

# Student User-Generated Content as a Communicative Success Factor for Universities— First Interim Results

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## Abstract

A research project for digital networking among students was launched at the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein, Tyrol at the beginning of 2021. Students are spending less and less time on site at the university campus due to the Covid-19 pandemic and advancing digitalization. The desire for shared digital communication platforms is growing. Interaction in online communities also brings some positive effects, such as a sense of membership, identity, belonging, and bonding, which is collectively referred to as a "sense of virtual community." The theoretical basis of this paper is provided by the Fogg Behavior Model in combination with network effect theory, Heckhausen's motivation model, and the Social Capital Theory, with the help of which the motivation and ability to participate in student online communities are analyzed. Subsequently, a quantitative survey was conducted among students of the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein, Tyrol. This resulted in the cornerstones and requirements for a new digital networking platform. The survey also elicited topics that should find their way onto the platform. Taking all requirements into account, the research team chose MSYammer as social networking tool. This paper gives a first interim report on the genesis and initialization of this platform. The project will end at the end of 2022.

**Keywords:** Online-Communities, Community Building, MS Yammer, participation, communication platform

## **1. Introduction**

### **1.1 Initial Situation**

In Austria, many higher education institutions already offer their students comprehensive networking opportunities, either directly initiated by the students or by the educational institutions themselves. At the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol, there are also networking opportunities for students in the form of physical courses and events organised by the university itself or the Austrian National Union of Students, but there is no common digital platform that enables an exchange outside of physical events. The desire for such a digital exchange platform among students has been expressed again and again in personal conversations in recent years, which is why this project was launched. Based on a scientific process, a digital student networking opportunity is to be created and filled with life.

### **1.2 Relevance of the topic and current reference**

As students spend less time on the university campus due to both digitalisation and the Covid 19 pandemic, there is a growing need for a space where they can communicate with fellow students regardless of time and place. For this reason, digital networking opportunities are emerging at more and more universities, shifting student communities from campus to online platforms (List et al., 2015). The ongoing Corona pandemic further reinforces this development (Raaper & Brown, 2020). For this reason, it is especially necessary now to provide appropriate digital communication platforms for students. The great advantage of such online communities is that, on the one hand, knowledge can be pooled and, on the other hand, the organisational culture is strengthened (Tanasic & Casaretto, 2017). The strengthening of organisational culture is strongly linked to the concept of the "sense of virtual community", which according to Blanchard (2007) is the users' sense of membership, identity, belonging and attachment to a group that interacts mainly through electronic communication. The results of a study by Chang et al. (2016) show that this sense of community among members promotes identification with the group, a sense of belonging and engagement in the collective. At the same time, communication barriers are broken down, which helps to build relationships between members. These relationships in turn help to improve student success and reduce dropout rates (List et al., 2015).

### **1.3 Objective and research questions**

In view of the current reference and relevance due to digitalisation, the idea was conceived to create a digital place of exchange for students and to accompany this project scientifically. In order to identify the need for a student online community and relevant topics for the platform, a quantitative survey will be conducted. Based on this survey, a suitable platform for implementation will be found or created and the internal organisation and administration of the network will be strategically planned. After this a first test run of the network is planned. Focus group interviews will evaluate the first steps after 8 to 12 months. This should result in suggestions for improving the platform, the effectiveness of which will then be

tested in a second test run. Based on available user and interaction figures, progress can be measured in real time during this phase. After this second test phase, a summary of the measures will be drawn and a decision made on the further development of the platform.

This paper deals with the first phase of the project and thus aims to plan and conduct a needs assessment for a student online community. In addition, communication platforms and topic characteristics are to be evaluated. This survey will be carried out by means of an online survey at the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol.

The following research questions can be derived from the objectives:

Research question 1: What features do students expect from student online platforms at a university?

Research question 2: How can community building among students be promoted by means of digital communication platforms?

First, the characteristics and structures of online communities are analysed by means of a literature review. One element of this is the users' willingness to use them. For this purpose, a connection is drawn between student online communities and the Fogg Behaviour Model, combined with the network effect theory, Heckhausen's motivation model and the theory of social capital. Based on this, a quantitative survey is conducted among students of the FH Kufstein Tirol, in which forms of online communities are compared and possible relevant topics for students are surveyed. From the survey in combination with the theoretical discussion, implications for the implementation of the platform will be developed.

