SOCIAL MEDIA IN A DICTIONARY FORMAT: ONLINE COMMUNITY OF
eksisozluk.com

Karin Reinhard, Baden Württemberg Cooperative State University Ravensburg, Germany
reinhard@dhbw-ravensburg.de

Diren Bulut, Istanbul University School of Business, Istanbul, Turkey
dbulut@istanbul.edu.tr

ABSTRACT

Internet technologies help people to reach information easily, but the reliability of the source or the appropriateness of the website is debatable. Using virtual communities as an example, people tend to add their personal opinions and very subjective comments, based on their past experiences. However, virtual communities should not just be viewed as a source of learning or information, but also a platform for self-expressing and socializing. This paper reviews the concepts of communities and virtual communities. These concepts are further developed using the example of a virtual community from Turkey, called eksisozluk.com. The paper describes how the system at eksisozluk.com works, how people communicate, and the special aspects, which make this online dictionary a community rather than a website.

Keywords: Virtual communities, online communities, user-generated content, communities of practice, Eksisozluk, suser

INTRODUCTION

The average person in Turkey spends long hours behind the computer screen and with online-based technologies. It is not just limited to work, the average Internet usage of Turkish people between the ages of 12-34 is 50 hours per month (Turkish Institution of Statistics [TUIK]). This time is not just used for work/school. People use the Internet for many purposes from information seeking to shopping, entertainment, and socializing.

Eksisozluk.com can be defined as a virtual community, user-generated online dictionary. The slogan "sacred source of information" is quite assertive for a user-generated medium, since none of the parties are evaluated for the accuracy of their information or comment. Even the structure is based on sharing information, definitions, and personal points of view. Eksisozluk is more than an online information panel; it is a virtual community, which allows people to communicate virtually in a way that they would never share in their real life.

This paper aims to analyze and understand the factors, which make eksisozluk.com not just a "dictionary," but a virtual community. It also discusses the basic structural modeling for building such a large user-generated virtual community. Accuracy and reliability are the key

attributes when one searches for information (online or not). This paper debates if it is possible to build that trust in the context of a user-generated community platform.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Communities

The term community derives its scientific basis from the field of sociology and is usually examined comparatively with the definition of "society." Communities refer to relatively smaller, informal, more emotionally attached groups, which have a common history, rituals, and values (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001). Communities are dynamic and vital systems, which depend on interaction. Bellah (1985) defines communities as participant dominated organizations, where individuals discuss, contribute, share and make decisions. Even though communities have been examined and defined, using a variety of different examples, most studies refer to their characteristics of common consciousness (Fraering & Minor, 2006; Gusfield, 1978), self-sufficiency (Hillery, 1955), participation and integration (Selznik, 1996). The core of the community that brings people together could be an idea, a belief, a function or an activity, a person or a story (Schouten & McAlexander, 1995). The core that glues people together in a community eventually creates a culture of its own.

Community by definition includes more than one individual, and features relationships, sharing and communication. The communication style, frequency and how individuals enter and leave the community shape the structure of the community (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2006; Carlson, Suter, & Brown, 2008).

Virtual Communities

Defining communities as networks based in a geographical territory (Jones, 1997) and limiting the idea of core value by the location makes it difficult to elaborate the concept of virtual communities. Virtual communities could be defined as ; *"… a number of people who team up due to a common interest, a common problem or a common assignment and for whom the interaction is independent of space and time as well as of their actual physical location"* (Leimeister, Bantleon & Kremar, 2002, p. 3). This independency relies on the technological developments and the presence of Internet and mobile communication channels. There are examples in literature referring to such virtual communities only as a community, brand community or consumer subculture, independent from their medium. More often the focus of academic literature is on the purpose of the community itself (Cova & Pace, 2006).

Vrasidas and Veletsianos (2010), state that "interaction" is key to virtual communities and define virtual communities in the context of constructivism, cognition and communities of practice. Learning or data processing is a constructive process, which requires the cognitive involvement of a person.

Communities of Practice

Community of practice defines individuals, who are engaged in support of an aim and form a group around that aim. Communities of practices are useful for collecting and sharing knowledge and experiences within the groups, and also may attract new individuals through interaction (Daniel, Sarkar, & O'Brien, 2004). Wenger, McDermott and Snyder (2002, p. 4) state that *"Communities of Practice are groups of people who share a concern, a set of problems, or a passion about a topic, and who deepen their knowledge and expertise in this area by interacting on an ongoing basis."* While this statement refers to the continuity of the communities, it also places the emphasis on shared values (Muniz & O'Guinn, 2001).

