

Virtual Communities: What?

Living in a reality mediated by digital technologies allows us-and, at the same time, pushes us- to learn beyond the context in which we are placed. More and more, it is asked that generations be able to learn not just life long, but life-wide, not only in schools, university or workplaces, but also through formal and non formal education institutions, at home, on the streets, and in virtual spaces.

There have been many studies since the beginning of internet times, about how computer mediated communication (CMC) might influence the lives of individuals, interpersonal relationship between people, and the social institutions that emerge from these relationships. 'Virtual community' is the term widely used to approach social interactions done virtually. The term is defined as a group of individuals with shared interests that regularly gather to discuss the subject of interest shared by its members through online platforms. These virtual communities, generally of young adults, along with having shared interests, are also communities for learning, for knowledge creation and at times for collective action.¹

In different forms of online social networks, there are members who have never met face to face but they still feel some belonging to a group of people who share similar interests and characteristics. The lack of physical experience doesn't affect the possibility of sharing common interests that enable the development of social capital such as arts, culture, activism, and politics.

Community in the term 'virtual community'

Though there are many social platforms that facilitate interaction, learning and action, the term community here refers to a social space created and maintained by people who have the need for a safe refuge with common identity as the common thread that is binding the members.

Key characteristics of virtual communities-

Some of the key principles that support the development and sustenance of a virtual community are-

a. **Sense of belonging-** The members feel a sense of belonging, familiarity, comfort and emotional attachment to the community.

b. **Shared interests-** The main reason many young adults engage and participate in virtual communities is because of shared interests with other members. They exchange knowledge by interacting with those who share common interests. These communities are hence safe spaces to share, discuss, exchange ideas, information and activism, to show their art to the world, to spread knowledge, to promote values they believe in and to publicize ideas.

c. **Creation of a common set of norms of coexistence to ensure mutual respect in exchanges between the members**

d. **Use of one or more virtual environments by the members to share, access information-** Many of the members of the virtual communities use the platform/ website along with twitter/Instagram of the same virtual community to share their ideas and to learn.

Why creating 'communities' and networks important for individual and social impact?

¹ Young People and virtual communities : New ways of learning and social participation in digital society by Pablo Rivera Vargas and Raquel Mino Puigcercos

Girls' Leadership Program of Avanti believes that creation of a network/ community of girls that act as a safe space for them to express themselves, get exposed to the challenges and ideas of other girls, gain knowledge, and learn new skills is of vital importance. The program proposes creating a digital network/ community so that girls from varying backgrounds can be a part of the community and can engage freely without the limitation of physically reaching out to these safe spaces.

The following are the reasons why developing a community is foundational for girls' empowerment and leadership programs-

a. **Building social assets-** Girls need spaces to access information, share and access information collectively supports learning, reflection, internalization of new information and gives space for expressing their opinions on the same.

b. **Seeking support-** Many girls experience different forms of Gender based violence, discrimination, disadvantages, and threats that they need safe spaces to share about and to seek support. The girls can take support from mentors and other support services in case of need for help.

c. **Social networks are important for emotional wellbeing**

d. **Strength of the collective-** Many interventions made for improving girls' education, agency and voice have shown that girls often derive more strength from a collective than from within. The association with a community and network helps them feel more empowered to voice their opinions, exercise their choices and take action to bring positive changes in their own lives and that of the group.

e. **Opportunities for practicing life skills require a safe community-** Important life skills like problem solving, negotiation, communication and collaboration, empathy, organization skills, etc require the girls to practice these skills in real life situations. Safe network of girls provides them the required platform to practice these skills through dialogue, discussions, learning from each other, and collective action.

f. **Digital civic engagement is safer than physical engagement in the communities (*especially for girls*)**

Some online youth communities and platforms-

The following are some virtual communities that are started and maintained by youth. Whereas some of these communities are for knowledge creation, some are solely for sharing their feelings and ideas, many for collaborating over a common objective/goal and some for engaging in digital civil action.

1. <https://www.youthvoices.live/>

Youth voices is an online community of 6554 members. The members post about their views related to their challenges, politics, plans for future, etc. It has schools across the USA that are participating in collective online sharing.

2. <https://roadtripnation.com/who-were-for/educators>

Roadtrip nation is a USA based nonprofit that works closely with students to create short video documentaries interviewing people who have made diverse career choices. The organization documents interviews/discussions, has short term guidance courses for youth and has courses for the facilitators.

3. <https://www.voicesofyouth.org/day-of-the-girl-karen-polinesia>

Unicef's online platform Voices of Youth is for the young adults to express and share their views through blogs, share motivational stories/quotes/ images and also share short write ups on select issues like-culture, education, employment, environment, health, human rights, innovation and technology, personal growth, etc.

4. <https://thewonderment.com/how-it-works/>

The wonderment is an online platform that attempts to build a virtual community where kids explore things that inspire them, and they collectively try to implement ideas for solving some contextual challenges. Students decide on paths that they feel connected to, submit creative work on those topics and themes. The students can also raise funds or build partnership using the platform.

5. <https://www.zooniverse.org/projects>

Zooniverse is one of the largest platforms for people-powered research. Using the platform, the volunteers come together to support the researchers with their studies. The platform is primarily managed by the Oxford university.

6. <https://diy.org/challenges/featured>

DIY is a platform where students can build skills by participating in projects and challenges that require them to use every day materials. The students can share feedback on other students' work, ask questions and post videos.

7. <https://www.epals.com/#/connections>

The platform for students to connect with other students for one on one messaging, collaboration over a project or for participating in the challenges posted on the platform. It also allows the teachers to create profiles and mention who would they like to connect with. The platform allows them to get in touch with the group the teachers are interested in getting in touch with and they can meet online using the platform itself.

8. <https://www.projectnoah.org/about>

Project noah is a global community of nature enthusiasts who share their photographs and experiences/journals of wildlife sightings. Amateurs, professionals share their photographs and experiences at the same place, learning from each other and feeling a part of a community of common interests.

9. <https://learn.kqed.org/>

KQED learn is a platform that provides media literacy projects and lessons to young people to practice and develop skills of media making. Discussion tab on the platform puts a discussion topic each week for the students to react to and the media challenges provides different prompts for the students to write their views, share short videos or audios as response to the posted challenge. It has videos that the students enjoy discussing.

10. <https://fandomforward.org/whatwedo>

Fandom Forward which was earlier called Harry Potter Alliance and Invisible Children (*an group organized around the documentary Invisible Children based on the struggle of the child soldiers*

fighting the war in Uganda). These platforms draw parallels between the collective interest and passion for media and citizenship action. These assume the viewers not just as mere fans of the media but the ones with active agency to participate in the media that interests them. Harry Potter Alliance has a estimated membership of over 1 hundred thousand people across the USA which includes both online presence and offline local chapters. HPA runs a variety of campaigns, raise funds and plan civic goals for achievements.

The main elements of fan activism are shared media experiences, a sense of community and the wish to help. It builds on an existing community of fandom and gives opportunities to using the shared media experiences to plan and undertake collective action.

Some online tools that are used for engagement-

1. <https://admin.flipgrid.com/manage/discussion>
<https://info.flipgrid.com/events/womens-history-month.html>

Flipgrid is a Microsoft tool that provides platform for the learners to post short videos for discussions, as feedback, and for expression. It also hosts live events that can be attended by a global community of learners and content that can be accessed by students of different age groups.

2. <https://parlayideas.com/how-it-works/>

Parlay is an online tool that supports the teachers in conducting live discussion or discussion on given topics (*written discussions*). The platform also provides a range of topics, prompts, reflective questions, and cues to the teachers to facilitate discussion. It also has system to maintain the class portfolio, provide feedback to students and assess their learning/engagement.