



An epidemiological assessment of online groups and a test of a typology: What are the (dis)similarities of the online group types?



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ABSTRACT

A vast multitude of online groups exist, and authors have been rapidly investigating their dynamics. Extant studies have provided great information on the effects of online group membership, but limitations are often noted in these studies. Amongst the most concerning limitations are issues of generalizability. Authors are often unsure whether their results are able to generalize to other online groups, including those that are seemingly similar. For this reason, some researchers have created typologies of online groups, in hopes that online groups that fall within the same category will be generalizable; however, no study has analyzed the merit of an online group typology, and conclusions are based upon speculation. For this reason, the current study analyzed the dynamics of three different online groups, which fall within separate categories of an online group typology: a cancer support forum, a LGBT forum, and a Harry Potter fan forum. The results demonstrate that these groups vary in their properties, including group members' group identity, well-being, and social support. These results provide support for an online group typology, and precisely demonstrate in what manner these groups differ. Additionally, the results offer valuable information about the individual groups, as some variables were previously unstudied in some group types. The discovery of these previously unknown dynamics leads to the potential of new studies, which is discussed. Therefore, the current study provides important implications for future studies, as well as the interpretation of future research results.

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1. Introduction

Several authors have recently shown great interest in the dynamics of online groups, typically defined as three or more people who perceive membership in some common social identity and whose dominant form of interaction is through computer-mediated communication (CMC; Baker, 2008; Howard & Magee, 2013; McKenna, 2008; McKenna & Green, 2002). Most of these researchers have investigated particular nuances of certain types of online groups. For example, Sherman and Greenfield (2012) examined the social support members received from forums designed for pregnant teen mothers. Alternatively, Welbourne, Blanchard, and Wadsworth (2013) studied member motivations for joining virtual health communities for infertility, and its relationship to particular outcomes. Studies such as these provide great information about specific facets of individual online groups, but a commonly noted limitation is these studies' generalizability. Welbourne, Blanchard, and Wadsworth stated, "we note that infertility groups have unique characteristics that may set them apart from virtual communities that focus on other health concerns ... it will be important to

see if our findings ... will generalize to other virtual health communities" (2013, p. 137), demonstrating concerns over the generalizability of results to seemingly similar online groups.

To mitigate these worries over generalizability, some authors have created online group typologies (McKenna, 2008; Porter, 2004). These typologies categorize online groups based on their common characteristics, and assert that studies' results can generalize if their online group samples fall within the same category. Despite these theoretical advancements on online groups, authors still note large concerns about generalizability (Baker & O'Neil, 2002; Fulk & Gould, 2009; Welbourne et al., 2013). A reason for this apprehension is the lack of extant information on the (dis)similarities of online groups. Rarely do existing studies concurrently investigate aspects of multiple online groups, although theoretical propositions are often made (Burke, Kraut, & Joyce, 2010; Howard & Magee, 2013; Matzat, 2009). This leaves authors unsure whether observed effects actually exist in alternative online groups. The answer to this ambiguity cannot be provided with extant studies, but the current study aims to provide information on several uncertainties about online groups.

In the current study, several types of online groups are analyzed using an existing typology of online groups. This analysis largely focuses on the commonalities and differences in online groups, in order to determine the (dis)similarity of the identified group types.

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The group aspects of interest were chosen due to their importance in previous studies, and include group identity (Barker, 2009; Kim, 2009, 2010; Kim & Park, 2011), self-presentation (Bessière, Seay, & Kiesler, 2007; Jin, 2010; Jin & Park, 2009), social support (Dietz-Uhler, Bishop-Clark, & Howard, 2005; Wildermuth, 2004), and well-being (Coursaris & Liu, 2009; Lewandowski, Rosenberg, Parks, & Siegel, 2011; Tichon & Shapiro, 2003). Through studying these aspects, the (dis)similarities between the groups are uncovered, allowing inferences about the generalizability of studies' results and distinctions made between online group types. Also, the current study provides a test of a popular online group typology (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna, 2008; McKenna & Green, 2002), which has not had any investigation into its validity before. If the typology is supported, then future studies can more safely incorporate it into their studies. Finally, through this process, many novel relationships are discovered. Several of the group aspects studied have not been investigated in all types of online groups, leading to the opportunity for future studies, which are discussed.