Communication and Trust

Online communities may have different levels of usage for their participants and could be used for many purposes from searching for information to learning (Soylu, 2009), social engagement (Bateman, Gray, & Butler, 2006; Nonnecke & Preece 2003) and self-expression (Kaplan & Haenlein, 2010). Nevertheless, the core function and value of a virtual community is communication (Klang & Olsson, 1999). This inter-personal communication shapes the community structure and defines communities/virtual communities as opposed to traditional communication channels.

As with all forms of communication, there is a possibility of misunderstanding between the parties. The parties to the communication should evaluate the accuracy and their understanding of the information they receive from other users.

The trust for the information generated within the community can be built upon having experience with the community. Leimeister, Ebner, and Kremar, (2005), define two main trust building dimensions; perceived competence and perceived goodwill. Even though these concepts are discussed for the organization providing the information, in a user-generated community these dimensions could be generalized and apply also for the users.

Eksisozluk

Eksisozluk (meaning "sour dictionary") is a popular virtual community in Turkey, which provides information, a source of learning, entertainment, and socialization (Soylu, 2009). It is a user-generated content website and has a collaborative hypertext dictionary structure, which provides personal definitions from the users of the community in Turkish (Gurel & Yakın, 2007). Furthermore, eksisozluk is used as a point of reference for study concepts and dissertations, and a source of definitions (Ozipek, 2013).

There are very few studies on eksisozluk, which usually concenter around user-generated content sharing (Dogu, Ziraman, Z., & Ziraman, D. E., 2009), the learning community concept (Soylu, 2009), and the cultural perspective (Gurel, & Yakın, 2007). This paper seeks to analyze eksisozluk.com not only as a virtual community with its own culture, language, and structure, but also examine how it is evaluated to ensure the provision of real, credible, and accurate information to its users.

EKSISOZLUK

Structure

Eksisozluk was founded in 1999 by Sedat Kaplanoglu (who writes under the nickname "ssg") with the slogan "sacred source of information." The website resembles the "Everything2" website, with user-generated contributions on different subjects (Dogu et al, 2009). The structure of the website consists of different words or phrases, called "titles," under which authors form the content, chronologically by their definitions, which are called "entries." The titles are not supposed to be just a word to be defined; situations, dates, people even feelings or imaginary words are allowed to be titles.

Access and Membership at eksisozluk.com

Eksisozluk defines the community membership in different stages. The eksisozluk community uses the term "suser" (dictionary user) for all the users, but allows them to have access to different applications. As a public website, with open access to the online entries, any individual can go online, access, and read the content on eksisozluk, without requiring any membership (De Valck, 2005). This access level does not allow any reader to like or dislike the "entries." Searches can be made by title, entry, or author using the community search engine. Susers can get a better view about a specific topic or the author and check their older entries too.

Registered susers access the virtual community with a nickname and password and can evaluate any entry. Rookies are members who have submitted ten entries and are waiting for their entries to be evaluated and approved, so that they are qualified to provide content, which meets the standards of the community. Rookies are new-comers, whereas authors are experienced (in various generations) members of the community.

Eksisozluk has many applicants, who want to become an author. For a period of time the author approvals were processed in "generations," where many authors were approved on the same date. Some authors create content in order to dominate some topics, while other authors take on an observer role and contribute in a very limited way to the content. The way in which an author can choose when and how to contribute to the community is one of the keys that give liberty for the susers. There is a serious level of seniority among the susers, by the time they become authors. Older generation authors have more experience, usually more entries and a degree of reputation related to their field of interest. They share their expertise with other susers.

Anonymity and Freedom of Speech

Unlike face-to-face interactions, online communities have different levels of self-exposing, especially with virtual communities, which allow the user to remain anonymous and use nicknames instead (Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006). The anonymity factor is relevant for eksisozluk (Dogu et al, 2009); nicknames give community members a more flexible environment for engagement. People are more eager to express their thoughts without feeling social constraints, as no one knows (except the moderation) about their personal information (Dholakia,

Bagozzi, & Klein Pearo, 2004). Anonymity allows authors to declare as much as they wish to declare about themselves.

