Focus Groups Findings Report

The research was conducted between April and July 2022.

**Researchers:** Daniela Lobo Silva, Hussain Akhtar, Paul Nyagah, Roshaan Khan and Sophie Jones-Tinsley

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# Introduction

* Total number of Focus groups: 5
* Total number of participants: 17
* Characteristics of participants: Distance learners, mature students, commuter students and mature students who were also distance learners, placement, or commuter students.
* One focus group was conducted for the student to specialist interest group (4 participants) and the other 4 were for the student to student on courses group (13).

This report outlines primary research that was conducted at the University of Bradford in 2022. It will discuss the rationale behind why these questions were chosen and it will examine the answers to the in relation to the literature we have read on the topic and our expectations. It is therefore intended to be read alongside the guidance document which details such literature. It is important to note that at the time of conducting this research, the term digital community was used; however, afterwards the term digital circle was adopted. To avoid confusion, digital community will be used here, in keeping with the time frame.

It is important to note the limitations of this research. Due to the time of year this was conducted, we had limited access to students, and we intended to have a larger sample size than we achieved. Equally, students were busy with exams and deadlines; therefore, our intention is to conduct further research to gather a more inclusive understanding of students experiences. Nevertheless, the research provides an insight into students’ perceptions of positive digital communities and how they may impact their wellbeing.

# Combined answers from all focus groups

## Knowledge-based questions

1. **What's your understanding of the term 'digital community’?**

Based on the array of different names associated with digital communities, we wanted to ask this question to gauge people’s perceptions of what a digital community is. 11 participants answered this question due to two not answering and that this was not asked to the student to specialise interest group. The responses are detailed below.

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| **Understanding of the term 'digital community'** |
| Answers provided  | Place for people with common interests, shared goals, and similarities  | Accessible place for people to meet digitally/online to communicate  | Something that is created together to build a support system | Place for people from diverse environments to meet | Place where people feel comfortable |
| 4 | 3 | 2 | 1 | 1 |
| Number of participants  |

It is interesting to note that the most common answer of shared interests, goals and similarities was found in the literature but was not our expected answer. It was expected that participants would say digital communities are primarily used for socialising.

1. **Which of these terms would you prefer: digital community, digital circle, online community, or virtual community?**

We wanted to identify which term was preferred to inform our language used in the resources and guidance document. Interestingly, most participants (47%) opted for “online community”, arguing that it was common, easy to understand and less ambiguous or self-explanatory. This preference was explained by one participant: ‘[I prefer] online Community [because] it gives the sense of where we are, whereas digital shows it is just gadget.’’

Coming in at second place, 29% of participants opted for “digital circle” because they said it created a feeling of safety and that it sounded both equal and inclusive. One participant stated: ‘‘I prefer the term ‘digital’ because online is less personal. The term ‘circle’ shows there’s no hierarchy, so it’s more equal.’’ and another one stating that ‘‘I prefer ‘digital circle’ because it creates a feeling of safety.’’

Only 12% mentioned “digital community”, with one person saying that ‘‘digital community is a global village; people can communicate freely as we’ve experienced in Covid we only had these online platforms for business communication and interaction with families.’’

“Online community” was the most common term found in the literature, which coincides with the participants preference; however, because “digital circle” was also a preference for participants (and it was a unique term created by the student collaborators) we opted for that.

## Experience based questions

1. **Are you part of any digital communities as part of your course/programme of study and what are these?**

It was important to gauge how many participants were part of digital communities at the university to inform how useful the resources and guidance document will be. When asked if they were part of any digital communities as part of their course/programme of study, 13 people said that they belonged to at least one group. 1 participant did not answer, 1 participant said they were not a member of any group, and 2 said they belonged to digital communities for personal purposes.

The most common type of community that the participants were engaged in were either societies related to their country, sport and interestingly, mental health, or communities relating to their course or module. Regarding the latter, one participant stated the following: ‘‘I always leave the groups when the module is finished but there are no rules for this so people can stay for as long as they want.’’

The literature identified that a lack of rules for the communities was common and that it can cause issues for analytical purposes (gauging activity in the group) and for bullying and harassment, because students who have left the university can behave poorly without repercussions.

1. **What platforms are these digital communities on?**

The literature discussed the importance of using the correct platform, based on the intended audience and purpose of the community. We therefore wanted to understand which platforms were used the most so we could cater the resource accordingly.

A quarter (25%) of all participants stated WhatsApp was commonly used, due to its ease of use and popularity amongst students. Equally, 25% of all participants stated Instagram was also commonly used because of its engaging, pictorial form of communication. These findings were expected, based on the literature.

