

Chapter 20

Perceptions of Identity and Expertise in Heavy Metal Fans within One Online Community of Practice

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ABSTRACT

Identity is central to learning (Wenger, 1998), and identity in online forums can be represented verbally in posts and comments as well as non-verbally through choices such as username, user picture, and signature. How a forum user interacts with others based on their perceptions of another users' identity and expertise impacts their experiences. This chapter examines informal learning experiences and behaviour based on the perceptions of others for three heavy metal fans within an online forum through a cyber-ethnographic study. This study explores participants' interactions with both verbal and non-verbal content to form their perceptions of others, including perceptions of expertise. The participants controlled how they interacted with content and other users in a Web 2.0 environment, which impacted the shared construction of knowledge based on their perceptions of identity.

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INTRODUCTION

This chapter discusses learning in online environments, specifically forums, and then focuses on the study of sub-cultures within communities of practice, namely the sub-culture of heavy metal. Identity is central to learning (Wenger, 1998) and interaction is central to identity, as engagement between actors creates meaning for the site of the interaction (in this case an online forum) and the forum participants themselves (Norwell et al., 2006). We can learn and potentially improve instructional design in formal settings by studying informal learning and participants' perceptions of others' identities. How a forum user interacts with other users based on their perceptions of another users' identity and expertise impacts their experiences. In addition, since sub-culture groups and some communities of practice have strong identities (Desanctis et al., 2003; Hill & Hughes, 1998) this research sought to examine informal learning experiences and behaviour based on the perceptions of identity of others for three heavy metal fans in online forums through an ethnographic study.

Research Questions

- What does identity mean to heavy metal fans in online forums?
- What is the role of online identity in community acceptance?
- What is the role of online identity in perception of expertise?

REVIEW OF LITERATURE

Learning in Forums

The technology used to create learning environments and the affordances each technology provides can have an impact on the types of learning which occur, in that how the participants

manage their interactions and have experiences within these technological structures controls the extent to which the users learn within these environments (Desanctis et al., 2003). The nature of asynchronous online learning environments, whether used for formal learning or not, affords a larger and more diverse audience with benefits, such as more information resources and more opportunities for idea generation (Desanctis et al., 2003). Johnstone's review of communities of practice shows that forums are in fact an ideal environment for the development of communities of practice (Johnstone, 2001), which are discussed later in this section.

Historically it has been believed that online communities using "lean" communication such as forums, face limitations in terms of communication, but in fact they can develop complex communication, and technology does not solely dictate the levels of knowledge building and learning (Carlson & Zmud, 1999). While Desanctis et al. (2003) focus their study on online communities which are open but dedicated to learning subjects such as software rather than entertainment topics like music and heavy metal, informal forums such as the forum being studied – i.e. a heavy metal music fans' discussion forum – with a strong, well-established community can be defined as successful if using their definition of being "longstanding; people visit repeatedly, and participants from a sense of mutual identity" (p. 3). The participants, albeit a small subset, do meet face-to-face, and the forum cannot be easily destroyed or deleted, in this case because they are attached to an online magazine and have been in existence for 10 years.

Communication within online forums generally takes the form of conversation and is free-flowing, not structured or facilitated (beyond moderation), and as such, analysis and challenge levels of knowledge and sense-making are not prevalent, although they do occur as would be expected within a well established community of practice (Desanctis et al., 2003). In an open and asynchronous community, learning in the formal

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