## 2. Theoretical Background

### 2.1 Building and benefits of an online community

Community building describes the development of digital groups in the online world. In order to bind a group of users to each other and to the network, a suitable concept or building strategy is needed. User loyalty can be achieved through content, common goals or incentives, among other things. The success of a community stands and falls with its relevance for the members and also with factors such as the participation, interaction and content contributions of the users (Tanasic & Casaretto, 2017).

The steadily decreasing presence of students on university campuses is leading to an increasing interest in online communities as a place to network (List et al., 2015). At the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol, for example, 30% of part-time studies have been covered by e-learning courses for several years. From March 2020 to July 2021, apart from a brief interruption in autumn 2021, almost all courses took place online due to the Covid-19 pandemic. Due to this change, stable structures such as the FH campus with shared

facilities or regular face-to-face events were missing. These were replaced by less familiar instruments, by online tools (Raaper & Brown, 2020).

This makes it all the more important to provide networking opportunities in this digital environment, because digital platforms are used by students both to make friends with other users and to maintain existing acquaintances, as well as to find out about the latest social activities in the network (Thomas et al., 2017). Studies have shown that this form of networking increases students' psychological well-being and self-esteem (Buckley, 2011), which also increases their motivation to actively engage in their studies and invest time (List et al., 2015). The positive relationship between continuous study group membership and academic success (Bradshaw & Hendry, 2006), reinforces the assumption that academic success is positively influenced by friendships formed or maintained in online communities (List et al., 2015). Especially when students study in an online environment such as distance learning or e-learning, interaction in online communities helps them feel less isolated, which is a contributory criterion for academic success (McInnerney & Roberts, 2004).

In addition, the activity in social networks and online communities significantly promotes the identity formation of students. By sharing photos and status updates or liking certain postings, young people engage in a kind of self-expression and relationship-building, which can help to bind community members together (Thomas et al., 2017). Especially for first-year students, an online community encourages them to build new relationships and to immerse themselves in a sense of community (DeAndrea et al., 2012).

An online community can be useful according to social capital theory too. Students benefit from this social capital by strengthening loyalty and a sense of group among students. But the university also draws positive effects from it. For example, the value of the university brand can be increased (Pleil & Bastian, 2012). Another advantage for the university comes from the phenomenon of affect generalisation, which describes the transfer of an affect from one object to a related object (Cooper, 1981). In the case of organisations, affective commitment and feelings of sympathy that exist with a work group or interest group can generalise to the organisation as a whole and vice versa (Ren et al., 2012). Thus, if the connections among students in an online community strengthen, this can also strengthen the bond of students to the university and subsequently the corporate identity of the organisation (Drezner & Pizmony-Levy, 2020).

## 2.2 User activation

In order to analyse the behaviour of students regarding the use of online communities, the Fogg Behaviour Model (FBM) is used as an overarching structure in the following. This model describes that three elements - motivation, ability and prompts - must come together to trigger a desired behaviour (Fogg, 2009). The model is thus intended to provide a basis for the implementation of "persuasive design", i.e. the design of technologies that induce people to perform a certain action (Fogg, 2002). The x-axis of the FBM maps the capabilities from

"difficult to do" on the left to "easy to do" on the right. The y-axis maps motivation from low to high. Prompts are a kind of igniter that can eventually bring people to implement and thereby increase motivation or increase skills. In order to consciously control the three dimensions of the model when building the student online community and to trigger the desired behaviour - active participation - the motivating factors for use are identified, possibilities to design the platform in a simple and intuitive way are analysed, and prompts are weighed up accordingly.

The following theories will be used to analyse how the three dimensions of the Fogg Behaviour Model can be controlled and thus positively influence community building.

### **2.3 Motivation**

There are numerous scientific theories and studies on the subject of motivation. The following section focuses mainly on the approaches of Rheinberg, Fogg and Heckhausen.

#### **2.3.1 Motivation according to Fogg**

In order to design processes in such a way that the motivation of the participants is increased, Fogg describes three motivators in his model, each of which can have a positive or negative characteristic. These include pleasure/pain, hope/fear and social acceptance/rejection. If pleasure or pain is the motivator for a behaviour, the behaviour arises immediately because these two feelings are very strong motivators to do something. With hope and fear, on the other hand, there is an expectation of the outcome occurring. People hope for a good outcome of an event or fear a bad one. The third motivator, which has a significant impact on people's social behaviour, has 2 characteristics: social acceptance and social rejection. This motivator influences social behaviour, such as clothing style or choice of words, as people try to avoid rejection with their behaviour. Behaviour in social networks and online communities is particularly strongly influenced by this motivator, as many users' behaviour is based on gaining social acceptance (Fogg, 2009).