One interesting finding that was unexpected was that Facebook was deemed unsecure and unsafe and was only used by 17% of participants.

This is not in keeping with current research which suggests Facebook is a very close second to Instagram[[1]](#footnote-1). These opinions may be due to the age of participants and the age of each platform.

Microsoft Teams came in as the fourth most used due to it being the University of Bradford’s chosen academic platform. The least used platforms were Zoom, LinkedIn, Canvas (virtual learning platform), and Email; however, these are not types of digital community platforms. It is therefore notable that perceptions of what digital communities are maybe uncertain for some participants.

1. **How active is this digital group? (this includes how active you are in this group and how often the group communicate collectively)?**

This question was deemed important because we wanted to ascertain how often these communities were used. The literature suggests that for a community to succeed, regular activity is necessary.

50% of participants stated that the communities they are involved in are very active and engagement is high, yet 2 participants are not active themselves due to finding the volume of messages and information overwhelming. This was related to WhatsApp specifically. 1 participant stated that they have the group on mute most of the time and would only engage to respond to or ask questions relating to their academics. This participant explained their engagement further: ‘WhatsApp is very active because it’s instant. [Activity is] constant to the point that it must be muted at times.’’ This view was shared by other participants who only use the communities for course related queries.

1. **Who should create/lead programme based digital communities? Should it be staff, students, both or someone else?**

The literature discussed the importance of having a creator of and a moderator for digital communities in order for them to be monitored and maintained effectively. It was expected that participants would say staff should create and run the community; however, nearly half of participants (46%) stated that it should be both staff and students that lead the groups.

1 of the 8 participants clearly explained their reasoning behind their view: “the elected student representative should pay careful attention to the group, so that in case any major issues arise, he/she will report to the staff who should be overseeing the group activity”. Equally, another participant mentioned: “we have had a few issues in the WhatsApp group such as people taking other’s numbers to make phone calls or even giving death threats. The course representative is the leader of the group, but it might be good for staff to be involved to stop abuse from happening.” Safety concerns seem to be a clear reason that most participants want staff present in the community.

There was contention between the other participants with a mix of views relating to the other staff to student ratios. Interestingly, nobody agreed to the groups being led by staff only.

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| **Should students be the leaders of these groups, or should it be run by staff members?**  |
| Leader of digital community | Staff and students | Did not respond | Student groups should be run by students | Student only | Staff groups should be run by staff | Staff only |
| 8 | 4 | 2 | 2 | 1 | 0 |
| Number of participants |

1. **Whose responsibility is it to resolve/deal with issues or problems within the community?**

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| **Whose responsibility is it to resolve/deal with issues or problems within the community?** |
| Who should resolve issues | Administrators/Leaders of the group | Members of the group | University / Module coordinators | Other  | Did not answer |
| 9 | 2 | 2 | 2 | 2 |
| Number of participants |

One key theme that came through in the literature was the need for a code of conduct within the community, especially in terms of what processes there are for reporting inappropriate or harmful behaviour. We wanted to identify who the participants felt the responsibility of resolving any issues lies with.

For this question, 53% of participants agreed that the administrators/leaders of the community should be responsible for dealing with issues; thus, referring to students’ representatives or any other member who serves as a leader or administrator of the group. 1 participant emphasised this by stating: ‘‘the leader of the group should step in more and be able to resolve the issues (removing people from group)” the participant goes on to say that “we should be able to resolve issues ourselves. It doesn’t come down to the university, this should be the last resort” which perhaps shows that they view issues as inherent and only serious cases should be dealt with by the university.

For the remaining participants, there were mixed views on the topic. 12% agreed that issues should be solved by members of the group whereas 12% felt that University and module coordinators should deal with problems that emerge. The ‘‘other’’ category refers to 1 participant who considered that there should be an election to elect the responsible person for the group, and another participant who said it depends on context, as situations may vary/require different levels of authority to deal with issues.

Linking to the previous question, 46% of participants believed there should be staff and students leading the community and 53% feel the responsibility of resolving issues lies with the leader. Therefore, if there is no designated or identified leader, then it may leave the community open to challenges.

