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The top five reasons for lurking: improving community experiences for everyone

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Abstract

Even in busy online communities, usually only a small fraction of members post messages. Why do so many people prefer not to contribute publicly? From an online survey that generated 1,188 responses from posters and lurkers from 375 MSN bulletin board communities, 219 lurkers spoke out about their reasons for not posting. While lurkers did not participate publicly, they did seek answers to questions. However, lurkers' satisfaction with their community experience was lower than those who post. Data from 19 checkbox items and over 490 open-ended responses were analyzed. From this analysis, the main reasons why lurkers lurk were concerned with: not needing to post; needing to find out more about the group before participating; thinking that they were being helpful by not posting; not being able to make the software work (i.e., poor usability); and not liking the group dynamics or the community was a poor fit for them. Two key conclusions were drawn from this analysis. First, there are *many reasons*

why people lurk in online discussion communities. Second, and most important, *most lurkers are not selfish free-riders*. From these findings, it is clear that there are many ways to improve online community experiences for both posters and lurkers. Some solutions require improved software and better tools, but moderation and better interaction support will produce dramatic improvements.



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Keywords

Online community; Bulletin board; Posters; Lurkers; Survey; Textbox questions; Open-ended text questions; Behavior; Attitudes; Support

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