against prior research on online communities to confirm conclusions and answer the research questions. There was only one observer for the survey, which also created a limitation as a triangulation of observers would be ideal for varied analysis (Neuman, 2006, p 150). The communities were offered the option to voluntarily take the survey at which point the results of the survey will be released to them publicly so that they may know how they compare to different communities (p 151). The quantitative survey will used reconstructed logic as to identify what communities to survey (p 151). The process for selecting the various online communities was as follows:

1. Locate a community with clear expectations and social norms in place.
2. Identify what the focal point of the community is, and make sure each surveyed community varies from one another.
3. Ensure the community has an active group of members.
4. Ask the Community Managers if it would be acceptable to survey their members (if applicable).

Based on these criteria the following online communities were chosen: reddit, GovWin, GovLoop, and Social Media Today and were surveyed successfully. In addition to the online communities that are identified the survey was spread through social networking sites (Twitter, Facebook, and Google+). The survey itself was designed so that it can be shared to communities after the initial posts, and there was a question within the survey to locate where they found it. Because Lurkers are important to online communities, it will be important to identify both where they share the survey and what level of motivation prevents them from advancing in the
proposed Self-sustaining online community ecosystem model (Appendix D). The survey itself acts as a conduit to reinforce how content can be shared from initial online communities by lurkers and back to their own networks.

Lurkers are the anonymous members that make up a majority of any online community, and that means they will be less likely to participate in a volunteer survey (Takahashi, Fujimoto & Yamasaki, 2003). A single community will be identified to measure traffic on various different types of content, and then analyzed to see what occurs after viewing it. A series of controlled pieces of content will be created that uses the communities current process (no social networking share buttons), and at least two other pieces of content will be created with different social share buttons that increase the ease of engagement. This means that at least two articles included buttons that allowed consumers to share the content directly on the page rather than manually updating it on their individual networks. Page analytics will show how many people view each piece of content, and the addition of a social share button will publicly show if anything interacts with it. This process will identify if the lurkers (individuals who have not commented on the content) are simply consuming information or are unwilling to adapt to the community’s current procedures and adapt to the structuration (DeSanctis and Poole, 1990). Further, this will also identify what level of their need for safety is sufficient for that community (Maslow, 1943).

**Sampling**

Quantitative data was provided from a target non-probability sampling, more specifically voluntary members of several online communities (Neuman, 2006, p 224). The sampling element was the group of willing surveyed participants that choose to provide insight into what motivates them to contribute in their particular online community. This process is also known as
a non-probability convenience sampling approach. Although lurkers from a community would be a value added to the data, the targeted population will likely be General Members, Power Users and paid participants such as Community Managers; however, there was an identifier question within the survey that identified lurkers.

Each community’s responses will be averaged together so that the attributes and features that make up each of them will be integrated together as if it were one super community. Online community members who were already currently engaging with each other were accessible, and prone to completing the survey as they are among the targeted population. The message or opportunity to take the survey came in the form of either a forum post or a blog post with a call to action. Social Media Today had a preview article created for its community that highlighted the importance that would result from the independent study, whereas reddit, GovWin, and GovLoop had discussion posts with a simple call to action seeking survey participants. Not all actively engaged community members are online at the same time so posting several opportunities to take the survey would bring in one percent with a potential for nine percent of all engaged users to be surveyed.

The sampling size is based on the 90 – 9 – 1 concept (Howard, 2010) and the 1:10 ratio of active users in online communities (Takahashi, Masakazu & Yamasaki; 2003). The target population was selected based upon their willingness to participate in the survey, which reduces the potential that a lurker will complete it. However, there is a potential for error as a lurker may find the survey appealing, but a question provided in the survey (Appendix A) will identify these members. Further, each online community that had the call to action to take the survey also included integrated social networking buttons that allowed participants to share it with their own network if they felt it was relevant. The sampling size for those who took the survey as a result
of it being shared to their network was determined by a question within the survey (Appendix A) that asked where they were referred from.

