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Discovering Sense of Community enabling factors for Public and Government Staff in Online Public Engagement

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Abstract

eParticipation has largely not lived up to expectations and government responsiveness to public feedback, provided via eParticipation has proved challenging. In a new conceptualization of the theory of *Sense of Community* (SoC), this paper explores the dynamics of online government responsiveness, using dimensions of SoC to identify how those components *enable successful interaction* from both the perspective of government staff and public users. This study reports from two case studies designed to explore these interaction dynamics in online engagement initiatives in Ireland and the UK. The findings enabled the identification of important factors which facilitate successful SoC (for online public interaction) in this domain. Participation for government staff users was particularly associated with their perception of a safe online space. For public users, openness without responsiveness to public feedback was not valued, highlighting the importance of appropriate government responsiveness. The absence of social interactivity was identified as a negative for public users while the presence of social interactivity was identified as a positive for government staff users in the second case study. Overall, this study is the first empirical step to contribute to an understanding of successful social online processes in online public engagement. It highlights the utility of examining all four subconstructs of SoC and proposes factors to assist in the identification of critical SoC components in future studies.

Keywords: eParticipation, Responsiveness, Online social interaction, Sense of Community (SoC)

1 Introduction

Some have argued that government has largely chosen to ignore the implied value system of the social web [1] consisting of openness, participation and collaboration practiced by creative commons licences and open innovation [2]. The promise of the social web has been fulfilled to some extent in the business world via ecommerce where the utility of web social elements using SoC theory has been recognised [3, 4]. Much excitement has surrounded the potential of the internet for public engagement, yet it has

largely not lived up to expectations [5, 6]. Challenges to achieving this promise come from governments' use of the internet for social interaction which has largely remained rooted in a bureaucratic and deeply formal mode. Other domains have recognised the value of web social tools [7] for interactivity, but governments have tended to pursue an unbalanced approach that favours the efficiency gains of using technology to disseminate information cheaply or to call on the public to contribute their opinion [8]. While there have been some successes [9] important barriers to government use of the social web include the worry of uncivil behaviour [10] and a lack of evidence regarding the impact of socially enabling internet technology on the success of government and public online interaction [11].

The term *Online Public Engagement* (OPE) [12] is used in this paper, as equal importance is placed on discovering elements of both staff and public participation, as 'public engagement' implies a two way interaction. This type of social interaction has proved to be challenging for many domains including eParticipation [13], Public Patient Involvement in health sciences research [14] and citizen science [15]. Common too are questions relating to the value of OPE [11] as the evaluation criteria often do not adequately accommodate understanding of the outcomes [6].

Challenges to successful OPE include a lack of understanding of the role of online interactivity in demonstrating government responsiveness to public feedback [1, 16] and the need to carefully consider the implications of the digital divide. This includes inequality of access due to cultural and material factors, the high costs of online participation for working class groups with regard to organisational resources, as well as individual differences in access, skills, empowerment and time [17].

Ireland where the study is based has been recently recognised as a leader in deliberative engagement, notably traditional citizen's assemblies [18]. Described here is the first attempt to identify *a type of online public interaction* that draws on the theory of SoC to help understand successful social online interaction between government staff and public users. Two case studies were investigated using an inductive approach to discover important components from both perspectives. This paper responds to the call for further research that goes beyond the technical challenges and examines the impact of social and physiological factors on the motivation of users of civic participation [12]. Recognising government responsiveness to public feedback as a key challenge to successful OPE, a broader conceptualisation of government responsiveness in the public sphere [16] is used. The approach taken to translate SoC theory for online public engagement is described below. The iterative data collection process of case studies referred back to SoC theory after each data gathering phase to help to identify SoC enabling factors specifically for online public engagement.

