Self-Disclosure Asymmetry in Online Communities: a Challenge of Demographic Diversity

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We explored how self-disclosure of demographic differences enhances overall engagement and goal attainment among community members within the context of Twitter-based smoking cessation community. We examined whether inhibited self-disclosure may help to explain why goal-oriented online communities with unfamiliar and demographically dissimilar members often experience weak ties.

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EXTENDED ABSTRACT
The success of online communities depends on the active engagement and strong attachment of the members (Ren et al., 2012). Disclosure of personal information is a commonly proposed mechanism that induces close interpersonal relationships (Ensari and Miller, 2002). Therefore, a question that arises is how online communities can encourage members to disclose themselves to the community, and result in positive outcomes. Our study considers this question by examining online health communities for smoking cessation (Pechmann et al., 2016).

Self-disclosure is “any message about the self that a person communicates to another” (Wheelees and Grotz, 1976, p. 47). Researchers have found that disclosing personal information such as demographics is positively associated with developing high-quality relationships (Phillips et al., 2009). In addition, interpersonal similarity in demographics helps individuals build close relationships (Naylor et al., 2012). However, consumers are often concerned about disclosing personal information to demographically dissimilar others, because this may potentially increase the psychological distance between them and others (Phillips et al., 2009). This greater distance may undermine dyadic ties, which in turn may weaken online communities.

Therefore, understanding how similarity in and self-disclosure of demographics may affect dyads seems important for helping online communities improve engagement and goal attainment. Hence, we investigated how dyadic similarity in demographics affected whether the members of the dyad disclosed their personal demographic information to others. We also examined whether dyadic similarity affected the goal of dyadic abstinence (smoking cessation) due to the mediating effects of dyadic disclosure, dyadic tie strength, and total engagement.

Hypothesis 1: In online communities, members of demographically dissimilar versus similar dyads will be (a) less likely to engage in reciprocated self-disclosure and (b) more likely to engage in asymmetric self-disclosure about the demographic in their posts, but (c) only if there is an obvious minority on that demographic.

Hypothesis 2: In online communities, regardless of whether dyads are demographically similar or dissimilar, self-disclosure of demographics in posts will be associated with tie strength.

Our first study examined 8 online communities that participated in a 100-day quit-smoking program called Tweet2Quit in 2012-2013 (Pechmann et al. 2016). Individuals who were interested in an online community for quitting smoking and who met the screening criteria (i.e., ages 18-59, residing in the continental USA, current smokers interested in quitting, mobile phone with data plan, social media users) were assigned to 20-member communities on Twitter consisting entirely of other smokers. Participants were mailed 8 weeks of study-provided nicotine patches to help them quit and were sent automated daily reminders to post to their online community. Also, they were encouraged to choose a quit date within one week of joining the online community, so that all members were striving for the same goal with similar milestones.

The demographics of the online community members were measured by a survey – gender, employment status, marital status, and age. Once members began to post to their online communities, the dyads that were formed were identified using social network analysis (details below). After this, the demographic similarity or dissimilarity of each dyad was determined by comparing the dyad members’ survey responses. Goal attainment, defined as sustained smoking abstinence, was assessed using email surveys (Pechmann et al. 2016). A dyad was identified based on whether a member sent at least one post to another member (Centola and van de Rijt 2015). Tie strength was measured as the count of posts exchanged between two members of a dyad (Shriver et al. 2013). Individual-level self-disclosure of demographics was assessed by two independent coders who examined if a post discussed gender, employment status, marital status, or age. Self-disclosure was coded in terms of occurrences and also content. Dyadic-level self-disclosure of examined demographics were coded as follows (Moon 2000): non-disclosure meaning neither dyad member self-disclosed the demographic (0), asymmetric self-disclosure meaning one member did so (1), and reciprocated self-disclosure meaning both members did so (2).

H1 predicted that demographically dissimilar versus similar dyads would show less reciprocated and more asymmetric self-disclosure of that demographic in their posts, if there was an obvious minority on that demographic. To examine H1, our z-tests compared the percentages of dissimilar versus similar dyads who reached each stage of self-disclosure by demographic. The results supported the hypothesis. We expected to see dissimilarity-based self-disclosure asymmetry for gender and employment status because men and the unemployed had an obvious minority standing in these online communities. Consistent with this expectation, gender dissimilar versus similar dyads were less likely to engage in reciprocated self-disclosure and more likely to engage in asymmetric self-disclosure of gender in posts. Also, employment dissimilar versus similar dyads were less likely to engage in reciprocated self-disclosure and more likely to engage in asymmetric self-disclosure of employment status in posts. For marital status and age, where there was no obvious minority, these effects did not obtain.

H2 posited that self-disclosure of either similar or dissimilar demographics in posts would relate to positive dyadic outcomes. To test H2, self-disclosure type was regressed on each outcome, separately for similar and dissimilar dyads. For dissimilar dyads, most of the results supported the hypothesis. For employment-dissimilar dyads, self-disclosure of employment status in posts related to tie strength. For marital-dissimilar dyads, self-disclosure of marital status in posts related to tie strength. For age dissimilar dyads, self-disclosure of age in posts related to tie strength. For similar dyads, self-disclosure of gender in posts related to tie strength. For employment-similar dyads, self-disclosure of employment status in posts related to tie strength. For marital-similar dyads, self-disclosure of marital status in posts related to tie strength.
In this research, we explored a psychological phenomenon, self-disclosure asymmetry, wherein one member of a dyad self-disclosed his or her demographic but the other did not. We reasoned that self-disclosure asymmetry might help to explain the weakness of ties in online communities that are comprised of diverse strangers. Furthermore, we observed substantial self-disclosure inhibition in the online communities that we studied, primarily in the form of asymmetric or one-sided self-disclosure. When there was an obvious minority on a demographic, minority members of dyads chose to conceal this demographic from majority members.

REFERENCES