**Instrumentation and Procedures**

To identify what motivates an online community the researcher surveyed (Appendix A) the members of several online communities, survey Community Architects and Community Managers, and use historical-comparative research on Lurkers (Neuman, 2005). The data from these surveys was compared and contrasted to find similar trends, and detect any abnormal results (results that differ from past research) that have not been previously published about online community engagement, sharing and consumption. Survey questions were formed by a Community Manager and architect that has experience building various types of online communities. Online community members also assisted in the formation of the questions as preliminary questions were asked of members to help form a foundation. The questions within the survey assisted in identifying what motivates various types of online community members to contribute, engage with one another, share content, consume content, or leave them. Lastly, an exploratory question devised to identify if a Lurker was hindered by the current tools of the community was included in the survey. There are several factors that cause a member to lurk, and a combination of the surveyed data and results from this experiment may better inform Community Managers what role Lurkers play in the ecosystem.

Using Neuman’s steps in the process of survey research the survey was developed to obtain quantitative data (2006, p 277). The questions in the survey are based upon the exploratory design that has identified gaps in this thesis’ research. The behaviors, attitudes and characteristics of the various online community members were identified through analysis of the
quantitative data (p 273). Further, the survey results are more reliable as various online communities were surveyed and compiled to identify common trends.

The use of surveys can cause additional limitations because it must remain ethical, which resulted in some surveys to be incomplete. The instructions listed on the survey allowed participants to opt out of questions they felt were too intrusive. To reduce any limitations in data, the questions were portrayed in an objective nature so that it did not identify the participant. Further, there were no questions or open text response sections of the survey that would seek out descriptors about the participants. This includes, but is not limited to: not seeking an email address, name, associated school, online community username, or longevity with the online community.

**Data Analysis**

Data that is provided from the completed surveys was analyzed in two ways: confirmation of past research, and answer proposed research questions that identify gaps in past research. The results from the data were formed into the following themes to identify the participant’s motivation within a community: Psychological, safety, belonging, esteem, self-actualization (Maslow, 1945). The level of necessity or agreement with the surveyed questions identified the participant’s current motivation, and then was compared to their willingness to comment, share content, and consume content. This solidified the proposed Self-sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model (Appendix D).

**Survey and Data Ethics**

Participants who were surveyed had to meet specific requirements before providing their informed consent. Surveyed participants had to be a minimum of 18 years of age, and actively participating in an online community. A controlled group of individuals who do not actively
participate in online communities will also be surveyed with the same questions, but with the caveat that they will likely not be able to complete all of the questions (increasing the potential for incomplete surveys that will not be used in the final data analysis). All questions in the survey were worded in such a matter that participants could not be identified through their answers so that anonymity can be retained (Neuman, 2005, p 132). Raw data from the surveyed participants will remain confidential, and only the averaged data will be provided in the academic findings (p 139). To ensure all surveyed participant’s information remains confidential the only identifiable information will be a user’s IP address to ensure there are no duplicate competitions by a single user; however, this information automatically prevents a secondary survey completion and was not presented to the survey administrator. All survey responses that allowed open text fields were reviewed to ensure there was no private data included as well. Regardless of the research questions stated in this study all data and anomalies produced from the data will were presented so that information was not suppressed. Insinuations and variables can be further explored based on the anomalous information, but it was provided in an appendix regardless (p 145). Moreover, all data produced from the various surveyed communities was only used for purely academic research. There was no funding from commercial vendors of any kind, and all research was conducted by an individual (p 150). There were be no risks to participants as their identity remained classified; however, the benefits that will result from this data will yield community builders an invaluable amount of information to incorporate in future online communities.
Chapter 4: The Study

Introduction

Past research has shown that Community Managers were among the motivating factors to create the most content, and that they should constantly encourage or find new ways to get all members of their community to actively participate. This study has identified that as more users have begun to adopt the Web, there is a larger variety of what people want from the community structure. Because each surveyed community and social network differed by structure, tools used to communicate, being either private or public, allowing anonymous users, and were either professional or casual the demographics will vary greatly. The demographics will vary due to GovWin being used frequently by males between the ages of 35-55; GovLoop has more male users, but younger members; reddit has more male users, but has users between the ages of 18-87; and Social Media Today has more female users with an unidentified range in age.

