Knowing Your Role: the Effect of Reputation Signals on Participation Intentions

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Reputation signals high in role clarity generate greater participation intentions than low role clarity signals, mediated by feelings of connectedness (Study 1a/b). New users are particularly motivated by high role clarity signals (Study 2). Low community endurance attenuates the effect (Study 3) and face-to-face interaction mitigates the effect (Study 4).

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT

Many brands maintain an online community where consumers discuss the brand’s products, share tips, provide solutions, and connect with peers. A key component of these communities is user reputation (Lampel and Bhalla 2007). Brands go to great lengths to emphasize reputation in the community to motivate users to contribute (Bolton et al. 2004). However, the ways that brands signal user reputation vary greatly. While one community might use points to display a user’s reputation, another may use more descriptive, hierarchical labels. Can the type of reputation signal impact users’ participation in an online community? If so, why?

We suggest that label-based reputation signals differentiate from points-based reputation signals because labels can communicate the user’s role in the community (Hogg and Abrams 1993). When clear roles are designated in a community, it increases the likelihood that individuals will have stable, positive relationships with others (Callero 1985; Mead 1934), creates group cohesion, and fosters community attachment (Hewstone 1996; van Knippenberg 1984). By contrast, when role clarity is low, individuals feel less connected to the group and are less likely to participate (Rashid et al. 2006). Therefore, when reputation signals have high role clarity, users will feel more connected to the community and will be more motivated to participate.

The next two hypotheses test the moderating role of membership length and community interactivity. According to Kozinets’ (1999) model of developmental progression of participation in online communities, it takes time for new users to become connected to the community and high role clarity reputation signals can facilitate connection. Long-term users are already bonded to the community and connectedness is satiated (Brodie et al. 2013), thus mitigating the benefits of high role clarity signals. The advantage of high role clarity reputation signals can also be mitigated when the online community users also meet face-to-face, where strong social ties and connections can be built more effortlessly (Arrow and McGrath 1994) and high role clarity reputation signals are needed less.

Two lab experiments, a field study, and a field experiment have been conducted. Study 1 analyzes a large dataset of actual participation behaviors from a real support community. In Studies 2a, 2b, and 4, we created scenarios in which participants read about the reputation signals adopted in a community and were asked to rate their participation intentions and feelings of connectedness to the community. Participants were told that the community chose either points or labels, which were used to operationalize low and high role clarity reputation signals, to represent user reputation. In Study 3, we adopt a similar design, but survey users of a real online sports community.

The data for Study 1 consisted of the online community participation behaviors of 5,841 users in the T-Mobile Support Community. On July 19, 2013, T-Mobile changed their method of user satisfaction survey, we randomly assigned users to either type of reputation signal (points or labels) and asked about their participation intentions and feelings of connectedness if the reputation signal procedure were implemented. We also measured each user’s membership length. A significant interaction (Reputation Signal Type x Membership Length) emerged for participation intentions ($\beta = -.175$, $t = -2.15$, $p = .033$). We found that high role clarity signals are preferred by new users ($-1$ SD; $\beta = .43$, $t = 2.15$, $p = .030$), but not for long-term members ($+1$ SD; $\beta = -.02$, $t = -.09$, $p > .05$). The interaction on feelings of connectedness mirrored the results for participation intentions. The indirect effect of reputation signals on participation intentions was significant through connectedness for new users ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI: .39, .95% CI: .13), while not long-term users.

In Study 2, we created a field experiment with a real online sports community that does not have an existing reputation signal scheme. In a user satisfaction survey, we randomly assigned users to each type of reputation signal (points or labels) and asked about their participation intentions and feelings of connectedness if the reputation signal procedure were implemented. We also measured each user’s membership length. A significant interaction (Reputation Signal Type x Membership Length) emerged for participation intentions ($\beta = -.175$, $t = -2.15$, $p = .033$). We found that high role clarity signals are preferred by new users ($-1$ SD; $\beta = .43$, $t = 2.15$, $p = .030$), but not for long-term members ($+1$ SD; $\beta = -.02$, $t = -.09$, $p > .05$). The interaction on feelings of connectedness mirrored the results for participation intentions. The indirect effect of reputation signals on participation intentions was significant through connectedness for new users ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI: .39, .95% CI: .13), while not long-term users.

In Study 4, we conducted a between-subjects design to compare Points vs. High Role Clarity Labels (Newbie/Expert/Master) vs. Low Role Clarity Labels (Blue/Green/Red). Participants were more likely to intend to participate in the community when high role clarity signals were used versus either type of low role clarity signal ($M_{Points} = 4.62$, $M_{Blue} = 4.53$ vs. $M_{Green} = 5.49$, $F(2,77) = 5.29$, $p = .007$). Patterns for connectedness follow participation intentions. We found a significant indirect effect of reputation signals on participation intentions through connectedness ($a \times b = .56$, 95% CI: .13, 1.22).

Study 2a adopted a between-subjects design to compare Points vs. High Role Clarity Labels (Newbie/Expert/Master) vs. Low Role Clarity Labels (Blue/Green/Red). Participants were more likely to intend to participate in the community when high role clarity signals were used versus either type of low role clarity signal ($M_{Points} = 4.62$ vs. $M_{Blue} = 4.53$ vs. $M_{Green} = 5.49$, $F(2,77) = 5.29$, $p = .007$). Patterns for connectedness follow participation intentions. We found a significant indirect effect of reputation signals on participation intentions through connectedness ($a \times b = .56$, 95% CI: .13, 1.22).

Study 2b compares Points vs. Low Role Clarity Labels (Blue/Green/Red) vs. Low Role Clarity Labels with role information. We found that low role clarity labels with additional role information increased participation to the same degree as high role clarity labels.

The interaction on feelings of connectedness mirrored the results for participation intentions. The indirect effect of reputation signals on participation intentions was significant through connectedness for new users ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI: .39, .95% CI: .13), while not long-term users.

In Study 3, we created a field experiment with a real online sports community that does not have an existing reputation signal scheme. In a user satisfaction survey, we randomly assigned users to each type of reputation signal (points or labels) and asked about their participation intentions and feelings of connectedness if the reputation signal procedure were implemented. We also measured each user’s membership length. A significant interaction (Reputation Signal Type x Membership Length) emerged for participation intentions ($\beta = -.175$, $t = -2.15$, $p = .033$). We found that high role clarity signals are preferred by new users ($-1$ SD; $\beta = .43$, $t = 2.15$, $p = .030$), but not for long-term members ($+1$ SD; $\beta = -.02$, $t = -.09$, $p > .05$). The interaction on feelings of connectedness mirrored the results for participation intentions. The indirect effect of reputation signals on participation intentions was significant through connectedness for new users ($\beta = -.09$, 95% CI: .39, .95% CI: .13), while not long-term users.

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