Enhancing Knowledge Exchange by Regulating Self-presentation

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Abstract. This paper discusses the chances and risks of self-presentation for at-attachment and knowledge exchange in online communities. We distinguished between, on the one hand, extensive and individualizing self-presentation that enhances the chance to get in contact and facilitates interpersonal attraction be-tween community members and, on the other hand, focused self-presentation that highlights the shared characteristic of community members and therefore fosters social identification with the community as a whole.

Keywords. Online communities, knowledge exchange, self-presentation

1 Attachment and Knowledge Exchange in Online Communities

Online Communities are one of the most popular social software applications. Up to date, Facebook and Wikipedia are within the top ten global websites [1]. In Online Communities people come together to keep contact with friends or to find company but communities are not only helpful for maintaining friendship. People also become member to get in knowledge-related exchange. They inform about health topics, share special interests or discuss work-related issues. Generally, the kind of interaction varies between communities. There are communities that support primarily interper-sonal communication. In these communities, people find like-minded others or people with specific experiences and give and get advice or social support. In contrast, there are communities focusing on collaborative exchange and knowledge creation.
For a more structured perspective on communities, the typology of common-bond and common-identity groups is applicable [2]. Per definition, common-bond groups are based on interpersonal relations between members. Attachment to these groups is strongly related to the number of personal connections between members. On the contrary, in common-identity groups interpersonal relations between members are less important. To feel connected to a common-identity group it is not important to know the other members personally. Instead, it is important to share the interest, goal or vision of the group. Ren, Kraut, and Kiesler [3] presented a conceptual framework of antecedents and consequences of bond-based versus identity-based attachment to online communities and derived design implications. They reviewed a large body of

research and concluded that both types of attachment have the potential to support active participation but the type of participation differs. While identity-based attachment leads, among others, to on-topic discussion and prosocial behavior in accordance with the social norms of the group, bond-based attachment rather leads to off-topic communication and lower conformity to group norms. Concerning design implications they conclude:

> Identity-based communities should have clear mission statements and policies to keep conversation on-topic, can tolerate anonymity and large numbers of participants, and can conduct all communication in public forums. By contrast, bond-based communities should phrase their mission statements to encourage members to engage in and to tolerate conversations on wide-range topics, and would improve if the numbers of members were limited, and if they had mechanisms for private communication and identifying members. [3, p. 392]

This statement demonstrates that anonymity is associated with collective exchange in common-identity communities, while visibility is associated with interpersonal exchange in common-bond communities.

2 Different Types of Self-Presentation

Indeed, the field study of Lampe, Ellison, and Steinfield [4] in the context of social networking sites (common-bond communities) pointed out, that extensive self-presentation is positively related to the number of contacts. Further, a large body of research referring to the Social Identity Model of Deindividuation Effects [5] showed that anonymity fosters collective exchange. For example, Cress [6] reported that members of groups in which members were anonymous exchanged more pieces of information than members of groups in which personal photographs of members were accessible. However, it was also demonstrated that groups in which members were represented by uniform profile pictures exchanged more pieces of information than groups in which members of kept anonymous [7]. That demonstrates that is not self-presentation per se that diminishes participation in common-identity groups, but the kind of self-presentation matters. Self-presentation that highlights similarities between members and promotes the mission of the group might even be helpful to enhance participation.

By now, user profiles are a typical feature of forums, wikis, communities of practice and course management systems. During registration users are asked to fill out a user profile. Although user profiles play a minor role in common-identity communities compared to common-bond communities in which profiles are the main content, users are generally requested to enter at least a user name or to upload a profile picture. Apparently, the amount and kind of information people provide in user profiles varies to vast degree from community to community. However, we do not know if that is the consequence of peoples´ adaption to different interaction situations or if people simply fill out what is proposed by pre-defined profile fields.

In three studies, we investigated how the type of online community and personal goals affect self-presentation in user profiles [8]. Therefore, the registration process for an on-line community was simulated and participants were asked to fill out a profile for either the common-bond community "cooking friends" with the main goal to make new acquaintances to cook with each other or for the common-identity community "e-cooking" with the main goal to share cooking-related knowledge and experiences and to develop collaboratively the biggest online cookbook. Self-presentation was measured through amount (number of profile fields) and kind of information (on-topic versus off-topic fields) provided in user profiles. Results indicated that people who presented themselves to a common-identity community disclosed less information than people who present themselves to a common-bond community and focused on on-topic information. Additionally, personal goals affected self-presentation. People with the personal goal to contribute to a collective task preferred on-topic self-presentation. In contrast, people with the personal goal to get in contact provided extensive and individualizing self-presentation.

3 Supporting Social Interaction through Profile Design and Group Awareness

In a second step, we run two studies that manipulated not only the type of community but also the type of profile (on-topic versus off-topic profile) and measured perceived satisfaction with self-presentation in profiles, perceived importance of profiles as well as reflection about which kind of information is important for the group [9]. Results showed that people assigned to a common identity community who were confronted with off-topic profiles reported lower satisfaction with self-presentation. They also devalued the importance of profiles. Moreover, off-topic profiles undermined reflection about group-relevant information in the common-identity community. That means that while filling out the off-topic profile, participants did not reflect about the interest of the group and how they could contribute.

Obviously, not only the presentation of a meaningful community description including mission and vision, but also the design of user profiles has an impact on starting interaction through self-presentation. Profile templates offer the chance of promoting reflection about the role of the own person within the group. At the same time, providing off-topic profiles in common-identity groups might hinder reflection about what is important for the group. Through user profiles, community members introduce themselves to the group. Consequently, profile information facilitates finding like-minded others or experts. Additionally, accumulating profile information also draws a picture of the group as a whole.

To conclude, profile information can be used for engaging interaction by, first, bringing together the right people and, second, connecting the members with the community and promoting participation by highlighting similarities, shared interests and individual skills that are beneficial to reach the goal of the community.

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