



How heterogeneous community engage newcomers? The effect of community diversity on newcomers' perception of inclusion: An empirical study in social media service



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ABSTRACT

Online communities that provide social media services need to engage newcomers so as to not lose them to competitors. This study examines the role of community diversity (in terms of perceived visible dissimilarity, perceived informational dissimilarity and perceived value dissimilarity) in influencing perceived inclusion of newcomers in the online community and the influence of such perception on newcomers' engagement intention. The theoretical background on perceived inclusion is obtained from the optimal distinctiveness theory, which comprises of two dimensions, namely, social identification and perceived uniqueness. The results support the multiple roles of community diversity on a newcomer's perceived inclusion. The findings of this study contribute to a better understanding of the effect of community diversity on newcomers' engagement behavior, and provide recommendations on designing a personalized community diversity environment.

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1. Introduction

Web 2.0 technologies have become an attractive tool for a large number of social media sites that provide social-networking and micro-blogging services for people to interact in cyberspace. Critical to the success of such communities are newcomers who later become regular users of such sites (Casaló, Flavián, & Guinalíu, 2013). To develop and sustain these communities in the long run, it is important that community managers encourage such new members to engage and interact in the community. One of the issues in engaging newcomers in an online community is the heterogeneity present among existing members as well as newcomers. As newcomers hail from diverse background and motivation and communicate on diverse topics, it is difficult to engage them.

A heterogeneous community is an assemblage of diverse users, who vary in age, gender, education, knowledge, community experience, participation motivation and shared information. A homogeneous community, on the other hand, comprises users with similar characteristics (Chalmers Thomas, Price, & Schau, 2013). We consider these as two extremes of the continuum of the community

mix in an online community. For example, Tianya (<http://www.tianya.cn/>) could be viewed as a relatively heterogeneous community which contains various themes and complex composition of diverse members (Lu, Zhao, & Wang, 2010). On the contrary, Meilishuo, (<http://www.meilishuo.com/>), one of the most popular social shopping communities in China, focuses on a niche segment of female users and fashion lovers, and can be regarded as a relatively homogeneous community.

The research on online communities traditionally has not considered the diversity present within the community and this issue of diversity has gained attention only in recent studies. These studies have reported mixed results about the effect of diversity on a community. While some studies report positive effect of community diversity on members' creativity and performance in organizations, others report that heterogeneous mix among community members leads to dysfunctional community interaction and retention (Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007). Research on diversity in online communities (e.g., Chalmers Thomas et al., 2013), although few, also report competing assessments of community diversity and their effect on retention. Considering these contrary results, it is important to examine the role of community diversity in newcomers' engagement, as heterogeneity of community is not just opposite of homogeneity (Brewer, 2007) but a much more complex issue (Beverland, Farrelly, & Quester, 2010).

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The extant research on the influence of diversity on engagement can be classified into two streams, namely, influence of diversity on sense-of-belongingness and on uniqueness. Most of the research has been done in the first stream. For example, [Hobman, Bordia, and Gallois \(2004\)](#) report that community diversity is negatively related to members' social involvement. Other researchers (e.g., [Guillaume, Brodbeck, & Riketta, 2012](#); [Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007](#)) have found that community diversity is negatively related to social integration. The over-emphasis on the sense of belongingness is because previous diversity theories and constructs (e.g., demographic similarity) place more emphasis on the benefits of homogeneity ([Shore et al., 2010](#)). Research in the second stream report that a community with different characteristics would satisfy the distinct needs of consumers ([Chan, Berger, & Van Boven, 2012](#)).

For a better online engagement, both uniqueness and belongingness needs of newcomers' need to be fulfilled. According to [Burns \(1989\)](#), an individual's need for uniqueness is significant in the early stages of adoption and therefore should not be ignored. Therefore, in this study, we adopt the concept of inclusion based on optimal distinctiveness theory (ODT) ([Shore et al., 2010](#)) which posits that newcomers desire both belongingness and uniqueness ([Brewer, 1991](#)). Entering a new community is associated with uncertainty, anxiety and reality shock. Newcomers experience satisfaction and commitment (which is positively related to engagement) on successful inclusion in an online community. We propose that these two contradictory aspects of newcomers' perception of inclusion in the online community would well explain the complex relationship between community diversity and new members' engagement intention.

This study makes a few interesting contributions. First, this study extends the research on diversity to the online context where this concept has not been thoroughly examined. Second, this study extends previous research on sense of belongingness by introducing perceived uniqueness, perceived inclusion and the role of gender. Third, while previous studies have focused on individual dimensions of dissimilarity ([Harrison & Klein, 2007](#)) this research contributes by conducting a systematic empirical study focusing on the relationship between each dimension of dissimilarity of members.

