Chapter 5.4

Social Identities, Group Formation, and the Analysis of Online Communities

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ABSTRACT

Central to research in social psychology is the means in which communities form, attract new members, and develop over time. Research has found that the relative anonymity of Internet communication encourages self-expression and facilitates the formation of relationships based on shared values and beliefs. Self-expression in online social networks enables identity experimentation and development. As identities are fluid, situationally contingent, and are the perpetual subject and object of negotiation within the individual, the presented and perceived identity of the individual may not match reality. In this chapter, the authors consider the psychological challenges unique to understanding the dynamics of social identity formation and strategic interaction in online social networks. The psychological development of social identities in online social network interaction is discussed, highlighting how collective identity and self-categorization associates social identity to online group formation. The overall aim of this chapter is to explore how social identity affects the formation and development of online communities, how to analyze the development of these communities, and the implications such social networks have within education.

INTRODUCTION

Central to research in social psychology is the means in which communities form, attract new members, and develop over time. The mechanisms in which communities grow depend on an individual's ability to find and collaborate with others with relevant knowledge, skills, and beliefs that meet a particular need. While these mechanisms of social collaboration are not unlike traditional face-to-face interactions (Tyler, 2002), there are some important differences in the way in which group members interact in online environments. Relative anonym-

ity, selective self-disclosure, physical appearance, and the ease in finding 'familiar others' through search, embedded traits, and predefined groups, are some of the important differences between Internet communication and face-to-face interactions (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna, Green, & Gleason, 2002; Walther, 2007). Research into Internet social interaction has led to an increased understanding of face-to-face communications and brings into focus the implicit assumptions and biases that exist in traditional communication (Lea & Spears, 1995; Tyler, 2002). Assumptions that mediate face-to-face interactions such as physical proximity and non-verbal cues, assumed necessary to communicate and relate, do not exist in most Internet communications. However, given these limitations, online social communities continue to thrive and grow. The evolution of online communities confronts current views of how social and psychological dynamics contribute to human relationships, communication, and community formation.

Research supports the idea that the relative anonymity of Internet communication encourages self-expression and facilitates the formation of relationships outside of what is considered 'normal' socially mediated communication (Wallace, 1999). The complex origins of shared values and beliefs (Bargh & McKenna, 2004), self-expression through identity experimentation (Ruitenberg, 2003), and relative anonymous interaction (i.e. strangers on the train effect; Derlega & Chaikin, 1977; Rubin, 1975) challenge ideas of an 'individual' identity in relationship formation (Lea & Spears, 1995). As individual identities are malleable, adaptable, and the perpetual subject and object of negotiation within each context (Jenkins, 2004), the notion of identity requires an incessant comparison between the individual, the context in which they are interacting, their intentionality in the context of that interaction, and their 'true' (nominal) identity. The irregular nature in which individuals present arbitrary identities in various contexts, with multiple intentions, and within different social groups, results in a novel dynamic to human community formation and evolution.

In this chapter, we consider the psychological challenges unique to understanding the dynamics of social identity formation and strategic interaction in online social networks. We start with a brief overview of aspects within social psychology that are pertinent to a discussion on social identity formation in online social networks. Specifically, we introduce Social Identity Theory as a perspective in which to frame our current understanding of online social network formation. Next, the psychological development of *social (virtual) identities* (Jenkins, 2004) are explored in online social networks using the conceptualization of *self-presentation* (Goffman, 1959/1997). A discussion of collective identity and self-categorization follows and relates how social identity contributes to online group formation and evolution. Further, to illustrate how to evaluate the effectiveness of online social networks, we review several studies on online social networks using ethnographic methodologies, visualization techniques, and social network analysis (SNA). Finally, we present practical teaching and learning strategies educators can use to facilitate the use of social software for online social network formation within educational environments. The overall aim of this chapter is to explore how social identity affects the formation and development of online communities, to present some methodologies for evaluating the effectiveness of group formation, and to explore the implications of online social networks within education.

SOCIAL IDENTITY AND THE INTERNET

All human identities are social identities (Jenkins, 2004). Social identity concerns how we identify our similarities and differences to other known groups of individuals. Social identify is an ongoing interplay between how we identify

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