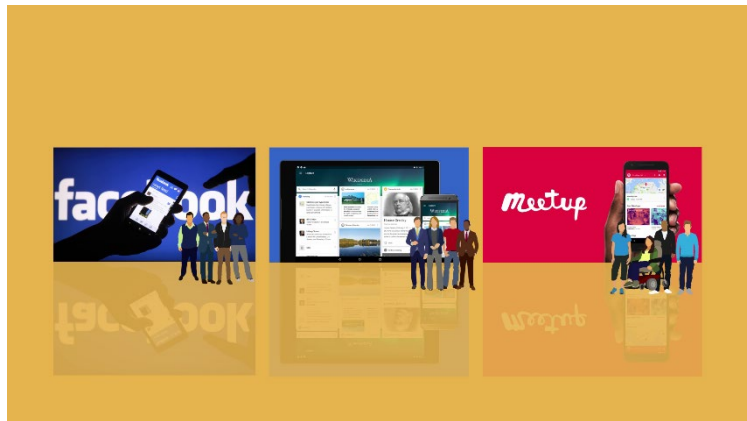# Digital Community

Stems from participation in online interaction, maintaining awareness and empathy towards other digital citizens to improve the health and wellbeing of all.

Some digital communities are more obvious than others and position themselves as a virtual space where digital citizens can meet each other and form relationships. In fact, you may already be part of a such a community – Facebook, Instagram, Twitter, LinkedIn, Deviant Art, or Meet Up, for example.

However, these days there are also many examples of digital communities set up by multinational corporations and big brands with the purpose of cultivating and informing consumers.

"When brand fans connect online, consumers are empowered to cultivate a deeper community around the products and services in question. Popular examples of such branded communities include Nike's global Run Club and Audi's car-sharing program in Sweden, which connects individuals interested in co-owning a vehicle with someone who lives nearby. These digital communities can help consumers understand a product or service and its potential role in the individual's daily life."[1]

Benefits

There are many potential benefits for members of digital communities, such as:

- **Customer Support**: members can access help and support for any issues they may be having. This could come from peer-to-peer learning forums, or expert moderators.

- **Personal and Professional Development**: members can share knowledge, ask questions, and contribute helpful information to assist other members.

- **Companionship**: many people engage in conversation and cultivate relationships with other members. This can be especially important when the user is physically or emotionally unable to create these relationships in the physical world.

- **Information**: Many communities are formed around the sharing of information and skills, which benefits all members of the community.

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[1] Byers, R. From Blossoming Emoji Gardens to Luxury Carsharing Platforms (2015, November 18) http://www.trendhunter.com/slideshow/digital-communities

Potential difficulties

Sometimes when you interact with digital citizens in an online community, it will be with people you already know and have a relationship with. However, you should be aware that often you will be communicating with virtual strangers. This will have a major impact on how we behave and conduct ourselves in this environment, as difficulties can – and will – arise.

Communication errors

Professor Mehrabian[2] famously concluded that human communication is only 7% verbal. This means that in a digital environment, unless you are using live video feeds, your body language and tone of voice are not conveyed, and other citizens could potentially lose or misinterpret 93% of your message.

This in turn can lead to what is called syntactic ambiguity. Consider the following sentence:

"He said he did not take her money"

This sentence has many different meanings, depending on which word is emphasised.

- **He** said he did not take her money.   (I believe him.)
- He **said** he did not take her money.   (I don't believe him, he probably did.)
- He said **he** did not take her money.   (But someone else did.)
- He said he did **not** take her money.   (And therefore he is still poor.)
- He said he did not **take** her money.   (But he won it gambling, or it was a gift.)
- He said he did not take **her** money.   (But he took someone else's money.)
- He said he did not take her **money**.   (But he did take something else of hers.)

If a succinct sentence like this can convey seven different meanings, then imagine how much of what we say online can either be taken out of context or misunderstood completely. To ensure that our online communication does not cause hurt, offense or distress to others, we need to be measured, emotionally intelligent, and empathic towards other members of an online community. We all have a right to feel safe, understood and protected online.

Health and wellbeing

Our digital health and wellbeing is extremely important. This includes the way we actually *use* technology.

> *"With the dramatic rise in the use of computers, smartphones, games consoles and iPad-style tablet devices, there has been an increase in the number of students across the UK showing signs of musculoskeletal disorder.*
>
> *Poor posture when working and relaxing with technology is a contributing factor. Students are particularly at risk because many have been using electronic devices for several years without guidance."[3]*

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[2] Dr Mehrabian, A. 1971. Silent Messages (1st ed.). Belmont, CA: Wadsworth. ISBN 0-534-00910-7.

[3] University of Aberdeen : https://www.abdn.ac.uk/staffnet/working-here/resources-5988.php#computer-workstations

According to New York spine surgeon Dr Kenneth Hansraj,[4] the burden that comes with inclining your head downwards to stare at your smartphone can cause "text neck" and may lead to early wear and tear on your spine. As you repeatedly pull and stretch this area, it can become inflamed over time, resulting in muscle strain, pinched nerves, herniated discs, and abnormalities to your neck's natural curvature.

Musculoskeletal issues such as back pain or numbness of the arms and feet, caused by poor posture while using a computer, are also common. And headaches and vision problems can be attributed to overuse of computers and screens. One of the IT Services Health & Safety Co-ordinators, Kevin Smith, says:

"The University of Aberdeen takes the Health, Safety and Wellbeing of its staff and students very seriously. If you have any health and safety concerns regarding the classrooms and IT equipment here please speak to your course tutors or student reps."

To help you mitigate some of the health issues that can be caused by using computers, the University has sourced a free ergonomics e-learning course from Cardinus Risk Management. This gives practical, real-world advice about how to avoid stress, strain and pain resulting from the careless use of technology.

Wellbeing apps

There are also many apps available that can increase your emotional and physical wellbeing while using technology.

Here are just a few that our in-house app experts in IT Services have tested and recommend:

f.lux
Sleep issues, vision problems, headaches

- One of the biggest contributors to modern sleep problems is the use of electronic devices at night. These emit light of a blue wavelength, which inhibits the production of melatonin and reduces both the quality and quantity of sleep. Essentially, light from a mobile device or computer trick our brains into thinking that it is daytime.

- f.lux adjusts the light emitted from your computer or device screen according to the time of day. To find out more about f.lux visit Toolkit.

Thrive
Phobias, stress, mental health

- Use Thrive apps for your phone, tablet or laptop to learn stress management and relaxation tips. Each app is tailored to a different situation, using scientifically proven methods from psychology.

- Founded by a games developer and a psychiatrist, Thrive create evidence based games such as **Feel Stress Free** and **Phobia Free**. To find out more, visit the Thrive website.

Buddhify
Stress, pain, anxiety, chaos

- Buddhify is a meditation app, helping you to build mindfulness into your daily routine. It contains over 11 hours of custom meditations to suit different activities, from taking a break at work or study, to going to sleep.

- To find out more about Buddhify, visit their website.

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[4] Washington Post (November 20, 2014) https://www.washingtonpost.com/news/morning-mix/wp/2014/11/20/text-neck-is-becoming-an-epidemic-and-could-wreck-your-spine/?utm_term=.2c3fd5b3da2f