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Weight Loss Through Virtual Support Communities: A Role for Identity-based Motivation in Public Commitment☆

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Abstract

Individuals increasingly participate in virtual support communities (VSCs) where they conduct numerous aspects of their lives with others whom they may never encounter in person, and they interact within these communities to attain various goals. Research finds that individuals are more likely to achieve success with such goals when they make a public commitment to achieving them. Through our netnographic inquiry, we extend prior theorizing of VSC with an explanation of how public commitment manifests in VSC in support of goal attainment. More specifically, we find these online communities make salient a context relevant social identity which motivates behaviors that facilitate compliance to the public commitment, and hence, more effective goal pursuit. In addition, we create a typology of member roles within these VSC that further influence public commitment. Our findings contribute to theories of VSC and public commitment.
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Introduction

Support communities once were primarily composed of family members; however, in contemporary society, support communities may be comprised of anyone, including strangers. While evidence points to a decline of in-person community usage, online collaborative communities flourish (Löwgren and Reimer 2013; Noble and Walker 1997). Increasing prevalence and utilization of support communities are attributed to media attention, changes in society including family structure, ease of access, and knowledge that social connections are important for maintaining health (Katz 1981). Further, widespread access to the Internet provides opportunities to expand the experience and composition of such communities (Hollenbeck, Peters, and Zinkhan 2006; Johnson and Lowe 2015; Kozinets 2010; Löwgren and Reimer 2013; Nelson and Otnes 2005; Papacharissi 2002). Online communities geared toward sharing and encouraging are best characterized as virtual support communities (VSC): groups of people with similar interests who gather and communicate via digital technologies to support one another (du Pré 2010; Dutta and Feng 2007).

Accessibility, availability, anonymity, and flexible representation increase the attractiveness of online communities (Johnson and Lowe 2015; Kozinets 1999; Schau and Gilly 2003). Given the prevalence of social media and increased employment of it in lieu of in-person support groups, it is likely that individuals who participate in online communities make public commitments to support goal pursuit in conjunction with or in lieu of in-person groups. More specifically, research posits that individuals who make an in-person public commitment are more likely to follow through on the identified course of action to attain specific outcomes (Nyer and Dellande 2010). We seek to understand if such public commitments yield similar

outcomes in online communities. Thus, the research question guiding our inquiry is: How do consumers employ public commitment in VSC to attain goals? We explore public commitment in VSC and find a mechanism enabling public commitment to be identity-based motivation.

Individuals manage distinct social identities across situations and construct relevant goals in support of those identities (Bradford, Grier, and Henderson 2012; Oyserman 2009a). Consider Charlie, a member of a fee-based weight loss program that also provides online venues for consumers to interact with one another. He introduces himself while also making a public commitment online to co-create outcomes that are likely only to materialize offline with compliance:

> I had my first weigh-in and I lost 3 pounds...Trying to get back to 200 from 275 [pounds]... I have portion control issues when I cook as I am a Chef and it's hard to get this one problem out of the way...I realize the difference in what I can eat, need to eat, want to eat. I will walk a mile a day rain or shine. I will control my diet and not the other way around. I [will] write about my daily routines, recipes, and mindful things that happen, [so] be ready for the sharing. <")))>< This is my Mile and I will walk it, if you walk with me, we will share the time. All journeys begin with the first step!
>
> ~Charlie

Charlie makes a commitment to his online community and himself with a community-relevant goal, describes his community-relevant plan to attain it, invites online community members to join him by sharing support in word and action, and offers another social identity with his fish emoticon. When engaging within this community, his salient social identity is that of weight loss seeker. More specifically, he gives and receives support from other members participating in this online community, which facilitates his adherence to service provider instructions to attain his weight loss goals offline.

Our objective is to explore how individuals within VSCs enact public commitment in support of goal attainment. Where prior research finds the physical presence of others facilitates public commitment, we explore how public commitment manifests in online communities where individuals are not physically co-present. More specifically, we explore the mechanism enabling public commitment for goal attainment in the absence of a physical presence by others. We find identity-based motivation leads to public commitment which is evident through interactions between members performing differing roles within VSC, and facilitates individual's progress toward their goals.

Literature Review

Public Commitment

Public commitment, which is a declaration of a position, increases the likelihood of compliance to a course of action and thus co-creation of related outcomes (Cialdini 1993; Nyer and Dellande 2010; Pallak, Cook, and Sullivan 1980). Nyer and Dellande (2010) find public commitment to be a motivator for individuals to remain compliant to specific behaviors which enable goal attainment. Public commitment may be escalated due to confidence when there is public accountability (Lichterman 1995; Ronay et al. 2016). Studies examining recycling and energy conservation behaviors find that those individuals who would be publicly identified participated at a higher level than those whose commitment was private (Burn and Oskamp 1986; Pallak and Cummings 1976). Thus, public commitment serves to increase one's motivation to stay the course and avoid eliciting disapproval from the self or others (Cranwell and Seymour-Smith 2012; Lichterman 1995; Parrott et al. 1998; Ronay et al. 2016). Nyer and Dellande (2010) find this effect was moderated by a desire to attain peer approval by achieving the goals to which individuals had publically committed. Public commitment presumes the physical presence of an audience as witness, where confession is construed as an act of moral redemption (Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010; Nyer and Dellande 2010; Weiner 1998). Thus, public commitment enables individuals to successfully pursue goals by engendering compliance in the presence of others.

As individuals employ new technologies in daily life, they are likely to interact with others through VSCs in ways traditionally associated with geographically proximate communities (Anderson 1983; Kozinets 1999). Within these online communities, individuals may be anonymous with fleeting or functional interactions for the purpose of seeking benefit from the community generally versus a specific other (Kozinets 1999). However, Kozinets (1999, p. 254) describes that what begins as an information search "transforms into a source of community and understanding." These communities are sites that foster belonging, information sharing and exchange, and emotional support (Johnson and Lowe 2015; Kozinets 2010; Lichterman 1995). Prior research finds evidence for a relationship between public commitment and compliant behavior to attain desired outcomes with in-person communities, yet, it is necessary to understand how public commitment manifests in VSCs where commitments are made online and compliant behaviors resulting in desired outcomes occur offline.

Public commitment research is primarily focused on in-person communities where compliance by the consumer is necessary to attain desired outcomes (Burn and Oskamp 1986; Moisio and Beruchashvili 2010; Nyer and Dellande 2010; Pallak and Cummings 1976). Yet, there may be situations in which face-to-face settings do not allow for full disclosure (e.g., shame, stigma), and hence public sharing may be impaired. Online communities allow individuals ease of access, continuous availability, and anonymity (Kozinets 1999). As individuals incorporate online communities into their lives, it is important to understand how public commitment manifests when individuals gather virtually.

Identity-based Motivation

Research acknowledges that individuals have varying identities which are contextually cued (Oyserman 2009b;