AUSTRALIAN COMMUNITY MANAGERS

MEASURING ONLINE COMMUNITY HEALTH

Your guide to understanding and measuring health in an online community

WHAT IS COMMUNITY HEALTH?

Community 'health' is like our own personal health.

It's a state of being, at any given moment, that indicates if things are working as they should be within the community, if the community as a whole is fulfilling its potential, and if there are risks or issues that might pose obstacles to that potential.

You can think of community health as an answer to the question: "How thriving are we?"

Just as we want to do more than simply 'be alive' as humans, we want our community to do more than just exist. We want it survive and be all it can be for its stakeholders over time.

Health is different from success and success metrics. Communities can meet specific goals successfully, but not deliver a healthy experience for members. However, communities with good health are more likely to succeed in their objectives.

Community health is dynamic. It can go up and down and will impacted by various factors, including community management.

This guide offers an overview of what community health is, why it matters, how to measure it and how to interpret those metrics.

WHY HEALTH MATTERS

Healthy communities have many benefits for participants and hosts or facilitators. They include:

- Improved user experience/satisfaction (people get more out of the experience and feel better about it)
- Improved community effectiveness (better at getting the core "business" of the community done)
- Increased community resilience (better equipped to handle change or crises)
- Increased community longevity (more sustained benefits and outcomes over time)

Measuring health is a diagnostic tool to give us deeper understanding of where the community is flourishing and where there is room for improvement. The status of our community health informs both strategic plans and community management tactics.

Examining health across functional, social and cultural indicators helps us get a holistic picture of a community. It means we don't chase 'engagement for engagement sake' and can focus on enabling relevant and high-value content, activities, experiences and relationships for participants.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY (SOC)

A Sense of Community (SoC) is central to our understanding of whether a community is healthy.

The SoC Index (sometimes called SCI) is an instrument created by sociologists David. W. McMillan and David. M. Chavis, and is considered the standard bearer globally across psychology and social science for identifying and measuring whether a SoC is present amongst members. Originally (and still) applied to offline communities, it is equally applied to online communities seeking to create an authentic community experience for members and participants.

McMillan and Chavis define a Sense of Community as "a feeling that members have of belonging, a feeling that members matter to one another and to the group, and a shared faith that members' needs will be met through their commitment to be together" (1986).

It consists of four, measurable elements:

MEMBERSHIP

The presence of boundaries, psychological and emotional safety, a sense of belonging and identification, personal investment, a common symbol system (i.e. culture)

NEEDS FULFILMENT

Member needs are integrated into the purpose of the community, and are met and rewarded by participation

INFLUENCE

Members believe they have influence in the group, and the group can influence members. Together, the group can have collective influence.

SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Members have mutual concern, shared history and shared participation. They engage in 'small moments' of disclosure with one another over time.

The SoC Index, in the form of a quantitative survey, measures these four elements to understand how your community is experienced and perceived by members and revealing key aspects of its social and cultural health.

It is then combined with Activity measures to get an overall picture.

Mcmillan, David & Chavis, David. (1986). Sense of Community: A Definition and Theory. Journal of Community Psychology. 14. 6-23. 10.1002/1520-6629(198601)14:13.0.CO;2-I.

SENSE OF COMMUNITY

Let's break these four elements down further.

It's helpful to frame each element as a statement about the community experience.

For example, the different factors within Membership can be summed up as "I'm a part of this place" (even if that 'place' sits across multiple platforms).

Membership
I'm a part of this place

Group identity & belonging
Psychological & emotional safety
Shared symbol systems (values, language, norms)
Meaningful boundaries

Needs fulfilment
My needs are met by participating

Intrinsic needs (e.g. emotional, social)
Extrinsic (e.g. informational, transactional)

Influence
My voice matters

Agency and autonomy
Ways to have impact
(individually & together)

Shared emotional connection
They get me here

Trust & disclosure
Mutual understanding & concern
Shared story & history

SCI SURVEY TEMPLATE

Here is a general Sense of Community Index survey template you can use as for your community. Adjust questions to suit community purpose - for example, in the statement about meeting needs, call out specific needs your members have. Always include at least one question for each SoC element.

