

## **DIGITISING EARLY CHILDHOOD INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE 2017**

ABSTRACT 350 WORDS

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### **EARLY CHILDHOOD WORKFORCE ENGAGEMENT WITH AN ONLINE, COMMUNITY-OF-PRACTICE TO SUPPORT HEALTHY EATING ENVIRONMENTS**

Early childhood education and care (ECEC) settings offer an important environment where children's food preferences and habits can be positively influenced to enhance future health and wellbeing. In particular, nutrition-oriented online communities-of-practice (oCoP) can offer support and information required by the ECEC workforce to provide healthy eating environments in this setting.

Supporting Nutrition for Australian Childcare (SNAC) is a nutrition-education website developed specifically for the ECEC workforce, where the online community-of-practice was fostered. A qualitative, netnographic, analysis of the SNAC community was conducted longitudinally over a 12-month period. Data was collected from interviews (n=42), observational and website data, including discussion-board threads and web-analytics.

One-year post-launch, there were 1045 SNAC members; 1.5% were regular contributors, 7.5% intermittent contributors, 80% peripheral participants (those who read posts without contributing material), and 11% not returning to the SNAC website after initial registration. Although, this 'participation inequality' is typical of most online communities (Nielson, 2006), for an emerging oCoP such as SNAC, it is often frustrating for active members and moderators who invest time and energy encouraging active participation.

It was encouraging, however, that while most members were inactive 'peripheral' participants, they still reported satisfaction with the 'vicarious support' received through reading food and nutrition-related online discussions. Although these participants avoided posting their own stories for fear of criticism, they were encouraged by stories shared by active members. In this way, the 'write-once read-many' concept, coined by technology experts, provides a continuous conduit of support: where stories which have been posted (*once*) by few active members, are read *many* times by less active members. In this respect, active members and moderators do make a difference despite the apparent silence; would knowing this encourage active members to continue posting, especially if they are inclined to reduce participation if the silence continues for too long?

While strategies to increase ECEC workforce engagement with this emerging oCoP is still needed, it is encouraging to see the efforts of a few making a difference for those working on the frontline. But what happens to the few? What rewards do they reap and how might they be encouraged to stay?