

**Toward the future: A conceptual review and call for research and action with online communities**

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examined how engagement with the internet may affect how someone engages in the political process (Alberici & Milesi, 2013) and barriers and facilitators to diffusion processes—that is, individuals' knowledge of and decision to adopt new ideas—within a youth-led online network (Kornbluh, Watling Neal, & Ozer, 2016).

Labor organization UNITE HERE networked with social workers, academics, and allies to pressure the Society for Social Work Research to relocate their conference, in response to low wages for workers at Hyatt Hotels in San Antonio (Brady et al., 2015). UNITE HERE created a strategy and used multiple social media tools to meet short-term goals, like identifying allies, raising awareness, and building community allied communities. Similarly, in the schizophrenia discussion group SCHIZOPH, a poster shared a story about a woman with schizophrenia who failed to pay for a cup of coffee (\$0.79) and was arrested as a result (Menon, 2000). Others shared similar stories they had heard or experienced. Eventually, one poster said they would send the diner \$0.79 with a (nice) letter. Other members liked this idea and together, the group sent letters and contacted the local news station that aired the original story. The presiding judge decided the woman's 17 days in jail was adequate punishment and ordered her release. SCHIZOPH considered this a victory. In both cases, online organization led to offline advocacy.

Alberici and Milesi (2013) utilized two offline contexts—meetings and an event—to recruit activists to complete questionnaires on various political outcomes. In the surveys of members of these two contexts, online discussions in attendees' own online communities were found to moderate the predictive effect of politicized identity. Collective action intention was significantly predicted by politicized identity only when participants reported a higher frequency of online discussion. Across contexts,

when participants reported higher levels of online discussion, anger did not predict collective action intention. Instead, collective efficacy predicted collective action and fostered collective action intention. Morality supported collective action intention. However, for participants who reported lower levels of online discussion, only anger predicted collective action intention. These results suggest high levels of online interaction can moderate other variables' influence on collective action intention.

One might suggest organization and communication among online communities and coalitions can improve one's ability to engage in effective advocacy. One study, however, suggests there are barriers and facilitators to such effectiveness (Kornbluh et al., 2016). In this study, high school students in three classrooms in three different schools practicing youth-led social change initiatives participated in a Facebook group. Being in the Facebook group inspired students to take action in their own projects and enabled them to receive ideas from other students. Some students were able to name specific instances where seeing another student's post gave them an idea for what they could do with their own projects. In addition to these facilitators, there were barriers to diffusion, specifically a lack of instructor engagement and in-class discussion about the Facebook group, and the fact the students were all engaging in activism in different topics. From these findings, we may suggest online communities engaged in advocacy dedicate time to reflection and focus on similar topics to facilitate diffusion of ideas.

The internet allows engaged political citizens to organize on issues important to them. While we only found four articles, all highlight the complexity of engaging in advocacy. Most event organizing happened online, while the actions resulting from these efforts happened primarily offline. It may be our political processes have not yet advanced to a point where we can truly

engage in them from our laptops and mobile phones as impactfully as we would like, but it may also be research has not caught up to the merging of offline and online worlds.

In these articles, advocates utilized a variety of online and offline tools in order to create change. The internet was used to share news, action plans, and results of different actions. Given the ease with which community members alternated between online and offline contexts, an argument can be made we should not distinguish sharply between online and offline advocacy, and instead see online tools as just that: tools. Whether online or offline, it is still advocacy.

Discussion

The discussion reflects on and integrates the studies of this literature review in the context of the four major categories identified in addressing the research question regarding the content of the articles about online communities. These four are: community building and sense of community, community support, norms and attitudes of online communities, and advocacy. Implications for future research and action in each category are considered in these four sections and broader implications for research and action are presented in their own section. In consideration of the first research question regarding the number of articles published, as *Figure 1* illustrates, community psychologists' interest in online communities has remained low (23) in the past two decades, although the findings of the studies that have been done have been illuminating. Many studies drew parallels or comparisons with offline spaces. For example, some articles explored questions like how online sense of community may map on to or influence offline sense of community or how online communities may provide social support. Other studies have examined how norms and attitudes we have seen in offline contexts might be recreated in specific online contexts and how

online advocacy might influence offline advocacy. Lastly, we have also seen some suggestions around synergy between online and offline worlds, to the extent it may make more sense to work towards understanding their various combinations rather than attempting to understand them in isolation. This section will summarize major patterns and suggest further exploration for our field to be informed by, and thus potentially inform online communities.

Community Building and Sense of Community

Community psychology research has indicated it is possible to create a sense of community via online communities, although there is disagreement about what this might look like. Some applications of social media are likely to foster networked individualism rather than a true sense of community (Reich, 2010). However, it remains to be seen whether and under what conditions social networks can host true virtual communities, networks of individuals, or some combination of both over time. When a community assembles for a more unified purpose, sense of community does appear to be possible and even likely (O'Connor et al., 2015). Further, Niland and colleagues (2015) suggest online connections are just as important as offline connections. There is no doubt the internet is increasingly important to interacting with others (Li et al., 2014; Loomis & Friesen, 2011; O'Connor et al., 2015; Reich et al., 2014). In fact, lack of access to the internet can have a negative effect on individuals (Vázquez et al., 2015).

Yet, there is little curiosity in community psychology literature about whether sense of community manifests differently in online and hybrid communities. Researchers disagree on how best to measure sense of community in traditional face-to-face contexts (Nowell & Boyd, 2010; McMillan, 2011; Stevens, Jason, Olson, & Legler, 2012; Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015). If we accept sense of community is contingent on ecology, then we must concede a

separate or elaborated measurement framework might apply to virtual and hybrid communities compared to in person communities. For example, in a study of 97 online-originated and 80 offline-originated online communities expanding on McMillan and Chavis' (1986) sense of community construct, Koh and Kim (2003) found community leaders' enthusiasm and perceived similarity amongst members impacted members' sense of belonging more for online- than offline-originated communities. Additionally, frequency of offline activities impacted members' sense of influence over the community more for online- than for offline-originated hybrid communities.

As in face-to face contexts, not all online gatherings are communities. As a result, it could be argued that some studies in community psychology journals, while uncovering valuable knowledge about communication online, are not assessing community phenomena. Two such examples include Wood's (2018) thematic analysis of news site comment sections and August and Liu's (2018) thematic and discourse analysis of YouTube comments. Wood's (2018) analysis applying Bandura's moral disengagement theory to comments on three news articles about anthropogenic climate change is focused on individual behavior. August and Liu (2014) note that of the 900 YouTube comments they examined in their discourse analysis, only 120 of these comments were replied to, with the modal conversation length being one comment and one reply. While August and Liu (2014) sought to learn if Gricean norms of cooperative conversation applied to race talk in YouTube comments, they add commentary on the general, "thin-sliced, anonymous/shallow" nature of these comment sections. In this way, communication research helps to explore the boundaries of the definition of community. However, direct investigation is required to understand the differences between online and face-to-face communities and is a quicker way to

understand the landscape of the ways we associate online.

One area where virtual sense of community is more reminiscent of McMillan and Chavis' conception of sense of community is the importance of behavioral norms and social support (Blanchard, 2008). Observing and posting supportive messages were related to increased perception of behavioral norms around support, which in turn was related to an increased sense of community. Additionally, supportive communication members received or sent through private messages directly increased sense of community. For these reasons, Blanchard (2008) suggested social norms mediate the relationship between members' well-documented need to be identified on the one hand and have a sense of community on the other. Practitioners may be able to help community members align their social norms to the purpose of the community and help community leaders develop strategies to increase perceptions of social support within their communities.

More research is needed to hone our understanding of sense of community and online communities generally, which can affect how researchers and practitioners' interface with online and hybrid communities. For instance, how does member turnover affect online communities, and what are the patterns of membership? To what extent and in what ways are new members recruited or discouraged? What is done to sustain or discourage participants' interest? How do perceptions of a community affect how community members interact with outsiders? For example, researchers and practitioners seeking to gain entrée into gaming communities may need to pay special attention to community members' perceptions of how others see them. Much of the psychological research on gaming in the 1990s and 2000s seemed focused on demonstrating video games cause violence (Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys,

2018). To understand these processes, we need to hear from researchers and practitioners alike on which strategies work and which fail, and how well research findings replicate in real-world application. Then community psychologists will have a sound basis for assisting online communities in developing a stronger community and therewith a stronger sense of community.