#### **2.3.2 Motivation for participating in student online communities**

According to a common definition of motivation by Rheinberg (2008), motivation is the "activating orientation of the momentary execution of life towards a positively valued goal state or the avoidance of a negatively valued state" (p. 17). This motivation is shaped by motives that are anchored in the person and incentive elements that arise from the situation (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). The motivation to participate in an online community is therefore made up of 2 main components: On the one hand, the concrete goals of action that arise in the participants themselves and give the behaviour of individuals and groups a common direction, and on the other hand, the situational incentives that the online community provides. Incentives are further divided into intrinsic incentives, which stem from the situation itself or the result of the action, and extrinsic incentives, which lie outside the actual action and relate to the consequence of it (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). Examples of intrinsic incentives are interesting content or recognition from other users for a

high-quality contribution. Extrinsic incentives, on the other hand, include money, the rewards of a competition or the awarding of test products (Schaffner et al., 2016). If the incentives created in the community finally meet the appropriate motivational characteristics, motivation is created, which is expressed in active participation by the members (Heckhausen & Heckhausen, 2018). It is therefore important to find out in advance which motives for use are anchored in the potential participants in order to create suitable incentives in the online community.

### **2.3.3 Sense of community and social capital**

Another construct that contributes significantly to the motivation of users is the virtual sense of community, which is an essential characteristic of groups from the online world (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). According to Blanchard (2007), this sense of virtual community is the user's sense of membership, identity, belonging and attachment to a group that interacts primarily through electronic communication (Blanchard, 2007). With a higher sense of virtual community, participants tend to feel a stronger sense of belonging and emotional support and tend to be more willing to contribute knowledge to the community. Consequently, individuals with a strong sense of community have a higher level of motivation and strive to become a valuable part of the community (Chang et al., 2016). As a conclusion, it can be assumed that the promotion of a sense of community motivates members and, as a result, new users can be activated.

A similar approach, which is also relevant when considering online communities and the motivation to participate in them, is the concept of social capital. This assumes that people gain shared resources through interactions in social networks (Austin, 2005; Townley et al., 2011). The principle follows two forms: bridging and bonding. Bonding is mainly about building emotional bonds, which are supported by participation in the online community or joining various groups. Bridging, on the other hand, does not involve the bonds within groups, but the relations and mobility between different groups. Through these behaviours, personal and collective goals are sought and realised in online communities (Townley et al., 2011).

### **2.3.4 Network effects - increase in benefits and growth of online communities**

The network effect theory according to M. L. Katz & Shapiro (1986) establishes a connection between the number of participants in a platform and the motivation to participate. This states that the number of participants directly influences the benefits of the network for its members. In relation to online communities, one can deduce that the more members contribute to a community, the more useful it becomes. Conversely, the more useful content is available, the more users are motivated to be active in the network. As more content is created and more people become active in the network, the motivation to join the network also increases (Cheng & Vassileva, 2005; Katz & Shapiro, 1986).

In order to achieve a continuous increase in benefits and consequently an expansion of the number of participants, the so-called critical mass of participants must be reached. The critical mass is the value at which a positive network effect occurs and the number of participants no longer increases linearly but exponentially. This can be achieved by offering contributions with a high benefit for the members right from the start (Kraut et al., 2011).

### 2.3.5 Simplicity of use

One of the three factors that influence motivation and affect behaviour is according to Fogg ability. Ability helps to simplify a behaviour and thus activate users. Fogg defines 6 components whose presence or absence contributes to the simplicity of a task: time, money, physical effort, mental effort, social misbehaviour and routine. These items, in the right composition, simplify a task. For example, Fogg describes it this way: If a behaviour requires money or time, but these components are not available, the target behaviour is no longer simple; but for someone who has sufficient money and time, it is. By identifying which resources are available to the target group and which are in short supply, barriers to use can be removed and the activity made easier (Fogg, 2009).

Especially in online communities, simplicity plays a major role in the technical operation of an application (Tanasic & Casaretto, 2017). Thus the familiarity of the users with the respective digital technologies has a great influence on the simplicity of the platform. A survey by Statistik Austria (2020a) shows that 94% of students in Austria can be described as digital natives. The term digital natives is used for people who were born after 1980 and have lived in an environment with digital media and online channels since childhood (Statistik Austria, 2020a). The average age at first enrolment in Austria is 22.3 years (Federal Ministry of Education, Science and Research, 2020). In comparison, the average age of students at the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol was 25.1 years in 2020.. One reason for the higher age of students is that a large number of part-time degree programmes are offered, for which the average age is higher than for full-time studies. The data collected shows that the majority of students are digital natives. Since digital media have been of great importance to a large part of the students since childhood, technologies are more involved in the search for entertainment, in exchanges with like-minded people, but also in the control of emotions (Bolton et al., 2013). Digital natives are also the leading users of social media: according to Statistik Austria (2020b), about 90% of Austrians between 16 and 34 regularly use social media, whereas only 59.9% of the total population between 16 and 74 are represented in social media (Statistik Austria, 2020b).