2 Sense of community for online public engagement

SoC is known as the cognitive component of social capital [19], and using all four sub-constructs of SoC facilitates a more appropriate way to examine important social processes in online engagement compared to the network based approaches of the past

[20]. Based on the foundational McMillan and Chavis framework [21]. The feeling of SoC has been defined as “a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members’ needs will be met through their commitment to be together” [21] 9). *SoC is built on interactions and this research identifies enabling factors of a SoC type of interaction for the purpose of identifying successful online public interaction.* SoC has a long empirical research history that is applicable to public engagement and has been found to strongly and positively correlate with important public values of trust and efficacy in traditional settings [22]. SoC has been found to positively influence important online behaviours such as information sharing and self-disclosure [23]. Linked to participation in social media communities [24] and in non-profit communities [25] SoC can also positively influence ‘stickiness’ (continued use, spending more time engaging with information) in eLearning [26].

The McMillan and Chavis original conceptualization of SoC in physically based communities consisted of four dimensions: *Sense of belonging*, *Shared emotional connection*, *Influence and Needs fulfilment*, and each have an important (interdependent) part to play in the theory of SoC. The concept of value that underpins SoC is a *shared value*, one that goes beyond individual value [21]. All four dimensions of SoC are introduced here to explore the utility of SoC to help understand social processes for both government staff and public participants of online public engagement.

A feeling of *Sense of belonging* is concerned with emotional safety and identification and more than the other SoC subconstructs has been identified by prior research as important to online participation in other domains; it has been used to represent the entire theory of SoC [27] and is often linked to usage or intention to use [28, 29].

In traditional communities the feeling of *Shared emotional connection* is associated with shared history, time together, contact and high-quality *interaction*; it has been identified as the subconstruct that best represents true SoC [21]. The impact of this subconstruct has not been explored adequately in online research and was not included in recent SoC research on participatory budgeting [30]. The potential of social interaction has been identified in public services in communities [31], yet little is known about the social processes involved regarding government responsiveness to public feedback.

The feeling of *Influence* refers to a bi-directional process where members are open to influence by the community and the community can influence members [21]. It is important in some influential SoC measures [32] yet it was dropped from an often-used measure of SoC online, in sense of virtual community SovC [33]. Existing indexes generally measure the SoC subconstruct Needs fulfilment in both traditional and online communities using a generic, non-specific measure of the extent that the community fulfils the individual’s needs [23]. This study employs a comprehensive measure of SoC, extending SoC theory to describe a conceptualization of shared value, where successful online public engagement needs to create shared value and fulfil user’s needs [21, 34].

SoC is conceptualized in this study uniquely as a type of *interaction suitable for government responsiveness to public feedback*. Here SoC reflects the foundational

McMillan and Chavis framework [21] [33]. Enabling further exploration of the role of social interactivity as identified in public service communities [31].

3 Methodology

Using a novel re-conceptualization of SoC for online public engagement, this is the first time the entire SoC framework [21] has been used to explore social processes in online public engagement (OPE). Drawing on the extant literature from both online and offline public participation as a theoretical lens: scoping interviews (13) observations of relevant open group email (an **Open Government Partnership** (OGP) civil society group were used (179 discussions involving 43 participants)). Two case studies then explored public and staff user's perceptions of online interaction using a SoC lens. The first was a focus group of public users of the Irish OGP Development plan eConsultation platform. Initially the focus groups were planned to take place in a hotel in Dublin and moderated by an experienced moderator, no time was found that could suit a viable number of participants. Eventually an asynchronous online text focus group was used by 9 participants. This method overcame time and distance constraints and enabled as diverse and broadly representative group (of people who had submitted to the platform) as possible to participate. Interaction guidelines were developed to moderate the focus group using group methodology [35] and data analysis was conducted using content analysis [36].

It was not possible to discover a suitable example of government online interaction in Ireland instead the Knowledge Hub UK was used. Although somewhat culturally different, historically the English and Irish bureaucratic systems are similar. The second case study included a webinar/focus group with 17 participants, a survey with 13 respondents and interviews with the fulltime manager of the online facilitators' community on **Knowledge Hub** UK. A short SoC survey was circulated to all members of the online facilitators community as part of a larger survey undertaken by the management of KHub. Questions were drawn from SCI 2 [37] and [38] brief SoC scale (offline) using a five point Likert scale. Unfortunately, there was a technical difficulty saving responses to the questionnaire and only 13 responses were saved. While this was far from ideal, the aim of this part of the research was to gain an insight into the experiences of users, therefore, the responses to the questionnaire were analysed and reviewed with the KHub Manager and then used to examine the health of the online facilitators community and identify SoC enabling factors from the perspective of government staff users.