1. **What are the benefits of digital communities you have experienced?**

The findings for this question aligned directly with the literature and the themes that came through were not surprising. Below we outline what percentage of participants that intimated the following benefits based on the first-hand experiences from digital communities they were part of. Some participants gave more than one answer, so the total will exceed 100%:

* Digital communities provided an ideal medium for conveying and receiving information- **18%**
* Fostered communication with peers and course mates which promoted meaningful and helpful connections – **12%**
* Free exchange of ideas which enhanced the process of learning- **12%**
* The digital communities were platforms for creating friendships- **6%**
* Convenience- Promoted virtual collaboration of academic group tasks and meetings thus getting rid of the need to meet physically- **24%**
* Gave a sense of belonging and reassurance- **18%**
* Fostered diversity, as the platforms comprised of members from different backgrounds – **6%**
* Initiation of connections i.e., socialising, was much easier as it felt less intimidating- **12%**
* Cost effective, saved time, and did not take as much energy as going onto campus - **12%**

1. **Have you had any negative experiences or challenges whilst in these digital communities? If so, what are they?**

The findings for this question aligned directly with the literature and the themes that came through were not surprising. Below is a summative categorisation of the challenges based on the feedback gathered from the participants. Some participants gave more than one answer, so the total will exceed 100%:

* Cyber bullying- Manifested in form of verbal aggression, coercion/harassment, and threats. Unfortunately, this was attributable to insufficient/lack of monitoring mechanisms within the digital communities- **24%**
* Privacy concerns- Ease of access to private information such as telephone numbers on the group platforms was of great concern and often resulted in stalking or misdialling – **18%**
* Overwhelming- frequency and volume of messages were a nuisance. As such, it often resulted to muting the platform’s notifications- **18%**
* Inappropriate content- Intentional or accidental posting or sharing of explicit content on digital platforms consequently offending participants on the digital platforms- **12%**
* Miscommunication- Messages conveyed via the digital platforms was easily misrepresented and amounted to conflict- **12%**
* Opaqueness- Virtual interactions amounted to a significant level of opaqueness as people hid behind their screens- **12%**
* Intimidation- Sharing information or communicating via the digital platforms was intimidating to an extent, thus participants preferred to assume the role of observers on the platforms- **6%**
* Low level of personal appeal for users such distance learners who heavily/entirely relied on digital platforms- **12%**
* Addiction to technology - **12%**
1. **Are community members informed of the potential risks and challenges before joining the group?**

This question relates to question 5 and the need for formal guidance in how to behave within the community. Somewhat shockingly, all participants (100%) intimated that, potential risks and challenges were not presented before joining the digital community (for both society and course related communities).

In most instances, they learnt about them after joining the community. Moreover, it was assumed that prior to joining the digital community, members should be aware of the potential risks that the different platforms, such as WhatsApp and Instagram pose, which participants deemed unhelpful.

1. **What would you consider to be ‘good practice’ when engaging with a digital community? What behaviours are acceptable/not acceptable?**

We wanted to understand what types of behaviour participants would expect to see within a digital community so that we could inform our resource and guidance document accordingly. The key themes that came out of this discussion were:

* Mutual respect irrespective of differences- **100%**
* Professionalism- **12%**
* Group guidelines and well-defined structures- Guidelines need to be provided to participants before someone joins a particular digital community as this will inform the do’s and don’ts of the platform- **53%**
* Empathy- **24%**
* No favouritism- **12%**

# **Specialist interest group related questions**

1. **What was the motivation for you joining the digital community for the society?**

From the total of 4 participants, 50% stated their motivation for joining was having access to the information and staying up to date. While one of these two was more active on social media in comparison to the other. 25% of participants stated their motivation was to gain awareness of the societies events and the convenience of accessibility.

1. **Should the community creator provide handover notes or guidance for future community leaders, including challenges and issues that have occurred or the risks they’ve faced?**

100% of participants agreed that there should be a rule book that can be passed on from one community leader to the other. Though believing that the society’s rulebook should be handed over to the succeeding leader, one of the participants was slightly more flexible in not bounding the leader in terms of rigid guidelines. The remaining three were keener to share guidelines, rulebooks, and experiences with future community leaders.

1. **How do you create a society/activity? Is there a set of conditions that students have to follow such as expected behaviours and setting up an online community?**

When talking about rules, 75% of participants wanted to have a set of rules that each society community can draft on its own, and these should entail guidelines around decorum among the members of the group. 1 participant disagreed with this and stated that they should have more freedom to fully express themselves and the group should not have any set of rules. This was not an expected finding. In terms of how to create a society, only one member explicitly answered that question with WhatsApp as the preferred platform for doing so.

1. [Digital 2022: Global Overview Report — DataReportal – Global Digital Insights](https://datareportal.com/reports/digital-2022-global-overview-report) [↑](#footnote-ref-1)