



# Common voice: Analysis of behavior modification and content convergence in a popular online community



Jude P. Mikal<sup>a,\*</sup>, Ronald E. Rice<sup>b</sup>, Robert G. Kent<sup>a</sup>, Bert N. Uchino<sup>a</sup>

<sup>a</sup> Psychology Department, University of Utah, United States

<sup>b</sup> Department of Communication, University of California, Santa Barbara, United States

## ARTICLE INFO

### Article history:

Available online 29 March 2014

## ABSTRACT

This study analyzes images and associated commentary from an online image-sharing community ([www.imgur.com](http://www.imgur.com)). We hypothesize that, in the presence of overt communication of social rules, site content will reflect a somewhat consistent, content convergence irrespective of who comments, given that an individual's social identity, rather than their individual identity, will dominate their online interactions. We began with a random sample of 5000 images, and we grouped those images into six categories. We then randomly selected 10 images from each category, and conducted a close qualitative analysis of the micro-comments submitted in response to those images. Our results suggest that there is an overt communication of behavioral standards through explicit behavior correction by other site members. Content convergence can also be observed both in responses to a single image, and more broadly in comment similarity across images and even categories. Cultural norms and resulting content convergence suggests that individuals may come to see themselves as representatives of the site when they post – and may modify their behavior accordingly. This may lead to the perception that a *common voice* appears throughout the site, which may have implications for the communication of social support over the Internet, and for more quantitative analyses.

© 2014 Elsevier Ltd. All rights reserved.

## 1. Introduction

Research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) tends to view websites as virtual spaces where individuals meet and interact rather than as social entities whose character or identity influences the interactions that occur within them. In this study, we examine the role that a website's culture can take in determining the types of interactions that occur there. Using Social Identity Theory (SIT) and Social Identification and Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) theory, we hypothesize that as individuals create or join groups online, they will come to identify as members of those groups, and will modify their own behavior so as to affirm group membership. As individuals learn the generally accepted rules of conduct associated with the site, their online interactions will shift to reflect their social – rather than individual – identities. The result will be a *common voice* emanating from the website: a generally cohesive tone, characterized by overall consistent responses, and overt behavior correction.

Imgur.com is an online image-sharing community. The website is currently the 49th most visited site on the Internet, with esti-

mates of over 75 million unique visitors per month. Imgur estimates that in 2012, 300 million images were uploaded, and the site received 364 billion page views (or roughly 1 billion per day). In spite these overwhelming numbers of images, comments, and users, discussions in weblog communities have noted not only the presence of a cohesive community, but have ascribed specific characteristics to Imgur members, specifically as they relate to particular outgroups (e.g., Reddit) (Broderick, 2013; Gannes, 2012). In this study we analyze a stratified random sample of 60 publicly available images and associated commentary from [www.imgur.com](http://www.imgur.com). We conduct a close textual analysis of the comments submitted in response to the images, and evaluate common voice using three criteria: (1) explicit communication of behavioral standards or behavior correction by other site members, (2) the repetition of comments/content beneath a single image, and (3) the repetition of comments/content across images and categories of images. Better understanding how group identification impacts site content has important implications for the study of online social interaction, including computer-mediated social support exchanges.

## 2. Theoretical framework

We begin with a brief overview of Deindividuation Theory and Social Identity Theory, with a particular focus on behavioral

\* Corresponding author. Tel.: +1 (801) 585-7139.

E-mail addresses: [mikal@csbs.utah.edu](mailto:mikal@csbs.utah.edu) (J.P. Mikal), [rrice@comm.ucsb.edu](mailto:rrice@comm.ucsb.edu) (R.E. Rice), [rob.kent@psych.utah.edu](mailto:rob.kent@psych.utah.edu) (R.G. Kent), [bert.uchino@psych.utah.edu](mailto:bert.uchino@psych.utah.edu) (B.N. Uchino).

modifications. Next, we review social identification in online social environments.

### 2.1. Deindividuation

The examination of the role of the social with relation to the self is rooted in the study of “submergence”, by *Le Bon* (1895). Attempting to explain the mob-like behavior perceived to have dominated during the French revolution, *Le Bon* held that, and that submergence leads to a loss of self-restraint, making individuals capable of indulging basic and destructive impulses. Submergence held that the social self and the rational self were in opposition, so participation in groups liberated individuals from rational self-restraint. Like submergence, Deindividuation theory built upon the assumption that the social and rational selves exist in opposition. Early empirical work found largely confirmatory evidence that deindividuation correlated positively with heightened hostility in group discussions (*Cannavale, Scarr, & Pepitone, 1970; Festinger, Pepitone, & Newcomb, 1952*). In these studies, deindividuation was measured by an inability to attribute arguments or statements to specific individuals following a group discussion.

