



The formation of social identity and self-identity based on knowledge contribution in virtual communities: An inductive route model



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ARTICLE INFO

Article history:

Available online 22 November 2014

Keywords:

Knowledge contribution
Social interaction tie
Social identity
Self-identity
Self-esteem
Virtual communities

ABSTRACT

Based on the social network perspective and work group perspective, this study brings social interaction tie and membership esteem together as the mediating variables between knowledge contribution and social identity to construct an inductive route model, aiming to understand how social identity and self-identity form based on knowledge contribution behaviors in virtual communities. To assess the theoretical model, an online survey was conducted in an interest-based discussion community, Baidu Post Bar (China), and yielded 348 useable responses. Both social interaction tie and membership esteem were found to have mediating effects between knowledge contribution and social identity. In addition, knowledge contribution was found to have a direct influence on social identity. The results also showed that self-identity can form through an inductive route. Our findings have implications for both practice and theory.

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1. Introduction

In recent years, virtual communities have attracted much attention from researchers and practitioners. Following Chou, Min, Chang, and Lin (2010), this study focuses on an interest-based virtual community (VC) in which a group of people share their opinions, insights, perspectives and experiences with each other, develop relationships, and collectively seek to attain goals through computer-mediated communication as a means of information exchange (Lee, Vogel, & Limayem, 2002). This type of VC is also called an online forum, bulletin board, or (electronic) discussion group. User-generated content (i.e., knowledge) has long been recognized as a vital factor for VCs' survival and success (Shiue, Chiu, & Chang, 2010); therefore, many studies have focused on the motivation of knowledge contribution in virtual communities. The literature on knowledge contribution shows that a variety of factors affect this behavior, including personal factors (personality traits, performance expectancy, sense of self-worth, reputation, altruism, self-efficacy, professional experience; Bock, Zmud, Kim, & Lee, 2005; Mooradian, Renzl, & Matzler, 2006; Wang & Lai, 2006) and social factors (social capital, social presence, sense of belonging, social identity, online relationship commitment; Ma & Yuen, 2011; Shen, Yu, & Mohamed, 2010; Wasko & Faraj, 2005; Zhao, Lu, Wang, Chau, & Zhang, 2012). Studies have also indicated that

recognition from the site (Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006) and outcome expectancy (Chiu, Hsu, & Wang, 2006) play key roles in an individual's willingness to contribute knowledge. However, little research has revealed the mechanism that underlies the influence of knowledge contribution on the effective running of VCs.

There is a self-running mechanism in VCs based on knowledge contribution. On the one hand, knowledge contribution can lead to interaction between members, which contributes to the formation of social identity and self-identity (Postmes, Spears, Lee, & Novak, 2005; Stryker & Vryan, 2006). On the other hand, social identity and self-identity play key roles in VCs' development (Shen et al., 2010). When social identity is significant, individuals are assimilated to a group-specific prototype, and group-specific thoughts and behaviors become the individuals' own thoughts and behaviors; thus, the individuals will work hard to help achieve group goals (Fielding & Hogg, 2000). Therefore, social identity contributes to members' participation in and loyalty to VCs (Dholakia, Bagozzia, & Pearob, 2004; Lin, 2008). Meanwhile, self-identity is associated with a relevant social role or in-group role, forming a set of identity standards that guide identity-relevant behaviors (Stets & Burke, 2000). Therefore, there is a strong relationship between self-identity and role-relevant behavior intention (Jostein, Paschal, & Silje, 2010), and thus, self-identity as a contributor may predict members' contribution behaviors in VCs.

The self-running mechanism of VCs involves knowledge contribution leading to the formation of social identity and self-identity, which can reversely facilitate members' sustained participation

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and knowledge contribution in VCs. The process through which social identity and self-identity form based on knowledge contribution is the core of the self-running mechanism. However, there has been little research that has examined the process of formation of social identity and self-identity based on knowledge contribution behaviors in VCs. A few studies have argued that based on contribution behaviors, individuals can form social identities through an inductive path. However, these studies have not fully revealed the mechanism that underlies the inductive path or addressed how and what compositions constitute the inductive formation path. This study constructs an inductive route model to identify the mechanism of the inductive social identity formation path. Meanwhile, the inductive route model may also predict the formation of self-identity.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. The two forms of social identity

Tajfel (1972) first introduced the concept of social identity as “the individual’s knowledge that he belongs to certain social groups together with some emotional and value significance to him of this group membership”. On the basis of this definition, Ellemers, Kortekaas, and Ouwerkerk (1999) and Bergami and Bagozzi (2000) proposed that social identity consists of three dimensions: a cognitive dimension (the cognitive assimilation of the self to the group prototype—self-categorization), an evaluative dimension (a positive or negative evaluation attached to the group membership—group self-esteem), and an emotional dimension (a sense of affective connection with the group—affectional commitment).

