New members' online socialization in online communities: The effects of content quality and feedback on new members' content-sharing intentions

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ARTICLE INFO

ABSTRACT

Online communities' viability and success are dependent on current members' active participation and content contribution, as well as on the sustainable community registration of new members. Based on the member-life cycle perspective, this study attempted to discover mechanisms that might be employed to increase new members' community participation. This study focused on user-generated content (UGC) sharing. The results of this study suggest that UGC quality gaps that exist between current and new members are important factors that might affect new members' socialization. In addition, the results demonstrated that feedback provided by members can affect new members' participation when UGC quality gaps exist. The results revealed that new members preferred an equivalent UGC community to either a superior or inferior community when they were unable to derive benefits from those communities. However, an investigation of the types of feedback provided revealed that new members expressed preferences for superior UGC communities to obtain learning opportunities and expressed preferences for inferior UGC communities to develop social relationships. This study can help researchers better understand how UGC communities' elements can affect new members' behaviors. In addition, the results can help community managers devise differentiated approaches.

1. Introduction

Recently, social-computing systems designed to enable users to share information have experienced a dramatic rise in popularity (Park, 2013). These systems enable online social interactions, as well as the rich exchange of multimedia (e.g., photos and videos) (Parameswaran & Whinston, 2007) based on user participation and online community formation. In these systems, people share personal content known as user-generated content (UGC). Users either create personal UGC or copy and revise UGC drawn from other sources. Some best-known examples of social-computing communities include content sites (e.g., Flickr and YouTube), and social interaction platforms (e.g., Facebook and Twitter).

Online communities' viability and success, including UGC sites, are dependent on current members' active participation and content contribution (Butler, 2001), as well as on the sustainable community registration of new members. Current members' participation is crucial because those members can answer

questions, contribute content, maintain and enforce appropriate behavioral norms, and provide other types of support that will sustain communities' prosperous continuation (Ren et al., 2012). Therefore, many studies have attempted to determine community members' motivations and desires. Studies have focused on members' access to quality content or the creation of incentives to encourage site visitors to remain and participate (Galliers & Leidner, 2003; Jeppesen & Frederiksen, 2006; Moore & Serva, 2007; Porter & Donthu, 2008; Ren et al., 2012; Rheingold, 1993). On the other hand, to ensure communities' sustainability and success, each community must attract new members who will join and participate in community activities. However, based on a review of the literature, only a limited number of studies have focused on new members' socialization in online communities.

Community members' roles have evolved over time (Lave & Wenger, 1991). Members initially participate as visitors. Members begin participating as newcomers. They continue participating and become more seasoned members. Ultimately, they become major participants (Kim, 2000). This process is known as the member-life cycle. Each role requires each member to acquire new levels of skills and experiences. These acquisitions can exert influence on members' reputations and status (Iriberri & Leroy, 2009; Kim, 2000; Wenger, 1998).

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Based on the member-life cycle perspective, Joyce and Kraut (2006) discovered the existence of two distinct phases of online community participation: joining and contributing (Moreland & Levine, 2001; Wittenbaum, Hubbell, & Zuckerman, 1999). Janzik and Raasch (2011) demonstrated the evolution of participation motivation over time. During early stages, newcomers have strong desires for the provision of information and support by other members (Fuller, Jawecki, & Muhlbacher, 2007; Hemetsberger, 2002). In contrast, during later stages, flow-experiences (Csikszentmihalyi, 1990) play important roles. In other words, newcomers may feel more comfortable and will be more likely to contribute content and opinions once they achieve certain levels of experience (Wasko & Faraj, 2000). Barriers to members' participation includes the fear that accompanies the provision of wrong answers or content and concerns related to new members' abilities to meet current members' expectations. Several studies suggest that the development of trust and the provision of positive feedback among members can help overcome these barriers (Leimeister, Ebner, & Krcmar, 2005; Porter & Donthu, 2008).

In the context of UGC-sharing, in which users upload and consume their creations or achievements, new members' socialization within communities can be more difficult and awkward. In other words, new members who intend to share UGC in online communities for the first time may experience various psychological states derived from current community characteristics. First, new members may have concerns related to the suitability of their UGC in relation to current members. New members may compare the quality levels of their UGC with the quality levels of current members' UGC. Second, new members may worry about the types of feedback they might receive from current members when they share UGC (e.g. evaluative feedback, friendly feedback, or no feedback). Finally, new members may be unsure whether they will develop good relationships with current members based on their UGC-sharing. In summary, current members' characteristics and the quality of online communities' current contents may affect new members' participation, particularly with respect to reading and sharing behaviors.