Among the critiques that have been levied against Deindividuation theory, two have particular relevance here. First, Deindividuation theory holds that only two states are possible – one in which the individual acts entirely rationally, and a second in which an individual is immersed in a group and loses all ability to self-regulate. The second critique comes from empirical counterevidence that suggests that immersion within a group does not always result in anti-normative behavior. Where several studies showed an increase in violent, anti-social behavior (*Donnerstein, Donnerstein, & Evans, 1972; Watson, 1973*), in some situations under conditions of anonymity, deindividuation produced pro-social behavior (*Diener, 1976; Zabrick & Miller, 1972*). Such empirical counterevidence gave rise to the qualification that, rather than pro- or antisocial, as such, deindividuation promoted behavior in keeping with group norms. According to *Reicher, Spears, and Postmes (1995)*, “. . . the classic deindividuation paradigm of anonymity within a social group, far from leading to uncontrolled behavior, maximizes the opportunity of group members to give full voice to their collective identities” (p. 161). Two alternative explanations for the prosocial behavioral modification found in anonymous groups include Social Identity Theory and Social Identity model of Deindividuation, discussed below.

### 2.2. Social Identity Theory

Like Deindividuation theory, Social Identity Theory holds that the individual identity is constructed of a personal and a social self (*Tajfel, 1970; Tajfel, Flament, Billig, & Bundy, 1971*). However, unlike Deindividuation theory, SIT holds that group participation can affirm personal identity, and that rather than a liberation from internal control, as a person shifts from the personal to the social self, internal controls are replaced by external, social controls, leading to the expression of a social self. Furthermore, individuals can identify with multiple groups, or have multiple social identities. Studies have found that, simply designating a group as such is enough to produce feelings of social identity, and once a group is formed and members begin to identify with the group, members will begin to modify their own behavior so as to affirm their group membership (*Ashforth & Mael, 1989; Brewer, 1979*).

This is consistent with the *Reicher, Spears, and Postmes* quote above: that group membership gives individuals the occasion to express their collective identities. Indeed, some conceive of community as a moral entity that transforms the individual through group pressure (*Poplin, 1979*). Moreover, through the process of self-anchoring, an individual’s own positive self-image may

become projected onto the group at large, creating a social attraction towards other members of the group, based simply on co-membership (*Cadinu & Rothbart, 1996*).

### 2.3. Social Identity model of Deindividuation in the online context

The Internet has changed not only the forms and possibilities of communication but also those of group formation. There is extensive early literature on how different conceptualizations of community support or challenge the potential for the development and support of online communities (*Calhoun, 1986; Katz, Rice, Acord, Dasgupta, & David, 2004; Rheingold, 2000*).

Online or virtual communities are often characterized by intimate secondary relationships, specialized relationships, weaker ties, and homogeneity by interest (*Wellman & Gulia, 1999*). Anonymity, the ability to join and leave groups or lurk, and the limited socio-emotional range of text raised serious questions about the durability and cohesiveness of online communities (*Rice, 1987*). Thus some early research on computer-mediated communication (CMC) showed a negative correlation between Internet use and offline social interaction, characterizing Internet users as socially reclusive and anxious, with greater risk of depression and isolation (*Kraut et al., 1998*; for recent arguments, see *Turkle, 2012*). As a result, it is unsurprising that studies of online group interactions assumed that increased anonymity would lead to an increase in disinhibited and antisocial behavior (thus the “cues filtered out” model; *Culnan & Markus, 1987*). This assumed negativity in online interactions seemed plausible given reports of “flaming”, or posting inflammatory or indiscriminately negative comments online (*Kiesler, Siegel, & McGuire, 1984*).

Yet other and later researchers found the opposite (*Hiltz & Tur-off, 1978; Katz & Rice, 2002; Walther, Anderson, & Park, 1994*). Rather than an increase in antisocial behavior, studies using the Social Identity model of Deindividuation (SIDE) theory found that Internet users in online environments were more likely to exhibit pro-social behavior and little flaming, particularly when primed with behavioral expectations and under conditions of anonymity (*Lea, O’Shea, Fung, & Spears, 1992; Postmes, Spears, Sakhel, & de Groot, 2001*). Unlike physical communities, the anonymity of online communities can make people *more* willing to help each other (*Wellman & Gulia, 1999*). However, in keeping with the proposed influence of a salient group identity, *Douglas and McGarty (2001)* found, in four studies, that identified in-group CMC users described anonymous out-group users more abstractly, or in accordance with their own group norms. Over time individuals can come to categorize, identify and compare themselves as part of various online groups (*Howard & Magee, 2013*), and online communities can impose community standards as a way of fostering group identity (*Albrecht, 2006; Tepper, 1997*). Further, as users gain more experience with computer-mediated communication, they become better able to express emotions (*Rice & Love, 1987*), and develop and maintain relationships as well as or even better than in face-to-face communication (*Walther, 1996*, referring to his Social Information Processing theory and the concept of “hyperpersonal” online interaction). Due to this increased intimacy in online settings, potential for identification, and the imposition of community standards, we expect to see site content converge towards more cohesive content.

### 2.4. Research objectives

Social Identification and Deindividuation Effects (SIDE) theory implies, then, that despite the ease of entry and exit from online groups, large group membership, extensive content, a lack of personal accountability, and user anonymity, online groups may develop a common group identity, separate from individual users’

Download English Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/en/article/350550>

Download Persian Version:

<https://daneshyari.com/article/350550>

[Daneshyari.com](https://daneshyari.com)