Demographics

The following demographical information will identify the three most leading attributes of participants unless otherwise noted. There were a total of 102 surveys (demographic information received) started and 74 completed (full survey) for a total response return rate of 72.5 percent. From the completed surveys 66.2 percent of participants were female, and the other 33.8 percent were male. The majority of participants were in the 25- to 34-years-old range (30 out of 74), with the average age being 33.9-years-old. The youngest participant was 20 years old and the oldest was 65. A majority of participants were from the United States making up 83.8 percent, followed by Australia with 4.1 percent. Other participants were from Belgium, Brazil, Canada, Denmark, France, Ireland, Israel, Italy and Nigeria; which made up 1.4 percent of all participants in total.
A majority of participants listed that they were employed full-time (78.4 percent), followed by 9.5 percent unemployed, and 8.1 percent employed part-time. The leading reported field of work was in marketing with 18.9 percent of participants, followed by 13.5 percent in education and 9.5 percent in communications. Approximately half of all participants listed themselves as married with 47.3 percent, followed by 28.4 percent single, and 20.3 percent in a relationship. Virtually all participants listed themselves as Caucasian in ethnicity with 85.1 percent, followed by 5.4 percent as Black or African American, and another 5.4 percent declined to respond.

Initially the survey was shared to four online communities (GovWin, GovLoop, Social Media Today, and reddit) and three social networks (Facebook, Twitter, and Google+). Twitter refereed 27 participants, Facebook 18 participants, and 5 from Google+. Outside of the initial survey listings there were several external communities that were listed as the origin of the survey: Yammer, a credit union’s water cooler site, RSS Flux, Meetup.com, Google Reader, Delicious, and the Social Media Club DC community. This shows the survey was shared to various other external communities based on the lurkers impression that the surveys contents relate to them. Further, participants identified that a majority of them were involved in two or more online communities at a time with a fairly equal distribution across each category. A majority of participants were involved with between two and 10 communities, with some being involved in over 50 at a time (Figure 1).
Results

The following information is an analysis of the data that resulted from the completed surveys (Appendix A). Each part of the survey was designed to help better form a model that will more clearly represent how successful online communities act as a self-sustaining ecosystem, and the data will be separated into different groupings based on the progression through the model. The first grouping of data will feature what Community Architects must include in their online communities for users to join them; the second will include data on why a Lurker chooses to either share content or just consume it based on their current needs that the community will satisfy; the third grouping will highlight how the users must adapt to the online communities structures, and that the structure must also change based on their interactions with it; fourthly, data will identify that users must at least motivated to belong to the community based on Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs (1945) to advance as a General or Advanced member, which also includes observing, understanding, and accommodating to the current social norms; lastly, a data analysis of how a community responds to the implementation of social share buttons on content that will assist in the identification of what types of Lurkers are involved with the online community.
Community Psychology & New Users

Following the proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model surveyed participants identified that as they looked to join new communities they initially must have a user interface that is easy to navigate, and that the tools used for communicating will influence how they participate. Prior to joining an online community it is expected that a user will already have met their physiological needs (Maslow, 1945), which then allows the user to have a minimal motivational factor for their safety. For users to obtain further information (satisfy safety needs) within a community they must first be able to surpass the barriers put in place by Community Architects, social norms set by current members, and the users motivation to obtain information.

As a new user finds a community the first thing they observe is the user interface (UI), which also means how easy it will be to navigate. In Figure 2 approximately 93.2 percent of surveyed participants state that the UI is an important factor when decided whether or not they would contribute to it. Further, 93.2 percent of participants also stated that the tools that allow them to communicate on the site must be easy to use. Because there are currently many types of content management systems (CMS), which means it is important for the tools to cater to the member demographics, their level of technological education, and does not have an excessive learning curve. Many sites currently integrate social networking sites to make it easier to register to the site and share content back to their networks, a method Community Architects are favorable towards due to the potential for increased growth; however, in Figure 2 participants were split evenly between whether or not social integration was an important factor when contributing to a community. Appendix E shows additional comments from surveyed participants on why they felt the integration with social media was or was not important. Lastly uses must decide if the purpose of the community requires them to remain anonymous when
posting. Figure 2 shows that 44.6 percent of participants felt that depending on the community’s purpose they may need to be anonymous, where as 33.8 percent felt it was unimportant all together, and 23 percent felt it was important. Additional comments from participants on what types of communities they felt were important ranged from not identifying with their professional work, health and fitness sites, communities that a user doesn’t know people in real life (IRL), candid or touchy subjects, and political communities (Appendix E).

