

The Clubhouse app: What is the allure of the invite-only social media network?

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Julie Wenah was seeking solace to share her thoughts when a friend invited her to join Clubhouse, a voice-only app where users chat and debate on topics ranging from politics, business, tech, professional networking, sports, music and religion.

Wenah's anxiety and isolation intensified, pushing her "close to the edge," she said as COVID-19 rendered her homebound in May. She felt sad and guilty after seeing nearly 2,000 of her co-workers get laid off due to the pandemic, then traumatized after the killing of George Floyd and its subsequent aftermath.

"Voice is a very intimate tool. There's something powerful about being able to hear someone's authenticity, vulnerability, and strengths all in one space," Wenah said. "I think this helps break down barriers and shows we are more alike than we are different."

What is Clubhouse?

The aural allure of the 11-month-old Clubhouse is

creating quite a frenzy beyond its exclusive status. The app is available just for iPhone users as the invitations are so rare they've even appeared for sale on eBay. The app with its unrecorded conversations has proven to be so popular globally that it's now banned in China. On Thursday, there was a "What the hell is Clubhouse?" discussion attended by hundreds in a mix of Arabic and English.

The chats in different rooms take place in real time and at all hours. Think of the voice-only platform as intimate conference calls with potentially thousands of people from all walks of life weighing in. The phrase, "Be authentic," is heard constantly.

Wenah, who currently serves as a community senior counsel at Airbnb and has been a policy adviser for the Obama administration, has participated and moderated hundreds of rooms in Clubhouse including "Testimony Tuesday," where members share whatever's on their mind.

Her ubiquitous presence also led Wenah to become a face of Clubhouse—literally. She appeared as the app's third "icon" when it became available on Apple's App Store in August. She's also witnessed the invite-only app's surge in popularity from more than 3,000 users to now seeing major figures including Elon Musk, Mark Zuckerberg, Oprah Winfrey, Drake, and Brad Pitt pop up.

Members can feel like they are either eavesdropping on conversations or exchanging ideas with power players and celebs—for free. Chats can go on for hours as this interaction comes at a time in a world mostly frustrated and weary with being socially isolated and worn out from attending video conference meetings all day long.

While Clubhouse hasn't disclosed how many people use the app, it has been downloaded more than 8 million times worldwide—more than double its

total on Feb. 1—and 2.6 million downloads in the U.S. alone, according to app tracker App Annie. Clubhouse is reportedly valued at \$1 billion and recently raised more than \$100 million in funding last month alone. Facebook is reportedly building an audio chat, and Twitter is working on a similar product called Spaces.

Notable investors include prominent Silicon Valley venture capitalists and early Clubhouse users Marc Andreessen and Ben Horowitz. Horowitz's wife, Felicia, who many credit with helping diversify members using the app, moderates a well-attended Saturday night virtual dinner party.

A recent gathering centered on an appreciation of Black art, covering topics such as street art and what would be shown in museums as well as making art more accessible and affordable. Guests included former Walt Disney Co. President Michael Ovitz, CBS News' Gayle King, CNN analyst Van Jones, Tina Knowles (yep, Beyoncé's mom), and hip hop impresario Fab 5 Freddy.

Another popular attraction is a weekly "town hall" with Clubhouse founders and serial entrepreneurs Paul Davison and Rohan Seth where they spend an hour Sunday mornings taking questions from members. During a unique way to spend Valentine's Day, 5,000 people—the maximum number in a Clubhouse room (and thousands of others listening in an "overflow" room)—heard Davison deliver rapid responses to questions.

Clubhouse has room to "evolve"

The app is currently exclusively on iPhone. So when will the app be available for Android users? "We're working on it," Davison said. He also maintained that members are humans, not bots. "We want to make sure that the person you are talking to is the actual person, that's how it works for now," Davison said.

Davison also responded to questions about its rules on misinformation, abuse, hate speech and bullying. There have been published reports and comments about misinformation, harassment, and dangerous rhetoric against the LGBTQ community.

Davison reiterated comments that appeared in a blog post last fall that Clubhouse doesn't tolerate any of those things and how it's also adding safety features and empowering its moderators. The app also has blocking and in-room reporting features to give members more control over their safety.

Jennifer Grygiel, a social media professor at Syracuse University who's been using the app since October, hopes that Clubhouse will fix any issues sooner than later as its invite-only membership increases.

"At some point, they may be pushed to address their business model concerns before there's significant issues in this room. We see this on other platforms, like Facebook Live where there's also real-time communication," Grygiel said. "The risk of bad actors could emerge as their base grows. Like every other place on the internet, it could be exploited."