Community Control Mechanisms at eksisozluk.com

Of course there are also some rules in the virtual community. Authors are bound to the penal codes of the Turkish Republic (Dogu et al., 2009) as well as the structural definitions. Every entry requires a definition (personal or structured). Titles are not supposed to be in question form (e.g. what should I cook tonight?), or in survey style, where everyone would add an item or two but not really make a definition (e.g. the best beverage ever). Even though the unlimited content is defined by Godwin (1994) as one of the features that a good virtual community is supposed to have, titles are limited to characters. If a title is linked to a previous title, with similar content, the moderation could change the suser status back to rookies waiting for approval, delete or edit the entry.

The community control mechanisms work quite well, in addition to an additional self-audit system. Some of the experienced authors help the moderation to find entries, which are not definitions, nor designed according to the guidelines. "Moderators" evaluate the entries and make necessary warnings or changes. "Hacivats" are few in number, but evaluate the entries by Turkish grammatical structure, and help moderation with the language. There are "snitches" who inform the moderation about unqualified entries, while "praetors" evaluate the entries, which may cause legal problems for the virtual community.

The praetors have one of the most important roles within the moderation process. The community consists of very many members, who have ideological differences and sometimes very strong views about political, religious or lifestyle topics. People expressing their views about other people or ideas have offended many people within and outside the community. Some authors of the community have been sued for their views or comments (Sabah.com, 2013). Eksisozluk also sued a journalist for defamation and won the case (Marketingturkiye.com, 2013).

**Statistics Related to eksisozluk**

The general statistics of the website are provided and updated regularly. As shown in figure 1, the dominant group of susers are male and between 18-25 years old. This information is derived from self-reported data of the susers and is dependent on the honesty of such individuals. To demonstrate this aspect, it is the personal belief of the authors that there are no susers who are older than 100 years old, as has been declared.

Figure 1. Gender and Age Profile of Susers (15/11/2013)

Gender	
Male	240672
Female	97504
Not specified	8594
Age	
Under 18	7825
18-25	199741
25-30	73885
30-40	50762
40-60	9553
60-100	1523
100+	123
Not Specified	3427

The number of entries per year is also available on the website; this gives a hint at the growth of the community, especially since 2009 (Figure 2).

Figure 2. Number of entries per year (15/11/2013)
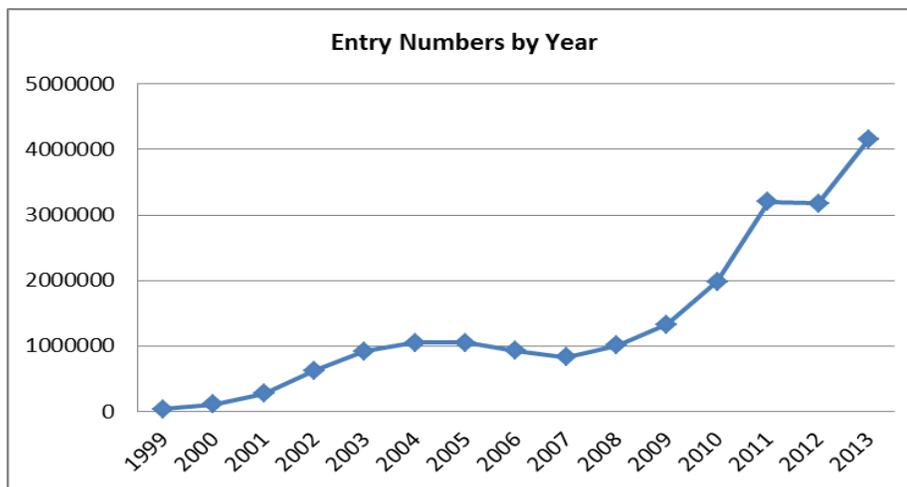
By 2013, eksisozluk's author population reached 54,575; many more are still waiting for approval (figure 3).

Figure 3. General Statistics (15/11/2013)

Total Entry	20665094
Total Title	3062778
Total "Suser"	367177
Registered Reader	70
Rookies	292194
Rookies waiting for approval	82522
Authors	54575
Entries Per Author	386
Titles per Author	57
Entries per Title	6

Content Creation at eksisozluk.com

Godwin (1994) lists nine important aspects of creating a good online community. One of these nine aspects is to use good software to promote good discussion. On eksisozluk, the most popular topics are listed on the left hand side of the screen, in chronological order and show how many entries have been added to a particular topic on a particular day. This gives susers an opportunity to catch the hot topic of the day, and also create their own specific content on the topics.

"...when I saw so many entries about him/her, I thought he/she was dead" is one of the very well-known entries about any name that becomes popular on the list. People, even if they are not very interested in that person, check the title when they realize it is a popular topic.

It is also possible to recognize the connection between some expressions or topics from an author. Some topics are full of entries from the same author. *"Recognizing lara gofret's titles from a mile"* is a very popular title. The author with the nickname "lara gofret" has 1054 entries just on his/her nickname title, and often shows disagreements and disputes about her/his views on men.

Having a well-known nickname is not always a sign of bad reputation. There are also topics attached to celebrities as well. Some people repeatedly provide quality information on certain topics that they are interested in. The author with nickname "Mr asil" has numerous entries about Japan, the Japanese, learning Japanese, a master's degree in Japan, and mistakes made while speaking Japanese.

Conflict in the eksisozluk Community

Disagreements or conflicts are not unusual. While the concept of common history and culture is key to a community (Shouten & McAlexander, 1995), the eksisozluk community has different subcultures of its own. Different authors may have clicks and supporting ideas of their

own. Topics such as religion, politics, and male-female relationships have some strong supporters on both sides.

While the conflicts provide a space for people to express their ideas, it also sometimes causes law suits, personal arguments and even provocations. The term "troll" is used for the authors, who have a contrary opinion on a sensitive subject and usually communicate their ideas with provocative language. The aim of a troll is not just to express themselves, but to disturb other people with their comments about their beliefs, a loved person, or politics. Private messaging facilities are available for authors to continue a dispute out of the public eye, although some authors prefer to express their anger publicly. Some authors step in with an entry such as, "don't feed the troll," which usually ends the accumulated entries on the topic.

Culture at eksisozluk.com

The susers of eksisozluk share a common history since 1999, and the act of accumulating entries has formed a culture over time. Every culture has different features. The culture of virtual communities tends to be defined through their language or common jargon.

Eksisozluk has developed its own abbreviations, words, and terminology over time. Authors are usually warned to avoid using curse words, as it could cause eksisozluk or the author legal problems. To overcome this issue and still manage to express themselves, authors use the expression "gg," instead of a curse word.

Even though it is an old name for females, "kezban" has a totally different meaning at eksisozluk. It expresses females (generally Turkish), who think that every male is interested in them and has, therefore, alternative motives for being around them. This female stereotype is defined as very shallow, self-absorbed and not very beautiful, even if they believe otherwise. "Kamil" represents the male version of this stereotype. Both terms are commonly used to attack other susers, although many authors feel it unfair to generalize and judge individuals in this way.

The word "Şakirt" actually means apprentice or student, but for the eksisozluk readers it represents the extremely religious Muslim authors or those who want to be seen as such. The entries and comments of a sakirt usually suggest that other people, who are not thinking or living like them, are sinners and will be punished in the afterlife. The atheists and şakirts have an ongoing dispute, which does not always stay within the lines of mutual respect. The provocation from both sides could provide the impulse for another entry-title war, and very rude personal messaging.

Socializing in the eksisozluk community

Even though some subcultures do not seem to get along well, the anonymity prevents real life chaos. People express their radical ideas about various subjects, such as politics or sexual orientation in a way that would not be possible in face-to-face interactions. Eksisozluk organizes get-together parties for authors, where no one is allowed to give their own nicknames. The so-called "eksifest" is now only held in open-air venues, as the number of authors has increased so significantly that no enclosed venue can safely host such an event. Concerts, parties, and an

environment, which allows people to come together on a face-to-face level, is the key to eksifest. By attending the eksifest, people can improve their online socialization and attain a more personal level of community bonding.

Some subcultures or groups organize their own events within the group. Football games, movie nights and fishing trips are the preferred mode of socializing for some groups. One major group in Ankara closed a premier night movie theater, to watch a follow-up movie for a loved TV show.

"Limon" (lemon) is a function of the community which helps authors to follow any event in their area of interest or location. The organizer adds the details of the get-together, and anyone who wants to participate can access the information.

Buddies are people you already know, or get to know due to their entries, who are added to a special list. When you access a quick link to your buddies, the system only lists the entries from your buddies, in the last week.