Although the above dimensions are widely recognized, social identity formation studies often adopt unidimensional social identity, and the connotation of social identity is inconsistent across these studies (Ashforth, Harrison, & Corley, 2008); thus, two research trends have emerged. In one research trend, social identity refers to self-categorization, which represents a response to the immediate perceptual environment, whereby individuals define themselves based on the degree to which they are similar to or different from others in their surroundings (Deaux & Martin, 2003). Social categorization of the self cognitively assimilates the self to the in-group prototype and, thus, depersonalizes self-conception and highlights the similarity between members (Brown, 2000; Tajfel, 1981; Turner, Hogg, Oakes, Reicher, & Wetherall, 1987). Self-categorization arises based on the situational significance of the group features (i.e., race, gender, visual similarities, and so forth) and thus tends to be more situationally and contextually determined (Postmes, Haslam, & Swaab, 2005). The items that measure self-categorization are “the extent of overlap between my image and the group image”, “I am similar with others in the group” (Foels, 2006; Kim & Park, 2011; Lee, 2004), and so forth.

In the other research trend, social identity refers to social identification, which may emerge based on individuals’ contribution behaviors, social interactions and social relationships in social networks or organizations (Postmes, Haslam, et al., 2005; Rink & Ellemers, 2007; Van Dick, 2001). Social identification accentuates the sense of belonging that forms on the basis of the individuals’ perception and acceptance of the shared task and goal (Wegge & Haslam, 2003); therefore, social identification can be conceptualized as “the experience of personal involvement in a group so that persons feel themselves to be an integral part of that group along with the emotional significance of this identity” (Ellemers, De Gilder, & Haslam, 2004; Hagerty, Lynch-Sauer, Patusky, Bouwsema, & Collier, 1992; Rink & Ellemers, 2007). This conception is quite similar to affective commitment that describes the emo-

tional connection with a group (Meyer & Allen, 1991). The small differences between these two conceptions may be that social identification accentuates both task involvement and an emotional connection with the group, whereas affective commitment more accentuates an emotional connection with the group (Ashforth et al., 2008; Dávila & Jiménez, 2012). For example, in VCs, both lurkers and contributors may feel an emotional connection with the group, but lurkers cannot feel task involvement in the group (Blanchard & Markus, 2004). Because of involving emotional attachment to and involvement in a group, social identification is more enduring and long term than self-categorization (Ashforth et al., 2008; Postmes, Haslam, et al., 2005). The items that measure social identification accentuate a sense of belonging rather than similarity: “I see myself as a member of this group”, “I have a strong sense of belonging to this group”, “I feel connected to this group” (Chiu et al., 2006; Postmes, Spears, & Lea, 1999; Swaab, Postmes, van Beest, & Spears, 2007), and so forth.

2.2. The two formation paths of social identity

The reason for the emergence of the two social identity forms may be that there are two distinct formation paths of social identity: a deductive path and an inductive path. Through the deductive path, individuals can assimilate themselves to a social category, whereas through the inductive path, individuals may integrate themselves into a social structure (Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005); that is, self-categorization emerges through the deductive path, whereas social identification forms through the inductive path.

The deductive path is a top-down process through which superordinate categories can shape a social identity. Group members may form a social identity based on the shared properties that differentiate their in-group from other groups (Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005). This property may be a feature (e.g., skin color, religion), a common interest, or other related factors (such as some form of entitativity or essence; see also Lickel, Hamilton, & Sherman, 2001). It should be noted that it is not the case that the group members need to like each other or identify their similarities as individuals. Rather, they identify and share a certain common feature that is given meaning at a super-individual level and in the intergroup environment (Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005). Based on these common features, individuals can deduce group properties to construct an internalized social identity composed of stereotypes and norms. This is the deductive social identity known as self-categorization in this study.

The inductive path is a bottom-up process through which social identity can be shaped based on individual contribution behaviors (Jans, Postmes, & Van der Zee, 2012). Contribution behaviors may lead to interaction and communication between individuals (Postmes, Spears, et al., 2005). It is through interaction and community that individuals can perceive the shared task and goal between group members, which can characterize the shared identity (Wegge & Haslam, 2003).

There have been a few studies on the inductive formation path of social identity, and inconsistencies can be found across these studies. On the one hand, Jans et al. (2012) argued that individual contributions of group members may contribute to the formation of a social identity. They experimentally examined the influence of diversity on the formation of social identity and indicated that the distinctiveness may be integrated as the essential property and thus as the shared cognitive representation of the group. They also suggested that the inductive path is a process through which individuals make active contributions to the emergence of a shared identity simply because they have an opportunity (or “voice”). On the other hand, in another study, Postmes, Spears, et al. (2005) argued that the formation of an inductive identity does not

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