Have members choose their preferred response on a Likert scale like the following, where each response is assigned a number score:

Agree – 4 / Somewhat agree – 3 / Somewhat disagree – 2 / Disagree – 1

Question/Statement	SoC Element
I feel comfortable being myself in this community	Membership
I understand and share the values of this community	Membership
My needs are addressed by the purpose of this community	Needs fulfilment
I have needs of mine met by participation in this community	Needs fulfilment
My voice/participation matters in this community	Influence
Together we get things done here	Influence
I care about members of this community	Shared emotional connection
Members of this community care about one another	Shared emotional connection

Tally responses for a score out of 4 for each question and element. Aggregate the scores for each element to get scores for each overall - e.g. 2/4 for Influence. Tally all scores against the total possible score for all questions asked (e.g. 8 qus = score out of 32. 10 qus = score out of 40).

You can then filter these results against other data points, such as your membership types (e.g. Veteran members report a stronger SoC, Premium members report more influence, etc.)

HOW TO INTERPRET YOUR SOC INDEX

You've run your SoC Index survey and have some results. What next?

Look at your final scores. How did you do?

If you are using the suggested Likert scale and scoring out of 4, you can adopt this assessment criteria.

0-1 out of 4
Weak Health

There is clear and urgent work to be done to move this number upwards and improve member experience and sentiment. Your community may not be effective or sustainable, and may be vulnerable to social and cultural risks.

1-2 out of 4
Fair Health

There is clear work to be done to improve health, but there are some positive signs registering. Work on increasing these systematically.

2-3 out of 4
Good Health

There are clear positive signs across indicators but there is still risk present. Address elements and areas where scores and lower and improve systematically.

3-4 out of 4
Strong Health

Members self-report a clear and strong Sense of Community. Work on sustaining this on balance over time, and addressing minor deficits.
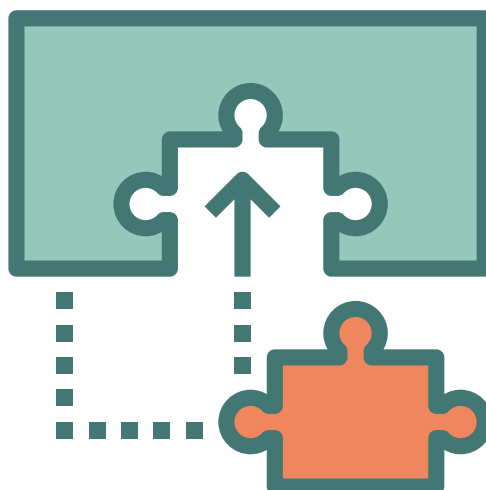
HOW TO INTERPRET YOUR SOC INDEX

If you've scored well (between 3-4) on specific elements, keep doing what you're doing! Try new tactics to see if you can improve even more.

If you've scored between 0-3 on an element, you'll need to examine why and decide how to address the gap.

Below is some guidance around interpreting and addressing low scores in each element.

MEMBERSHIP

Does your community have a clear group identity and boundaries that define what membership means? Look for ways to explore and codify this with members. This can be an opportunity for fun and creativity. Do people feel safe and welcome? How can you improve cultural protection? Examine member journeys from onboarding onwards to identify touch points where members can better understand, identify with and express their membership.

NEEDS FULFILMENT

Are you clearly communicating your community purpose? Are the relationships, content and experiences within your community delivering on that promise? Ensure you adequately understand your member needs (intrinsic and extrinsic) and look for more ways to meet these through community activities and experiences.

INFLUENCE

Create more mechanisms for members to individually and collectively influence community life. This could look like co-designing a community constitution encapsulating shared values, or a content project leaders within the community collaborate on. Ensure members can actively maintain the culture and boundaries of the community (can they reward each other and report issues?). Make sure the influence offerd is genuine and not performative (i.e. asking for feedback that's never responded to or actioned).

SHARED EMOTIONAL CONNECTION

Members may not feel like they have opportunities to get to know one another and build peer-to-peer relationships. Create more opportunities (via community management techniques such as rituals and shared experiences) for members to disclose aspects of themselves and bond. Celebrations and victories, losses and mournings, sharing worst fears and biggest hopes; these can all deepen shared emotional connection.

ACTIVITY MEASURES

Activity measures address the core "business" of your community, answering the question - what happens here. They are an important functional aspect of health, telling you if the community is doing what it's supposed to.

