Virtual Online Communities as Powerful Secondary Groups in Multiple Social Contexts

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Abstract

Online and offline discussion groups can be quite different with regard to the composition and personality characteristics of their members, the goals of the group and the context in which they exist. Multiple dynamics likely affect and influence the structure and performance of any given group. Most of these dynamics can potentially affect the group, regardless of the domain, virtual or face-to-face, and generate similar result. There are qualities of online communication settings and qualities of face-to-face settings that can uniquely influence the dynamics of a group in those respective settings. This study explores the functioning of virtual online groups and examines potentially influential factors for the workings of groups of various types.

Keywords: Virtual groups, Group Dynamics, Online communication, New Media

1. Introduction

Online groups share many characteristics with their offline counterparts who share physical places. Groups in both realms can be quite different with regard to the makeup and personality traits of their members, the purpose and goals of the group and the context in which they exist. Multiple dynamics likely affect and influence the structure and performance of any given group. Most of these dynamics can potentially affect the group, regardless of the domain, virtual or face-to-face, and generate similar result. There are qualities of online communication settings and qualities of face-to-face settings that can uniquely influence the dynamics of a group in those respective settings (see McKenna & Green, 2002; McKenna & Seidman, 2005 for a complete discussion).

In the next few pages I will explore the functioning of virtual online groups and examine potentially influential factors for the workings of groups of various types. The manuscript is divided into three parts, which examine: (1) the function of motivations and personality factors of individual members within the group, (2) the way in which different types of online groups distinctly function, and (3) features of the internal dynamics of online groups, such as cohesiveness, status and stereotypes, and performance.

2. Individuals and Groups

2.1 Individual Motivations of Members

The literature on traditional motivation theory suggests that all behavior is motivated to some degree and that a person will partake in a particular behavior to realize a specific end (e.g. Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Lewin, 1951). Motivations are not ephemeral, but rather are lasting and cross-situational. Any motivation that is behind a person's actions are expressed within contextually appropriate objectives. These objectives and motivations of group members, coupled with accompanying behaviors can have strong effect on nearly all aspects of the group. However, t is difficult to deconstruct the links between motivation, behavior and result. Next I will discuss two areas in which difficulty can become an issue when attempting to understand the functioning of a group.

• *Different goals, same behavior, different outcomes*

Different motives and goals held by different individuals may be behind the same apparent behavior. For example, a person may join and take part in an online illness support group with the aim of collect more information about the malady. Another person might join the same group to gain social support. Still, a third person might participate in the group to show support for a family member or a friend who suffers from the illness and who may or may not be part of the group. Taking part in the group may lead to different social and psychological outcomes for these individuals, even though they are participating in the same types of activities online (see McKenna & Bargh, 1999; McKenna, Green & Smith, 2001).

• *Different motivational processes, same consequences*

To further confuse the situation, similar results may come from different motivations. For example, reserch shows that when anonymous group interaction is joined by high group salience, the outcome is likely to be high levels of adherence to the group norms (Spears, Postmes, Lea & Wolbert, 2002). On the other hand, greater conformity to group norms can also come about as a result of identifiabilily if certain self-presentational motivations are operating, such as making a positive impression (Barreto & Ellemers, 2000; Douglas & McGarty, 2001).

The way in which an individual utilizes the available resources and interact with others online will rely to a great extent on that individual's motivations and goals. However, not only the individual for whom a particular motivation is operating that is affected, but the group as a whole. The goals of the individual members can interact not only with the Internet communication context to result in social and psychological effects for that individual but also invariably affect the dynamics of the as an entity itself.

2.2 Personality Differences among Members

Personality traits of online group members can greatly influence the functioning of the group just like they do in face-to-face groups. There are two personality traits specifically that have been found to act out differently in online group exchange than they do in traditional offline group interactions. Should a group be composed of a member or more having these personality characteristics, then the internal group dynamics are likely to be quite different if the interaction takes pace online rather than face-to-face. In addition to group dynamics the group structure and performance are also likely to be influenced. These characteristics and their influence on the group will be discussed next.

