Using narratives as tools for channeling participation in online communities

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ABSTRACT

As online communities (OCs), each with unique characteristics and dynamics, proliferate on the Internet, the question of what makes some more successful than others, in terms of engagement and participation, certainly merits research attention. Scholars have argued that these communities use narratives to keep members engaged and to channel participation in their various activities, so this research aimed to evaluate if narratives play a significant role in this matter. Members of an OC were invited to participate in an online survey ($n = 2028$) and three hypotheses about sense of community, participation in culture formation and participation in community successes were tested. Results show that narratives play a significant role in participatory behavior. Specifically, it was found that narratives play two roles: first, as an amplifier of *membership* and *shared values* in the effects each of these have in participation; and second, as a mediator between both *needs fulfillment* and *influence and shared emotional connection*, and participation.

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1. Introduction

Online communities (OCs) have been emerging on the Internet for years now, and as ICTs evolve, they continue to become more sophisticated (Preece, Maloney-Krichmar, & Abras, 2003). Each new community is as unique as the next, so it is difficult to monitor the ways these communities are able to self-organize to achieve various types of accomplishments. Still, as the potentials of what OCs can achieve have become more evident, understanding their inner workings is essential. Faraj, Jarvenpaa, and Majchrzak (2011) argue that a fundamental aspect of OCs is their fluidity, which provides opportunities for the community to collaborate and to manage its resources. One way in which OCs respond to fluidity in a productive way is by identifying ways for channeling participation. This can be done by keeping community members informed about what is happening in the community using narratives (Faraj et al., 2011). The aim of this research is to explore whether or not narratives are effective tools to channel participation to answer the question: *To what*

extent does using narratives positively influence participation in online communities?

This report starts with a theoretical framework that introduces OCs, including Faraj et al.'s (2011) propositions about how fluid OCs channel participation with the use of narratives. To add on this idea, Bruner's (1991) approach to narratives and Schein's (2004) definition of culture are used to create a foundation for a proposed model that provides a theoretical basis for three hypotheses about the links between participating in the creation of a community culture through collective narrative accrual and participating in community successes (goals reached by the community after self-organizing through recognized ICT channels).

To test the proposed model, an online community that emerged from YouTube in 2007 was chosen for a case study. An online survey was used to measure community members' sense of community, their participation in narrative accrual, and their participation in culture formation. Data analysis reveals that narratives have a significant effect on the participatory behavior of OC members.

2. Theoretical framework

2.1. Online communities

In general terms, OCs are groups of people who interact in virtual environments with a purpose, following certain norms, and

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supported by technology (Preece et al., 2003). The term can be applied to different kinds of communities, which vary according to their type of activities, their online and offline presence, their purpose, size, duration of existence, stage in their life-cycle, governance structure, and the software environment that supports them (Preece et al., 2003; Yates, Wagner, & Majchrzak, 2009).

Faraj et al. (2011) define OCs as "open collectives of dispersed individuals with members who are not necessarily known or identifiable and who share common interests, [and] attend to both their individuals and their collective welfare" (p. 1224). These authors also emphasize that OCs are highly fluid, but they are also continuous, so they can change their "boundaries, norms, participants, artifacts, interactions, and foci" over time, but remain essentially the same (Faraj et al., 2011, p. 1226).

2.1.1. Components of online communities

According to Maloney-Krichmar and Preece (2002), there are four components that are needed for OCs to exist:

1. People, who interact socially while satisfying their own needs or performing special roles.
2. A shared purpose, which can be an interest, need, information exchange, or service.
3. Policies, which can take the form of tacit assumptions, rituals, protocols, rules, and laws, that guide people's interactions. (From a social science perspective, these can be interpreted as the community's culture, as defined in Section 2.5).
4. Computer systems, which support and mediate social interaction.

2.2. Channeling participation in online communities

Channeling participation is about "identifying ways to keep interested participants informed of the current state of the OC's collaborative efforts" (Faraj et al., 2011, p. 1232), with the goal of making it easier for them to take part and contribute. Narratives in this context are stories that explain how the OC has acted over time (Faraj et al., 2011). Different communities may exhibit different types of narratives, but their essential function is the same: they are helpful by "creating a context for disembodiment of ideas, providing a temporary convergence, and allowing passionate and time-constrained participants to direct their efforts" (Faraj et al., 2011, p. 1232).