Community Support

Research reviewed here suggests community psychologists can use the internet to help members of communities, particularly those with members marginalized by others, provide support to one another (Barrera et al., 2002; Bliuc, Doan, & Best, 2018; Chong et al., 2015; Dunham et al., 1998; Dyer et al., 2010; Obst & Stafurik, 2010). Understanding how community support may look similar and different across communities may be helpful as communities and community psychologists attempt to build support networks for individuals who are socially isolated for a variety of reasons. Examples may include, but are not limited to, being a member of a very specific community (e.g. those who have been diagnosed with orphan diseases), living in a sparsely populated area (e.g. rural settings), or being a member of a stigmatized and targeted community (e.g. identifying as trans in a very conservative area).

Research on online communities can also enhance the social support literature. As we have seen, online mutual help groups have been in part successful. Interestingly, the online social support literature features more successes than the online sense of community literature. This may be because social support is a more concrete concept, with researchers generally agreeing on the definition of social support (Saegert & Carpiano, 2017) compared to the ambivalence surrounding the definition of sense of community (Abfalter et al., 2012; Blanchard, 2008; Koh & Kim, 2003; McMillan, 2011; Nowell & Boyd, 2010; Stevens, Jason,

Olson, & Legler, 2011; Jason, Stevens, & Ram, 2015). The social support literature is especially encouraging, however, as it shows face-to-face support, even among strangers, is possible.

We may ask how we can design interventions to turn strangers into supporters. Additionally, how much of an effect can we reasonably expect online communities to have in practice? Barrera et al. (2002) suggest social integration may not be affected by online mutual help groups but may alter *perceptions* of support. If true, this leads to other questions. How long does it take for positive outcomes of online communities to manifest, if ever? How might we integrate online support groups into already existing interventions? How does online social support affect other activities, such as engagement in advocacy?

Norms and Attitudes

We can also study how online communities' norms and attitudes affect their activities like advocacy work. Future research may focus on when digital efforts are helpful or harmful to advocacy efforts, and what is needed to have a successful digital advocacy campaign. Importantly, we can ask how we can moderate online advocacy campaigns through the building of community norms and attitudes. For example, the participants in the 79 Cent Campaign influenced each other's letters by highlighting the value of being courteous during the discussion on the listserv (Menon, 2000).

It would behoove community psychologists to look beyond our field to understand how advocacy and norms may be affected by online technologies. For example, fan communities have used online technologies to advocate for their interests for years (Bennett, 2012; Dimitrov, 2008; Earl & Kimport, 2009). Researchers have studied online communities such as "Black Twitter" (Brock, 2012; Florini, 2014; Sharma, 2013) and "Academic Twitter" (Letierce, Passant, Breslin, & Decker, 2010;

Stewart, 2015; Stewart, 2016) to explore how specific groups of people communicate and how these strategies may change over time.

Advocacy

Advocacy efforts can be developed and implemented online (Brady et al., 2015; Menon, 2000) and online advocacy behaviors might affect offline efforts (Alberici & Milesi, 2013). While online communities can become echo chambers, estimates of online ideological segregation may be overestimated (Barberá, Jost, Nagler, Tucker, & Bonneau, 2015). Internet contact, if used well, could foster action intention, although there are potential barriers to the acceptance of new ideas and strategies (Alberici & Milesi, 2013). More research is needed on best practices and ways community groups might focus efforts using social media and project management resources like Basecamp and Slack. Beyond capturing online community members' advocacy efforts, it would be instructive to investigate the degree to which these communities do or do not facilitate empowerment for their members.

Empowerment develops in progressive stages, contingent on a supportive external response from the environment with which a community interacts (Bothne & Keys, 2016; Keys, 1993). From the studies discussed above, there is reason to believe online settings provide supportive responses through opportunities to participate (the first stage in Keys' model), resulting in *power within* (Keys, 1993). The literature reviewed suggests members are willing to take risks in sharing their experiences with others. This willingness to take risks is essential to the second phase, *voice own reality and experience*, resulting in *power to*. However, mentions of themes germane to the subsequent three stages in the Keys model (viz., *affirmation/power with, increased choice and impact/power over, dignity efficacy and self-respect/power realized*) are less commonly encountered in extant community psychology

research. These partial parallels suggest the examination of empowerment in online communities could be a promising area of investigation. Evidence for the impact of online communities on advocacy efforts may portend the uncovering of their positive impact on empowerment.