3.1 Case Study 1: Open Government Partnership – public users' perspective

The OGP is a multi-stakeholder, trans-national collaboration initiative that began in 2011. The partnership is based on three principles of transparency, collaboration and participation and brings together government reformers and civil society leaders to create action plans. The aim is to make governments more inclusive, responsive and accountable [39]. Ireland joined in 2014 by endorsing a high-level Open Government

Declaration and undertaking to develop a country level action plan with public consultation every two years [40]. The OGP e-Consultation portal was created to facilitate public input into the second Irish OGP development plan and was open in 2016 for public participation. There were 52 submissions on the OGP development plan platform which were reviewed as part of the case study. The contact details of 33 users were openly found on the platform from the 52 submissions. An asynchronous online text focus group was used to explore the participants' experience of value in online public engagement. Nine people took part in the focus group, which overcame time and distance constraints and enabled as diverse and broadly representative group (of people who had submitted to the platform) as possible to participate. SoC theory was distilled into the three concepts shown in Fig 1 below as a more intuitive way to present to focus group members.

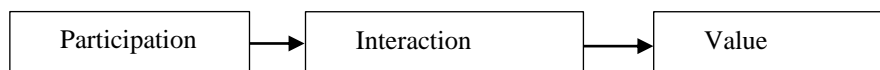


Fig. 1. The categories used to explore public users perception of value in online public engagement.

3.2 Case Study 2: Knowledge Hub – government staff users' perspective

As there was an absence of online participation perceived by government staff in case study 1, the second case study aimed to discover more about online interaction conducted by government staff. The **Knowledge Hub** (Khub) is the UK's largest public service collaboration platform (150,000 public service employees) it is an online networking platform and is free to use for public service professionals. Khub have been facilitating knowledge sharing between public service practitioners since 2006. Following an interview with the Digital Community Knowledge Manager, it was decided to discuss the utility of SoC from online communities in other domains with members. Members of the Online Facilitators Community on Khub (1,300 members) were invited to take part in a webinar/video focus group. SoC theory was discussed with reference to common community management challenges relating to participation, interaction and value with 17 members of this community. SoC subconstructs are outlined under the dashed line in Fig 2 below.

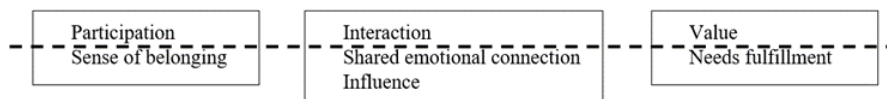


Fig. 2. Categories used to explore Staff users perception of value in an online public service community

4 Findings

Access to users was an issue in both case studies, the different approaches to the two case studies reflected the amount of access that was granted and the preferences of each group/platform management. Using SoC as a lens, each case study sought to discover users experience of participation, interaction and value. The first case study explores public user's perceptions of the value of online public engagement on the Irish OGP development plan portal with findings from the focus group. Reflecting these findings; the interviews with platform management of KHub, the webinar/ focus group and questionnaire with the online community facilitators aimed to discover the government staff perspective of online engagement.

4.1 The Irish OGP development plan portal – public users

The participants in the focus group were representative of the type of public users on the portal and contained representation from each of the five groups identified in the stakeholder analysis of the portal. OGP development plan portal users could be categorised as follows: International organisations describing the Irish based arm of international organisations whose primary concern was open government and transparency; interest groups describing sectoral and professional organisations who participated; social partnership organisations here describe unions, disability organisations and social advocacy organisations; local organisations describe those who identified themselves as from local networks (Public Participation Networks (PPN) attached to local councils); and finally, individuals (people who did not identify any affiliation). The portal enabled a diverse geographical spread of submissions which helped to enable one of the key aims of public participation: to gather a diverse range of views from as many people as possible for the development plan.