The statistics just mentioned show that students have a certain familiarity with these technologies due to growing up with digital media, so they can use them easily and routinely, and they generally show a high willingness to use online communities. However, it should be noted that digital natives are already users of various other social networks, which could jeopardise the establishment of independent student online communities.

### 2.3.6 Behaviour needs a prompt

According to Fogg, behaviour always requires a prompt, i.e. a request to do something. Fogg divides these prompts into 3 categories: Sparks, Facilitators and Signals. A spark initiates a behaviour when motivation is lacking. Accordingly, it is important to connect the trigger with a motivating element, such as social acceptance. It is equally crucial that the trigger is played at the right moment, when the triggered person can also react. The facilitator as a prompt is used when motivation exists but the ability to perform the behaviour is lacking. An example is the linking of the social media account with the contact app of the mobile phone by means of a simple mouse click. This makes it easier for users to find friends in social media. It is also possible to set the signal trigger. This only serves as a reminder to perform the behaviour, as the motivation and ability are already there (Fogg, 2009).

Assuming that the implemented online community of the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol would have an intuitive user interface similar to social media channels the target group already uses, and the usability would generally be high, the first trigger to be set would be a Spark. The reason for this is that the simplicity is given, but the motivation of the participants is estimated to be rather low when the platform emerges, as there is still little content available and not every student is represented on the platform yet. In order to arouse motivation, content could be initiated in the form of an image campaign that increases social acceptance and shows the advantages of being part of a student community.

After the motivation has been aroused, in the second phase, a facilitator trigger could further emphasise the ease of use of a student online community and provide some assistance through videos or explanatory sheets. A signal trigger, in the form of guest contributions or mentions, could then become relevant when the online community has already become somewhat established.

## 3. Empirical research

In order to discuss the need for a student online community, the motivation to participate and various fields of interest, an online survey was conducted among the students of the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein, Tyrol.

### 3.1 Method

When selecting the method, a descriptive research design was chosen. This design allows frequencies, facts and circumstances to be collected and described (Koch et al., 2016). For the survey necessary to answer the research question, the facts, the need for a student online community, the medium to be chosen for it, as well as subject areas that serve as incentives for participation in student online communities are collected. Due to the Corona pandemic and the first lockdown, a standardised survey of individuals was chosen, which was



conducted via the online survey tool "UmfrageOnline", as no interviewer is needed here and the planned 12 questions can still be well covered.

In order to test the survey and the comprehensibility of the questionnaire a pretest was carried out. It turned out that the time allotted of 5 minutes to fill in the survey was too short. Therefore, the time was extended to 7 minutes. In addition, changes were made to the content of the questions for better understanding. The questionnaire was distributed to the students of various degree programmes. The goal was to receive 150 completed questionnaires within 10 days. Since this goal could not be achieved in the first survey period, the survey period was extended by 14 days and the target of fully completed questionnaires was reduced to at least 100 responses. This target was finally achieved. 112 response forms were generated. Of these, the questionnaire was incompletely filled out by only 6 participants.

### 3.2 Results

Around three quarters of all participants surveyed stated that they saw a need for a digital student platform for the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol. For a quarter of the respondents (24.1%) there was even a great need, almost half (49.1%) saw a medium need for a digital communication platform. 26.8 percent of the students saw little to no need. For 62.5 percent of respondents, a digital networking platform strengthens cohesion among students. 25.9 percent could not or would not assess this. 11.6 percent said that they felt a digital communication platform would not strengthen the sense of community.

When asked about the most suitable communication channel for students, over 96 percent of respondents said they preferred an exclusive communication platform. Exclusivity in this context means that only students of the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein Tyrol have access to it and that this platform is closed to external visitors. Image and video-based image boards (72% approval) and a text-based student forum (52% approval) were very popular. In contrast, more than 51% of respondents rejected an own student Facebook page, as well as hashtag sharing on Instagram (75% disapproval). LinkedIn, TikTok or Youtube were rejected as an online communication platform by over 80 percent in each case.