Additional Opportunities for Research and Action

There are topics worth exploring not yet found in this literature on online communities. Community psychologists are well positioned to explore emerging issues like conflict resolution, justice, resistance to oppression, and restorative justice practices in online settings (Goodman, 2006; Katsh, 2007; Powell, 2015). Community psychologists could also serve important roles in the push against group polarization and extremism (Yardi & Boyd, 2010). Additionally, we might explore members' views of their identity in light of their online communities. Community psychologists could also study how others see their community through understanding concepts such as metastereotypes (Steltenpohl, Reed, & Keys, 2018) as they relate to online communities. Online strategies may map onto strategies we use for offline conflict resolution, or we may be able to find unique ways to lessen conflict using technologies as they develop, such as using virtual reality to build empathy (Robertson, 2016).

As noted above, most of the articles were descriptive in nature with only a few involving research designs amenable to sophisticated quantitative or qualitative analysis. The relative lack of methodological sophistication in most of the articles reviewed speaks to the nascent nature of research concerning online communities in community psychology. Future work can utilize qualitative methods such as online discourse analysis to probe the meaning of online communities and their dynamics for the users and quantitative methods like highly

structured surveys to examine specific issues of interest.

Theories popular in community psychology may also be beneficial to the studying of online communities, especially as researchers in the field of “cyberpsychology” consider their research’s own theoretical foundations (or lack thereof) (Orben, 2018). Bronfenbrenner’s (1977) ecological systems framework could be used to understand online and hybrid communities. For example, it may help us to understand how policy can affect how people use the internet. Recently, the United States Federal Communications Commission repealed net neutrality, which protected users from internet service providers blocking access to certain websites or offering paid prioritization plans (Shepardson, 2018). This repeal of net neutrality has the potential to massively affect how people use the internet, if the courts side with the FCC.

Further, there is what some consider a “moral panic” surrounding screen time, leading to organizations releasing conflicting guidelines. For example, the World Health Organization (2019) makes cut-off recommendations for children under five but does not outline evidence for this recommendation and acknowledges a research gap. However, the Royal College of Paediatrics and Child Health (2018) explicitly states there is no strong evidence for a threshold and does not make a cut-off recommendation at all. Indeed, recent pre-registered research suggests little evidence for meaningfully negative associations between screen time and adolescent well-being (Orben & Przybylski, 2019). Community psychologists working in research and practice settings with children and families should be aware of current stereotypes about media’s effects on well-being and the direction of current research.

Lastly, most of these studies focus on younger adults. We know older adults often differ from

younger adults on dimensions like processing capacity, judgment, knowledge, emotion regulation, attention to emotion, affective perspective taking, and the interpretation of ambiguous scenarios (Carstensen & Mikels, 2005). We might reasonably think there are differences in how older adults use the internet and when they may find the internet relevant or irrelevant to their social goals. Some research suggests older adults who use social media have a strong preference for connecting with family (Swayne, 2016). There may be differences in usage of and feelings toward the internet between individuals who grew up with the internet and those for whom the internet came into existence later in life. Given concerns about loneliness among older adults (Zhong, Chen, Tu, & Conwell, 2017), could online communities be one form of intervention for older adults without stable social networks?

There are other questions we may be able to tap into, given time and a concerted effort to disseminate our current practices with online communities, and make an intentional effort to include online communities in our research and practice. The potential here is virtually boundless.

Conclusion

Given the internet is an increasingly important part of people’s lives and unlikely to have less influence as time goes on, we have a responsibility as community psychologists to explore the types of online communities and activities with which people can engage. Online communities have much to offer community psychology in terms of theory, research, and action. By continuing to explore online and hybrid communities, drawing on interdisciplinary work as we build the literature within our field, we can move toward understanding this increasingly important aspect of the future. Further, we can apply what we know about online communities--through community psychology and other fields--to create contexts allowing community members

to be empowered to advocate for themselves and issues they care about.

Of concern is the lack of conscious curation of research regarding online and hybrid communities, especially insofar as it can inform social action. These communities fall within community psychology's domain of interest and should be a prime future focus. When our approaches and foci do not include a globally prevailing, volatile, and massively influential modality for creating and sustaining community, these approaches and foci must change. In order for the field to be relevant to the way humans take part in community in the following decades, we need to conscientiously coordinate research effort with a mind towards our future. As the late Oliver Wendall Holmes Jr. (1884) once said, "I think that, as life is action and passion, it is required ... that [people] should share the passion and action of [their] time at peril of being judged not to have lived."

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