• *The socially anxious member*

In regular face-to-face groups, individuals who have social anxiety generally take a more passive role than their outgoing counterparts (Leary, 1983). They tend to be slower to respond and with less consistency in group interactions than do non anxious members (Cervin, 1956). Kogan and Wallace (1967) along with others have found that shy group members are more likely to be indecisive and to have more opinion shifts. In addition, in a task-oriented the socially anxious members tend to be happy with group performance even when that performance is sub par (Zander & Wulf, 1966). Finally, socially anxious members tend to be less liked than others in the group.

In online groups, however, the behavior and the standing of socially anxious members are very different (McKenna & Seidman, 2005). Because many of the situational factors that can prompt and worsen feelings of social anxiety (e.g., having to respond on the spot, talking to someone face-to-face) are absent. In online situations, introverted individuals are able to participate in the group interaction on equal footing. As the study discussed below demonstrates, the online environment allows them to interact more comfortably and with less shyness than they would in a face-to-face situation.

McKenna & Seidman (2005) conducted a laboratory experiment examining the effects of communication modality and social anxiety on small-group interaction. Consistent with their responses on the Interaction Anxiousness Scale, socially anxious individuals in the face-to-face condition reported feeling anxiety, shyness, and uneasiness during the group interaction, while the opposite was true for non-anxious subjects. In marked contrast, interacting online produced significantly different results. Participants reported feeling considerably less anxious, shy, and uneasy, and more accepted by their fellow group members than did those who communicated face-to-face.

• *The aggressive member*

Another personality trait that may influence online group dynamics is aggressiveness. Many of the social boundaries that usually provide constrains on aggressive or dominating personalities within face-to-face situations are removed from online group situations (Sproull & Kiesler, 1985). The depersonalized condition under which online groups operate can decrease a member's sense of personal accountability (Spears et al. 2002) and hence increase his or her readiness to be involved in antisocial or insufferable behavior within the group. Friction within the group can become an issue within an online setting as a result. The phenomenon know as

"flame wars" could erupt in large online groups causing divisions within the group that may very well eventually lead to its demise. Online groups with open membership often discover in due course that they have attracted the attention of a "troll" – someone who joins the group with the aim of destabilizing and engaging the larger group in conflict. Depending on the norms and structure of the group such members may or may not succeed in their efforts (McKenna & Seidman, 2005).

Aggressiveness should not take an antisocial and obnoxious form, however. Just as in face-to-face interactions, members who, acting within social bounds, are more persistent in pushing their agendas while simultaneously taking an vigorous and strong role in the group will exert a strong influence on the group. In an environment without cues beyond the text, it is quite possible that the "mere exposure" effect (Zajonc, 1965) would result in the persistent member exercising greater influence over the group than would occur in other settings.

3. The Dynamics of Different Online Groups

Online groups differ in many ways. Groups with certain qualities and goals will generate different effects on members than other groups with different characteristics and purpose. Put differently, the range of features of communication will interact with quality and purpose of the group. The interpersonal effects of online interaction will diverge as a result of the social context. According to Katelyn & McKenna (2008) there are five distinct kinds of groups based on their characteristics and goals: Organizational groups, mainstream groups, stigmatized groups and support groups.

3.1 Organizational groups

Organizational groups, whether they are online or face-to-face, are different in many ways from groups that are social in nature. In a social context, features of online communication, such as anonymity and the lack of physical presence, can lead to greater self-disclosure and feelings closeness (see Joinson & Paine, 2007). On the other hand, Organizational settings these same features can lead to opposite effect. Research has shown them to result in greater distrust between participants when it comes to issues such as negotiations.

Thompson & Nadler (2002) in their investigation of electronic negotiations have identified a major problem that occurs in "e-gotiation": Negotiating parties often read into time delays in receiving responses from their opponents. Negotiating partners in a purely social setting attribute quite different motivations to such delays. For example, in a formal negotiation situation, people tend to assume that the other party will receive and read an e-mail immediately after they have sent it expecting an immediate response. Consequently, a delayed response is interpreted as stalling, power plays, or a sign of disrespect by the other end rather than the person was simply unavailable at the time. As a result, online negotiations can become bitter resulting in a less than satisfactory agreement.