Activity metrics concerned with health are usually drawn from the below list:

- New visitors or new members joining (not relevant for capped or intentionally small communities)
- Conversion of new visitors to new registered members
- Churn (number of members leaving or lapsing into inactivity)
- Visits per active member per month (traffic/repeat visits)
- Members active within the past 30 days (you need to determine what Active is for your community relative to your user personas and habits)
- Number of posts contributed (overall, per unique user)
- Discussion depth ratios (how replies does a post get)
- Posting distribution/social density (how many unique users are participating in discussions)
- Rate of responsiveness (how quickly users get a reply from another user)
- Questions asked, Questions answered (any gap between the two)
- Member content generated (overall, per unique user)
- Connections made (users following each other)
- Content progress/level acquired (in a community of learning or practice where members move through programmatic content)
- Usefulness of content (page views and/or rating of usefulness via voting or polling)
- Number of likes/shares (among the least relevant in community, but may signal content usefulness)

Consider any 'pre-existing conditions' impact these measures to contextualise them. For example, if members are going through a hard time, patterns may change - engagement may drop or increase. Look for trends over time that are statistically significant.

Creating a community health report that includes functional (Activity), social and cultural (SoC) features is the most reliable way to gauge true health and identify issues.

WHEN TO MEASURE HEALTH

Health measures and analytics are most valuable when they are conducted regularly and can serve as benchmarking for community professionals and organisations.

Annual community health checks are better than none at all, however a year is a veritable eon in internet time, and the life of an online community. If issues or risks are captured, it's often to too late to intervene, minimise damage or course correct.

Activity Metrics - Monthly
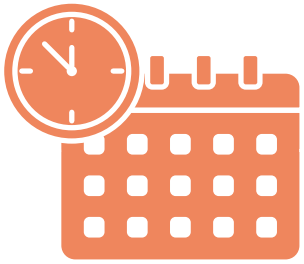
Activity health metrics should be measured most frequently. These will often form a part of monthly, or sometimes even weekly dashboards.

If you have the operational capacity you might like to measure these weekly or even daily. Take care you don't get bogged down in changes moment-to-moment. You're looking for statistically significant trends over time you can investigate and act upon.

Sense of Community Index (SCI) - 2-4 times a year

Sense of Community Index surveys that measure the social and cultural experience of community by your members can be run less regularly, ideally between 2 to 4 times a year (depending on the length of survey and how busy or distracted users or members may be).

The longer and more detailed your survey, the less frequently you should run it, to minimise survey fatigue amongst participants. a shorter survey could be run 4 times a year with minimal bother.

High-level insights from your SoC Index can be added to seasonal or annual reporting that speaks to the overall effectiveness and sustainability of the community. As with other metrics, they can be utilised to demonstrate how specific community management programs or tactics are working, and to build a case for particular support or investment.

Benchmarking

Benchmarking health over time helps you calibrate norms for each key indicator, so you can clearly spot improvements or issues. If you only measure in an ad hoc fashion, you may miss critical opportunities to correct issues, or opportunities you could have leveraged.

OTHER MEASURES

In addition to the measures outlined so far, you can also look to the following for deeper understanding of community health. Each correlates with one or more SoC elements.

Look for your own functional, social and cultural cues that reliably offer insight into community cohesion and sustainability, then add these to your own health dashboard.

Measure	What is it?	SoC Element
Self-disclosure	Are members engaging in self-disclosure in their community contributions, including content that may make them vulnerable?	Membership & Shared emotional connection
Self-governance	Are members proactively conducting boundary maintenance, and reporting issues?	Membership
Referrals	Are members advocating for the community externally and referring others to join?	All
Moderation issues	How many moderation issues are occurring within the community regularly? How distributed are they? This is often captured in a moderation report.	Membership (do members feel safe) Influence (do members feel they can affect the culture)

REMEMBER: HEALTH IS CONTEXTUAL

Consider your unique context when determining the healthy baseline for your online community. What is 'thriving' for your people and your purpose?

Though the measures and insights in this guide are reliable indicators of community health, it's important to remember that community health is always contextual.

In a community of practice for busy professionals, three posts a month and attendance at a community event might be considered strong commitment. In a buzzing gaming community, these same measures might be seen as unsatisfactory.

If you are building a community for a group of people who have challenges opening up to others, social and cultural health indicators like trust and belonging will likely take longer to mature than more functional health indicators, such as responsiveness, questions answered, or needs fulfillment.

Belonging and trust may be less important for your community overall than more functional health measures. It all depends on the purpose of your community for your members and your organisation.

You should curate your unique health reporting that selects the most revelant activity metrics for your community, and solicits responses to SoC statements that resonate for your purpose and members.

Regardless, research demonstrates that stronger experiential community health, such as Sense of Community indicators, more commonly leads to communities that are effective and sustainable. Think of community experience as an analogue for customer experience, if that's a more familiar frame of reference.

For more resources on community health, measurement and online community practice, visit australiancommunitymanagers.com.au