But one former corporate executive of a multibillion dollar company and frequent Clubhouse moderator believes that the founders are taking everything members say into consideration while making major changes on the back end of the app.

"They're growing and evolving," said Kat Cole, the former chief operating officer and president at Focus Brands, the parent company of mall staples Jamba Juice and Cinnabon. Cole said Clubhouse could make a litany of changes members want, "but that would distract from a pure listening and speaking experience. They have had the discipline to add other tools, like a calendar, and trust and safety tools, to protect the space. There's always more they can do."

Cole, who is based in the Atlanta area and has nearly a million followers, said she's not an investor in Clubhouse but "a passionate member." She hosts and dispenses advice in several rooms, including one called "Leadership Lab." On Friday, Cole and Wenah co-moderated a Leadership Lab session titled, "Unleashed: The Unapologetic Leader's Guide" based on the critically-acclaimed book by Harvard business professor and former Uber executive Frances Frei, who also participated and took questions.

A self-described multitasker, Cole, a married mother of two toddlers who's an angel investor, mentor and on the boards of several companies, said Clubhouse offers her more flexibility than she envisioned after joining in May. "I can host rooms with thought leaders exploring important issues and I can participate in my jammies, make something to eat, and touch so many lives in the process."

Cole likes the app's "low friction and high ease of use." She compares Clubhouse to attending a virtual conference, except you don't have to travel or be seen. "Because it's voice, I find I pick up more nuance, it feels more emotive," she said.

Grygiel said Clubhouse's strategy, from managing growth to hiring employees and making money will determine whether it will still be mentioned with Facebook and Twitter. "Networking alone doesn't pay the bills, and it's unclear who is benefiting from being in Clubhouse right now besides the early in-group that is already well connected," Grygiel said.

The allure of Clubhouse? Who comes

Shortly after Clubhouse got its latest round of funding, Musk raised eyebrows appearing on the app to chat with Vlad Tenev, the controversial chief executive of Robinhood over the GameStop trading turmoil on Wall Street. Musk later tweeted he'd try getting Kanye West and Russian President Vladimir Putin on the app.

Not long after Musk, Facebook CEO Zuckerberg appeared on Clubhouse praising virtual and augmented reality.

Those surprise sightings prove anybody may show up, said Clubhouse member Cliff Worley, a senior director of portfolio growth marketing for Kapor Capital in Oakland, California. He feverishly tried listening to Musk in a packed room—and even an "overflow" room—with no luck. He settled for a livestream on YouTube.

"It was kind of like trying to buy the hottest pair of sneakers online on a drop date and you can't get in the app," Worley said.

Grygiel is uncertain about the app's longevity.

"Clubhouse may have a timeline. We'll see."

Worley, who has moderated chat rooms with his former boss, Shark Tank star Daymond John, disagrees .

"Clubhouse is a value-driven app. There's no hiding behind a highly-produced video or photo shoot with this," Worley said. "If your voice is not bringing any value, you will not have a significant following."

Suzette Yasmin Robotham, a diversity, equity and inclusion practitioner at a Silicon Valley tech company, shares a similar sentiment.

"I think this has created an opportunity for more voices to be amplified on an even playing field," said Robotham who has co-founded a Black Love Club.

Clubhouse as space for candid talk

Of course, the app brings business opportunities. For Ruby Gadelrab, the founder of MDisrupt, a platform pairing digital health innovators with industry experts, she hopes chatting with a digital health founder she met on the app leads to a partnership.

Gadelrab appreciates the app's candor. She recalled a riveting discussion about eliminating health disparities.

"It was one of the most super and brutally honest conversations about the disparities and ways to fix them," Gadelrab said. "We could talk more openly, more liberty to speak."

The honesty and vulnerability prompted Wenah, who has 1.5 million followers to share her feelings in the app after Floyd's death in Minneapolis in May. She anguished because the Houston native has a childhood friend who knew Floyd, also a Houston native.

Wenah, who at the time lived in Oakland, California, revealed to Clubhouse members she was scared to walk a block to a nearby post office fearing she might be accosted because it was near where a federal officer was fatally shot during a

protest of Floyd's killing. A Clubhouse member was so moved she drove an hour from Silicon Valley to help Wenah overcome her fear.

She shared that in a Twitter thread in August, six months before the app's popularity surge and becoming the app's third icon.

Last week, she reflected that "I still feel a sense of healing, a sense of belonging, and instant community."

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