![Figure 2](image)

**Lurkers, Consuming, & Sharing**

After the initial barriers are surpassed a user can then become a lurker and begin to consume the content created by Power Users, Community Managers, and General Members. A majority of surveyed participants stated that for them to join a community and contribute there must be active discussions currently occurring (Figure 3) with 33.8 percent stating that there should be active discussions, 31.1 percent feel there should be both seeded discussions and ongoing discussions, and 21.6 percent feel there should be very active discussions occurring. Past research has been more favorable to community managers seeding discussions, but only 6.8 percent of participants felt this would motivate them to contribute and engage other users. Once a
user has decided to join a site they are classified as a Lurker, and whether they decide to interact with the sharing tools, engage with other users or consume content will classify them further.

Active Lurkers (those who share) are difficult to measure in comparison to Passive Lurkers (those who do not share) as survey respondents had a wide range of percentages for sharing content. Of participants 16.2 percent of them respectively stated that they share content between 0% and 10%, 41% and 50% and 71% and 80% after consuming community content (Figure 4). This means some users hardly share at all (Passive Lurker), some share nearly half the time (Active Lurker), and some share more frequently (Active Lurker). As noted in the proposed Self-sustaining Online Community Ecosystem Model (Appendix D) Lurkers begin to deviate based on whether or not they share, if they can adapt to the structure of the community (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), and are further motivated to belong to the community (Maslow, 1945) the user may potentially become a contributing General Member.
To fulfill safety needs (gaining information when a question is asked) a user must be able to find the content or information that will satisfy it. Figure 3 shows that participants either want active discussions or a mixture of Community Manager seeded discussions and those that are ongoing. Further, Figure 5 shows that when a user poses a question as a General Member they commonly seek out at least a source of information that points them in the right direction (36.5 percent of surveyed participants). Surprisingly only 3 percent of participants felt they needed expert insights when asking questions, and 24.3 percent felt that both a source and added insight is what they were looking for in a response from the community. Participants also stated that they were more favorable to a community driven structure rather than by Community Managers.
Adapting the Community

Surveyed participants stated that for them to want to belong to the community they would prefer their needs, ideas, and suggestions to weigh heavier on changes over that of the Community Manager or Architect. Only 1.4 percent felt that the Community Managers and Architects should choose how the community evolves, whereas 35.1 percent felt the community should have more power, 25.7 percent thought it should be completely up to the community, and 31.1 percent felt there should be a middle ground between Community Managers and members (Figure 6). Additionally 64.9 percent of participants felt that members should be enforcing the rules of the community, 25.7 percent felt moderators should enforce them, and 10.8 percent felt there should be a mix of both community and moderator enforcement. Of the surveyed communities reddit is an example of how a community enforces its rules by using up and down voting arrows on all content submitted as well as comments made on the content.

Motivational factors that contribute to how likely a user will contribute or participate in conversations include community exclusivity, if their friends are active in the community and the types of conversations occurring. A majority of participants (86.5 percent) felt that if their friends were actively contributing to the community they would also be more motivated to do so.
as well. Participant’s also felt they would prefer ongoing discussions (67.6 percent) over easy question and answer discussions (48.6 percent). Similar to how clubs function, if a user’s friends are inside it will make them more interested to gaining access. Online community marketers and Architects often wish to keep their community private to gain valuable information on the users (due to registration); however, 71.6 percent of participants felt that depending on the community’s theme it should vary, while 29.7 felt they should always be public, and 6.8 percent felt them should be private. These responses show that based on whether or not a user has the option to remain anonymous will influence how public they want the community to be (Figure 2). While initially users may want to belong to the community based on exclusivity, it will not be a factor in how much engagement will occur. A user who can adapt to the structure of the community and is motivated to belong to the community, increase esteem, or achieve self-actualization will increase their engagement.

**Member Roles & Motivation**

Once a Lurker has become a General Member and has begun posting and testing the waters of how a community functions, participants stated that a majority of them observe how others interact on the site prior to becoming a frequent contributor. Participants felt that studying the ways users are communicating is important prior to contributing or participating in discussions (63.5 percent), whereas only 2.7 percent felt there was no reason to do so, and 37.8 percent thought this process depends on the type of community. Users who have surpassed the need to belong to the community and seek esteem from their fellow members not only apply the Communication Accommodation Theory, but help set the structure for others. These members are often considered to be Advanced Members or Power Users.
Advanced Members and Power Users set the tone for the community based on participant’s responses to how much they would like the community to play a role in structure building (Figure 6). However, outside of engaged members there are methods Community Managers and Architects utilize to increase the ease of use for sharing content, increasing engagement and alter the roles members play in the ecosystem. Among these methods is the implementation of community achievements that are provided based on certain actions a member completes. Surveyed participant responses showed that a majority of them were apathetic towards the use of community achievements as 43.2 percent of them stated they were neutral, 32.4 percent felt community achievements increased their motivation to contribute, and 9.5 percent disagreed (Figure 7).