The most important technical requirement for the platform according to the students is the possibility to send private messages (77.1 %), followed by access that can only be used by students of the FH Kufstein Tirol (72.5 %). 67% of respondents advocate for the application also being available as an app. Equally important for students are known social media interactions, such as likes or subscriptions from people (50.5%), as well as the possibility of assigning usernames (36.7%) or active registration as an access restriction (36.7%). In contrast, 33.9 percent are in favour of the platform also being usable without active registration. Rather unimportant was the possibility to act anonymously (21.1%) or to build a network that can be used by everyone, both internally and externally (7.3%).

In terms of possible formats, the students interviewed prefer photos (92.7%), text (87.2%), video (50.5%) and audio (22%).

According to the survey, the following topics provide students with incentives to use the platform: networking and getting to know each other (78 %), exchanging information with other students about their degree programme (73.4 %), eating and drinking (65.1 %), leisure and party activities (59.6 %), sports (41.3 %) and topics about their studying location Kufstein (39.4 %). Classifieds (36.7 %) and “everything to do with living and shopping & benefits” (34.9 %) were rated as less relevant.

Finally, with regard to the topic of corporate influencers, respondents were also asked about the classification of the term influencer. More than half of the respondents (56.6%) rated this term as neutral, 30.2% of the students stated that they had negative associations with the term. Only 13.2 percent rated the term "influencer" as positive.

#### **4. Conclusion and further implications**

The results of the research show that there is a need for a student online platform at the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein, Tyrol. Research question 1 was answered by the results of the student survey. Our students prefer a platform that can be used as an app and offers exclusive access for them. The three most important topics are networking and getting to know each other (78%), exchanging information with other students about their degree programme (73.4%) and eating and drinking (65.1%). At the beginning of the project, influencers were considered as a possible option. According to the research, this plan was discarded.

Research question 2 was answered using different approaches to motivation theory. As shown, motivation and the ability to operate and use a digital platform are present. The basic requirements for the new student platform are that it is tailored to the students' needs, easy to use and that the students' motivation to use the platform is kept high by implementing the desired topic areas. As a result, there should be an added value for the participants that makes them want to be active on the platform in the long term in order to reach a critical mass of participants. According to Fogg, a signal trigger would have to be set here as an attention element.

In addition, there is a corresponding tactic of the chosen strategy. In this context, Fogg (2009) points out an important point: "(...) timing is often the missing element in behaviour change." If, according to our research, the elementary behavioural prerequisites for the use of the student platform are already given, then the right timing for the behavioural prompt is of central importance. Through the empirical results of this study, we know which topics and requirements are important for students in a digital communication platform. The next steps will be to create awareness and credibility for the new platform and ultimately acceptance. And it will also be a matter of supporting students' behaviour with the help of this platform. "If you're having to motivate people to do something, you're in a bad spot. You should instead

go back to the first step: find behaviours they want to do, and make them easy to do." (Fogg, 2019, 18)

After analysing different student community platforms and their possible implementation into our university's IT system and taking the Fogg Behaviour Model and the factors mentioned in the survey into account, Microsoft's Yammer application was selected as a suitable digital student platform tool. Yammer is an application provided by Microsoft that represents an intra-organisational exchange platform in companies. Yammer is part of the Microsoft Office365 package. This is provided to all our students automatically by the University of Applied Sciences Kufstein, Tyrol. Access is only possible via a personal identification number by the students and can therefore be used exclusively by our students. Since the platform can be used directly with the student email address and the corresponding password, it is particularly easy to use, free for the students and available for all of them. The aim of the Yammer platform is to create a space in which members of an organisation can network and interact with each other. The application can be called up with the full range of functions via the PC or is also available as an app for the smartphone with limited functions (Microsoft, 2020). Thus, Yammer already fulfils some basic needs of the students surveyed.

In order to network within an organisation, Yammer provides functions such as the creation of communities on specific topics, the possibility for feedback through surveys, responses or reactions to posts and the sharing of various file formats. It is also possible to personalise one's own feed. In addition to subscribing to groups or posts, an algorithm ensures the personalisation of the content displayed. In addition, Yammer offers typical functions from other well-known social media that are already routine for the target group, such as the use of hashtags, tagging people or the comment function. For accessible use, MS Yammer offers the voice output function or the programming of certain key combinations (Microsoft, 2020).

The next phase of the project will be to introduce MS Yammer to the student community. As already described, the launch of such a platform is a particular challenge. The goal is to fill this digital platform with life, to communicate the added value among the students and ultimately to generate a digital student community of its own.

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