Participation

Many public users shared their identity and contact details; 33 out of 52 submissions. Respondents in the focus group mainly found the platform trustworthy and were willing to participate and share their names as shown by this quote from a participant of the focus group.

“It was pretty easy to make a submission. It felt competent and trustworthy. It was a good idea because while it had some direction there was scope for plenty of freelance input. Seeing examples helped”.

It was highlighted by focus group participants that the cost of contributing is disproportionate. For some, making submissions was part of their paid employment, for others it was voluntary. These included people from local organisations, some individuals or any group that was staffed by volunteers, this they felt should be addressed in future consultation processes.

Interaction

While the eConsultation portal had the potential to facilitate online interaction. Observation of the use of the platform confirmed that the platform was used almost exclusively for submitting contributions to the development plan replicating the traditional process. Despite the technical ability to interact informally on the platform, there was only formal statements/document drafts from government staff. A focus group participant stated

“I felt the platform had the ability to be interactive and responsive but was not used to its full potential by the participants, including myself!”

The effectiveness of the participatory process was questioned by participants of the focus group. They called for more clarity on the role of citizen input in the decision-making process regarding the proposals that were included or excluded in the draft development plan.

Value

The lack of responsiveness by government to the input of the public was highlighted as a key concern by public users. The formalised structures of responding with a draft document at the end of the consultation was not valued by the participants of the focus group. Public users were critical of the type of government responsiveness and unsure of the extent of process transparency in the development plan portal process.

“We did not consider that our opinions were well reflected in the plan...there was also no feedback that I could find on the final set of submissions”.

The focus has traditionally been on how to engage with the public or increase public participation, very little is known about the government staff perception of interactivity in online public engagement. Case study 2 described below aimed to discover important elements of online participation from the perspective of government staff.

4.2 Knowledge Hub online facilitators community – government staff users

This case study was undertaken to discover factors that influence the online participation and interaction of public users/government staff. The findings from discussions with the Community Manager and webinar participants are outlined below with reference to SoC where all four subconstructs of SoC were evident.

Participation

The online facilitators community was a restricted group, which added an increased layer of *privacy* to the group. Each user created a profile of themselves on the Khub platform, (in some communities it was necessary to be a verified public sector employee). This enabled users to join groups and connect with other people on the platform and all of their participation on the platform was identified from this profile. The majority of staff answers to the survey ‘*agreed*’ that they could trust other members and webinar/focus group participants recognised the concept sense of belonging. The Community Manager when interviewed felt that the closed nature of the community (including *verified identity*) helped to reassure users that the platform was a safe place to participate.

Interaction

In the Online Facilitators' Community two types of interactions could take place, private messaging, and open interaction. The latter was shared with email notifications from management of webinars and online events and comments in weekly updates. Most of the interactions were clustered around how to create and maintain an online group e.g., walk throughs of technical details of using the platform to facilitate a group. Much of the participation was receiving information from the expert community managers, supported by the private messaging system on the community.

Shared emotional connection was recognised by webinar participants and in the survey respondents '*agreed*' that users cared for each other. The Community Manager explained that there was a high level of support in this group. Private messaging was supported by the platform which is likely to be an important additional support as users came to this community largely to receive support, but also '*agreed*' it was important to participate.

Influence was recognised as challenging in practice, the Community Managers felt they could give more agenda setting control to members of the community in future as survey respondents felt unsure if they had influence in the community, but they mostly '*agreed*' that it was important to take all views into account when making decisions on the Khub.

Value

Along with interaction within the community, the fulltime Community Managers and other members of the community were available to provide additional support through private messaging. There was also the opportunity to network and find individuals working on similar projects or people who had similar challenges. Webinar participants and the Community Manager could recognise how the Khub fulfilled needs. Survey respondents '*agreed*' that they had needs met by participating on Khub but were unsure of the extent that Khub fulfilled their needs. They '*agreed*' that their community could make decisions together for the good of the community.

