

Reddit study shows how growth, aging affect online communities

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Through studying groups on the website Reddit, researchers at The University of Alabama found as online groups grow and age, discussion concentrates among fewer contributors and retention of new contributors becomes harder.

"Online communities are easy enough to create, but the question is, 'Are they going to be here in six months?' For the vast majority, the answer is no," said Dr. Elliot Panek, who studies the sociological and psychological implications of digital [media](#) as a UA assistant professor of journalism and creative media.

"Our research suggests that the creators of online communities need to be more proactive in incentivizing and encouraging widespread participation to motivate [group members](#) to stick around and be more active in the conversation," he said.

In work outlined in the journal *Social Media + Society*, Panek and his team of UA students analyzed millions of comments on Reddit to understand why some online communities fail while others flourish. A popular website that hosts large-group [discussions](#) on thousands of different topics, Reddit organizes its discussions into groups, called sub-reddits.

The team examined six years of data within 30 popular sub-reddits, analyzing the influence of group size and the passage of time on the dispersion of participation in discussion and the active member turnover per month, two characteristics of online communities.

"Some people dabble in online communities just to get a question answered," Panek said. "For other people, online communities are central to their lives. What we're trying to understand is when online community life becomes central to people."

This data provides answers to fundamental questions about establishing and growing [online communities](#), as well as how to keep existing group contributors active. The findings are useful for [communication](#) professionals in areas such as social media account management, [application development](#), marketing, online education and organizational communication with the public.

More information: Elliot Panek et al. The Effects of Group Size and Time on the Formation of Online Communities: Evidence From Reddit, *Social Media + Society* (2018). [DOI: 10.1177/2056305118815908](https://doi.org/10.1177/2056305118815908)

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