Virtual Community Engagement Processes

Khaiziliyah Khalid* Haryani Haron* and Natrah Abdullah*

Abstract : Community engagement is crucial in building positive relationships within the members of a community. Community engagement will takes place when the communities contribute something which is beneficial and visible to the communities. The possibilities of technology in community involvement have become a trend in the study of community engagement. Technology has made deeper engagement possible, which can expand the breadth, depth and quality of community engagement. A qualitative study was conducted by looking into the processes of community engagement in virtual communities. The finding shows the engagement processes involved in the virtual communities. With the advancement of technology, it is believed that the community will be engaged more.

Keywords : Community, Engagement, Community Engagement, Technology, Community Engagement Continuum.

1. INTRODUCTION

Community engagement is a planned process which involves interactions between connected people for specific purposes whereby the community input is used to make decision. Reference [1] mentioned that people can be connected by geographic location, special interest or affiliation, to address issues affecting their well-being, linking to problem solving or decision making [2]. It is believed that community engagement will result in the creation of new community relationships as people learn how to work together [3]. The feeling of being included in decision-making, being listened to, and being informed are key elements in creating community engagement, thus lead to develop trust among the community [4]. Community engagement provides the community with an opportunity to give input into the decisions that are made by the community [5]. Effective community engagement will help to utilize disagreement in a positive way by helping those involved better understand each other's point of view [6].

Community engagement involves community collaboration for the mutually benefit exchange of knowledge and resources [5]. A wide range of exchanging information and negotiable mutually acceptable decision occurs a lot in the creation of community engagement [6]. It is believed that community engagement will result in the creation of new community relationships as people learn how to work together [3]. The feeling of being included in decision-making, being listened to, being informed to and trust are key elements in the creation of community engagement ([4], [7]). Effective community engagement will help to utilize disagreement in a positive way by helping those involved better understand each other's point of view [6] which eventually improves communication and interaction, thus leads to the creation and dissemination of new knowledge [8].

Sense of community will be achieved as the results of the engagement of the community. Through engagement, community will tend to share emotional contact through interaction and participation with others, thus create sense of community [9]. Community engagement requires interaction and participation of community members in activities that address their issues. According to [10], community engagement

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*   Faculty of Computer & Mathematical Sciences, Universiti Teknologi MARA, 40450 Shah Alam, Selangor, Malaysia *E-mail : khaiziliyah.khalid@gmail.com, haryani@tmsk.uitm.edu.my, natrah@tmsk.uitm.edu.my*

is vital to avoid the absence of sense of community [1] which can result in losing the trust ([11], [12]) and volunteerism [12] in the community, which also affects the empowerment in the decision making ([12], [13], [14]).

A.   Community Engagement Processes

Community engagement is one-way communication [4] which involves information delivery, consultation, involvement and collaboration in decision-making and empowered action in community. Informing the community is the basic elements in engagement. The community will be informed when the information flows from one to another ([5], [15]). References ([2], [6]) mentioned that informing the community helps in engagement by developing a shared understanding of the problems raised, learning how to generate common goals and having clear mutual expectations about the whole objectives in the community activity. The spreading of information through informing and consulting ensure the community to have balanced and equal information aligned with the community's goals which helpful in assisting community to have a better understanding ([4], [6], [15], [16]-[18]). References ([6], [15]) found that consulting is referring to the process of obtaining feedback from the community which gained from the information flow in the community, not just from one to another. Reference [17] mentioned that consulting is vital to ensure the interest of the community is taken into consideration, to avoid social exclusion. Consulting keeps the users informed, listened and acknowledged ([16]-[18]).

Involving in the community can be achieved by working directly with the community throughout the process to ensure community concerns are understood and considered ([2], [6], [17], [19]). Reference [15] added that that involving ensures input or feedback directly reflected in the alternatives developed and providing feedback on how community input influenced the decision. Reference [18] found that motivation in the community will be decreased when they wondered whether their input has been considered or not. Involving leads to active participation in the community since their collaboration can be recognized, which will foster to the subsequent collaborations [4].

Reference [2] cited that work collaboratively is crucial as communities are more likely to be engage. This is due to the fact that collaborating leads to develop respectful and trust relationships, strengthen the community by having clear understanding on how to evaluate alternatives or outcomes to any issues. Collaborating involves forming partnership with communities in each aspect of the decision, including the initial development of alternatives and the preferred solution ([5], [17]). References ([2], [6], [17]) discovered that collaborating involves creating the space for community to understand the wholeness of the problem, feel safe to share ideas, take ownership of the initiatives and solutions that they agree to, and hold themselves accountable for creating any decisions. Reference [4] mentioned that collaborating is about building trust over a period of time, where honest, flexible and sustainable relationships are developed. In collaborating, communities are able to recognise each other's role and able to openly discuss any community issues, thus develop solutions with the presence of ongoing communication, interaction and participation ([4], [5]). Community's recommendation in formulating solution will be taken into account into the decisions to the maximum extent possible in collaboration process [6].

