



Styles of moderation in online health and support communities: An experimental comparison of their acceptance and effectiveness



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ABSTRACT

Medical and social support communities depend very much on the active participation of their members. An active nurturing and moderation of online community activities is often necessary to overcome typical problems of community interaction, such as a lack of trust and active engagement. However, it is unclear what types of moderation and social control members do accept and which are effective. We study the acceptance and effectiveness of different moderation styles in two experimental scenario studies. Our results demonstrate that direct forms of control that provide members with incentives are not accepted and are regarded as ineffective, whereas more indirect forms that rely on relational interests and normative obligations are regarded to be more acceptable and effective. Furthermore, positive (rewarding) moderation styles are more effective than negative (punishing) styles. Members regard negative moderation styles as more effective for the avoidance of unacceptable (rule-breaking) behavior than for the stimulation of desirable (e.g., engaging) behavior. Acceptance and effectiveness of different moderation styles do not differ between active versus passive members.

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1. Introduction

Online communities for people with medical or psychological limitations are used by quite diverse audiences, such as people with diabetes, eating disorders, older adults who face difficulties in coping with their restricted mobility, and patients with serious diseases, such as cancer or HIV/AIDS (e.g., Blank & Adams-Blodniaks, 2007; King, 1994; Mo & Coulson, 2013; Weitzman, Cole, Kaci, & Mendl, 2011; Wright, 2000). Empirical studies indicate that members of online communities can profit substantially from participation in a community with respect to gaining useful information, receiving social support, and building up valuable relations with fellow-sufferers (Barak, Boniel-Nissim, & Suler, 2008; Coursaris & Liu, 2009; Eysenbach, Powell, Englesakis, Rizo, & Stern, 2004; Idriss, Kvedar, & Watson, 2009; Shim, Cappella, & Han, 2011). Online health and support communities (OHSCs) thrive on the contributions of their active members. However, OHSCs often face problems with their members' engagement. In many OHSCs only a small minority of members actively contributes (e.g., Lau & Kwok, 2009; Mo & Coulson, 2010; Preece, Nonnecke, & Andrews, 2004). Another problem is that in some communities, members behave in inappropriate ways (Coulson & Shaw, 2013). Although

it is unclear whether passive members profit less from OHSCs than active posters (Mo & Coulson, 2010; van Uden-Kraan, Drossaert, Taal, Seydel, & van de Laar, 2008), a sufficient level of members' active engagement in community discussions is regarded as a precondition for any benefits to emerge in online communities (e.g., Matzat, 2010; Pfeil, Zaphiris, & Wilson, 2010).

Recently, studies of different types of online communities have demonstrated that an adequate active moderation increases the engagement of members, and consequently also increases the beneficial outcomes for members in an online community (Chen, Xu, & Whinston, 2011; Gairin-Sallan, Rodriguez-Gomez, & Armengol-Asparo, 2010; Hsieh & Tsai, 2012; Wise, Hamman, & Thorson, 2006). Moderators in OHSCs themselves regard their moderation style as important for the regulation and stimulation of membership engagement (Coulson & Shaw, 2013). Although the literature on online community design and management offers many recommendations for moderators to increase members' engagement, until now it remains unclear what forms of moderation are useful for OHSCs to increase members' engagement. Some of the typical recommendations suggest the use of appeals to community norms, the provision of financial incentives, formal reputation systems, and informal provision of social approval (Figallo, 1998; Kim, 2000). An important limitation of this literature is that its recommendations are best-practice examples, without a proper empirical and theoretical foundation. In contrast, the literature

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on consumer online communities provides evidence-based recommendations about the strengths and weaknesses of different forms of moderation and online community management (Garnefeld, Iseke, & Krebs, 2012; Yen, Hsu, & Huang, 2011). It is unclear whether the same moderation styles that work in the commercial sphere also work in OHSCs, or whether the “incentives offered should match the values of the group in question” (Hall & Graham, 2004: (1). Our study addresses this knowledge gap. We contribute to answering the question what forms of moderation members of OHSCs do accept (and which ones not), and which forms are more effective in facilitating desirable member behavior, such as helping new members or sharing ones' knowledge. Accordingly, an important objective of our study is to create knowledge on useful styles of moderation in OHSCs. This increases our understanding of effects of social control in online communities and may help health professionals in their management of medical and social support communities on the Internet.

In the next section, we introduce the theoretical background of our study, and summarize the findings of earlier research. We distinguish moderation styles in OHSCs along two dimensions. The first dimension distinguishes between so-called direct and indirect social control. The second dimension distinguishes between positive, rewarding styles and negative, punishing styles. This then leads to four hypotheses about the acceptance and effectiveness of different moderation styles in OHSCs. Our research design consists of two experimental scenario studies among 99 randomly selected members of seven Yahoo! OHSCs. We first describe the procedure, the measurements, and the findings of the first experiment, followed by the procedure, measurements, and findings of the second experiment. We conclude with a general summary of the findings and discuss the implications of our study for the moderation of OHSCs and clarify directions for future research on online communities and social media.