Credibility, Accuracy and Reliability of other Users

Information sources such as newspapers, books or television undergo a rigorous verification process, whereas the Internet is a free area, where an individual can write without any source, credit or proof (Flanagin & Metzger, 2000). Some websites are very careful about checking facts, such as news websites. Others ask an author to refer to the source, where he or she gathered the information. Wikipedia also warns readers when there are not enough references to back up the information (Wikipedia). Verification becomes much more complicated when the web site has user-generated content and has many users like eksisozluk.com.

The suser-generated information pool consists of millions of titles and entries and is increasing rapidly on a daily basis. There is no way for the moderation team to check the credibility of the information in all entries. It is also not possible, because the source of most of the entries is highly personal. Some would define "Madonna" as a phrase in Italian language meaning "my lady," where another would define as "my childhood love." Both are considered as definitions and it is not possible to check or discuss the accuracy of these entries.

In such cases, the reliability of the information usually lies with the reliability of the source. As Leimeister et al. (2005) stated perceived competence and perceived goodwill determine the extent to which a suser can test the reliability of the information in an entry. Some authors have a reputation for providing quality, reliable entries on specific subjects. When verifying information, susers go through many entries, sometimes with conflicting data or opinions in order to decide which entry is more reliable. The ability to access an author's other entries, could provide additional insights to the reader about the particular author's experience or view on a subject, enabling them to verify the level of trust that can be afforded.

Referencing is also a possibility. It is possible to upload a link about the topic you are writing about. A new website link, a picture, or a scientific article can be linked to an entry. It is also possible to refer an author's own entry, as well as other authors' entries. The entries have

numbers attached to a link and you can send the reader to those entries with just a click of the mouse.

In some debate topics, over a celebrity's tweet, a Facebook posting, or a YouTube video, authors usually prefer to add a screen shot, in case the tweet or the posting is removed or disabled for others to see.

Editing an entry is always a possibility. The eksisozluk.com community also developed a self-auditing system. When an author shares inaccurate information, the following entries can correct the mistake and give more detailed information. Sometimes the author is warned by personal messaging. In such cases, either the owner of the entry makes the required editing and explains why he/she wrote such an entry, or he/she tries to prove that the entry is correct by providing more detail. Sometimes the author apologizes or indicates that irony was intended in the erroneous entry.

Even with these precautions, there is still a large possibility of accessing inaccurate, unreliable or discreditable information, as with all Internet sources. One should also consider that eksisozluk has more of a microblog-structured dictionary format and is not a news website or encyclopedia. There should always be room for doubt when evaluating the entries.

CONCLUSION

Within the paper, the eksisozluk website is examined not as an online dictionary, but as a virtual community. The interaction between the community members create an environment for self-expression and socializing through entries and titles, with personal messaging and other "sub-etha" functions like "eksi-survey" or "limon."

The mode and outcome of self-expression is key on eksisozluk. Some authors create a reputation for themselves, as an expert on a specific topic or general style of writing. Other authors just share information or personal opinions/stories; some of them use eksisozluk as their unwinding platform, to communicate their anger, frustrations or disappointments. Troll authors like to provoke others, to initiate a fight, conflict or an argument.

Socializing in the virtual eksisozluk environment does not seem to be enough, for some authors. The socializing is transported to another level and the individuals meet in person and become friends; some even meet online and get married.

One of the most important aspects of eksisozluk is that people write with nicknames; as long as they are not sued, this anonymity allows them to share every critical, contentious thought, thus creating a free environment for open discussion.

Even though entries can be very subjective and personal, people still access the community for information gathering, learning and information sharing. Susers can communicate with each other to ask questions, learn and search for a better understanding on a particular topic.

It is not fair to evaluate it just as a dictionary or a website. Eksisozluk has its own culture, and provides a base for several subcultures and even replica online communities. With its own terms, language, trolls and contributions from well-known Turkish celebrities, eksisozluk is a dynamic community, which evolves with every new author, entry or title.

Having reviewed the facts, perceiving and evaluating eksisozluk.com, as a "sacred source of information" presents some difficulties. Despite the presence of moderation, esksisozluk.com still gives the majority of responsibility to its susers, to evaluate the reliability of the entries. Even though checking other entries shared by a particular author, the editing system and peer corrections, the accuracy of the entries cannot be 100 per cent guaranteed. The perceived competence and goodwill of an author can assist susers in evaluating the trustworthiness of the information more efficiently (Leimeister et al, 2005).

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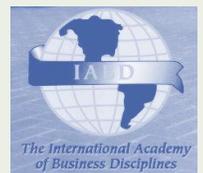
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