Empowering is both a process and an outcome of community engagement, which described as any action that provides a community with the final decision-making power ([4], [15]). Empowering is a group-based participatory, developmental process through which community gain greater control over their lives and environment, acquire valued resources and basic rights, and achieve important life goals ([2], [19]). References ([4], [16], [18]) found that empowering communities goes a stage beyond collaborating, where there is an element of power to be handed over to a community. Reference [18] mentioned that communities are represented equally in the partnership and mutually accountable for all aspects of the activity in the community, as the result from empowering. Empowerment is about an ongoing relationship

with a community. When capacity is built within community, the skills and potential of community to be involved in decision making increases, and communities are more resilient, more able to cope with challenges and changes, and better connected ([15], [17]-[19]). Empowering involves the greatest level of community engagement in decision making processes, by placing the final decision making in the hands of community. The community is provided with the skills, information, authority and resources in order to make the final decisions ([15], [16]).

B.   Community Engagement Continuum

Community engagement is often depicted as a continuum as shown in Figure 1, ranging from low level engagement strategies such as informing to high-level strategies such as empowering ([4], [20]-[21]). Community engagement can have the additional value of increasing the skills of members of the community and ensuring knowledge stays in the community, with community members themselves building multidirectional trust and giving the communities sole decision making [4]. A logical and transparent process that lets community members understand how and why a decision is made is crucial for the community engagement to be successful ([22], [23]).
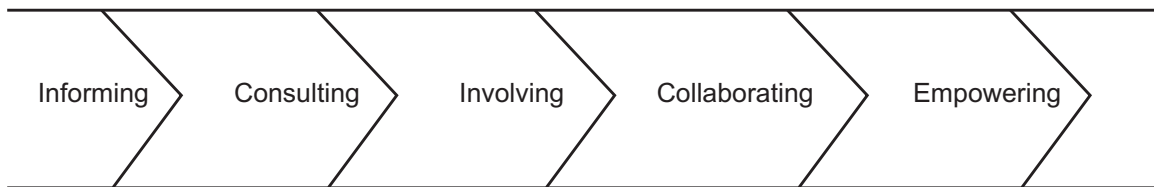

Figure 1: Community Engagement Continuum

Community must be involved in every processes of the continuum. References ([17], [19], [24]) mentioned that each step in the decision making process is an opportunity to work with the community to build trust. Communities can lose the trust by failing to involve them until alternatives have been developed, or worse, a preferred alternative has been chosen ([20], [25]).

As an aspirations, concerns or values of people in the communities being issued, and communities share their aspirations, concerns and values with communities, and these aspirations, concerns and values of communities are incorporated into decision making process; the communities are stronger by building trust along the continuum ([26]-[27]). Establishing an effective communication and involvement between community's results in a greater sense of community, increased multidirectional trust, and strong power in decision making ([7], [20], [28]).

Community engagement enables a significant difference to the way communities live, and works best when communities are engaged across a range of diversity, thus empower the community ([29], [30]). Engagement help people in the community to recognize and value their own skills, knowledge and expertise as well as opening up access to better role of community as the spectrum moves from left to right [31]. Even though in the beginning of the continuum only some of the community involve, but then later evolve to strong involvement as the continuum moves from informing to empowering ([19], [26]-[27]). This evolution happened as the result of encouraging people to work collectively, not individually, so that they can gain confidence and strength from each other which eventually leads to the decision making at community level ([32]-[33]).

2.   QUALITATIVE STUDY

In achieving the objective of this paper, qualitative method was adopted. Qualitative study often relies on personal contact between the researcher and their context over some period of time of the research. This contact makes a partnership which will lead to a deeper insight into the context of the study. Thus, a qualitative approach is very oriented toward breakthrough and procedure, have strength, less generalization and more concerned with a thorough understanding of the research problem in its unique context.

Data was collected through observation, in order to look into the real practices of processes in the community engagement. The observation was conducted in three months. The observation was done towards the information posted on the chosen virtual communities in social media. The researcher became the participant of the communities, and observed the interaction and participant of the members in the communities. Data collected and analyzed with reference to the community engagement continuum.

There were two virtual communities chosen for the observation. Both are active virtual communities with more than 300000 and 170000 members respectively. The first virtual communities (Community A) is the community who practiced one kind of popular diet in Malaysia based which focus more on protein intake. The members in Community A actively sharing information pertaining the diet issues and somehow will be motivated when other members shared their achievement in terms of losing weight or inch loss.