3.2 The Mainstream Social Group

 Mainstream groups as the name indicates are non-specific and non-specialized informal social groups that have no particular purpose such as business negotiations or social support. These online groups fall into two categories: common bond and common identity groups. In common bond groups such as family members joined together by social media like "Whatsapp" attachment to the group is based on the bonds that exist between group members. In common identity groups, such as a sports team, attachment to the group is based on the identification with the group as a whole (i.e. purpose and goals) rather than the bond between group members (Prentice, Miller & Lightdale, 1994). Sassenberg (2002) has examined groups that fell into these categories on the Internet. His research indicates that in common identity groups, as compared with common bond groups, there is greater adherence to group norms. Common identity groups develop norms within them that have greater effect on group members' behavior. Thus the kind of group one belongs to matters.

3.3 Stigmatized Groups

Individuals with a stigmatized identity can benefit greatly from participating in online groups devoted to that identity. Identifying oneself in a face-to-face situation is difficult and can be socially costly for individuals with such identity. Online groups offer the anonymity that removes these constraints making it easy to interact with others and share experience without the threat of social sanctions. Because there are little or no ofline groups of that nature, membership and participation in a relevant social group can become an important part of one's social life and can have significant effects on one's sense of self and identity.

McKenna and Bargh (1998) found that people with stigmatized social identities are more responsive to feedback they received from other group members than their counterparts in non-stigmatized groups. In other words, the norms of these groups exert a greater than usual influence over member's behavior. These members are motivated to behave in such a way as to gain acceptance and positive evaluation from other members. Thus, compared to mainstream Internet groups, within stigmatized groups, participation is significantly increased when there was positive feedback from other group members and the opposite is true when the feedback is negative.

According to Deaux's (1996) model of social identity, active partaking in a stigmatized-identity group should lead to the integration of the virtualgroup membership into the self. Individuals then tend to be motivated to make this significant and new aspect of self into a social reality (e.g., Gollwitzer,
1986) by sharing it with important others. Consistent with this, McKenna and Bargh (1998) revealed that many participants taking part in such online groups had, as a result of their Internet group participation, come out to their family and friends about this stigmatized aspect of themselves for
the first time in their lives. Through their participation, they gained from increased self-acceptance and felt less socially isolated and different. Clearly, membership and participation in Internet groups can have powerful effects on one's self and identity.

3.4 Support Groups

The benefits from participating in online groups cannot be seen more clearly than in groups which offer social support to people who are afflicted with illness or psychological distress. Barak and Dolev-Cohen (2006) conducted a longitudinal study with emotionally distressed adolescents who were members of an online support network for distressed teenagers. They found that those who engaged in more active participation in the first month of the study experience significantly less emotional distress by the third month of the study as opposed to those who participated less. In line with these findings, greater participation in an online community support group for the elderly is positively related to lower perceived life stress (Wright, 2000).

For those who lack social support from the members of their established social network, online support groups can prove to be a significant alternative. For example, in a study of diabetics Barrera et. al (2002) found that those who were assigned to an online diabetes support group felt they had received more support than those who were asked to use the Internet for information gathering about their illness only. Participation online for the hearing impaired was also found to be particularly beneficial with little face-to-face support (Cummings, Sproll & Kaiser, 2002). Online support may be vital for those who feel actively forbidden from turning to family members or face-to-face groups. Davison et al. (2000) found that people are particularly likely to turn to Internet support if they are suffering from an embarrassing or stigmatized illness such as prostate cancer because of the relative anonymity of the online community. These patients experience a high level of anxiety and uncertainty and thus are highly motivated to seek help and support from others afflicted with the same illness.