**Identifying Lurkers Through Social Share Buttons**

Another way to increase the ease of use for sharing community content back to the individual user’s network is through increase the ease of use with share buttons or widgets. As Lurkers make up such a vast portion of a community it is important to make it easier for Active Lurkers to share the content to their networks. Figure 8 shows how placing a set of share buttons
in a prominent place above community content has made it easier for its members to share the content. At the start of September the buttons did not exist, and after implementing them in the middle of the month content was shared 238 times and then clicked on 257 times by their networks. This shows that Passive Lurkers can be turned to Active Lurkers by implementing tools they are able to interact with easier. Further, the data gathered from content that was shared in Figure 8 did not include physical engagement in the form of comments on them, also showing that while members may act as Power Users in some cases, in others they also act as Lurkers.

![Figure 8](image)

**Summary of Findings**

Surveyed participants noted a majority of them were at one point involved with an online community in the past, and prior to joining one the user interface, navigation and tool functions must be easier to understand. Once part of the community, Lurkers will decide whether or not to share the content; however, placing share buttons in prominent locations makes it easier for members to share content to their networks. The importance of integrating the community with the member’s social networking sites was split down the middle, and it is easier for people to join a network if they are public facing. Some feel it is easier to keep track of the community if
they can sign in with their social network account. Between those who create the community and who decides how it evolves, based on participants responses members feel they should have more power because they are the ones using it. Participants also felt that depending on the theme of the community that either being able to remain anonymous or having it remain completely private would be important. For those that contribute to a community having friends being part of it also increases a members potential to contribute. While members at times feel community achievements will contribute to their increase in engagement, they feel that their social norms and structure should be self-created rather than frequently interfered with by Community Managers and Architects.

**Discussion**

Based on the research questions that the survey was built on the following can be confirmed: By having tools that community members are easily able to interact with it not only increases engagement through content sharing, but onsite engagement in the form of discussions; social norms and the community structure may initially be put in place by Community Managers and Architects, but as it grows members want a stronger voice in how it evolves; and that for an online community to be self-sustaining each type of member needs to be motivated to satisfy a different level of need so that they either consume, contribute, or create content to the community.

**Community Tool Effects on User Motivation**

Based on the responses from the study participants mostly agreed that having an intuitive design with easy to use communication tools are a must when deciding whether or not to use them or get involved. As someone who has worked with both modern and out-of-date communication tools for building online communities there is a clear difference between how
much engagement and activity is found between the two, and it would appear that the survey participants also agree with that sentiment. “Develop an online community framework that works appeals to the motivations of human beings. Some are self-motivated, others want rewards like recognition or money. Learn about personality types” (Millington, 2008). Further, Nonnecke, Andrews, and Preece (p. 15, 2006) showed that Lurkers were not motivated to contribute because their expectations were not met. This was either due to their level of benefit being less than expected, or not feeling like they belonged (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006; Maslow, 1945). The communication theory associated with the initial barrier, Adaptive Structuration Theory, is also a key to understanding what motivates different group members to continue to use the advanced communication tools, and how the tools must adapt to their needs.

The Adaptive Structuration Theory states that while initially group users must adapt to the structure put in place for them, the outcome for the group’s use of the online community will vary. More specifically outcomes will be due to the structural potential of the technology, how they are appropriated or managed by current group members, and new social structures were formed through the consistent use of it (DeSacntis & Poole, p. 143, 1994). This means that an online community’s members may have some initial impression of what they would like to get out of the group, and unless the structure is suitable to satisfy their needs it will alter their role in the ecosystem. As noted by the surveyed participants (Figure 6), online community members would also prefer they have a greater voice in the changes and improvements done to their ecosystem rather than having a sole individual or non-member like a Community Architect do so on their behalf.

Social Norms and The Community
When it comes to building an online community there truly needs to be a joint reason on why people would want to gather to discuss or share content about a specific theme. While the initial structure may be built by a Community Architect, what will eventually lead to the success of the community is by allowing the various members to make it their own (Preece, 2001). Lurkers do not worry about the social norms of the communities, and therefore they do not worry about observing how people interact (Nonnecke, Andrews & Preece, 2006; Maslow, 1945); however, the difference between contributing member types can usually be found through who is doing the most contributing, and who is also able to converge with those in the community (Giles & Ogay, p. 238, 2006). Further, based on the Communication Accommodation Theory a member has already fulfilled their need to belong to the community, and will not worry about the repercussions from converging or losing their self-identify (Giles & Ogay, 2007).

Depending upon how much a member integrates with the community they will increase their ability to obtain a greater esteem from their peers (Advanced Users), and potentially achieve self-actualization as well (Power Users). Therefore based on past research, the communication accommodation theory, and the results from the study social norms do in fact come from the community members. If a Community Manager attempts to diverge from their community members by imposing unfavorable restrictions (based on community input) there is a greater risk for fracturing current members, and increasing the possibility for members to find a more suitable platform for communicating.

**Maslow’s Hierarchy of Needs and the Self-Sustaining Ecosystem**

Through the study’s data, gathering of past research, and clarifications of how several communication theories act as barriers it would appear that based upon what each type of member needs is based on how motivated they are to either contribute to the community or
achieve self-actualization. For this reason I have designed the Self-sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model (Appendix D) to clearly show the minimum level of motivation members require prior to playing a different role within the ecosystem. For example, a member must have at least satisfied their physiological (breathing, food, water, shelter) (Maslow, 1945) needs prior to even considering becoming part of an online community. Second, a member must want to satisfy their safety needs to want to consume or share the community’s content. This could be the result of someone wanting to identify information about an illness, increase their job security through learning and staying relevant, or even getting advice on financial issues (Maslow, p. 18, 1945).

Third, for members who seek to belong to the community not only must they adapt to the current structure (DeSanctis & Poole, 1994), but based on the study there must be either seeded discussions or active discussions (Figure 3). For those who have issues with the communities interface or how they can communicate with others they will likely not participate in discussions (Figure 1). Fourth, members who are seeking to fulfill their esteem needs will likely among the General and Advanced Members who frequently contribute to a community. Those who are seeking esteem (Maslow, 1945) are the members who want to fulfill or improve their self-esteem, confidence, respect from others, and possibly even obtain achievements (Figure 7). These are the members who already feel they belong to the online community, but would like to gain something from contributing; however, unless they adjust to the social norms put in place by their fellow members they may diverge (Giles & Ogay, 2007), and remain as a General Member rather than an Advanced Member. “It’s not the technology that makes a community great; it’s the sense of community among the members” (Millington, p. 13, 2011).
Lastly, members who seek self-actualization are those who have already fulfilled their esteem, belonging, safety, and physiological needs (Maslow, 1945). These are the top tier members of an online community who strive to stand out, act as the problem solvers, experts, or reach their full potential. In the context of Maslow’s (1945) Hierarchy of Needs “even if all these needs are satisfied, we may still often expect that a new discontent and restlessness will soon develop, unless the individual is doing what he or she, individually, is fitted for. More specifically these are the Power Users of a community. The users who have mastered their other needs, can mold and break the Spiral of Silence (Fahmy & Liu, 2011) that is often found within online communities, and also seem to hold a similar weight of importance to that of a Community Manager (Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002; Figure 6).

**Altering the Ecosystem**

Past research has shown ways to increase engagement onsite (Cheng & Vassileva, 2005; Harper, Li, Chen & Konstan, 2006; Ludford, Cosley, Frankowski & Terveen, 2007), but based upon the participants feedback in the study online community members are not particularly fond of these methods or changing roles without their own needs being fulfilled (Figure 7). Further, altering the role a member plays in the ecosystem can affect the longevity and self-sustaining nature that a successful community follows as each member balances out another (Ba, S. 2001; Butler, Sproull, Kiesler & Kraut, 2002). The results in the study are significant because they show combined results from a variety of different online communities, and what truly motivates people to either consume, share, or engage with others. By using the proposed Self-sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model while creating or growing a community it will better inform Architects of what is required to achieve a successful online community.
Chapter 5: Summary and Conclusions

Limitations of the Study

While the study provided to participants was built by a combination of Community Managers and General Members based upon their motivation to contribute to a community, there were several limitations that could be improved in future research. The time constraints for which the study was provided was in a month long time span, and additional communities could have engaged with the survey on a greater level if there was a budget for advertising it. Third, several of the questions that were listed in the survey could have been adapted for a greater scale of responses, more specifically getting a range of response rather than agreeing or disagreeing. While the agree or disagree questions were primarily for confirmation of past research, it would still have been more accurate. Finally, the amount of participants could have been greater as not even one percent of the surveyed communities were able to respond. The mixture of a brief response period and funding also contributed to this limitation.

