

# Why do you want to be a member of this online community? – Reasons for joining an e-mentoring community.

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**Abstract.** For the purpose of getting more females engaged in science, technology, engineering, and mathematics (STEM), we set up an online community that brings together female high school students and women engaged in STEM. The main foci of this online community are (1) e-mentoring between women and girls who are interested in STEM and (2) exchanging with other members within a web based community platform. As in traditional mentoring programs, e-mentoring needs people who offer to mentor or want to be mentored. Participants must invest time and effort into building a relationship to a person, they have not known before. Here, we ask why people do this. We look at reasons for women to get voluntarily engaged in an e-mentoring program as well as at reasons for girls (mentees) to get involved in an e-mentoring community.

## Background

While research about online communities (OCs) covers a lot of areas (e.g. benefits from participation (Barak & Dolev-Cohen, 2006), importance of active involvement (McKenna & Bargh, 1998; Schimke, Stoeger, & Ziegler, 2009)), not much is known about reasons for joining an OC. Ridings & Gefen (2004) found that information exchange is the most important reason for joining OCs; reasons depend furthermore on the background of the OC: e.g. obtaining or giving career/social support is more important in OCs with professional topics, while friendship is more important in OCs dealing with personal interests.

Leitner, Wolkerstorfer, and Tscheligi (2008) conducted semi-structured interviews in order to answer the question “why” people join OCs. For their study they interviewed 21 OC participants and identified three thematic pillars of OCs: (1) The communication chain: People want to be informed and to communicate upon certain topics, (2) The self-reflective chain: People want to learn from other people for self-reflecting reasons, (3) The friendship chain: People want to overcome certain space limitations to maintain and strengthen relationships.

## Study, results, and prospects

We asked 246 girls and 211 women who applied for the CyberMentor community (OC for girls and women who are interested in Science, Technology, Engineering, and Mathematics) for reasons why they would like to participate. A quantitative content analysis showed that for mentors the main reasons were passing on experience and encouragement of young women. Girls mostly named learning about study courses/professions and getting more information about STEM topics as reasons for joining the e-mentoring community.

Applying Leitner et al.'s three thematic pillars to the categories we conveyed from our data, we found that they were fairly applicable for the girls. The mentor's reasons did not fit so well in their categories. This might be due to the different roles mentors and mentees have in mentoring settings. Mentors mostly pass on information and experiences while mentees are usually receivers and learners. For girls the self-reflective (44%) and the communication chain (32%) are the most important aspects, followed by friendship (15%) and other reasons (9%). The mentees want to learn from others and get information about topics they are interested in. For the mentors the communication chain (37%) and other reasons not applicable to the three pillars (35%) are mostly important for joining the OC, followed by the self-reflective chain (27%) and friendship (1%).

Summarizing our findings we can say that the three thematic pillars of OCs defined by Leitner et al. (2008) fit well for the girls who are participating in the CyberMentor community. For the mentors though – who are rather 'givers' than 'receivers' – other reasons seem to be important. Thus specific roles of online community members can evoke different motivations for joining an OC. Future research might be able to answer open questions concerning links between such roles and reasons for joining an online community.

## References

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