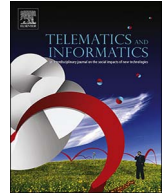


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Latent communities of digital publications: The role of editors, followers, and advertisers

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ABSTRACT

This research explores how digital publications may be turned into something more than just a meeting point for people who are seeking information and may become a latent community. The paper proposes that the network of editors, followers, and advertisers of digital publications determine the user sense of community towards the publication. While the pattern of connections among editors and followers reinforces the sense of community, advertisers act as intruders who weaken the feasibility of building a community. Data were collected from followers of digital publications. The dynamics of the sense of community is described as a process in which informational value and identification are essential to nurturing readers' soft or hard commitment. Findings indicate that the strong ties between editors and followers as well as the diversity positively impacts on informational value and identification, whereas advertising intrusiveness diminishes the informational value.

1. Introduction

Nowadays, many digital publications and online magazines offer information to consumers concerning several subjects of interest: fashion (fashionista.com), automobiles (motortrend.com), technology (gizmodo.com), food and drink (oola.com), games (game-spot.com), etc. In these publications, we can observe a network of relationships among the three parties: publishers and their editorial team, readers or followers, and advertisers or sponsors. Each contribute to and benefit from the resources embedded within, available through, and derived from said network.

The publication's editors offer information in line with readers' interests, thereby enabling advertisers to reach a large and/or high profile audience of potential consumers for their brands and products. Readers and followers can not only read the contents but can also share and comment on them, and can even have forums for interaction. A sense of community thus emerges among individuals who feel attached to these publications. Individuals who read these digital publications can evolve from being mere readers to becoming engaged supporters displaying a sense of identity and can eventually turn into content providers who complete the information by voting and commenting on posts and by interacting with other users, thus contributing to a richer experience with the publication. Consequently, the latent communities that spontaneously and naturally stem from these digital publications (hereafter, publications' online communities, POCs) are not the core service of the digital publication (the main content is provided by the publisher and its editorial team), but rather a manifestation of its success.

Although, online communities are hosted by publishers who are independent of the brands, they seek profit through brand advertising. Readers are also expected to pay attention to the publication's ads and sponsored content and to display a preference and a buying behavior favorable to the advertisers, which in turn provides the revenues required to sustain the publication's business.

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Paradoxically, the presence of advertisers in the digital publication might be perceived as intrusiveness and so spoil community building.

Despite the abundant research on knowledge and information exchange in online communities applied to professional community settings (Chiu et al., 2006; Lin et al., 2009) and to communities of consumers (Chan and Li, 2010; Lu et al., 2010; Thomas et al., 2013; Breitsohl et al., 2015), to the best of our knowledge, research has thus failed to focus on online communities that support digital publications. Given such a context, we attempt to address the following research questions: What are the dynamics of the sense of community among the followers of digital publications? What nurtures followers' sense of community? To what extent does advertising impact on identification with the community and on follower commitment?

To address these questions, the current research proposes, on the basis of the sense of community theory (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), that the sense of community in digital publications is grounded on three pillars: the primary functional benefit they provide (i.e., informational value), the feeling of membership and emotional connection (i.e., the identification), and the intention to invest time or effort in the long run (i.e., commitment). We examine three actors who determine the sense of community: the editors, the followers, and the advertisers. Based on the network theory (Granovetter, 1973, 1983) we maintain that the structure of connections among followers and editors (strong ties and diversity) is a driver of identification and perceived informational value, while the perceived intrusiveness of advertising (banners and sponsored content) acts as an inhibitor of individuals' identification and value perception. To test our proposed hypotheses, we chose a firm specializing in digital publications and collected data from the users of different publications in order to encompass different thematic areas (technology, lifestyle, automobiles, leisure, and economy).

This research makes a number of contributions. First, we examine the extent to which the three participants in a publication – editors, followers and advertisers – impact on the sense of community. Although previous works have studied the influence of bloggers' credibility as a determinant of success (Lu et al., 2014), together with social capital as a determinant of consumer participation and commitment in online communities (Chang and Chuang, 2011; Chiu et al., 2006), there is little research investigating the effect of advertising in online communities (Becker-Olsen, 2003; Andreini et al., 2014). Second, extending the Breitsohl et al. (2015) classification, which distinguishes two types of community-host (consumers and firms), the current paper identifies a third kind of host: a publisher, that has its own profit goals and revenue sources (as a firm) and is neutral with regard to content focus (as consumers). Third, while most prior literature explores the drivers of consumer participation and information-sharing, we consider that the element defining these latent communities is not only participation (since readers and followers are not supposed to be the main content generators), but the perceived informational value and identification with the community.

2. Sense of community in digital publications

2.1. Publications' online communities

Breitsohl et al. (2015) propose a typology of online consumption communities based on their content focus (brand vs. activity communities) and type of host (consumer-hosted vs. firm-hosted communities). Including POCs in this typology is not clear since there are certain differences with other online consumption communities. There is some ambiguity about the content focus and about the host. As regards content, the focus of these digital publications is usually an activity or a common interest (i.e., fashion, technology, sports, cooking, etc.), not a brand, although the community identity does eventually tend to be built around the publication brand, as with brand communities. As for the type of community host, POCs cannot be categorized as either company- or consumer-hosted. Although they are actually hosted by companies the objective is not to promote the brand or activity itself (publishing) but to offer information about other subjects from a neutral point of view. Therefore, POCs represent a blurred category of online consumption communities.

In addition, most of the literature addressing online communities (Breitsohl et al., 2015; Wang et al., 2015; Pai and Tsai, 2016) focuses on the exchange of user-generated content, where consumers post comments and opinions about brands and activities. In many cases, consumer or user-generated content is the *raison d'être* of the online consumption community. Although the behaviors that characterize online consumption communities are consumer interaction (Lin et al., 2015) and content posting (Breitsohl et al., 2015; Malinen, 2015; Teichmann et al., 2015), these behaviors are not indispensable when it comes to building a POC. What is unique in POCs is that a proactive consumer role in creating content is not necessarily expected because information is basically provided by the publication's editors. Followers can participate by commenting on and sharing information, but the degree of interaction and active participation is lower than in other communities. In this sense, some authors agree that participation should not only be viewed through content sharing, and claim that passive participation has been overlooked (Hu et al., 2016; Malinen, 2015). This passive participation refers to simply watching and reading information, known as lurking. In these cases, the perception of activity and social presence is made visible through displays of site usage (Malinen, 2015), such as the number of likes, number of visits, etc. Therefore, a sense of belonging to a virtual community may exist among followers who do not post content and who are mere spectators, and who read and spend time in the community (Malinen, 2015). Even if they do not know each other, they are aware of the existence of a group of followers they belong to.

2.2. The pillars of the sense of community in digital publications: informational value, identification and commitment

According to the theory of sense of community (McMillan and Chavis, 1986), the sense of community is defined by four elements: membership, influence, fulfillment of needs, and shared emotional connection. Membership is the feeling of belonging or being a part of the community and it means that there are boundaries (people who belong and people who do not). Influence refers to both, the

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