Further Study Recommendations

The current study has indicated several areas for further study that can improve the proposed Self-Sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model that was created from the data: A future study can indicate the frequency of sharing between each type of community member, and to see if there are patterns between the user’s motivation level and that of the type of content. This is a potential way to further understand why a Passive Lurker will become an Active Lurker, and if there are other particular member roles that share more than others. A Community Manager or Architect could gain valuable insight on to whom they should focus their attention to when deciding what methods of sharing content should be implemented into the community. Lastly, though the surveyed participants have confirmed that past research still remains accurate
outside of who tips the scales for how the community’s structure is adapted, further research could be utilized to see the effects that result from Community Manager and Architect interference with community established norms and structures.

**Conclusions**

As a Community Manager I have been in the shoes of each type of member, and know how each part plays a role in a successful online community’s ecosystem. Because each community is different the geographic and demographic variations can affect what type of member a person may become, and that is beyond a single person’s comprehension. The quantitative data that resulted from the surveyed participants helped identify what specifically motivated a member to consume, share or engage with others in addition to what specific needs are being satisfied in doing so (Maslow, 1943). Prior research is limited to one type of community per experiment, which prevents a comparison between different types of people. With the inclusion of past research on lurkers and new research to identify what role they play the motivation of a community may be more successful than it appears on the surface. Using specific tools the identification of lurkers may play a larger role in motivating and expanding the community without incentivizing them to publicly participate. Further, by altering the lurkers role it may in fact alter the longevity of an online community’s self-sustaining ecosystem if there needs are not being satisfied as they were in a previous role. Lastly, the data shows that each type of member is involved at a certain level based on their level of motivation, and therefore those who are seeking esteem or self-actualization will contribute the most content, the formation of social norms, and assisting other members to be included; however, the lower member levels will continue to consume and share the content and assist in the community’s growth.
Using the data from the survey I can firmly establish the proposed Self-sustaining Online Community Ecosystem model as a foundation to build successful online communities from; however, prior to utilizing the model the reason for the community to exist must still fall in line with past research that shows there truly is a need for it. The model will not help Architects, educators, or niche groups create a reason for a community so much as build a foundation around a reason that already exists and has not been catered to. Without a solid reason for an online community content will not flow freely from the community members themselves, and will eventually not be utilized as it was intended. Further research can and should be done towards the better understanding of creating communities around lesser known themes.
References


Appendix A

Proposed Survey Questionnaire

Please provide answers to the following demographical questions:

1. Country ________________________
2. State __________________________
3. City (worldwide) _________________
4. Gender _________________________
5. Age ___________________________
6. Field of Work ___________________
7. Employment Status ______________
8. Relationship Status ______________
9. Ethnicity _______________________

Select the appropriate answer that best describes why you are involved with this community; if you are not part of an online community select N/A when appropriate:

1. What community or social network site brought you here: Open Text
2. How many online communities are you a member of? Open Number
3. If you are not involved in an online community now, have you ever been? Y/N/NA
4. Does the user interface of a community influence you to participate? Y/N
5. Do the tools (ease of use) influence you to participate in the community? Y/N
6. Do you study or observe the way users communicate before contributing or participating in a discussion? Y/N/It depends on the community
7. Do you prefer a well-structured community will enforced rules, or a community that relies on its members to enforce social rules? Enforced Rules/Members enforce the rules/Other
8. If you answered other, please provide further details: Open Text
9. Do users increase or decrease your need to fit in with the social norms of the community? Increase/Decrease
10. Do you prefer a well-structured community with enforced rules, or a community that relies on its members to enforce social rules? Rules/Members
11. Does the integration of other popular social media sites into the community increase your potential to join or register to participate in the community? Y/N
12. Why? (Is it important to have a community that integrates with accounts you already have created, or are simple registrations sufficient?) Open Text
13. Is it important that the community allows you to remain anonymous? Y/N/Depends
14. What type of communities do you prefer to remain anonymous for? Open Text
15. Will you be more reluctant to participate in an online community if you must state your real name? More/Less/Depends/Doesn’t Matter
16. If your friends are already contributing to a community does that make you more or less likely to participate? More/Less
17. How often do you share content, articles, or discussions from communities? Open Percentage
18. If you do share content, do you also contribute to the community discussions? Y/N
19. Do you prefer solid conversation or quick and easy answers? *Easy/Ongoing*