2. Background

2.1. Existing online group typology

To address concerns over generalizability in online group studies, a survey of a wide array of online groups is needed. A vast multitude of online groups exist, making it impossible to concurrently study all online groups in existence. Instead, it is more feasible to draw comparisons between online group types based on an existing typology. Fortunately, several researchers have created typologies of online groups. Among the most popular was created by McKenna (Bargh & McKenna, 2004; McKenna, 2008; McKenna & Green, 2002), and divides online groups into four types. These four types are delineated by the online group members' primary motivations, which are often believed to be the precursor to all behaviors (Atkinson & Birch, 1970; Heckhausen & Leppmann, 1991; Lewin, 1951). Motivations of group members affect almost all aspects of the group, and shape the group's functions, experiences, and ultimate purpose. Member motivations are also seen as enduring qualities which span across several situations, and can direct the group over extended periods of time. It should be noted, however, the same motivations do not always lead to the same processes and results. The actual processes and results of group membership are impacted by extraneous variables often beyond the control of group members. Since factors such as processes and results are not under the complete control of members, it is more appropriate to categorize groups by their motivations since they are directly controllable.

Additionally, while the primary motivation of a group's members determines its label within the chosen typology, it does not completely deter group members from holding auxiliary motivations. It is possible, if not likely, for group members to have multiple motivations for membership. For instance, an individual may join a group primarily to connect with similar others, such as a Lesbian–Gay–Bisexual–Transsexual (LGBT) group, but they may enjoy the group's activities and also join for enjoyment purposes, too. These auxiliary motivations are important, but they are not as pivotal within groups as primary motivations. Primary motivations are shared by almost all members and are the main focus of groups, whereas auxiliary motivations may only be held by a few members. For these reasons, auxiliary motivations do not shape groups as strongly. Therefore, the existence of auxiliary motivations does not nullify a typology based on primary member motivations, despite their effects on certain group members. Given these theoretical implications of categorizing online groups by their primary

motivations, below is a description of the chosen online group typology.

In no particular order, the first is stigmatized identity groups, which are composed of members with a common group characteristic (sexual orientation, fringe political belief, etc.) that is socially sanctioned or embarrassing and may be dangerous if disclosed. For example, those who are homosexual may hide their homosexuality due to social stigmas, and are unable to form in-group ties with other members; however, a stigmatized identity group provides methods to create ties with other homosexuals while allowing individuals to retain a sense of safety (Dietz-Uhler et al., 2005; Wildermuth, 2004). Stigmatized identity group members' membership is largely motivated by their need to create significant bonds with others that share their stigmatized characteristic. Second, support groups consist of members who have certain illnesses which may be rare or limit their mobility. These members are primarily motivated to discover other individuals who understand and empathize with their condition and can provide social support (Coulson, Buchanan, & Aubeeluck, 2007; Finn, 1999). The third type of online group is formed based on member's shared interests, such as online video games or special interest forums (Chak & Leung, 2004; Lim & Lee, 2009). These members generally see their interactions as leisure and a pastime, and are motivated by their enjoyment from the shared interest. This group type goes by many names, including garden-variety social group (McKenna, 2008) and virtual community (Yu & Young, 2008). Neither of these titles adequately describes this type of online group while differentiating from others, so the current article uses the term avocation groups. Although avocation group members' reasons for interacting are likely not as vital as other online group types, authors have still proposed that individuals identify with and value these groups (Billieux et al., 2013). Fourth, organizational group members are brought together to complete tasks for businesses, and their online connectivity allows them to complete projects which would otherwise be more difficult (Sosik, Avolio, Kahai, & Jung, 1998). This online group type is unlike from the other three, as these group members' primary motivation does not stem from any social desires. Instead, their primary motivation arises from their assigned tasks, and is largely transactional.

With this typology, the current study investigates several aspects of stigmatized identity groups, online support groups, and avocation groups. Organizational groups were not of interest, because they are convened by businesses for certain purposes and are not naturally occurring. This causes organizational group members' motivations to be largely transactional, whereas the other three online groups' members' motivations are largely transactional. The differing motivating processes results in vastly different group dynamics (Sosik et al., 1998), and many of the research questions for organizational groups are not applicable to other groups. For example, the most popular outcome of studies with organizational group samples is organizational productivity (Cogliser, Gardner, Gavin, & Broberg, 2012; Faems, Janssens, & Neyens, 2012; Frazier & Fainshmidt, 2012), which is non-existent in other types of online groups. While this group was not analyzed in the current study, future studies should certainly investigate this type of online group with alternative research questions. Now that an online group typology has been chosen along with the groups of importance, the following presents the topics which will be investigated.

2.2. Group identity

Individuals' group identity plays a primary role in how they interact with a group (Abrams & Hogg, 2004; Brewer, 1991, 2007; Tajfel & Turner, 1979). When individuals identify with a group, they will categorize and compare themselves and others

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