This paper is organized as follows. In Section 2, theoretical background and hypotheses are presented. In Section 3, the research methodology including the processes of measurement development, data collection, and analysis is presented. In Section 4, interpretation of results, their theoretical contributions, practical implications, and limitations are presented. Finally, the conclusions of this study are presented in Section 5.

2. Literature review and hypotheses

2.1. Perceived dissimilarity

Dissimilarity refers to the degree to which one differs from others along various characteristics ([Hobman et al., 2004](#)). Based on one's perception, dissimilarity is defined in this study as a subjective measure of how an individual perceives himself to be different from other team members. Perceived dissimilarity is a multidimensional concept ([Harrison & Klein, 2007](#)). Scholars have identified generally three dimensions of dissimilarity, namely surface-level (based on demographic characteristics such as age, sex, or race), deep-level (based on personal characteristics such as idiosyncratic attitudes, values and preferences) and functional dissimilarity (extent to which team members differ in their functional background) ([Guillaume et al., 2012](#); [Horwitz & Horwitz, 2007](#); [Pelled, 1996](#); [Pinjani & Palvia, 2013](#)). Some scholars (e.g., [Arazy, Nov, Patterson, and Yeo \(2011\)](#)) view functional dissimilarity as a type

of deep-level dissimilarity. [Hobman et al. \(2004\)](#), identify three other different dimensions of dissimilarity, namely visible dissimilarity (differences among community members in immediately observable biological characteristics, such as age, gender, and virtual appearance.), informational dissimilarity (differences among community members' professional background, knowledge, and experience) and value dissimilarity (difference among members underlying psychological factors, such as values, motivations and principles). We adopt Hobman et al.'s view in this study. Perceived dissimilarity has been examined in dyadic research ([Tsui & O'Reilly, 1989](#)) as well as in group-level research (i.e., perceived group diversity) ([Arazy et al., 2011](#); [Shin, Kim, Lee, & Bian, 2012](#)). As the focus of this study is on the perception of dissimilarity in a community, we examine perceived dissimilarity at the group-level.

2.2. Inclusion

Although, the concept of inclusion has been examined in the organizational literature since last ten years ([Roberson, 2006](#)), there are considerable differences among researchers with respect to its definition. [Shore et al. \(2010\)](#) elicit two general themes consistent with ODT (i.e., belongingness and uniqueness) from various definitions of inclusion. They also define perceived inclusion in the organizational context as "*the degree to which an individual perceives that he or she is an esteemed member of the group by experiencing treatment that satisfies his or her needs for belongingness and uniqueness.*" In this study, this definition is adopted because it is suitable for studying the phenomenon of newcomers' engagement in an online community and because it departs from existing inclusion research, which overlooks the need to balance these two needs in order to foster inclusion.

Need for belongingness is defined as the need to form and maintain strong, stable interpersonal relationships ([Baumeister & Leary, 1995](#)), and need for uniqueness is defined as the need to maintain a distinctive and differentiated sense of self ([Snyder & Fromkin, 1980](#)). [Brewer \(1991\)](#) argues that individuals try to optimize these needs in groups to which they belong. To fulfill their need for belongingness, they choose social identities with particular groups and seek acceptance in those groups ([Pickett Silver, & Brewer, 2002](#)). However, if members of groups are perceived as too similar, then one's individuality becomes lost and his/her need for uniqueness remains unfulfilled ([Snyder & Fromkin, 1980](#)).

Although both needs are important, at times one or the other may become more prominent ([Chan et al., 2012](#); [Correll & Park, 2005](#); [Pickett et al., 2002](#)). Depending upon the prominent need, the associated social identity will also become prominent. Previous studies have also indicated relationship between diversity characteristics and inclusion in the workplace ([Cho & Mor Barak, 2008](#); [Findler, Wind, & Barak, 2007](#); [Roberson, 2006](#)). However, there has been little empirical research on the influence of community diversity on inclusion and even conceptual understanding of this relationship is quite incomplete. The extant research on diversity and inclusion focus on the benefits of similarity assuming that dissimilarity creates dislike and negative effects ([Shore et al., 2010](#)). However, this assumption has not been consistently supported by previous studies ([Brewer, 2007](#); [Pittinsky & Simon, 2007](#)). This study focuses on the perspective of dissimilarity and further examines the effect of multi-dimensional dissimilarity among community members on perceived inclusion of newcomers in the online community.

2.3. Research model and hypotheses

[Fig 1](#) shows the research model developed based on the above discussion. We hypothesize that perceived visible dissimilarity, perceived informational dissimilarity and perceived value

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