This qualitative exploratory data collection indicated that the SoC as outlined above clearly had relevance for government employees who were online community facilitators. It created a framework for discussing the quality of online interactions and helped community managers to identify areas for improvement.

5 Discussion and Conclusions

In this initial empirical exploration of SoC for online public engagement, case study 1 focus group participants, who were users of the public portal, clearly showed a commitment to the public value principle of the citizens' role as a contributor and not just the receiver of public value [41]. A key finding of case study 1 corroborates earlier research findings [8], public participants found the type of government responsiveness used (formal documents) was insufficient. These public users' expectations of responsiveness were closer to a broader conceptualisation of responsiveness [16]. The absence of government responsiveness (timely online interaction) more usually associated with

social web interaction values [1] had a significantly negative affect on the participants' experience of value in online public engagement. The second case study extends the knowledge of conditions of online participation for government staff users, showing that the provision of a safe place to participate was a key element that enabled their participation and interaction online. Important too was the provision of timely and appropriate supports to facilitate that participation. Case study 2 shows the importance of providing a safe, supportive space to participate that fulfils the needs of users. The findings give an indication of the elements of SoC that are important for public and government staff users as shown in Table 1 below.

Table 1. Evidence of SoC in the case studies

Behaviour	Indication of Sense of community
<i>OGP Ireland (Public)</i>	<i>Sense of belonging</i>
Some identity sharing and information sharing.	Some evidence of identity sharing.
<i>Khub (Gov Staff)</i>	
Restricted groups, Verified ID, visible participation	Users highlighted the importance of feelings of safety on the platform.
<i>OGP Ireland</i>	<i>Influence</i>
Interaction possible but not displayed.	Only formal replies given by government, public influence not highlighted.
<i>Khub</i>	
Knowledge Exchange	Shared agenda setting identified as challenging, but important.
<i>OGP Ireland</i>	<i>Shared emotional connection</i>
No social interaction.	No feelings of this type identified
<i>Khub</i>	
Direct messaging/ Manager support	Feelings of support/care experienced.
<i>OGP Ireland</i>	<i>Needs fulfilment</i>
Lack of responsiveness affected benefit	Openness, low cost of participation.
<i>Khub</i>	
Webinars and online events and the availability of peer support.	Knowledge exchange, learning, social interaction.

The following limitations to the study have been identified, it would have been preferable to conduct both case studies in one country only, but the special relationship and bureaucratic similarities in both countries helped to ameliorate this. It also would have been good to have more public users take part in the focus groups, but care was taken that participants were representative of the types of stakeholders on the eConsultation platform. As an outsider to government, it was also difficult to gain access to their perspective, the focus group/webinar and interviews with the community manager helped to bridge the gaps in understanding from the small number of survey replies.

Until now social dimensions of online public engagement have received little attention [42], here new evidence and appropriate theory to support further examination of the importance of the social dimensions of online public engagement is described. Highlighting the separate challenges for both public and government staff users of online public engagement platforms. The paper builds on observations, interviews and case studies using the SoC lens to identify a type of online *interaction* for online public engagement. SoC is a highly desirable element for online engagement [24] and the SoC enabling factors described in Table 2 below can assist the identification of SoC in online public engagement for similar research endeavours.

Table 2. Enabling Sense of community factors for online public engagement

SoC	SoC enabling factors
Participation <i>Sense of belonging</i>	Moderation, Identity sharing/ Verified identity
Interaction <i>Shared emotional connection</i>	Social interactivity, Support
<i>Influence</i>	Bi-directional influence
Value <i>Needs fulfilment</i>	Responsiveness, Learning, Peer support

The factors identified in Table 2 above were used to enable the next stage of this research to select a platform for qualitative and quantitative analysis of this conceptualisation of SoC interaction, confirming the effectiveness of these factors to indicate the presence of SoC in successful online public engagement.

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