However, differences between kinds of support groups can lead to markedly different results and to different group dynamics. For example, Blank and Adams-Blodnieks (2007) found significant differences in the communicators in breast cancer support groups compared with those taking part in prostate cancer support groups online. Groups related to the female-oriented disease were composed largely of survivors themselves (87%), with spouses of the survivors making up only 3 percent of the group membership. In contrast, both spouses (29%) and family and friends of survivors (17%) were active members in the groups related to the male-oriented illness, with the survivors themselves making up just slightly more than half (54%) of the group. These differences in the makeup of membership lead to differences in the kinds of support wanted (emotional versus treatment-related) as well as the topics addressed in the two kinds of groups.

4. Internal Dynamics of Groups

4.1 Cohesion and Influence

The cohesiveness of a group, the amount of influence group members exert influence on one another, and the extent to which members will adhere to group norms are affected by many factors. In online groups specifically, the anonymity of members is particularly significant in encouraging or hamper cohesion and influence.

Spears et al. (2002) have suggested that anonymous communication within groups leads to a feeling of depersonalization by the group members. Specifically, when members sense a lack of personal accountability

and personal identity then the group level identity becomes more significant. When the group identity becomes more salient, group norms can have a stronger effect than face-to-face situations. The degree, to which group identity is heightened, however, plays a significant role in shaping what the outcomes of anonymity will be on the development and influence of group norms.

For example, Spears, Lea and Lee (1990) discovered that when members of online groups interacted anonymously and group salience was high, normative behavior increased in those groups as contrasted to online groups in which member's identity was hidden but the salience of the group was low. An intermediate level of conformity was achieved in regardless of group salience in face-to-face situations.

Postmes et al. (2001) examined the effects of primed behavior in electronic groups. They found that primed subjects with either task-oriented or socio-emotional behavior before participating in online groups under either anonymous or identifying conditions. Subjects in the anonymous groups displayed behavior consistent with the corresponding primes they received, markedly more so than did their counterparts in identifiable groups. Normative behavior strengthened over time in the anonymous condition, with the participants conforming even more strongly to the primed behavior. Conversely, when members were identifiable to others, their behavior ran counter to the norms and became even more prime-inconsistent over time.

4.2 Power and Status

Generally speaking, equal status increases the chances of perceived similarities both within and between groups thus enhancing the likelihood for improvement in their relationship (McClendon, 1974). This is especially the case when it comes to groups containing minority members. It also resulted in reduced stereotypes when there is in-group and out-group interaction (Pettigrew, 1971). In face-to-face interactions, even the slightest differences in manner of dress, body language, use of personal space, and the seating arrangement in the room can hide real or perceived status differences. Within group interactions tend to make people highly sensitive in discerning subtle cues that may be indicative of status (Hogg, 1992).

The situation is different in online interactions because many of the cues that people rely on to estimate the status of others are missing. Nevertheless, there are ways in which a member's status can be gauged in online groups. For example, Sassenberg et al. (2001) found that those members perceived as experts in terms of task-related knowledge are generally considered as more useful resources for information and are given more room in interactive discussions to share their view points. When such differences do become apparent and they are highly relevant to the task at hand, they can have an even more marked influence than occurs in equivalent groups in face-to-face situations (see Postmes et al., 2002).

In other situations where the status differences are known, online interactions tend to ameliorate some of the effects of status differentials. For example, when combining members of two established groups, the members are likely to be well aware of the status structure within their own group even if the do not know about the pecking order of the other group's members. In face-to-face situations such distinction within the groups often become clear to all, as those who stand lower tend to speak less often and give deference to those with higher status within their group.

This is not the case in online situations. In electronic communication there is generally a reduction in the usual inhibitions that typically occur when one is interacting with his or her superiors. In other words, existing internal status does not figure prominently and does not affect the behavior of group members to such an extent. Less superior members are more likely to speak up, to speak "out of turn" and to share their thoughts freely. Therefore, online communication makes power structures less relevant during discussions enabling all members to contribute more or less equally (Spears at al., 2002).