Faraj et al. (2011) claim that narratives "represent a collective understanding of how individual behaviors interrelate over time" (p. 1232). This research explored how narratives influence participatory behavior in OCs. In order to do that, the following sections provide a theoretical background on how culture is created in communities, and how narratives play a role in creating culture.

2.3. Creating culture through narratives

Narratives are a version of reality that is easier to accept, and as such they serve as instruments for our minds to construct reality (Bruner, 1991). For Bruner (1991), narratives are defined as spoken or written accounts of connected events, and these accounts help people to make sense of their worlds. Taking Bruner's approach to narratives, as well as other authors', Brown (2006) also explored several narrative features to better understand how they serve to create culture and identity.

2.3.1. Key features of narratives

Brown (2006) argues that organizational actors use identity-relevant narratives "in their efforts to understand [...] the collective entities with which they identify" (p. 734). A first feature of narratives that allows individuals to better understand these collective entities is "narrative diachronicity" (Bruner, 1991, p. 6), or *temporality* (Brown, 2006). These concepts refer to how individuals make sense of time by using narratives to create mental patterns of significant events (Brown, 2006). Narratives are also characterized by *particularities* – specific details that distinguish one narrative from another, even when they are part of a same genre. Genres represent different human plights, but they can also be "ways of telling that predispose us to use our minds and sensibilities in particular ways" (Bruner, 1991, p. 14). Either way, genres influence our modes of thought and interpretation. Another narrative feature that does this is that of *referentiality*, which is about how people use references from within one narrative and from its larger genre to make sense of it.

In addition to genres, Bruner (1991) talks about the notion of *hermeneutic composability*, which refers to how interpretation of narratives is also affected by contextual factors. Two important ones are: first, the issue of intention (for both storyteller and listener: why is the story told?); and second, the issue of background knowledge (again, for both storyteller and listener), and how each interprets the other's background knowledge. This leads to another feature of narratives: *context sensitivity and negotiability*. Since the understanding of narratives is very sensitive to context, narrative discourse in everyday life can be a viable instrument for cultural negotiation (Bruner, 1991).

Another key feature of narratives is *breach of canonicity* or of *normativeness*, which refers to how "to be worth telling, a tale must be about how an implicit canonical script has been breached, violated, or deviated from" (Bruner, 1991, p. 11). In short, not every sequence of events constitutes a narrative; there must always be an element that makes the story worth telling, and this element can be found in the story itself, as well as in the mode of telling it. This is related to the idea of an *intentional state entailment*, which explains that while protagonists in narratives start off in a specific setting with happenings that befall them, they are able in charge of what happens during their storyline.

The last feature of narrative is *narrative accrual*, which refers to the way in which narratives are made into a whole: "narratives do accrue, and, as anthropologists insist, the accruals eventually create something variously called a 'culture' or a 'history' or, more loosely, a 'tradition'" (Bruner, 1991, p. 18). When a group, or in this case an OC, takes on the endeavor of identifying, sharing and collectively interpreting specific narratives, it is actively creating its own culture and providing itself with legitimacy and historical foundations. Moreover, in such endeavors, the process of joint narrative accrual, is one of the ways in which people work "mentally" together (Bruner, 1991). This means that narratives are effective not only in helping to create culture, but also in strengthening group cohesion, as narrative accrual is a collective, ongoing activity.

2.4. Culture in online communities

Schein (2004) proposed an understanding of organizational culture that can be applied to culture in OCs (Xiao, 2006). Organizational culture is relevant in this case because it deals with culture in a specific kind of heterogeneous group – a group that is not necessarily connected by nationality, geographic locations, or specific specialized activities. Certainly, the differences between a formal organization and an online community can be many, going from the existence (or lack thereof) of specific purposes and resources, to the communication channels used, to the different formal and informal social structures that occur within them. Still, establishing some parallels between them will help make the formation of culture easier to understand. For Schein (2004), culture can be defined as: