Virtual communities : The reality of their existence and limits

المجتمعات الافتراضية : حقيقة وجودها وحدودها

Dr.Hana Achour ***1**,

مخبر دراسات الإعلام والوسائط الرقمية - جامعة أم البواقي[1]

hana.achour@univ-oeb.dz

Abstract:

Virtual communities are among the new topics discussed by researchers nowadays which were created by the emergence of the Internet, the development of technologies and the widespread use of new media by individuals as well.

The importance of these virtual communities is increasing with the rise of their spread and dependence on them in many issues that are sometimes fateful, which show the importance of this study. As we are trying through this research paper to learn more about the nature of these virtual communities by recognizing their types, revealing their characteristics, analyzing the benefits of their existence, and observing the negatives of their spread, all through a theoretical research study that seeks to discover the reality of visual communities' existence and their limits.

Keywords: community; cyberspace; virtual communities.

الملخص :

تعتبر المجتمعـات الافتراضية من المواضـيع المسـتحدثة التي أوجـدها ظهـور الإنترنت وتطور تكنولوجيـا الإعلام و انتشـار استخدام الوسـائط الجديـدة، كل هذه العوامل أوجدت لنا مجتمعا افتراضيا جعل من الفضاء السـيبراني فضاء للاجتماع والتعبير عن مختلف الآراء والاتجاهات و مشاركة الآخر.

تتزايد أهمية هذه المجتمعات الافتراضية مع تزايد انتشـارها و الاعتماد عليها في العديد من القضايا التي تكون في بعض الأحيان مصيرية. من هنا تظهر أهمية هذه الدراسة، حيث أننا نحاول من خلال هذه الورقة البحثيـة التعـرف أكثر عـن ماهيـة هـذه المجتمعـات الافتراضية مـن خـلال التعـرف عـن أنواعهـا، و

---

*Dr.Hana Achour

الكشف عن خصائصها، و التطرق إلى الفائدة من تواجدها، و رصد السلبيات انتشارها، كل هذا من خلال دراسة بحثية نظرية تسعى لوضع الحدود التعريفية اللازمة للمجتمعات الافتراضية.

الكلمات المفتاحية: المجتمع، الفضاء السيبراني، المجتمعات الافتراضية

.

1. INTRODUCTION

The world today is experiencing a development in the scientific and technological field, which resulted in the communications revolution that in turn touched all aspects of daily life, previously the world praised the inventions of the nineteenth and twentieth centuries represented in the telegraph, telephone, phonograph, radio and television, and then the invention of satellites, which was the first step in the world of communications, all these developments had a great impact on humanity especially with regard to social change.

But the world today is witnessing a new breakthrough in the world of communications that began with the emergence of the Internet which was the cause of an unprecedented communicative knowledge revolution that changed the stereotypical image of ordinary life and continues to change it on a continuous and rapid basis that is difficult to control. For example, even though virtual communities have existed on the Internet for almost a quarter of a century but the concept of virtual communities is still tainted by ambiguity and researchers in the field of communications and modern societies have not settled on a single definition of it.

Through this research paper, we will try to identify all the details of these societies through a theoretical study to answer the following main question:

➢ **What are virtual communities?**

A number of sub-questions fall under this main question:

- **What are the types of virtual communities?**

- **What are the characteristics of virtual communities?**

- **What is the point of having virtual communities?**

- **What are the pros and cons of virtual communities?**

1-1 The aim of the study:

Each study has specific goals that the researcher seek to reach and this study entitled " virtual communities: the reality of their existence and limits" aims to:

- Learn about the different types of virtual communities

- Discover the characteristics of virtual communities

- Monitor the benefit of having virtual communities

- Know the pros and cons of virtual communities

1-2 The importance of the study:

The importance of this study is the importance of the topic itself. The issue of virtual communities is a controversial topic that is still vague and needs more research and studies in order to reveal its details, as this helps in predicting its development and future prospects on the one hand, on the other hand, this study contributes to draw a new vision of the concept of virtual societies by presenting the different points of view of Western researchers interested in studying this type of society.

2. Virtual communities defining:

There are several definition of visual communities **Rheingold** focused on the technological aspect of virtual communities and defined them as:"social aggregations that emerge from the net when enough people carry on those public discussions long enough, with sufficient human feeling, to form webs of personal relationships in cyberspace" (Tseng, 2014) **Barnatt** and **Romm** describe virtual communities as a group of people who communicate with each other via electronic media such as the Internet. They share common interests, and their geographical location, physical location, physical interaction or ethic origin does not impose any constraints for the formation of the community (Buhrmann, 2003) So, basically virtual communities is a group of people trying to achieve something as a group of people that are using new information technology as a mean. (Stolterman, Ågren, & Croon, 2021) .

It is clear from the previous definitions that there is no unified definition of the virtual

community but this does not prevent us from deducting some common points between these definitions, namely:

- **Socially engaged people**
- **Exchange of information to achieve a specific interest**
- **Cyberspace**

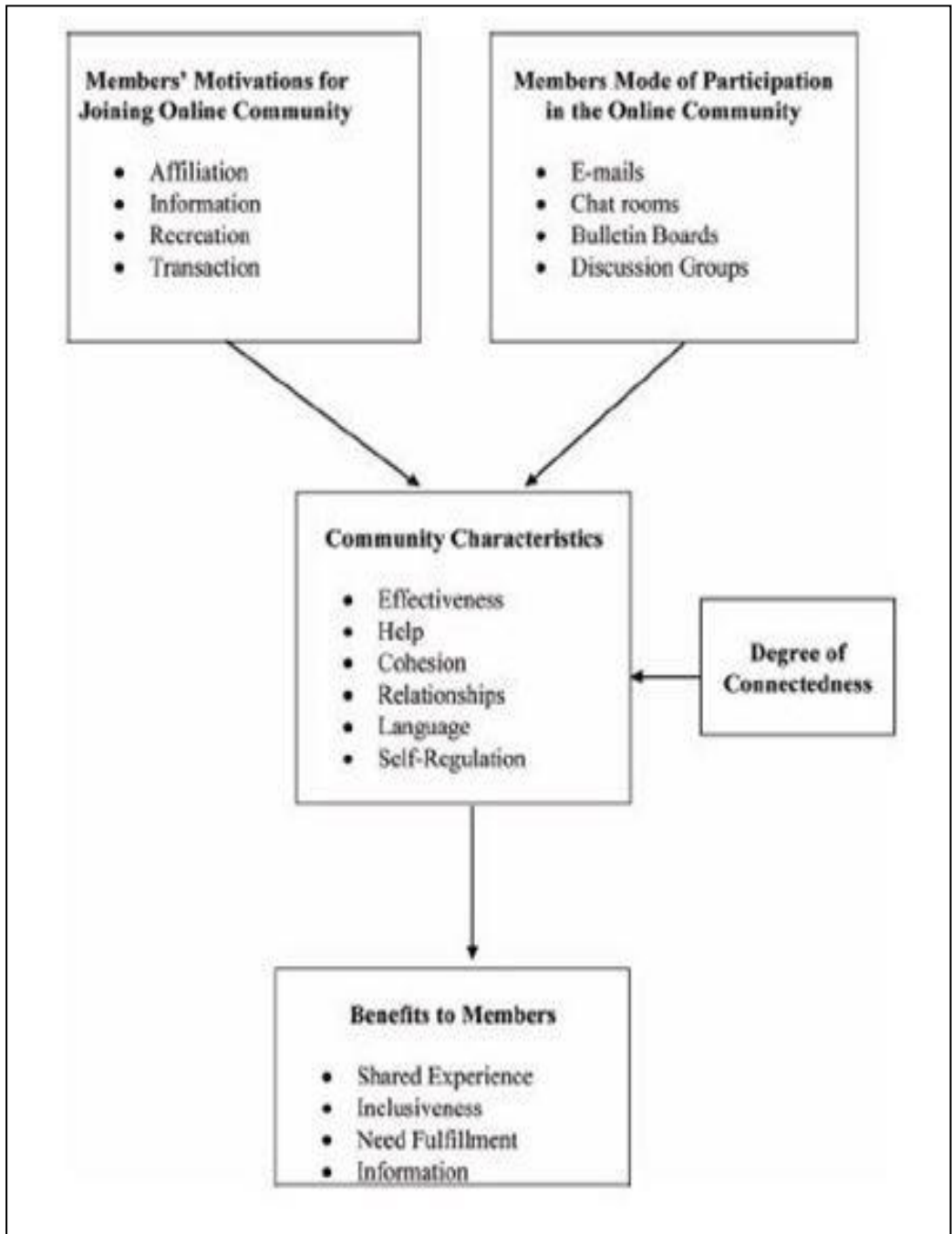**3. The characteristics of virtual communities:**

Virtual communities have characteristics that distinguish them from other communities which they got summarized by Alder and Christopher is six characteristics:

- ✓ **Cohesion**: members seek a sense of belonging and develop group identity over time.
- ✓ **Relationships**: community members interact and develop friendships over time.
- ✓ **Effectiveness**: the group has an impact on members' lives.
- ✓ **Help**: community members feel comfortable asking and receiving help from each other.
- ✓ **Language**: members develop shared communication tools that have a unique meaning within the community.
- ✓ **Self- regulation**: the community develops a system for policing itself and sets ground rules of operations. (Roy, 2010)

The figure below explains more the characteristics of virtual communities:

Figure N 01 : the characteristics of virtual communities

Members' Motivations for Joining Online Community

- Affiliation
- Information
- Recreation
- Transaction

Members Mode of Participation in the Online Community

- E-mails
- Chat rooms
- Bulletin Boards
- Discussion Groups

Community Characteristics

- Effectiveness
- Help
- Cohesion
- Relationships
- Language
- Self-Regulation

Degree of Connectedness

Benefits to Members

- Shared Experience
- Inclusiveness
- Need Fulfillment
- Information

Source: Abhijit Roy, 2010, p84

It is clear now that these virtual communities have a world of their own, governed by their own laws where their members are looking for an identity of their own, formed through the formation of friendships capable of solving their problems using their own language, all under the scope of unified policy.
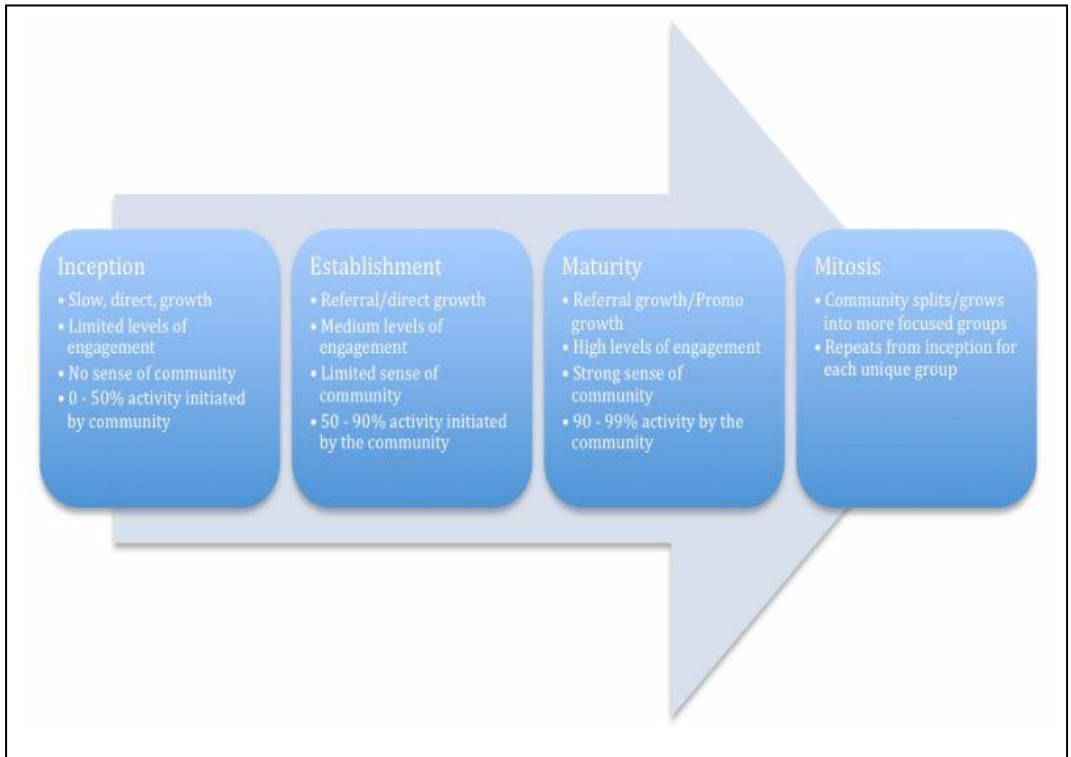
4. Stages of online community life cycle:

Kim proposes a five stage online community building process which progresses as follows:

- **Visitors**: There are individuals who "lurk" in the online community, yet do not participate in them.

- **Novices**: They are new members or "new-bies" who are usually passive and are busy learning the rules and culture of the online community and thus are not actively engaged in it.

- **Regulars**: They are established members comfortably participating in the exchanges and make up the largest segment of the online community.

- **Leaders**: These members are volunteers, contractors, and staff who create topics and plan activities that keep the online community running.

- **Elders**: They are respected members of the online community who are always eager to share their knowledge and pass along the culture of the community to the newer members (Roy, 2010) .

Other researchers have drawn another lifecycle of virtual communities which is explained in the figure below:

Figure N 02: the stages of online community life cycle

Inception
• Slow, direct, growth
• Limited levels of engagement
• No sense of community
• 0 - 50% activity initiated by community

Establishment
• Referral/direct growth
• Medium levels of engagement
• Limited sense of community
• 50 - 90% activity initiated by the community

Maturity
• Referral growth/Promo growth
• High levels of engagement
• Strong sense of community
• 90 - 99% activity by the community

Mitosis
• Community splits/grows into more focused groups
• Repeats from inception for each unique group

Source: (eActivities)

So as we see there are four stages of online community life cycle:

- **Inception**: in which the members of the community are characterized as slow, direct with a limited levels of engagement and this community has no sense and has 0-50% activity initiated by community.

- **Establishment**: the member is referral and has direct growth with medium levels of engagement and in this level the members have a limited sense of community but it has 50-90 % activity initiated by community.

- **Maturity**: the member is referral and promo growth and has high levels of engagement with strong sense of community with 90-99% activity by the community.

- **Mitosis**: In this level the community splits and grows into more focused groups and it repeats from inception for each unique group.

5. Virtual communities' types:

Since there is a difference in the inclusion of one specific definition of virtual communities, it is logical that the division of these communities into types also differs between researchers.

So, the different types listed here give a better idea of who can be potential members of a virtual community and how and why these communities exist.

5-1 Communities based on the particulars of its members:

Kardars named a few types of virtual communities' base on their people that make up their memberships:

- Age-related virtual communities can be targeted at older people as youths.
- Gender-related communities
- Virtual communities reflecting real communities.

5-2 Virtual communities based on purpose:

Armstrong and **Hagel** argue that there are four community types that reflect consumer needs:

- Communities of transactions
- Communities of interest
- Communities of fantasy
- Communities of relationship

5-3 Communities of practice:

Morland defines virtual communities as informal networks of people engaged in a particular profession, occupation or job function that actively seek to work more effectively and to understand their work more fully.

5-4 Customer communities:

According to Online virtual communities building virtual communities online is one mechanism for keeping in touch with customers and allowing customers to keep in touch with each other to gain insights such as best practice or to solve each other's problems.

(Buhrmann, 2003)

In other hand there is who see that there is two types of virtual communities:

✓ **The first** involves the more traditional sense of a physically based community which adds electronic resources for its citizens' use. For example, a town or city that puts information about its city hall, schools, and community organizations online, that provides electronic access to government employees as well as other forms of e-mail, electronic bulletin boards, and Internet would be a physically based virtual community.

✓ **The second** type of virtual community is geographically dispersed with members participating due to their shared interests in a topic and not their shared locations..the members of these communities may never meet each other and their interactions may be limited to just that topic or community of interest. (Blanchard & Horan, 2000)

6- The pros and cons of virtual communities:

The importance of studying virtual communities is increasing day by day due to their wide spread and the positives and negatives they carry. In this element we will try to address the most important of them.

6-1 The pros of virtual communities: The pros of virtual meetings are divided

6-1-1 According to member:

Virtual communities have given to their members:

● **Virtual Identity**: In the virtual community, the members can choose the name they want without being judged.

● **Absence of geographical boundaries**: The virtual domain allowed the space to build relationships between members despite the geographical difference.

● **Digital creativity**: Everyone can comment on the creations, as criticism has become available to everyone and not only to specialists. (Roy, 2010).

6-1-2 According to businesses:

- **Reaching a broader audience**: Reaching a broad audience is a common goal no matter what level of engagement an organization is undertaking and this is why successful projects use a combination of virtual and real community engagement methods

- **Cost effective:** Solely using traditional public participation often neglects a large portion of the community, so by adding online engagement to your consultation methods, you are able to cost effectively more members of the community and encourage them to participate more than ever before.

- **Deeper engagement**: Online engagement methods have opened many opportunities for both organizations and community participants. Digital engagement can provide a better participant experience by using the video, interactive content and virtual and augmented reality.

- **Data-driven outcomes**: Online platforms mean you can create a report, evaluate or give feedback at any given time. This allows your team to spend more time on finalizing reports and getting them approved.

- **Building trust**: by Creating a place to engage online sets the stage for sustained participation

- **Using a safer option for online engagement**: People expect to be able to engage online – if organizations don't create a place for engagement to happen, then it is common for the public to create their own space (6 Major Benefits of Online Community Engagement, 2018)

6-2 The cons of virtual communities:

- **Digital subconscious**: it is the lack of knowledge of the basics of the virtual world and the inability to control its tools

- **Exaggerate the facts**: it is known in the virtual world is that flow of information is

difficult to follow it all due to the participation of everyone in publishing, which contributes to amplifying the facts

- **Digital harassment**: Unfortunately, virtual communication has opened up the field of digital harassment by harming the other, harming him sexually and socially blackmailing him.

- **Isolation**: although the basis of virtual communities is communication between individuals, this created another problem, which is the individual's sense of isolation from his real surroundings. (جعواني, 2017)

7. CONCLUSION:

The subject of virtual communities is broad and complex and one research paper is not enough for it because each researcher has his own point of view in dealing with this type of community, what has increased the difficulty of addressing,   is the continuous technological development in the field of communications, until today we are talking about the technology of **Metavers**, which is capable of creating a new generation of virtual communities so researchers must hasten to agree on the concept of virtual communities to join the upcoming developments.

Bibliographie

1- *6 Major Benefits of Online Community Engagement*. (2018). Récupéré sur www.socialpinpoint.com: https://is.gd/YtknxB

2- Blanchard, A., & Horan, T. (2000). Virtual Communities and Social Capital. Social Dimensions of Information Technology: Issues for the New Millennium.

3- Buhrmann, C. (2003). Virtual communities: implications for companies. *South African journal of information management , 5* (4).

4- eActivities. (s.d.). Récupéré sur https://eactivities.union.ic.ac.uk/training/articles/490?collection=90

5- Roy, A. (2010). Online Communities and Social Networking. (I. Global, Éd.) *Virtual Communities: Concepts, Methodologies, Tools and Applications* .

6- Stolterman, E., Ågren, P.-O., & Croon, A. (2021, 11 01). *Virtual communities — why and how are they studied* . Récupéré sur http://citeseerx.ist.psu.edu/: https://is.gd/tTHfea

7- Tseng, C.-H. (2014). Do Types of Virtual Community Matter for the Effects of online Advertisement and Electronic Words of Mouth? *Marketing Review (Xing Xiao Ping Lun)* , 11 (1), 30.

8- جعواني, و. (2017, 12 27). Récupéré sur www.ahewar.org: https://is.gd/tATKuF .