20. Should community managers welcome new members, or leave that to users? *CM/Users*

21. Do you prefer open communities or private communities? *Open/Private/Depends*

22. How important is it for members to dictate how the community is formed around them?
   
   1  2  3  4  5
   Leave it to the pros   Indifferent   It is up to the community

23. When joining an online community how important is it to you that there are already active or ongoing discussions occurring?
   
   1  2  3  4  5
   Discussions just need to be created   Neutral   There must already be active users

24. Do community achievements increase your interest in engaging the community?
   
   1  2  3  4  5
   Not Important   Indifferent   Nice to have something in return

25. When asking a question how much insight must you receive in order to continue asking the community?
   
   1  2  3  4  5
   Just point me in the right direction   Neutral   They have to provide useful information

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**Appendix B**

*Survey Questions for Community Architects & Community Managers –*

(These questions were optional and included in the survey; however, a participant must have identified themself as a previous Community Architect)

1. Have you ever created your own online community? *Y/N*

2. What was your initial reason for creating the community? *Open Text*

3. How did you decide on what tools your community could use to communicate? *Open Text*

4. Did the tools evolve or change as the community grew? *Open Text*

5. Why do you feel members participated in your community? *Open Text*
   
   Would you have changed anything during your initial approach to building your community? *Open Text*

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**Appendix C**

*Privacy Terms for Proposed Online Survey*
You are being asked to participate in a survey being conducted by Elliot S. Volkman as a part of his thesis for a master’s degree in Communication and Organizational Leadership at Gonzaga University. This survey will assist in the identification of what motivates an online community to engage, grow and produce long lasting results. The survey will ask demographical questions and questions regarding the use and participation in online communities.

All information provided for this survey will remain anonymous, and only the averaged results will be released publicly. There will be no commercial involvement with this scholarly research. Your involvement in this study is voluntary and you are not required to answer any questions; however, it is encouraged that you answer each question to the best of your ability based on your experience.

Please review this consent form prior to the completion of this online survey, and select the corresponding box at the end of it acknowledging your consent.

By signing this consent form I confirm that I have read and understood the information presented in this consent form. I understand that my participation in this research study is voluntary and I may decline to participate at any time.
Appendix E

The following information are direct responses from surveyed participants. Questions will be numbered and their responses will appear next to that number in the table.

**Question 1:** Does the integration of other popular social media sites into the community increase your potential to join or register to participate in the community?

**Question 2:** What types of communities do you prefer to remain anonymous for?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Question</th>
<th>Comment</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Ease of use across the board. I don’t want to repeat myself across multiple platforms.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Expediency in dissemination of information through multiple communities at once is the advantage.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I don’t need more usernames and passwords.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Less steps to join make it easier, more appealing in my already-packed day.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>It helps if I can use an account I already have - takes less time and is easier.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I like being able to share in one place and have it auto update everything else, because I’m lazy.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I tend to forget if I’ve signed up for several different accounts, therefore simplicity into one community I already use is nice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>I think we are all on community overload these days and the more we can layer communities the better.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Easily integrates your friends list (pro); however, I usually prefer to set up an individual account rather than rely on a Facebook log-in (for privacy reasons).</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Anything that can link me to my profession.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Depends – mostly for non-work related [communities].</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I like the Craigslist model. I’m sure there are other models that make sense.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>I never share my last name with anyone, if I can help it.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Non-Formal communities... e.g. Gaming sites.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>None, but I like the option.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ones that require candid and touchy subjects such as [real] employer info, or exposing something.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Political, controversial topics.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Health-related communities.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Ones not associated with people I know IRL [in real life] or with my profession, or would somehow be embarrassed if a client/employer found I was on.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Once where I may not have the option to restrict who receives a message. (Though for me this is typically not an issue, the possibility may arise).</td>
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</table>