5. The Emergence of Group Leaders

In both online and offline, as group membership becomes increasingly prominent, members tend to become more sensitive to prototypical qualities of the group. In other words they become more aware of the characteristics that differentiate that group from other groups like it. They also become sensitive to how each member compares to the groups prototype. Social identity theory of leadership suggests that when there is a high degree of overlap between the individual's qualities (e.g. goals, values and attitude) and the group prototype, that individual is likely to become group leader (Hogg & Reid, 2001).

Research on leadership emergence has shown that people have a heightened awareness of the most subtle differences in prototypicality among group members (Hogg, 1992). They are able to delineate which group member comes the closest to the group's prototype and thus become group leader. Therefore, group leaders are those individuals who seem to best personify the behaviors and norms other group members are trying to conform to.

Group leaders not only exemplify group norms and values, but are also active in trying to influence the behavior of other members. This is especially the case in established groups. However, such is not the case in newly formed groups. In new groups, individuals who best fit the prototype do become leaders, but not because of their ability to influence others in the group. Rather, they are perceived to be exerting an effort to influence the less prototypical members. However, in reality it is not the individual who is exercising the influence but the prototype that the leader happens to most closely fit (Hogg & Reid, 2001).

One would expect that the social identity theory of leadership would apply even more strongly in online groups than in face-to-face groups for several reasons. Factors that have been shown to determine who will be seen as best fitting the group prototype, such as physical appearance and interpersonal dominance, are not generally present in online contexts. In face-to-face situations, the individual who most closely fits the goals, values and ideals of the group might nonetheless be dismissed as potential leader by other members because factors such as age, physical attractiveness, and race may play a role in their assessment. Age and race often go counter to group prototype and members are often not aware that they influence their judgment about someone (Bargh, 1989). Because these factors are generally not present in online situations, they would not play an important role and thus would not hinder the most prototypical person's chances to become group leader.

6. Group Performance

Many organizations today have working teams whose members are dispersed all around the globe and who regularly communicate and collaborate on professional tasks through the Internet. Their efforts are routinely met with success even though the team members have never met in person and are unlikely to do so. This phenomenon is known as a "virtual team" (Katelyn & McKenna, 2008). The deployment and utilization of virtual teams is becoming ever more common in today's organizations, especially as the rewards of having virtual teams have become more noticeable (Cascio, 2000). For example, employers have noticed that telecommuting increases worker productivity and reduces absenteeism (Abreu, 2000).

Research has shown that virtual teams perform as well as face-to-face work teams. Dennis & Kinney (1998) have conducted a number of studies examining the functioning face-to-face and virtual work groups with mixed results. For example, they discovered that face-to-face work groups tend to share less vital information than do members of electronic work groups. On the other hand, members of electronic groups also tend to make poor group decisions, irrespective of the fact that they shared 50% more vital information needed to make the best possible decision. Galegher and Kraut (1994) also found that for virtual work teams, the final outcome of interaction was not different in overall quality from that of face-to-face groups. This is consistent with the observation made by Brandon and Hollingshead (2007) that technology "intertwines" with the specific tasks being performed to affect group out comes. Specifically, some tasks are better suited with better expected results through virtual interaction, while others require higher levels of communication richness achieved through face-to-face interaction to assure their success.

7. Conclusion

A multitude of factors can combine to contribute to the shape the nature and functioning of online groups. Some factors are equally important for groups which communicate in a face-to-face context. Some elements, while wield some influence in real life situations, exert even more influence in online situations. Yet other factors appear uniquely to influence the dynamics of online groups.

Different categories of online groups will operate differently depending on the context. The organizational group will function differently than the recreational or the support group. Groups within these larger categories will differ from one another as well depending on the composition of their individual members and their personal characteristics. The various goals and personality traits of the individuals will uniquely affect the group in question.

Issues such as the level of anonymity of the members and the importance of the group identity will uniquely interact with the situational context in which the group is functioning to shape the behavior of the members and the overall group dynamic and structure. All the factors make the dynamics of online groups more fluid and ever changing.

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