Interaction Dynamics in an Online Community: a Longitudinal Analysis of Communication Genres

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The growth of online communities has created borderless and virtual spaces where geographically dispersed consumers can participate in informational and commercial exchanges. While the importance of these communities is undeniable, consumer researchers, public policy makers and marketers do not have a full understanding of the relationship dynamics in these communities. This article departs from traditional life-cycle community development models, by using rhetorical genres repertoire as an analytic apparatus for investigating online communities’ dynamics. In this nethnography, we analyzed the discourse of bulletin boards hosted at BabyCenter.com. Our findings show how periods in the life of a community correspond with changes in the nature and expression of specific communicative genres, themselves a consequence of members’ contrasting struggle between community involvement and personal independence.

[to cite]:

[url]:
http://www.acrwebsite.org/volumes/13066/volumes/ap07/AP-07

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The growth of online communities has created borderless and virtual spaces where geographically dispersed consumers can become participants in informational and commercial exchanges. In developed economies, online communities play an important role in the social and economic life of consumers. For instance, 40 percent of Americans participate in online communities (Parker, 2004) and one-third of visitors to e-commerce sites used community features such as chat rooms and bulletin boards (Brown, Tilton & Woodside, 2002). While the importance of this phenomenon is undeniable, consumer researchers, public policy makers, and marketers do not have a full understanding of the relationship dynamics in these communities. Although we can build on insights from research with traditional communities, there are some dissimilarities between real/traditional and virtual communities (e.g., anonymity, nature of relationship etc.) that must be acknowledged. One such key difference (and also research opportunity) is that online communities are an environment in which member-generated content is encouraged and can be captured (Hagel & Armstrong, 1997). The emerging question is how to explore and understand the social interactions within a community and the ways interactions evolve and change over time?

This article seeks to depart from traditional life-cycle community development models, by using rhetorical genre repertoires as an analytic apparatus for investigating a community’s communicative practices. Accordingly, in order to understand a community’s communicative practices, we must examine the repertoire of genres that are routinely enacted by members of the community. A classification of community’s interactions will be rhetorically sound if it contributes to an understanding of how communicative practices work – that is, if it reflects the experience of the people who create and interpret the communicative practices (see Miller, 1984).

In this nethnography (Kozinets, 2002), we analysed text data from the discourse of bulletin boards hosted at a selected Internet community, BabyCenter.com (a website for new and expectant parents). The unit of analysis was the verbatim thread transcript, which was operationalised as a post (seed) with all of the replies. During the initial phase of data collection, messages were collected for a one-month period from five different bulletin boards (cross-sectional) at two points in time (semi-longitudinal, September 1999 and November 2000). Across the five boards and two periods, these data reflected different community life stages (as communities are organised by pregnancy due-dates). In the second phase of data collection, a full longitudinal study was conducted. The complete text of all messages of one bulletin board was captured for a nine months period starting with the inception of the community.

This analysis highlights the role that communicative genres play in a community’s evolution. The tremendous variety of communicative genres observed in the data called for a deeper understanding of the sources of shifts in communicative genres, and of the ways in which these dynamics inspire communities’ transformational processes. Based on analysis of communities’ communicative practices, we developed a two-dimensional typology of communicative genre repertoires. This typology enabled us to develop a deeper understanding of the sources of shifts in communicative genre, and of the ways in which these dynamics inspire communities’ transformational processes. The two dimensions are: (1) identity orientation (i.e., the focus of the communicative genre) and (2) patterns of interaction (i.e., the functions that communicative genres serve). First, we show that the expression and nature of communicative genres change as a result of members contrasting struggle between social identity and personal identity. Online communities’ communicative practices are co-determined by the simultaneous and dynamic forces of members’ desires for involvement (i.e., social identity or commitment) and independence (i.e., personal identity or individualism). Second, we propose that communicative genres reflect two overarching and conceptually distinct interaction patterns: (1) an informational/instrumental/task-oriented communicative act, and (2) a symbolic/expressive/socio-emotional communicative act.

Our analysis of the longitudinal data collected in phase 2 uncovered eight periods in the life of this community, demonstrating that community’s development is a continuous process of reciprocal social construction. As such, this novel perspective provides guidance on the interplay between a community’s development and circumstantial events, on triggers of change, and the mechanisms that cause a community to remain in any stable period. This analysis calls attention to the fact that complex systems like online communities never settle on a fixed state. On the contrary, these systems are subject to constant perturbations, which drive bursts of transient behavior. The nethnographic account demonstrates that change events encompass both macro-level forces such as periods in a community’s life span (e.g., acquaintance period, first trimester of pregnancy, etc.) and immediate situations (e.g., a specific thread) that form the context for the community’s interpersonal communication processes. Our findings illustrate that events have a dynamic and relativistic meanings and that “a same event can evoke different responses from different groups or from the same group at different times” (Arrow, McGrath & Berdahl, 2000: 195). Thus, a particular event (e.g., a debated topic), at different times, has different implications for group’s communicative practices because the group and the context will have changed.

Through this study, it is hoped that consumer researchers will realise that there are many opportunities to leverage the unique assets of member-generated content, and that future research can advance our theoretical and practical understanding of this rich consumption arena. Also, we hope that future inquiries on how communities operate and the ways in which they can be improved in order to serve and protect consumers’ interests more efficiently will provide guidance for practitioners and policy-makers who create, manage and regulate these online communities. Understanding the detailed dynamics of a community’s interactions can provide directions for better managing and facilitating consumer-to-consumer interactions. This is critical because different types of communication within social groups can have very distinct and often unintended impacts on a group’s sense of
satisfaction. It is assumed that the more satisfactory the experience, the less likely consumers are to switch to a competing community, and the more likely they are to spend more time on each visit, and hopefully getting benefits for themselves, their families, and society as a whole.

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