2. Earlier research and theoretical background

2.1. Earlier studies

Already since the 1990s people increasingly use the internet as a source for information and help around medical and psychological problems (Rainie & Fox, 2000). OHSCs are popular because of their convenience. They often include bulletin board systems, emailing lists, or other social media offering information that is available 24 h a day (ibid.). For users they often are an alternative for or supplement to social support that is offered in face-to-face interactions (Cummings, Sproull, & Kiesler, 2002; Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005). OHSCs are a special type of online communities because they do not just offer informational benefits, such as consumer and knowledge sharing communities do (Hall & Graham, 2004; Jarvenpaa & Staples, 2000). An important additional benefit of OHSCs is that members meet similar people, and develop affective relationships (Barak et al., 2008; Coursaris & Liu, 2009). Processes of self-disclosure, leading to emotional health benefits, are a special asset of useful OHSCs (Shim et al., 2011). Some OHSCs can develop rather strong norms that guide the members' community behavior (Preece & Maloney-Krichmar, 2005).

A potential problem in OHSCs is that they thrive on the active contributions of their members. The literature discusses various factors that affect the members' tendency to participate actively during discussions in online communities. Personality factors play a role as well. For instance, members with a stronger pro-social value orientation are more likely to participate actively (Jadin, Gnamb, & Batinic, 2013). Social incentives, for instance status considerations, as well as material incentives stimulate members' discussion contributions (Hummel et al., 2005; Matzat, 2009b). In

addition, moderators' involvement in community activities may be an important determinant of the health benefits (Coulson & Shaw, 2013; Lorig et al., 2002). One of the crucial tasks of a moderator is the development, and, if needed, enforcement, of clear rules of members' engagement (Coulson & Shaw, 2013). Furthermore, according to the literature on online communities, moderators can stimulate discussions by fulfilling various functions. These functions include the prevention of extreme conflicts between members, ensuring that members' contributions stay on-topic, fostering trust between members, starting up new discussions when needed, and helping specific members. Intensity of moderation on all these dimensions can vary very much between communities (Preece, 2000). In some communities moderation activities can become very time-consuming (Berge & Collins, 1993; Coulson & Shaw, 2013).

The literature on the design and management of online communities offers many recommendations for effective moderation. Kim (2000), for instance, recommends constructing a members' ranking based on the number of their postings within a specific time frame. This would provide an incentive for members to increase the number of postings so that they can achieve a higher position in the ranking. Another recommendation is to use community specific symbols and to appeal to community-specific norms. Such symbols and pleas to norms would motivate members to take into account the community rules (Kim, 2000).

While the recommendations for effective moderation are interesting, there are two important limitations. First, the theoretical foundation of the recommendations is unclear. It is unknown why the recommendations work. The lack of a theoretical foundation also makes it hard to find out under what conditions, or for what types of communities, they do work and under what conditions they fail. Second, there is insufficient systematic empirical testing of the recommendations that goes beyond the best-practice examples. A philosophy of “anything goes” clearly does not work as the example of Suler (2000) demonstrates. He provides an interesting case of a large multimedia chat community moderator who temporarily banned a misbehaving member from the community. Later, the moderator was confronted with other outraged members who fiercely disagreed with this decision. In order to make sure that moderators avoid making wrong decisions that damage the community, it is important to step away from the best practice example. What is needed is a theoretical underpinning of the expected effects of specific moderation styles and systematic empirical tests and comparisons of the acceptance and effects of different moderation styles.

Systematic research on consumer and knowledge-sharing online communities indicates that the style of moderation can have desirable and undesirable effects. A number of studies demonstrate that material incentives can motivate members to share knowledge and become more active (Bartol & Srivastava, 2002; Henning-Thurau & Walsh, 2003; Hummel et al., 2005). However, as Garnefeld et al. (2012) demonstrate, there may be detrimental effects of material incentives as well. They distinguished between a single material (monetary) incentive and a single normative plea to members' willingness to engage, while also examining their short-term and long-term effects. They found that a single monetary incentive in the short term increases members' willingness to contribute actively. The short-term effect of the single monetary incentive is stronger for passive than for already active members. In the long term, however, the single monetary incentive does not have any effect on passive members, but reduces active members' willingness to contribute. Explicit single normative pleas, on the other hand, increased active and passive members' willingness to contribute in the short term (but not in the long term). They did not have any negative effects in the long term. Garnefeld et al. (2012) explain the negative long-term effect of monetary

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