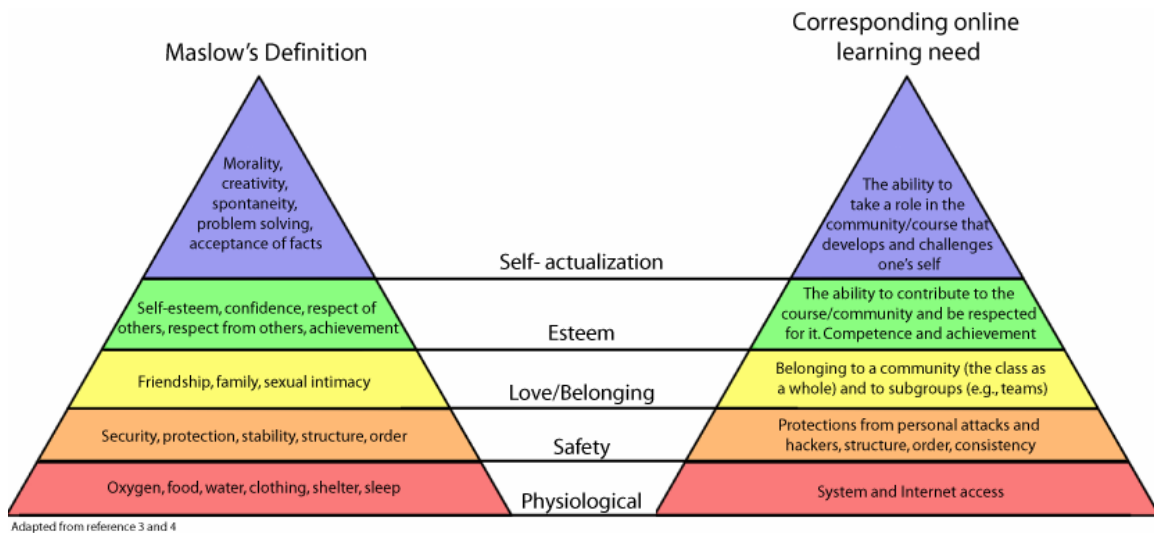


Quality of life: Can online communities satisfy Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

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*Happiness is not a station you arrive at, but a manner of traveling
(Margaret Lee Runbeck).*

Can online communities satisfy Maslow's hierarchy of needs?

Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs is a theory in psychology that was proposed by Abraham Maslow in his 1943 paper "A Theory of Human Motivation". The theory states that humans have needs that are more powerful than others, and when these basic needs are satisfied, other higher needs emerges. Maslow' means that these needs are both physiological and psychological and that they are the same in all cultures. The Hierarchy of Needs theory consists of five levels and is often visualized as a pyramid where the more basic needs is found in the base of the pyramid. The four lower levels, associated with physiological needs are named Physiological, Safety, Love/Belonging and Esteem. The top level is named self-actualization and is associated with psychological needs; see the figure for a more detailed description of the different levels. [1]

An online community is a group of people that uses the Internet to communicate. Some examples of online communities are e-mail subscription lists, message boards, chat rooms and instant messaging systems like ICQ and MSN. Computer games that can be played together with other people over the Internet are also online communities. Two types of online communities that have grown in popularity over the last years are blog services like Blogger, and social network services such as MySpace and LunarStorm.

People have always had a need to communicate with each other, to be seen and get attention. This is important parts of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs and also something that an online community can help people with. An article about how to create successful social network services, which was published in the Swedish design magazine Cap&Design, states that: *"today's online communities can satisfy the three top levels of Maslow's hierarchy of needs; self-actualization, esteem and love/belonging"*. This is because *"you can easily meet people from all around the world, people with the same interests and you can interact with them. You can be an expert on your special topic in the community and maybe become famous in your community"*. [2]

By letting the users be responsible for the content and/or the design of an online community, the three top levels of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs can be fulfilled to an even higher degree. Wikipedia is a free online encyclopedia that anyone can edit. For a user that contributes to the encyclopedia it can be a way to reach self-actualization. Flickr.com is an online community where users can share their images. Here, the users can show other people their photos and develop own functionality for their web pages. This can give the user a feeling of belonging and esteem. Many popular online games of today can also fulfill parts of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. In a game such as World of Warcraft, the user builds up the strength of a character by interacting with the virtual world and with other humans' through their characters in the world. In the popular first person shooter game Counter Strike, the users forms teams together with other players and meet other clans to compete. Online Poker is a game that can give the player both self-actualization, and be profitable and help the user to achieve basic physiological needs.

Online communities can satisfy parts of Maslow's Hierarchy of Needs. To satisfy the higher levels in the Hierarchy of Needs, an online community must first satisfy the lower levels. For example is a physical connection to the Internet needed. The design of the community must also protect the user's security so the user feels safe. Otherwise people will avoid using the system. [3]

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