Meanwhile, the second chosen virtual community (Community B) focuses in gardening within house area, which is not for business purposes. Mostly the members in Community B are those people who really interested in the gardening, so by actively joining the community they will gain benefit in terms of adding new knowledge in gardening activity. This community benefits the beginner also since the members of this community loves to share and guide the beginner who sometimes got zero knowledge about gardening. Since this community involves gardening at small scale only, so the members actively discuss regarding utilizing their vacant area to be filled with gardening activity. Besides that, this community discuss on pest controlling and managing their gardening parts with recycled materials.
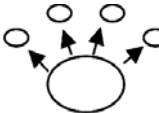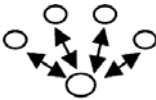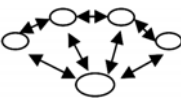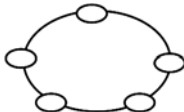
3. FINDINGS AND DISCUSSIONS

Data collected from observation analyzed with reference to the community engagement continuum which contains processes in community engagement. Table 1 shows the details of activities involved in each of the processes in community engagement.

Table 1 shows all processes in community engagement happened in the two chosen virtual communities. The participation of the community starts from informing, consulting, involving, collaborating and lastly empowering. The needs of the communities identified at the beginning of continuum enable better understanding which leads to the decision making at community level. Even though in the beginning of the continuum only some of the community involve, but then later evolve to strong involvement as the continuum moves from informing to empowering. This evolution happened as the result of encouraging people to work collectively, not individually, so that they can gain confidence and strength from each other which eventually leads to the decision making at community level.

There is a need to increase the participation and interactive among the community in the beginning of the continuum to enable the community to engage more. From observation, it is found that some of the members in the community feel neglected when sometimes their concerns were not being asked. Even worse, asked but not being considered. Besides that, some of them demotivated when they unable to have a successful achievement like other members had, even though they had followed every single steps of knowledge being posted. These problems can be avoided with the advancement of technology in enhancing the existing platform to be more interactive and useful to members. Technology will enables the community to participate easily, contribute on their own time, and have a voice when they were previously unable to do so, freedom to share opinions, advocate and even disseminating ideas within the community. In addition, technology provides standardization so that knowledge can be delivered in the same way each time. The potential to replicate and disseminate knowledge widely in different setting also will be increased due to the scalability advantage brought by technology.

Table 1
Details on Processes of Community Engagement

		Informing	*Consulting*	*Involving*	*Collaborating*	*Empowering*
Processes	Community A	Equipping community with information: • Diet phases • Do's and Don'ts • Diet's tips and tricks	Obtaining feedback from community and respond: • Ketosis phase • Inch loss or weight loss • Diet's side effects • Food intake	Working directly with community to ensure communities concerns considered: • Recipe • Workout • Ketosis experience	Communities participating and resolving conflicts together : • Maintenance phase • Source of recipe • Inch loss or weight loss tips and tricks • Food intake • Workout and no workout	Communities having authority over new decisions: • Diet phases • Do's and Don'ts • Ketosis phase • Inch loss or weight loss • Diet's side effects • Food intake • Maintenance phase • Source of recipe • Inch loss or weight loss tips and tricks • Workout and no workout
	Community B	Providing community with information : • How to start • Watering, seeds and pest controlling • Do-it-yourself activity	Seeking community views and commenting : • Pest and watering control • Seeds distribution Plant care	Working directly with community to ensure communities concerns considered: • Lighting and watering controls • Minimizing small space • Gardening techniques	Communities recommending and removing obstacles in : • Planting management • Do-it-yourself materials • Garden maintenance • Planting steps	Communities have ownership towards decisions they agree to : • How to start • Lighting, watering, seeds and pest controlling • Do-it-yourself activity • Seeds distribution • Plant care • Minimizing small space • Gardening techniques and maintenance
Promise to the Community		Ensuring communities being informed with necessary information needed; easy to be accessed and understand.	Actively seek and obtained feedbacks from the community and reacted well pertaining to the issues related.	Worked directly with communities making sure communities feedbacks and concerns consistently understood and considered.	Communities' collaborative working together resolving conflicts and removing obstacles towards any feedbacks or problems communities faced. Communities feel safe in sharing ideas related to decision making.	Communities responsible over new decisions and takes accountability for the outcomes of those decisions.
Role of Community		Gets information	Shares information	Gets involved early on	Partners from the start	Decide together
Community Involvement		Some	More	Better	Whole	Strong
Outcomes		Established communication channels	Developed connections	Visibility of partnership established with increased cooperation	Partnership and trust built	Strong multidirectional trust built
Working Diagram						

4. CONCLUSION

Technology has a significant impact in engaging the community. Technology enables more interaction and participation in the community. This is due to the fact that technology allows community to share broadly within community and champion their ideas, leads to decision making process. Informing process is a fundamental component of consulting, involving and empowering. Informing is also the way by which members demonstrate accountability to the community. Engagement is iterative, since informing process still needs to be done after consulting, involving, collaborating and empowering. Thus, technology is needed to foster the iteration process, eventually increase the community engagement.

5. ACKNOWLEDGMENT

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