The current study will attempt to discover the mechanisms that might affect new members' community participation. In particular, it will focus on UGC-sharing. Initially, we investigated the effects of the quality gaps that exist between content uploaded by current and new members on new members' participation. Then, we examined the moderating role of feedback on new members' UGC-sharing based on existence of quality gaps.

2. Theoretical background

2.1. Participation and Gratification Theory

One major research topic in communication research has been users' reactions to content characteristics. During the early stages of communication research, content was a primary focus. Media users were generally considered passive users. However, as the new media environment emerged (including the use of VCRs and cable TV), researchers increasingly focused on media consumers' active aspects. Specifically, many studies focused on audiences' psychological processes during their exposure to various types of mass media. This process has been described as the Use and Gratification Theory (Swanson, 1987).

The Use and Gratification Theory focuses on psychological communication motives. The theory attempts to explain why different people use the same mass media to achieve different purposes (Severin & Tankard, 1997). This theory assumes that media users are goal-directed because they have needs. Therefore, they can select appropriate media to gratify those needs (Katz, Blumler, & Gurev-itch, 1974). The Internet offers a higher level of interactivity than other traditional media. Therefore, Internet users can discover more opportunities to gratify their tastes and needs (Ruggiero, 2000).

According to numerous studies focused on the Use and Gratification Theory in the context of the Internet, three major Internet usage motives have been identified (Ko, Cho, & Roberts, 2005; Papacharissi & Rubin, 2000): (1) The social networking motive encourages users to construct new social connections so they can create interpersonal relationships. (2) The learning motive encourages users to acquire necessary or even unnecessary information from the Internet. (3) The hedonic motive encourages users to access the Internet for entertainment and relaxation purposes.

Because UGC-sharing in online communities aligns with the continuum of Internet usage, UGC-sharing motives are expected to be similar, in most cases, to Internet usage motives. However, UGC-sharing includes users' intentional participation by the creation or exhibition of personal content (Ko et al., 2005; LaRose, 2001). In other words, participation is the key point that differentiates UGC-sharing from traditional Internet usage. In this paper, we emphasize the centrality of 'participation' and its relationship with Situated Learning Theory (Lave & Wenger, 1991) because individuals develop their identities and practice them by participating in UGC communities.

Situated Learning Theory has emerged as a radical alternative to conventional cognitivist theories of knowledge and learning. It emphasizes the relational and structural aspects of learning, as well as the dynamics of identity construction (Handley, Clark, Fincham, & Sturdy, 2007). At its core, Social Learning Theory criticizes assumptions implicit in many conventional theories: (1) 'learning' represents the acquisition of objective knowledge and (2) learning is best achieved during educational/training sessions that remain separate from the settings in which that learning will be applied. In contrast to the cognitivist perspective, Situated Learning Theory considers learning and knowing processes integral to everyday practice in workplace, family, and other social settings. In Social Learning Theory, the focus shifts from decontextualized 'objective' knowledge to the accomplishment of knowing-in-action and knowing-in-practice. Lave and Wenger (1991) argue that participation is central to situated learning because individuals develop their identities and practices based on participatory opportunities made available to them. Participation is not simply an event. It involves the ways individuals understand, take part in, and subscribe to the social norms, behaviors, and values of the communities in which they participate.

Conceptually, UGC-sharing in online communities is similar to the participation described in Situated Learning Theory because UGC-sharing behaviors do not include simple and passive content consumption. Rather, they involve dynamic and active participation. Members upload personal content, communicate with other members, improve their capabilities, and develop themselves with respect to hedonic or utilitarian aspects in both action and practice. Finally, in the context of UGC-sharing, use and gratification evolve to become participation and gratification because of the upgraded three motives, based on participation that occurs in practice. Specifically, the social network motive can be interpreted as the UGC creator's motive to communicate with other users and the creator's motive to form closer relationships with other users by participating in UGC-sharing (socializing motive). In addition, the learning motive can encourage the UGC creator to obtain feedback and comments from other users, as well as to improve the quality of his/her own UGC (learning by doing motive). Finally, the hedonic motive can also be considered the UGC creator's motive to enjoy others' UGC, and, perhaps, even to please others with his/her personal UGC (entertaining motive). The current study proposes that the three motives involved in the participation and Gratification Theory can affect individuals' intentions to engage in UGC-sharing.